



AFTER PEDAGOGY
THE EXPERIENCE
OF TEACHING

Paul Lynch

SWR

STUDIES IN WRITING AND RHETORIC

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PROLOGUE: THE TUESDAY MORNING QUESTION

THIS PROJECT BEGINS WITH A QUESTION I hesitate to ask. I've imagined the question many times; I may have even muttered it once or twice at a conference or in a grad seminar. But I am still reluctant to enunciate it. Call it the "Monday Morning Question," the question that asks, "This theory (or idea, or philosophy) you're proposing is great and everything, but what am I supposed to do with it when the students show up on Monday morning?" Offered sometimes as a forthright engagement, sometimes as an intemperate challenge, sometimes as a *cri de coeur*, the Monday Morning Question is either the subtlest or the bluntest meeting of theory and practice in the work of composition. Asked well, the Monday Morning Question inspires inquiry. What are the practical implications of a theoretical awareness of one's pedagogy? How can and should pedagogies change when they are contextualized in their histories, histories from eras far different than our own? How should we respond when the reading we do away from the classroom undermines our assumptions about language and writing? But asked badly—asked, that is, in the way I have sometimes wanted to in my lesser moments—the Monday Morning Question can stifle inquiry by seeming to demand that any theoretical insight be justified with an immediate pedagogical application. Have some interpretation of a recondite philosopher? Discovered an obscure historical treatise on rhetoric? Found some troubling trend developing in the disciplinary literature? The skeptical manifestation of the Monday Morning Question can imply that such projects are relevant to composition only insofar as they directly shape classroom practice.

But whatever the spirit in which it is asked, the most troubling risk of the Monday Morning Question is the way it slots thought into the worn intellectual groove of theory-vs.-practice. This tired

binary at once suggests two untenable ideas: either there is a nebulous and ephemeral thing called theory that cannot survive in the wilds of practice, or there is a rough-and-tumble realm called practice that will mar the pristine beauties of theory. This self-defeating choice has troubled composition for a long time. Twenty-five years ago, Louise Wetherbee Phelps described it in her book *Composition as a Human Science*. Regarding theory's entrance (or intrusion) into the pedagogical project of composition, Phelps observed that the field seemed to have reduced the issue to two bad options: "teachers could naively accept [theory] (along the lines of the banking model of education), or they could reject it as impractical, overly abstract, and irrelevant" (220). At its most extreme, this fracture has descended into recrimination, which Susan Jarratt describes: "Establishing 'composition' as a legitimate university field has entailed a heated defense of teachers as noble practitioners—front-line soldiers in the battle for literacy—as against ivory-tower literature scholars for whom teaching is secondary to theoretical or philosophic activities: i.e., scholarly research" (94). I do not mean to suggest that most, or even many, compositionists still think rigidly in either of these two ways. Rather, I mean to ask whether composition has finally sidestepped this division. For her part, Phelps offered *phronesis*, or practical wisdom, as a plausible workaround. Through a reading of Gadamer—along with Freire and Dewey—Phelps suggests that *phronesis* "makes it possible to address the previously unthinkable possibility that a discipline might constitute itself without submitting praxis to the domination of theory" (206). In resisting theory's domination, Phelps does not mean to reject it. Instead, her seemingly paradoxical position is that *phronesis* offers the best way for theory to enter into practice and to reshape it.

As persuasive as this argument is—and notwithstanding the wide influence of Freire and Dewey—it is less clear that Phelps's appeal to practical wisdom has resolved the theory–practice split. About a decade after Phelps published *Composition*, Gary Olson worried that the field was facing yet another round of "theory wars" that would pit theoretically informed scholarship against "straightforward" narratives of good teaching and good writing (both of which would be defined by accessibility for first-year students) ("Death").

This fight, according to Olson, was essentially a replay of the battles in the late 1980s, right around the time *Composition as a Human Science* appeared. Indeed, Olson comes to the same conclusion that Phelps had a decade before, going so far as to quote her observation that “deep in the disciplinary unconscious runs a strong undercurrent of anti-intellectual feeling that resists the dominance of theory in every institutional context of the field—journals, conferences, writing classrooms, textbooks, teacher education—and even in some forms of theory itself” (Phelps, qtd. in Olson, “Death” 24). That feeling, Olson argues, led some to dismiss theoretical inquiry as careerist maneuvering for disciplinary domination (29). While Olson rejects this reading of the field as a product of both straw-man and ad hominem argument, he also welcomes a healthy and vigorous hegemonic struggle, one in which critical theory helps scholars to stretch composition’s field of inquiry beyond its traditional bounds (30). Reminding his readers that “struggle can be collegial and congenial,” he quotes Chantal Mouffe’s distinction between enemies and adversaries and hopes that the latter term will characterize disagreement in rhetoric and composition (30).

