

# THE RESISTANCE TO TEACHING

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Patricia Donahue and Ellen Quandahl, eds. *Reclaiming Pedagogy: The Rhetoric of the Classroom*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1989.

Henry A. Giroux and Roger I. Simon, eds. *Popular Culture, Schooling, and Everyday Life*. Granby, MA: Bergin & Garvey, 1989.

There is something wrong with how theory and practice commonly get talked about. Usually theory gets defined in terms that make it seem to *come before* the practice it describes. We hear of how to “translate theory into” practice or of the need to make sure that the work we do as teachers and intellectuals is “grounded in” or “informed by” a theoretical stance. The implication is that somehow one first gets a theoretical position and then puts it to use in the classroom or in writing. A result is that talk about theory often displaces talk about teaching. Kenneth Burke has pointed out how attempts to define the substance of a thing lead ironically but invariably to talk about something else instead—to its substance, what “stands under” the thing rather than the thing itself. And so theory has very often become the sub-stance of teaching, and talk about principles has crowded out talk about practices.

You can of course image another way of talking about theory as *coming out of* practice, that would see the everyday work of classrooms, journals and departments as what stands under theorizing and gives it purpose. Theory could then be seen not as the neutral base of practice but as a way of arguing for certain kinds of work rather than others. Instead of worrying about how to “translate theory into practice,” you could see the problem as one of how to use theory to explain and defend the sorts of work you are already committed to.

The two anthologies under review here offer a useful contrast between these ways of thinking about theory and practice.

On one hand, the writers in *Popular Culture, Schooling, and Everyday Life* use theory as a kind of ground or base for practice. This results in a lot of talk about theory and very little about classrooms, and finally in a book whose declared aim is to investigate “the relationship between popular culture and classroom pedagogy” (221) but that fails to offer a single detailed description or critique of a teaching practice. Stripped of any real connection to classroom work, most of the uses of theory in the book prove to be less critical than hortatory. You finish reading convinced that we should be doing something with popular culture—but just what that might be is never made clear. On the other hand, most of the writers in *Reclaiming Pedagogy* locate their uses of theory in direct relation to the work that goes on in their classrooms. What you get from the best of these pieces is not so much a set of teaching methods as a sense of why theory matters, of what holding a particular theory feels like and commits you to in the classroom.

Henry Giroux and Roger Simon begin *Popular Culture* by arguing that we must take “student experience as a central component” of our thinking about schools and teaching (1). An implication is that we must make popular culture a subject of classroom study, since it is largely in and through its forms that students forge a sense of their identities and allegiances. They next assert that culture cannot be reduced to an assembly of texts—as educational conservatives like Hirsch, Bloom and Cheyney would have it—but must rather be seen as a far more complex “set of relations” between persons, groups, texts and discourses (11). To understand the workings of popular culture, then, we must do more than offer readings of media texts, we must describe how such texts are used and given meaning in the course of everyday life.

Unfortunately, while many of the writers in *Popular Culture* restate these axioms, few act on them. Rather, their essays show a deepseated resistance to serious and sustained talk about teaching that is one of the characteristic blindnesses of our profession. Most begin by stating a position in theory (even when, ironically, that position argues for placing student experience at the center of theorizing about education). From there they usually move on to analyze at length a number of media texts (*Dirty Dancing*, *Lethal Weapon*) or trends (punk, the ambiguous 80s stardom of

Springsteen). Generally, they close with a few lines on what their theoretical stance implies for their work as teachers. None does so convincingly. Few voices of actual students are heard throughout the volume. Not one classroom scene is described; not one student text is quoted. (In contrast many of the contributors are strikingly fond of referring to their own work: Phillip Corrigan cites 28 of his previous writings in a kind of cross between a bibliography and a curriculum vitae; Lawrence Grossberg logs in with eight self-references, Henry Giroux with four, and Roger Simon with three; while Paul Smith uses one footnote to allude to a recently published book and another to advertise a forthcoming one.) In the place of analysis of what happens (or might happen) in schools and classrooms, we get (often repetitive) doses of educational theory and (sometimes ingenious) close readings of movies, tv shows, rock stars and the like.

This resistance to teaching is perhaps best shown in the vagueness and brevity of what most of the contributors actually have to say about classroom work. In many essays it is not clear what sort of course in what subject at what level of instruction the writer has in mind when he (the pronoun is nearly apt: 11 of the 13 contributors are men) talks about "pedagogy." A common move is to close with a paragraph or two that glancingly refer to broad "implications" for teaching: "This, of course, considerably complicates the task of cultural studies, and of critical pedagogy . . ." (193) begins the final paragraph of one essay. "This" refers to 18 pages of close analysis of tv programs centered on "couples." The paragraph on teaching runs three sentences. "We must intervene as critics and educators" (114) intones the closing of another piece, which has just spent 23 pages analyzing the phenomenon of postmodernity without once referring to the classroom. Another essay looks at tv religion as itself a reactionary form of schooling and argues (once again in the closing sentences of a 23 page piece) that "as educators, we need to . . . deconstruct . . . the desire for community and struggle that televangelism mobilizes" (170). Yes. But surely *as educators* we need to do more, to also find ways of urging and helping students to attempt such deconstructive readings themselves.

