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## **Education Reform and the Limits of Discourse: Rereading Collaborative Revision of a Composition Program's Textbook**

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This article links failed reform to failed education through a case study of an annual collaborative revision of a program textbook in the Composition Program at the University of California at Irvine. Review of successive editions of the program's *Student Guide to Writing at UCI* reveals a progressive retreat from the program's pedagogical commitments and the reappearance of product-oriented instruction.

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**T**here is increasing evidence that the failure of education reform is located in the educative act itself. James Milroy and Lesley Milroy observe that teachers' "rational conviction" about the intellectual bankruptcy of traditional notions of correctness in language use did not necessarily alter teachers' classroom practices, even though teachers appeared to believe they had done so (104). In a 1995 review of the assessment-driven reform movement across the United States, Larry Cuban reports a similar phenomenon. Teachers who actively embraced in-service training required to teach to the new assessments did not change their instructional practice to any significant degree, although teachers appeared to believe they had made the changes they had been taught

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(55–57). More generally, “researchers have found few substantial changes in teaching as a result of new state curricula” across the nation (55). A study by Glynda Hull and her colleagues of a single teacher’s training in “Remediation As Social Construction” further suggests that idiosyncratic student performance can prompt a teacher to engage in instructional practices that her training had discredited. A study of the classroom practices of a national expert on process pedagogy suggested to Arthur Applebee an enactment of process so reified as to render it meaningless to students who, not surprisingly, experienced writing as “busy work.” Diane Halpern reports that 21% of the adults responding to a random survey in the United States were convinced that the sun revolves around the earth. She goes on to discuss the extent to which a teacher’s failure to address the implicit and explicit beliefs that support students’ models of how the world works prevents students from learning anything that runs contrary to those models. Halpern also argues that teachers fail to learn for similar reasons. Her favorite example is “the deadly dull three-hour lecture [she] once sat through on the shortness of people’s attention span” (B5).

These examples of failed reform are also examples of failed education. They appear to confirm the analyses of Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, Michel Foucault, and Louis Althusser, who define the failure of education as inevitable because dominant discourses, beliefs, and practices easily reproduce themselves in disciplinary state institutions. However, all the above reforms, whether “conservative” or “liberal,” fail for the same reason: what people say is at odds with what they do.<sup>1</sup> Hegemony is apparently two-fold, as Antonio Gramsci has argued. An explicit theory of practice is organized by a purely verbal system of beliefs that determines group membership. An implicit theory of practice, often at odds with the verbal system, determines performance. Gramsci would call these implicit, practical discourses part of the “common sense” that subjects inherit with normative cultural performance (333, 323). Bourdieu might define this kind of “common sense” as an effect of an institutional-cultural “habitus” that organizes practical action. Halpern might define it as an implicit model of how the world works in schools. We can integrate Gramsci and the concept of implicit models or habitual discourses of practical action with theories of postmodern subjection by drawing on a poststructuralist theory of the sign: The referent of the sign is always another sign. People “talk the talk” of an explicit theoretical discourse that determines group membership, but they “walk the walk” of an implicit practical discourse that determines what the explicit theory is understood to “mean.” Explicit

theory functions, largely, as a discursive layer of redescription that refers to but does not alter very much the terms of a latent discourse that organizes practical action. Indeed, postmodern theory requires this layering and divi-

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sion of discursive-linguistic functioning. If no subject is possible, absent a discourse, then learners are always already subjected at the point of any (further) education. It is not conceivable that a few hours of in-service, a few days of TA preservice training, or even a fifteen-week course in comp-rhet theory could entirely displace upwards of sixteen years of discursive

formation as a literate subject, which is not to mention any number of years as a practicing professional, even presuming that all these subjects actively engage new learning and commit themselves to a change in their practices. As the researchers above have observed, teachers believe they have altered their practices even though their classroom performances exhibit little significant change. One can assume very little change in student performances as well. In this view, we can begin to understand why hard-working, often overworked, teachers become cynical about the value of “the latest fad” in education reform or the time required for in-service training. To this purely epistemic or cognitive problem can be added Zygmunt Bauman’s analysis of the moral-political shift in the social construction of postmodern authority in institutionalized discourse. A decentered understanding of responsibility for enacting what is “right” and “wrong” or “professional” and “appropriate” is also determined, to a significant degree, by subjective formation within the strictures of institutional norms. John Trimbur has described this kind of effect as the “group think” that sometimes follows from collaborative learning. The groupthink of postmodern departmental and institutional norms, Bauman suggests, is a potent force in rendering nugatory any individual moral-professional responsibility for action.