Of course, Olson is right: just as we should reject the term *enemy* in favor of *adversary*, we should repudiate the idea that theoretical inquiry represents a betrayal of composition’s true mission. But in avoiding this destructive distinction, Olson lays the foundations for another. His apologia for theory suggests that such scholarship will push the field beyond the classroom:

Those who wanted to define the field *as one devoted not to just the teaching of writing* but to all aspects of how discourse works turned to critical theory from a wide variety of disciplines, including anthropology, feminist theory, philosophy, and sociology. Clearly, this latter group has made substantial progress. For twenty years, composition scholarship has developed as an interdisciplinary, “intellectual” enterprise—and we are much the richer because of it. (30; emphasis added)

In spite of all that I find right about this claim, what troubles me is the language suggesting that a focus on teaching is likely to retard the progress of composition’s intellectual work. Certainly Olson’s

vision of agonism is salutary and necessary, but that vision also suggests something that Phelps tried to resist as much as composition's anti-intellectual tendencies—namely, that to accept the influence of theory is to move past pedagogy.

Let me be clear: I am not trying to position myself as Olson's adversary, much less his enemy. Much of the argument of the present work is premised on ideas that Olson has helped to articulate. But I am concerned about the ways in which those ideas are sometimes forwarded. Witness, for example, Sidney Dobrin's recent *Postcomposition*, which comes about ten years after Olson's prediction that the anti-intellectual pedagogues would end up starting a new round of theory wars. Yet if anyone is trying to start a war, it is Dobrin, who explicitly calls for a kind of "violence" against the discipline (113). Postcomposition, he writes, suggests a "creative destruction" of composition as a pedagogical enterprise (188). "Writing theory must move beyond composition studies' neurosis of pedagogy, must escape the shackles of classroom, students and management" (28). In addition to being neurotic, then, those interested in composition's teaching mission would also apparently enslave both the field and its students. It seems that the naïve expressivists are no longer the source of the fighting words.

While Dobrin offers the most extreme rejection of composition's traditional pedagogical mission, he is of course not the only scholar who would bristle at the Monday Morning Question. His work is only the latest contribution to "postpedagogy," whose basic claim is that composition can no longer be defined by pedagogy because pedagogy "hope," which has shaped the field for so long, is no longer available. After the Great Paradigm Shift from preprocess to process, the field has followed a series of smaller shifts until arriving at "postprocess," which is best defined not as a system of teaching but as an attitude about teaching. This attitude holds that teaching is too complex, too particular, too situated to be rendered in any repeatable and therefore portable way. Capital *P* Pedagogy, just like capital *T* Theory, guarantees nothing. Now we have moved beyond postprocess to postpedagogy, which tries to evade the pedagogical on the grounds that it is nearly impossible to speak about teaching without being tempted by the will-to-system, to process, and to

pedagogy. Yes, runs this argument, we might encounter teachable moments, but no pedagogy can reliably occasion them. The best we can do is to create the conditions in which they might occur. Process cannot reliably result in product; the revelations of critical pedagogy do not bring about revolution. The stable self is not there to be expressed, and the construction of the social does not sufficiently account for struggle. There is, in short, no pedagogical solution to composition's troubled evolution. This is bound to be disorienting to a field that, for its first few decades at least, was defined by a search for a viable pedagogy.

To be sure, anyone who has taught for any length of time already knows that pedagogy does not often survive contact with the classroom. But now our theoretical inquiry has arrived at the same conclusion, a conclusion that demands our attention. And while Dobrin may stand alone in his call for violence, he is joined by a host of others in his desire to give up composition's pedagogical quest. In addition to Olson, we can find the postpedagogical idea expressed in the work of Diane Davis, Byron Hawk, Cynthia Haynes, Thomas Kent, Thomas Rickert, Victor Vitanza, and Lynn Worsham. In one way or another, all of these scholars wish to fundamentally alter the way the field thinks about teaching.

The problem is that the activity traditionally known as teaching (and, one hopes, the activity traditionally known as learning) will likely continue in some institutional form. That raises a fundamental question: how does composition, which has for so long defined itself as a teaching subject, reinvent the pedagogical portion of its mission without recourse to pedagogy as we have traditionally understood it? I doubt that many would deny that composition's research agenda should include more than teaching; the real question is how we talk about pedagogical work, in and out of the classroom, in the wake of this expanded agenda. If pedagogy is no longer our primary focus, how do we proceed with the work that takes up half of our professional lives? How do we teach after pedagogy? Answering that question is the project of this book.