The emphasis most of the writers in the volume place on offering close readings of texts (rather than on problematizing ways of reading) is an oddly familiar and disturbing one. Again, since

none of the writers speak at much length about what goes on in their classrooms, I am pretty much forced to guess at what their teaching practices might be like. But I am afraid, given the hip but still decidedly professorial tone of most of the essays, that much current teaching about popular culture is likely to resemble a survey of lit class in postmodern drag. My concern is that in the name of helping students become more critical of their culture, such teaching might in fact mystify their relations to it, by implicitly telling them that their own readings of media texts are inferior to the more sophisticated ones of their teachers. There is a difference between studying cultural criticism and practicing it. We need to make sure that our teaching does not encourage students to remain as they were before, consumers rather than critics of various discourses—both popular and academic.

The only contributor to address any of these issues is Paul Smith, who argues that a teacher needs to offer strong readings of media texts if he wishes students to do the same and that students need to look at such texts in relation to larger social issues. As an example, he briefly outlines an undergraduate course in reading and writing that investigates the ways gender is represented in the texts of popular culture. Smith's essay is far and away the best in the volume, and I am inclined to agree with both of his points. Still what he has to say about teaching is for the most part simply asserted rather than demonstrated. While he correctly argues against a view of the teacher as an "empty sounding-board for students' reactions" to media texts (42), he does little to suggest what a teacher can do to present his own readings of such texts without simply overwhelming those of his students. Once more the problem of how to *enact* a view of reading in the classroom is displaced by talk about goals and principles.

Similarly, Stanley Aronowitz concludes a wandering but likeable essay on "Working-Class Identity and Celluoid Fantasies" by proposing that the study of popular culture "break the line between critique and practice . . . to include at its center video and music production and performance" (217). This would allow students to "[express] their own ideas," Aronowitz suggests, while also contesting the humanistic privileging of reflection over practice (217). Perhaps. But it's not clear to me how such technical training is necessarily more liberating than other forms of learning. Certainly there are already plenty of programs—in fields like

studio art, technical and creative writing, journalism, music, and film production—that offer similar kinds of training but that pose little or no challenge to the traditional values of the academy. In fact those programs I am familiar with are for the most part depressingly careerist. Training in making music and videos could be part of a radical curriculum, but it could also be part of the same old conservative one. It all depends on how you train students to use these media and what you encourage them to use it for—and once again that question gets no answer.

This deferring of the issue of practice, of how to enact theory, continues to the very end of the volume. Giroux and Simon conclude *Popular Culture* with three pages of unanswered questions for progressive teachers, including:

How do we affirm student voices while simultaneously encouraging the interrogation of such voices? . . . How can we keep from slipping from a vision of human possibility into a totalizing dogma? . . . Will not raising contradictions in students' lives simply threaten them? . . . Should teachers be accountable to specific groups or an organized public sphere? In practice, how would/should this be done? (231-33 passim)

Good questions all. If only they came at the *beginning* of the book.

What accounts for this resistance to teaching? Part of the cause is without doubt political. The pedagogues of ancient Greece were slaves. Talk about methods and practices of teaching has long been despised as the concern of normal schools and failed scholars. One response to this dismissal has been a move to theory. But while this has helped to legitimate a certain kind of talk about pedagogy it has also, as the essays in *Popular Culture* show, shifted the focus of that talk away from the actual practices of teachers. Another cause is, I think, the very elusiveness of the subject. The discourse of the classroom is inflected by any number of voices—including not only those of teachers and students, but also those of principals, parents, department chairs, school boards, textbooks, testing services, politicians, businesses, churches, the media and more. What happens in any given class is often hard to describe, and nearly impossible to explain. Well-planned lessons or assignments fail; stupid or hasty ones succeed. Good students miss what seem simple yet crucial points. And sometimes nobody at

all seems to understand. Far from being too trivial to elaborate, the ambiguities of teaching may prove a harder subject to write on than the dictates of theory.

Still another reason may be epistemological. This is the case made by Mariolina Salvatori in an essay framing many of the issues addressed in *Reclaiming Pedagogy*. Salvatori argues that so long as we view knowledge as something that scholars first create or discover and then bring with them into the classroom, talk about teaching will of course focus on trivial and methodological concerns—matters of clarity, tact, efficiency, and so on. But if knowledge is seen as the *result* of the sorts of interactions that take place between students, texts, and teachers, then the question of method becomes far more interesting and important. The first view sees the classroom as a site where existing meanings are conveyed or skills are applied, where students work to “get” what their teachers already know or have. The second sees the classroom as a place where meanings are formed and negotiated. Inquiry into meaning is then, as Salvatori puts it, “no longer something that a critic, a teacher does *for* inexperienced readers/students” (29). Rather it is a “rigorously structured collaborative activity that. . . . makes possible the recognition of a student’s work as a form of knowledge in the process of formation” (29-30). The question for both theory and practice, then, is how a teacher can usefully shape and direct this “knowledge in the process of formation.” Of central concern is not only how the teacher positions herself in relation to the texts being read, but how she makes her students aware of the ways *they* are positioned as well.