John Clifford has argued that interrogating the local, specific, historical, and political contention through which discourse takes its ordering principles is necessary to understanding its (motivated) effects. While that kind of interrogation is important to fully understand how and why a specific reform fails in a specific institution, it is also the case that all the above failures have in

common the general decentering effects of “subjection” and the concomitant alienation of subjects from (relative) cognitive authority. That decentered subject is the general condition of possibility that makes Clifford’s argument for local precision a valid one. However, the common feature of the failures above suggests that the implications of that general condition have not been fully articulated or examined. Indeed, if one were to focus solely on the local, specific, historical, and political contentions surrounding what people say about their theoretical orientation, the examples of failure, above, suggest that the analysis would be incomplete.

Mainstream educators and pundits have begun to recognize the effects of decentered subjectivity, even if they may not accept the radical explanation of its “cause.” The pervasive hue and cry with respect to critical thinking, active learning, and reflective practice across the entire gamut of political persuasions is one symptom of an emerging rejection of what the theory movement has been able to chart as it wanes: Normative educational socialization of subjects within the modern, although designed to promote “natural reason,” has effects virtually indistinguishable from rote learning. The postmodern critique of “rational” and “disciplinary” discourse therefore indexes a return of the repressed. Modernity was inaugurated, in part, by a rejection of rote learning affiliated with scholasticism. The postmodern subject of advanced capital appears to require discursive support for (relatively) greater cognitive authority, just as the subject of modernity appeared to require (relatively) greater cognitive authority than scholastic training could provide. Institutionalized, educative discourse is now a significant site for intervention, just as it was with the advent of modernity. That is the purpose of many emerging discourses within composition and literary studies and the purpose of all the reforms noted above.

The collaborative pedagogical culture of the Composition Program at the University of California at Irvine suggests, indeed, that instituting and maintaining a new educational discourse is a difficult project, even when supported by a high degree of consensus. The textual record of the annual revision of *A Student Guide to Writing at UCI*, the program’s core textbook, reveals a slow retreat from reform, a retreat that proceeded unobserved and unauthorized by the administrators and teachers, who remained committed to process-based reforms. This paradoxical phenomenon is a local and sustained

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version of the kinds of failure noted above. Discussion with participants in the revision and study of the textbook itself suggest that discourse is more open than Bourdieu, Foucault, and Althusser have argued, but it is more closed than a strictly liberal, rhetorical approach assumes. Reform was not secured through individual rational conviction and familiar training programs alone. Reform needed to have reached deeper than conscious conviction in order to alter the “hundreds of minor and arbitrary truths [that] are taken for granted, unchallenged, accepted as inevitable”—a virtually endless task—rooted in a “minute, molecular process” of transformation (Gramsci quoted in Clifford 43, 51). What Richard Miller calls “sustainable reform” is “perpetually in need of fixing,” not only as a result of systemic institutional constraints such as Miller has examined in *As If Learning Mattered* (204), but also because the discourse through which reform is codified and enacted is often insufficiently profound and will, in any case, remain perpetually fragile rather than a simple and lasting fait accompli of direct in-service or graduate training. I’d like now to explore the annual, collaborative revision of Irvine’s program textbook as a case in point.

### **Institutional history**

The Composition Program at the University of California at Irvine teaches approximately 300 sections of composition per year in five lower-division writing courses over three quarters.<sup>2</sup> These five courses are linked as an instructional series of prerequisites and requirements. More than one hundred sections are offered in Writing 39B, the introductory first-year course, which I directed from 1996 to 2000. Students are enrolled in courses on the basis of their scores on the system-wide University of California writing placement exam, administered each spring to more than 17,000 future first-year students.