My method of answering the question does not reject postpedagogy but rather accepts it as a starting point. Postpedagogical arguments are penetrating, even disturbing, and they demand some-

thing more nuanced than simple disagreement. I want to argue *with* these scholars, both to dispute and to deliberate. After all, my central question—What does it mean to teach after pedagogy?—could not be articulated without the argument they have occasioned. Yet I also refuse the suggestion that pedagogy is a self-defeating pursuit. Surely composition has the scholarly resources to talk about teaching as an intellectual enterprise. Thus my initial return to Phelps, who attempts to articulate a pedagogy rigorous in its attention to resources and responsiveness.

Yet turning to Phelps raises other issues. Why, for example, has her cultivation of *phronesis* (by way of Freire, Gadamer, and Dewey) not taken deep root? There may be several answers to this question. Among the most important, I would suggest, is that *phronesis* has often been superseded or undermined by epistemological concerns. Our field's interpretation of Freire, for example, has often assumed that new ways of knowing would result in new ways of doing. In fact, objections to that epistemological assumption—particularly the version expressed by James Berlin—have occasioned a great deal of postpedagogical discourse, particularly in the work of Hawk, Rickert, and Vitanza. The same could be said for hermeneutics, as Raúl Sánchez observes in *The Function of Theory in Composition Studies*. Hermeneutics, Sánchez argues, still believes that writing *represents* some other reality rather than being a reality in and of itself. Sánchez objects to this essentialism, which “reserves systemic and uncritical conceptual space for *something* nondiscursive” (92). This attitude—which, Sánchez argues, is also forwarded by Berlin—reduces writing to a “notation system of experience” and rhetoric to “the dress of thought” (47). Casuistically stretched to pedagogy, Sánchez's objections would caution us against seeing the pedagogical situation as a text to be interpreted for its meaning.¹ Ultimately, Gadamer's hermeneutics may do a great deal to justify composition as a human science rather than a hard science. But it also may inadvertently distance us from what actually happens (or ought to happen) in pedagogy: the invention of writing (rather than the interpretation of it). In addition to these difficulties, there is the basic conceptual difficulty contained in the idea of *phronesis*

itself, the problem of imagining the sort of wisdom that is triggered by a situation that has not yet occurred.

Of Phelps's original triumvirate, then, we are left with Dewey and his idea of "experience," which, I argue, offers the most productive available means for doing the work of teaching after pedagogy.² Teaching begins neither in practice nor in theory, but in experience. New teachers, for example, have little to go on except experience, as Erika Lindemann observes: "They *remember how they were taught*; they read; they listen to others suggest what writing courses ought to do—but evaluating the information is difficult. Until they develop a conceptual framework to help them sort out what they read and hear, *they must teach by trial and error*" (3; emphasis added). As we accumulate experience, its power becomes more alluring. Paul Kameen articulates this desire in *Writing/Teaching*: "I'm sure many share the feeling that I've had, quite often, after I've finished teaching a course for the first time: that I wish I could go back and do it over, but with the knowledge I have right now. Not next term or next year, but to go back in time with the same people, the same books. Smarter, this time, though" (131). The ultimate teacher's dream: to teach a particular course with the experience of already having taught that particular course. Wouldn't it be wonderful if, like a pedagogical Bill Murray in *Groundhog Day*, we could anticipate every difficulty, every misunderstanding, and every stumble and then head them off with perfect, brilliant aplomb? (Sure, there is the risk of suicidal ennui, but just think of the teaching evaluations.)

As Kameen understands, such a world is neither attainable nor desirable since such a world makes growth impossible. We can only be smarter *next* time, which means that the smarts we have attained through our experience have to be revised and repurposed. Kameen insists, "It's important to recognize the degree to which what a course actually teaches is not necessarily confined to the time it takes to complete it. . . . Somewhere down the line my thinking about [a course] will make a difference" (131). Ann Berthoff insists that the "most useful slogan for the composition course" is "*Ex nihilo nihil fit*: out of nothing, nothing can be made" ("Learning"

76). The challenge, therefore, is to make something new out of the something we already have. Berthoff's motto makes pedagogy "post" in a literal sense—that is, pedagogy is the work that follows classroom activity rather than precedes it. What we should be asking ourselves, in other words, is the *Tuesday Morning Question*: what do we do on Tuesday morning with the experience of Monday morning? Pedagogy is not the first step; it is the second. It is a "sundown activity," similar to what Gustavo Gutiérrez describes in *Theology of Liberation*:

Theology is reflection, a critical attitude. Theology *follows*; it is the second step. What Hegel used to say about philosophy can likewise be applied to theology: it rises only at sundown. The pastoral activity of the Church does not flow as a conclusion from theological premises. Theology does not produce pastoral activity; rather it reflects upon it. (9)

One need not believe in the Church, liberatory pedagogy, or even Hegelian dialectic to recognize the appropriateness of Gutiérrez's idea for the present discussion. With a couple of key substitutions, we can invent a vision for the Tuesday Morning Question: "*Pedagogy follows*; it is the second step. . . . It rises only at sundown. The *teaching of composition* does not flow as a conclusion from *pedagogical* premises. *Pedagogy* does not produce *teaching*; rather it reflects upon it." Pedagogy is not what we do before we enter the classroom or even while we're there. It is what we do after we leave. Both preposition and adjective, the *after* in *After Pedagogy* refers not only to our contemporary conversation—in which we are skittish about discussing pedagogy at all—but also to a kind of teaching that focuses on how we work with experience that has already occurred. Pedagogy is something we pursue; instead of it following us, we follow it. Our work—literally "post"—is to engage that which is occasioned by our students' work.

Dewey, whose ultimate keyword is *experience*, offers guidance as to how we might make a habit of the Tuesday Morning Question, how we might be smarter next time and how we might make something else out of something. For Dewey, experience is the moment,

the place, and the event where everyday living meets our methods of reflecting on that everyday living. Throughout his vast corpus, Dewey argues that the problem with both education and philosophy is that they have failed to engage experience. Philosophy, he argues, has removed itself from the world and become rigid and scholastic; schooling, meanwhile, denies the needs and interests of students and is therefore desiccated and rote. Dewey's project was to enliven both by introducing them to what Kenneth Burke famously called the Human Barnyard (*Rhetoric* 23). Dewey captured this project experience, which for him meant not only the raw data of everyday living but also our methods of reflecting, repurposing, and learning from everyday living. Put in its tersest form, the argument of *After Pedagogy* is that postpedagogy needs a philosophy of experience if it is to sustain both the activity of pedagogy and the possibility of surprise.

In making this claim, I mean to shift our focus from students' learning to our teaching. Our pedagogical conversation has been plagued by worries that the wrong pedagogy might inflict crippling habits of thought. Expressivism might render students unfit for rhetorical and social cooperation, social construction might disequip students from thinking for themselves, and so on. This anxiety—though important—assumes that we can draw a straight line from an approach to a result. When we worry that a personal essay will encourage an outmoded notion of subjectivity, we presume that our students are utterly malleable. But of course that is not true. Let us grant, then, that our pedagogical interventions do have effects on our students; let us grant that they are willing and able to learn the lessons we have to teach. But let us also grant the basic assumption of postpedagogy—namely, that the pedagogical moment is too complex to be either accurately predicted or exploited. If this last claim is true, then our work can really only ever be the examination of pedagogical experience. We cannot know what precisely the student will do with what we have offered, but we can think with the student about the experience of the offer itself.



Chapter 1, “Inspired Adhoccery,” describes the field’s profound uncertainty about pedagogy while at the same time hinting at a way forward. Clearly, we need to reconsider pedagogy when we find that the “teaching discipline” loses confidence in that teaching mission and even desires to reject it. Given that there will be many more Monday mornings, composition needs to find a way to think about teaching that does not fall into any system-building habit. The phrase I use for this project is “inspired adhoccery,” which I borrow from philosopher Charles Taylor. It captures what I see as the paradox of pedagogical work, which certainly must make ad hoc interventions but does so through commitments, ideals, and experiences imported into the present situation.

In Chapter 2, “Is Teaching Still Impossible?,” I trace the history and theory of the postpedagogical movement in composition. Beginning with the work of Thomas Kent and Victor Vitanza, who find a common influence in Jean-François Lyotard, the chapter follows the postprocess and postpedagogical conversations to their most recent expressions in the work of scholars such as Cynthia Haynes, Thomas Rickert, and Byron Hawk. These scholars urge us not to place too much faith in pedagogy. In effect, they insist that pedagogy cannot be sustained in the familiar ways—through a system or program. In their hands, pedagogy focuses on the accidental, teachable moment: the compelling piece of writing that emerges for reasons we can neither explain nor predict. Put simply, postpedagogy refuses to answer the Monday Morning Question. In so doing, however, it leaves the teacher with the deepest form of pedagogy hope: the hope that the teachable moment will emerge, perhaps even in spite of our pedagogical choices. The problem which such a “nonprogram,” I argue, is that it offers no grounds for sustaining itself. Of course, by its own terms, it cannot offer such grounds. I argue that we can avoid this impasse if we turn away from grounds and toward experience—the experience not just of the student, but of the teacher as well.