This is the issue taken up in one form or the other by almost all of the writers in *Reclaiming Pedagogy*. For instance, in “Freud and Interpretation,” Patricia Donahue and Ellen Quandahl describe a course that asks basic readers and writers to come to terms with the extraordinarily complex text of *Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*. To do so, Donahue and Quandahl first ask students to write an essay piecing together the story of Dora’s life from the clues given in Freud’s text. Once they have done this, they are asked to direct their attention, again in writing, to the ways Freud interprets Dora’s narrative, to how his “ideas about disease and cure, about the structures of all ‘good’ psychoanalytical stories, about the behavior acceptable to eighteen-year-old women” lead

him to attribute certain kinds of meaning to what she has to say (55). Finally, students are asked to write from Dora's point of view to suggest possible gaps and blindness in Freud's reading of her story. This sequence of assignments seems a patient and yet powerful way of helping inexperienced students to "invent the university" by taking on some of its ways of reading and writing. It also offers an exciting blend of theory and practice, reflection and action, as students are offered a chance to contrast the view of reading Freud enacts in trying to understand Dora with the view they themselves enact in reading Freud. As Donahue and Quandahl put it: "Reading is bound by rules, stipulated and secret. . . . Freud reveals his backstage secrets to us; we can reveal ours to our students" (57). A result is that such rules are thrown open to question. Students are asked not simply to apply certain methods of reading and writing, but to interrogate their usefulness.

In "Conversations with the Social Text," Nina Schwartz makes a similar classroom use of Roland Barthes as a model for reading. Schwartz argues that students need to learn "more about the ways in which other writers and thinkers arrive at and reveal their interpretive habits and assumptions" (62) before we can ask them to show much critical awareness of their own choices as readers and writers. She has students look at *Mythologies*, then, not only for what Barthes has to say about culture but for *how* he says it. And so, for instance, in reading his essay on "Toys," students note that Barthes does not so much define what toys mean as point out certain gaps and problems in the "myth" of ownership they express. Barthes thus poses a method of reading that looks not for coherence but for contradiction. As Schwartz puts it: "The difficulty of reading Barthes actually begins to prepare students to carry on a work like his outside his texts" (65). Students are asked to imagine "a different kind of writing" (69), whose aim is not to explain and defend why things are as they are but to highlight precisely what the status quo usually excludes or represses. Patricia Donahue continues this line of thinking in suggesting that we present Barthes to students as an example of a purposefully "obtuse" reader whose goal is "to challenge the universality of . . . meaning and to question common sense as seamless, inviolate truth" (75). She then uses the writings of several students to show how, when pushed to offer an "obtuse" reading of "The Fall of the House of Usher," they are able to move well beyond the stan-

dard summaries of plot, theme, and conflict they are first inclined to give as their “readings” of the story. And, in a similar move, Ellen Quandahl describes a course in which students read Freud, Kenneth Burke, and Jane Addams “less to explore the *point* of these texts than their *operations*, in order to develop some critical language for use in reading these and the students’ own texts” (124).

All three of these writers show us how a teacher can make a different view of reading explicit in the classroom, as well as how students can use this alternate way of reading to generate new sorts of meaning and knowledge. They do so by taking the practice of certain theorists (Freud, Barthes, Burke) not only as a source of method but as a subject for the course. Thus the theory of reading driving the work of the course gets foregrounded as a *theory*, as one possible view among others, rather than submerged as an unstated and invisible part of the teacher’s “method.” What we have, then, is not so much theory “informing” the practice of a teacher, but theory offered as the subject of a course in reading and writing, as something that students can work on and question themselves.

Many of the other writers in *Reclaiming Pedagogy* argue for more familiar ways of *applying* theory to teaching. While their pieces are not as striking as those I’ve just discussed, much of what they have to say seems useful and sensible. Elaine Lees makes use of Stanley Fish’s theory of interpretive communities to suggest that the problem many students face in proofreading their texts is not one of learning to “see what’s there on the page” but of learning to see those texts in the ways university-trained readers do. She thus argues for presenting proofreading to students as a true form of reading, of interpreting, rather than as a mechanical hunt for errors that are objectively “in” the text. Jon Klancher appeals to Bakhtin’s theories of dialogism to ground teaching that has students look for the competing voices and discourses that writers draw upon and transform in their texts. As an example, he describes a course that investigates the rhetoric of the American civil rights movement. And Randall Knoper argues trenchantly that most attempts to align process theories of writing with deconstruction have failed to take seriously the ambition of Derrida and others to forge not only a new *method* but a new *kind* of writing. What use is a deconstructive process, Knoper argues, that leads to the



same old kinds of products—to yet more traditionally “clear and coherent” essays?

While none of these writers follows the lead of Schwartz, Donahue, and Quandahl in making theory the center of a course in reading and writing, all speak directly and intelligently to concerns in both theory and teaching. If *Popular Culture* is an example of the continuing resistance to teaching, then *Reclaiming Pedagogy* shows that this resistance can be contested, broken down, worked through—that a new view of theory and practice is within reach.

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