The Composition Program at UCI is part of the Department of English and Comparative Literature and the School of Humanities. Because it teaches required lower-division courses, the program is accountable to the Senate faculty of the university as a whole and is routinely reviewed by a committee of both internal and external reviewers appointed for that purpose. It is also accountable to the university system administered from the president’s office in Oakland. During any given quarter, the program employs approximately 100 teaching assistants or former teaching assistants, all of whom it has trained. Instruction, staffing, curriculum, and in-service in the several courses are administered by the campus writing director, three course directors, three teacher mentors, an office manager, and her assistant.

Since the early 1980s, the current campus writing director has promoted

process theory, peer review, and collaborative and student-centered learning. As a result, the program's pedagogical and institutional culture is strongly corporate, collaborative, and processural. Housed in the "theory hot house" of Irvine's English and Comparative Literature Department and drawing on the inherent strengths of graduate students pursuing such training, the UCI Composition Program has also drawn on poststructuralism as a support for process and on theorists in composition and rhetoric influenced by postmodernism and poststructuralism, such as David Bartholomae, Lester Faigley, and Susan Miller. Collaborative learning and process writing have been framed at Irvine as practices that

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decenter authority; writing has been articulated in relation to a process approach to interpretation of text and world-as-text. New teaching assistants learn the program's theoretical orientation and curriculum through a collaborative process that includes preservice instruction in the curriculum and expected classroom practices, weekly staff meetings, a graduate seminar in rhetoric and composition theory, one-on-one mentoring, and a variety of related supports for professional development. By these means, teaching assistants become qualified to participate as collaborative writers in the annual process of revising the program textbook. It would seem, then, that Irvine exhibits the optimal conditions for what Richard Miller calls "sustainable" reform. Institutional culture reinforces and employs the very practices and procedures that the teachers teach and have been taught.

Produced at the suggestion of the chair of English and comparative literature, with the support of the dean of humanities, *A Student Guide to Writing at UCI* was first published in 1993. The book was designed to codify nearly fifteen years of the oral "folklore of practice and pedagogy" that defined a relatively "young program" developed out of reforms in the 1980s (1st i).<sup>3</sup> As an effort merely to "state publicly what [program teachers] do and why they do it," the *Student Guide* was not understood to constitute any change in pedagogical practice, administrative procedure, or theoretical orientation (1st i). Its first chapters present students and teachers with a theoretical rationale for a required sequence of lower-division writing courses. Succeeding chapters explicate the process of reading and writing students are expected to learn. In the first edition, interviews with course directors address commonly asked questions and explain the program's theoretical rationale in more detail. Perfor-

mance standards, rubrics, and annotated anchor papers support grading in specific courses. Portfolios of student writing support class discussion of the writing process and peer review. The *Student Guide* was created through the cooperative efforts of the campus writing director and the program's administrative and instructional staff of course directors, teacher mentors, and teaching assistants. It has been revised every year since publication of the first edition. By the time I arrived in 1996, as new faculty, the *Student Guide* was a central textbook for all five lower-division writing courses.

Participation in the annual revision process has been an important avenue to professional development. All work on the *Student Guide* has been voluntary. Revision is initiated by teaching assistants, mentor teachers, and course directors who use the book in their classrooms. All teaching assistants and course directors who want to work on the book are welcomed into the revision group. Discussion of proposed changes and drafts in circulation among participants has been egalitarian, amicable, and inclusive. Revision proceeds under the specific editorship of course directors and under the general editorship of the campus writing director. Each fall, desk copies of the new edition of the *Student Guide* are distributed to the entire teaching staff during the annual joint staff meeting, and teachers who worked on the revision offer brief presentations on new features. The *Student Guide* revision process is, then, a model of collaborative, process-based, social construction of a shared pedagogical document. But by 1997, the text had become far more organized by traditional dos and don'ts, which operated in contradictory relation to unchanging theoretical statements about the program's process approach.