To articulate a philosophy of experience for our postpedagogical discipline, I turn to Dewey in Chapter 3, “The Cultivation of *Naïveté*.” Composition has often wondered how students retain

what we have taught them, as though our lessons can be carried in a case. Dewey's notion of experience suggests that what we learn enters into an ecology that immediately reshapes and grants significance to that experience. Thus Dewey's notion of experience offers a way to think about the Tuesday Morning Question. Postpedagogy would have us concentrate our attention on recognizing moments of emergence; Dewey would remind us that such moments are meaningful only insofar as they are incorporated into future possibility. Dewey thus provides the theoretical grounds for continually rethinking and renewing teaching after pedagogy. His philosophy actually begins in praxis—that is, it assumes that practice and theory cannot be divided in our actual experience of the world. They are concomitant and coequal. Because they are so often divided for purposes of analysis, however, the difficulty lies in articulating a praxis that captures the full complexity of their interaction.

For this purpose, I turn to casuistry in Chapter 4, “Unprincipled Pedagogy.” Casuistry is a method of case-based reasoning designed for situations in which two values, goods, or rules conflict. Its usefulness for pedagogy is in its taxonomic method of interpreting situations. Casuistry sees experience as a repertoire of response, a repertoire shaped by particular sensitivity to the new situation. A pedagogical casuistry would therefore allow teachers to bring the given and the new into productive relationship. To be sure, casuistry is a counterintuitive choice for a method. For many, the term itself is arcane and obscure; for many others, casuistry is a synonym for manipulation and deceit. Though its roots can be traced to Aristotle, its reputation has been in decline since the seventeenth century. In between, casuistry became a common form of moral deliberation in the Catholic Church, most closely associated with the Jesuits (whose own name, like casuistry, became a byword for sophistry). In spite of this historical baggage, I turn to casuistry because it is essentially a method of practical reasoning whose self-correcting check is the complexity of experience itself. Applied to teaching, casuistry can balance the (sometimes) competing claims of *kairos* and pedagogy. Composition may no longer believe that we can or should produce pedagogy, but that does not mean we cannot

have a rigorous pedagogical conversation, a conversation tied to the actual experience of teaching.

Most important, casuistry offers pedagogy a method of practical wisdom. Unfortunately, “method” and “practical wisdom” are more often opposed than they are linked. Depending on one’s perspective, method either obviates or stifles practical wisdom; practical wisdom either supplements or compensates for method. Like so many either–or distinctions, this is a false choice. Method is not so generalizable that it cannot be fashioned for particular situations, and situations are not so particular that they cannot be reshaped through method. *After Pedagogy* assumes that practical wisdom itself is produced through the intervention of method. We discern how our old experience does or does not fit new experience, how new experience does or does not fit old assumptions. We experience, we reflect, we shape and reshape action through reflection on past experience. This basic method, which Dewey would call both empirical and practical, guarantees nothing, but uncertainty does not undermine wisdom. In the realm of praxis, wisdom without uncertainty is not wisdom at all. The once and future challenge to teaching is to articulate our wisdom with and within this uncertainty.

In *After Pedagogy*, Paul Lynch opens a space for the ongoing development of an “inspired adhocery” over the course of a teacher’s life in the classroom. Because we are always in the inescapably contingent position of teaching after whatever has been taught and learned *before*, we can never know in advance, either via our training in theory or our prior experience in the classroom, how best to prepare for or respond to what happens in our next class. This is not a crisis, Lynch argues; it is the condition that underlies the experience of all teaching.

—Richard E. Miller, coauthor of *Habits of the Creative Mind*

What does it mean to teach after pedagogy?

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

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

By turning what students and teachers know about writing into an area of intellectual inquiry, a philosophy of experience can make teaching sustainable after pedagogy.

Paul Lynch is assistant professor of English at Saint Louis University, where he teaches courses in rhetoric and composition. His work has appeared in *College Composition and Communication*, *College English*, *Pedagogy*, *Present Tense*, and *Rhetoric Review*.

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