I undertook a study of the *Student Guide* in an effort to account for the possibility of divergent but apparently legitimate interpretations of its grading rubric.<sup>4</sup> In our curricular meetings, teacher mentors produced quite divergent assessments of the same papers and supported their assessments through appeal to virtually the same language in the *Student Guide*. Rather than force consensus, we began to explore the basis of our differing interpretations of *Student Guide* language. These discussions led to my formal study of all existing editions of the *Student Guide*, which surfaced a progressive retreat from the program's core commitments. I then discussed the history of the program and the *Student Guide* revision process with the campus writing director, who is the primary administrator for writing instruction across the campus and a major architect of the program itself. His name appears first on the title page of all editions, having served as "the principal editor" when the book was created (1st i), as "editor and voice of the guide" (2nd ii), and as an acknowledged

source of “advice” in subsequent editions (e.g., 3rd ii; 4th ii). In our conversations about the program and its history, the campus writing director did not suggest that he had authorized or observed any significant changes in the theory or pedagogy that the *Student Guide* represents.<sup>5</sup> Although every edition’s acknowledgments outline changes made to the text, none announce any shift in pedagogy, theory, or approach.

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Acknowledged revisions are understood to provide “expanded description and many more examples” or a revised “version” of the text’s “wording” (2nd i); changes “building once again on the strength of the two earlier editions” (3rd i); or “new material,” an “expanded section,” and “more specific information” (4th i). Every acknowledgment in every edition names every curricular leader and a large number of TAs as contributors.

I went on to speak with several former contributing editors, teacher mentors, and teaching assistants who had participated in various revisions. These informal talks and interviews confirmed the evidence of the acknowledgments: Revision was not understood to have made any significant change in the program’s theoretical and practical commitments. On the other hand, further study of differences in the interpretations and uses of *Student Guide* language confirmed the findings of initial meetings: Different program participants had quite distinctive interpretations of some of the key terms through which the program’s commitments were articulated. Beneath the surface of what appeared to be a high degree of consensus, codified in a widely shared pedagogical discourse, was an undercurrent of interpretive differences that, apparently, had never been fully articulated. The performative relationship between administrative policy and enactment, theory and pedagogical practice, training and learning was compromised by the very medium—instructional and institutional discourse—that proved quite other than translucent for the teachers and administrators inscribed within them. The combined effects of variable appropriations of the program’s core discourses resulted in the slow accretion of multiple and significant change over time. That slow accretion had dramatic effects on the coherence of the program’s pedagogical discourse but no specifically localizable point of “origination” or authority, to the extent that no one appears even to have observed, let alone authorized or deliberately authored, any change understood to be substantive.

Practically speaking, however, no theorized approach to language instruction can be inaugurated from a position entirely outside the traditions to which

it is critical. Early process pedagogy can be understood as a discursive hybrid that retains traces of the traditional, strictly product-oriented pedagogies to which it had been opposed.<sup>6</sup> The reversion to more product-oriented approaches at Irvine was supported in part by the imperfect break, within process itself, with precursor traditions. That imperfection is a function of unavoidable disjunctions that proceed from the limits of discourse. Theories are neat, ideal, bounded systems; practice is messy, variable, and open ended. Any theory therefore exists, in fact and in principle, in disjunctive relation to the pragmatic totality of possibilities within which it might be implemented. On the other hand, and despite this unavoidable disjunction, the possibility of performing a new (reforming) theory within a specific pragmatic scene requires an integration of theory and practice through which they are virtually indistinguishable, the very schemata of assumptions and practices that support pragmatic action having been altered. But, as suggested above, language users are not in entire control of their practices or possessed of knowledge that can be entirely unified. They create greater and lesser degrees of integration. Not only do specific local contingencies render practice messy, language users necessarily appropriate “the same” discourse in different ways and to different

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degrees, contingent upon the archive of discourses and experience they bring to their training. Learning and reform are therefore organized by disruptions, tempo-

rary hybrids, gaps, and provisional coherences that cannot be known in advance. Failure to create or maintain change inaugurated by instruction in or dissemination of a reform’s theory and practice would then be, in part, an effect of a failure to consider diversity in appropriation as an inevitable and ongoing part of any process of language learning, use, instruction, or pragmatic corporate action.

Reform is “perpetually in need of fixing” in part because diversity in the appropriation of any discourse is inevitable, even if it is motivated by consensus. The reform that led to the institution of process approaches at Irvine was of such long duration that there was virtually no dissent on this point among those directly responsible for teacher training, curriculum development, and editorial guidance of the *Student Guide* revision. The assumption created by this virtually unanimous support is of widely shared, perfect appropriation—an assumption that proved unwarranted. Irvine’s textbook revision process suggests, alternatively, that institutions fail to sustain change for the same rea-

son they fail to maintain perfect bureaucratic functioning: Language and discourse are not translucent, and people are not perfect or identical.

The Composition Program's successive revisions of its primary textbook produced three kinds of unnoticed retreat from process approaches and critical textual studies: (1) process theory itself emerged as a discursive hybrid, retaining latent features of the instructional tradition to which it had been opposed; (2) efforts to present complex theories of text in terms undergraduates might understand reintroduced an approach to close reading grounded in immediate intuition, of which the program's poststructuralist approach to reading is otherwise critical; (3) an unobserved conflict between nonlinear processes of literate performance and rubric-based scoring protocols resulted in a style of explicitness that reintroduced product-oriented instruction. Because the coherence and dissemination of the theory and practice represented by the *Student Guide* were never in doubt, revisions, which increasingly diverged from unchanged theoretical statements in the *Student Guide*, appeared as legitimate parts of the program's instruction. Changes in the textbook resulted in a significant shift in the program's pedagogy, but those changes were not supposed to have had that effect and, to that extent, were not authored by anyone.

### **Writing: process instruction and the text of the *Student Guide***

The first edition of the *Student Guide* is a slim volume that sets forth basic pedagogical commitments. The explicit theoretical rationale for the program's curriculum, published in the first edition of the *Student Guide* in 1993, remained virtually unchanged throughout the four-year process of revision. The central role of "text" in the curriculum is presented in that chapter:

To write about a text—your life, an object, a short story—suggests that human beings understand the world through language, and interpretation means looking at things as if they were made up of words. In some sense, a text is like a web, a series of overlapping and interacting meanings, yet those meanings are not obvious since you must question them, unravel them from the web, and interpret them in your own way. (1st 11; 4th 10)

Text constructs experience of the world rather than recording or representing it. Insofar as a person's life is intelligible at all, it *is* a text in the above formulation. "Text" would therefore be a name for the dynamic, differential, linguistic network that conditions "experience," making it appear ordered—legible—in a particular way. Students might therefore be taught how to read/write a per-

ceptual tableaux and consider the assumptions and consequences of understanding oneself to read/write—or construct—a scene, as opposed to seeing it. Instruction in reading and writing might then go on to support students' efforts to surface and account for the formative effects of the linguistic practices, discourses, narratives, textual orders that they have internalized and through which they necessarily and inescapably read/write. By creating a dialogue between their textual inheritance, its ordering effects, and the possibilities that a complex text can inaugurate for an engaged reader/writer, students can learn how to recognize, manipulate, and revise the textual and discursive knowledge they already have and develop, thereby, practices and positions that may be new to them. Robert Land, the assistant director of the program in 1994, puts it this way: "Students have to think beyond received notions, so that they can use writing as a way of learning, a way of knowing. . . . We want to change students' ideas about what *writing* is, and resisting pre-conceived ideas is part of that process." (Land qtd. in 1st 73, emphasis in the original).

The assignment sequence for Writing 39B presented in the first edition of the *Student Guide* appears to support students' study of text and textuality as a concept and theme of the course, embedding that study in a process approach to writing:

Assignment 1: Analyze a photograph as text.

Assignment 2: Analyze the use of language in a single print passage.

Assignment 3: In-Class Essay Test: first draft of Assign 5.

Assignment 4: Library Collaboration on poem/short story for Assign 5.

Assignment 5: Literary Analysis of a poem or short story. (1st 6–8 )

The opening gesture of this sequence is an exercise in defamiliarization, designed to teach the concept of text as such (1st 7, 11, 73–74). Students are asked to treat a photograph as if it were "a written text" and to "evaluate not only WHAT the photograph says, but also HOW it says it . . . Use the information in the photograph—what is present and what might be missing—to interpret the photograph" (1st 7).

The second assignment is organized around a rhetorical approach to language. Students are asked to consider "how the author uses a specific strategy to achieve a particular effect on the reader" (1st 7). Text is not presented solely as an ideal network of signs that hide/disclose "meaning." Texts can have effects on readers, suggesting that students might study their responses as a way

to open a reading. The third assignment situates in-class, on-demand writing as “first draft”—an initial effort to interpret a short text. The collaborative library assignment reinforces the group work and peer review done in class.

The course culminates in the fifth assignment, which is structured as an exploration of the potential of a single text to support different interpretations. Having asked the student to “argue for an interpretation of a poem or a work of short fiction,” the assignment lays out the following requirements:

1. Present and support one interpretation.
2. Present and explain (perhaps briefly) an alternative perspective that would lead to a different but credible interpretation.
3. Argue for the interpretation in #1 as being more credible than the interpretation discussed in #2. (1st 8)

Emphasis on audience and argumentation suggests, again, a rhetorical approach. In requiring students to consider alternative interpretations, this assignment also requires them to consider the potential for text to produce multiple rather than singular effects. Although the assignment does not invite discussion of different subject positions as a determinate factor in what appears most persuasive, it does not preclude discussion of that difference either. In the first edition, then, the assignment sequence for Writing 39B begins with an exploration of text as a concept and guides students in the study of close reading, rhetorical effect, audience, interpretation, and argument.

Process pedagogy in writing and poststructuralist approaches to reading have focused on nonlinear, recursive, generative models of language that are holistic. Revision of the *Student Guide* suggests that a linear, more product-oriented approach found its way into the curriculum because process pedagogy is a hybrid that includes latent traces of that linear model. As Sharon Crowley has demonstrated in *Methodical Memory*, the linear model of language learning was developed in the eighteenth century and has remained current in twentieth-century textbooks on writing. Its formalist parsing of writing into discrete skills that must be mastered before moving to the next skill often results in very little time actually spent using reading and writing to do serious intellectual work. This preparatory formalism is the problematic, uncriticized element that process pedagogy both retains and masks—with the help of Jerome Bruner’s cognitive psychology.

Both Crowley (“Around 1971” 195–202) and James Berlin (122–24) document the pervasive influence of Bruner’s model of intellectual development on

the process movement. Seminal process theory, such as R. D. Rohman and Albert Wlecke's *Pre-Writing: The Construction of Models for Concept Formation in Writing*, drew on Bruner to develop theories of invention based on introspective cognition.<sup>7</sup> As Crowley observes, Bruner provided theoretical support for emphasis on interiority, expressivist rhetoric, and creativity, which is problematic in its location of invention entirely in the mind ("Around 1971" 200). However, Bruner's "spiral" curriculum was designed to teach the conceptual structure of the "content" disciplines through a "process of education" organized by heuristic tasks that return, recursively, with increasing sophistication to previously learned conceptual ensembles. For Bruner, a student's subjectivity is strictly cognitive and focused on a disciplinary content. For Rohman

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and Wlecke, a student's subjectivity includes a psychological dimension: Writing proceeds from introspective relation to general knowledge a student already has.

The absence of any disciplinary "content" in process writing oddly supports transforming process itself into reified content-to-be-learned. The writing process is (re)defined as a series of discrete, partial tasks: pre-writing, first draft, revision, proofreading. These partial tasks become, de facto, the "basic

skills" to be learned prior to engagement with any specific intellectual project, situated purpose, or discipline-based argument. Clifford describes just such a transformation of process into content (48) as does Applebee. Where the preparatory formalism of linear, product-oriented writing instruction presents the sequential mastery of various parts of text as the basic skills necessary to constructing whole texts, process pedagogy can (re)present the stages of a process as the basic skills necessary to creation of a whole text. That linear, narrative procedure can then function as a formal scaffold around which other re-emergent elements of product-oriented instruction can cohere as part of what appears to be process pedagogy itself.

The *Student Guide* includes language reflecting the influence of Bruner and the early expressivist approach to writing. The sequence moves "from self to others, from up close to far away" (1st 12), or from personal narrative in 39A, through analysis in 39B, to research-based argument in 39C. The entire

curriculum is “*sequential* and *cumulative*”; “one assignment builds upon and complicates previous ones,” having a cumulative effect that “is greater than the sum of its parts.” (1st 11, emphasis in the original). Writing 39B, which mediates the shift from the personal to the academic, “moves from analysis of academic writing, based on readings in fiction and non-fiction, to more and more complicated tasks of interpretation” (1st 1). The language, here, closely resembles Bruner’s description of the spiral curriculum, but the complexity of this spiral will be determined by “*tasks* of interpretation” (which, by any other name, are still *assignments*) rather than by the constructive, recursive process of interpreting any complex text (regardless of the assignment given) or by the constructive, recursive process of writing itself (regardless of the assignment given) or by any useful integration of these two complementary processes. The implicit division of reading from writing situates writing as a mere medium for recording interpretations that would seem to take place largely through introspection and intuition antecedent to writing.

Although the assignment sequence for Writing 39B in the first edition is the most faithful to critical textual studies and instruction in argument, it retains traces of the linear, product-oriented approach to which process theory was originally opposed. The sequence begins with a promising holistic and heuristic approach: study of photographs to support discussion of what it means to call something a text. But the balance of the sequence is parsed into tasks or procedures that move from part to whole, in a linear series of discrete procedures-to-be-learned. The writing assignments represent largely managerial tasks, rather than questions, problems, heuristics, or specific inquiry and argument. Assignment two requires partial analysis of one text, deciding for students how much text they should consider. The third assignment requires performance of one stage of the writing process: a first draft for the final assignment. The final assignment requires students to bring all the parts together in a draft of an argument based on textual analysis. Students therefore prepare over the course of ten weeks to write one argument/paper.

In addition, the tasks that form the assignment sequence do not live up entirely to the theoretical claims made about them. The students are asked to explore the potential of a text to support multiple readings, but the assignment promotes demonstration of interpretive validity. To be faithful to the theoretical statements in the *Student Guide*, the assignment should have required discussion of the variable assumptions or reading practices that support equally or differently credible responses to textual ambiguity. A student essay, written in response to the assignment, suggests that students were not

confined to a discourse on validity, but any divergence from it went unrewarded. In “My Papa, the Drunkard: Abusive or Antic,” published in the *Student Guide* in 1994, the student writer does not argue that his choosing to interpret the father as playful is more valid than the alternative; he argues that his lack of experience with alcoholic adults leads him to read in a distinctive way: “Why I interpreted the poem in this manner is because I did not come from a family where drinking problems have occurred . . . to others this may not be the case” (2nd 210). However, the teacher-authored commentary on “My Papa, the Drunkard” undermines the student’s nascent insight. According to the teacher, the student’s paper is well written because he discusses “different possibilities of the poem’s language, while also taking a stand and making a decided interpretation” (2nd 210). In other words, a student paper that achieves some of what the *Student Guide*’s theoretical statements promote, as the variability and ambiguity of text, is “misread” by teacher commentary, so that the paper appears to conform to a conservative assignment promoting univocal validity in interpretation. As we shall see, the lack of an adequate reading pedagogy to support the theoretical statements of the *Student Guide* had a narrowing effect on the program’s practical orientation.

### **Reading: translating theory into instructional discourse**

The possibility for a return to reading practices at odds with poststructuralist approaches to text can be located in the initial discussion of textuality, quoted above, which is evidently concerned with translating a complex interpretive discourse into terms that undergraduates might understand. Two terms are especially problematic: *meaning* and *analysis*. The discussion situates “text”/“language” implicitly as a medium between the reader and the “world” or “meanings.” However, text conceived as mediation posits subjects and objects prior to or “outside” text. There are no subjects or objects prior to language, if text is understood as the condition and effect of “experience” always already textually ordered. If text is situated as a medium between student and world/meanings, text becomes, de facto, the signifier, while world/meanings become, de facto, the signified (referent). When the student reader is confronted with the web-like density of literature, emergent awareness of the signifier considered as a trope is understood to restructure signification as a literary effect.

Wlad Godzich describes the approach implied here as a “commonplace of undergraduate courses in literature.” Students are presented with texts, the “literariness” of which renders the immediate textual surface opaque. Close reading, which both values and works against that opacity, is understood to

result in a sudden “moment of illumination when everything will become clear, when [students] will *understand*” (148, emphasis added). Understanding enables students to reread and explicate how opacity hides/discloses the force of a text, which is to say they can recount how form and content work in concert to produce “meaning.” They can do “analysis.” The romantic root of this expressivist approach is evident in Godzich’s choice of metaphor: “illumination.” And as Godzich observes, “one of the more insidious [effects of this pedagogy] has been the separation of students into two different groups on the basis of their success or failure in achieving illumination” (n. 6, 303). This issue is particularly crucial at Irvine, as it is at an increasing number of institutions, where many undergraduates are first-generation college students and/or immigrants and international students. Absent very much of the cultural and literate context presupposed by the “commonplace” approach to reading Anglo-British texts, students from nondominant groups are less likely to achieve the prescribed “illumination.”

Critical textual studies calls into question various forms of immediacy presupposed by the commonplace approach to reading above, but the *Student Guide* does not offer a pedagogy that honors the concept of text and the process of critical analysis it would seem to be teaching. Efforts to discuss text in terms understandable to undergraduates provided, instead, an opening for the reappearance of an approach to reading based in intuition. In 1994, a much narrower version of the literary emerges, which responds in more familiar ways to the traditional reading pedagogy latent in the program’s definition of text in relation to “meanings.”

Revision began in 1994 by dropping the analysis of a photograph and omitting the holistic focus on defamiliarization of text and interpretation. While use of a photograph to foreground the differences between “common sense” notions of reading and the unfamiliar practices that students are to learn is not the only way or perhaps even the best way to initiate rethinking on the students’ part, it does acknowledge that the approach to text to be taught is distinctive and nonobvious.

Through revision, the second assignment becomes the first. Students are required to “analyze” the “language” in a single passage, in order to “explain

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how the language works” (2nd 7), an approach grounded in the commonplace reading pedagogy that Godzich calls into question. While teaching first-year writing students how to do close reading is important, the commonplace approach stations them before a text and implicitly relies on intuition. Certainly a teacher might intervene and help students consider reading as anything but a matter of immediate intuition. But a written assignment speaks much more loudly than any other instruction. It is what students in a first-year course engage when they finally sit down to do their assignment. The assignment text implies that immediate intuition is adequate, any additional instruction merely additional. Because many teachers using the assignments and the *Student Guide* are also learning teachers, the sequence implicitly teaches them that such an assignment is a “good” one.

A new and promising second assignment is introduced. Students are asked to “analyze how several different authors treat a similar theme and formulate [their] own response to one of the thematic questions the various readings raise” (2nd 7–8). This would have been much more appropriate for a first assignment. It begins to teach students that “meaning” and reading are generated by differences rather than simple intuition. Such an assignment provides to beginning readers what classical rhetoric provided to beginning writers: a doable invention strategy through which to generate a reading/text. It therefore supports useful instruction in close reading as a practice that proceeds powerfully through differential analysis. Skilled readers perusing what appears empirically to be a single text are not, of course, actually reading only one text. They read a text in differential relation to an internal, textual, and discursive archive produced by years of reading. The more slender a reader’s internal archive, the more that reader can be helped by what appears to be too much: differential analysis of two texts rather than isolated focus on one. As an alternative to literal differential analysis, one might also begin teaching students how to recognize the degree to which they are not in fact reading only one text either, when empirically it seems they are, and begin demystifying critical reading as an effect of immediate intuition that only a small number of people can ever do very well.<sup>8</sup>

As a result of a further revision in 1994, the telos of the course is no longer argumentation. Students are rather asked to do very specific, traditional exegesis: “Select one element of the novel (plot, character, foreshadowing, setting, symbolism, point of view, or theme) and analyze how a part of this element enriches your understanding of the novel as a whole” (2nd 8). The assignment would seem to draw out more strongly a focus on the literary, which may have

been understood to support greater focus on the textual, by requiring students to engage a much longer text (a novel) and to examine quite specific elements of that text. However, the new assignment does not require or foster acknowledgment of potential differences in interpretation or possibilities for turning the text on itself. It rather equates a very specific style of aesthetic experience with “understanding” the text itself, as in the “commonplace” approach to undergraduate instruction in reading. Such an assignment would also not be much of a writing assignment or instruction in rhetoric to the extent that argument is no longer explicitly required.

The effect of this change is evident in the papers published in 1995 after a year of teaching the revised assignment sequence. The model papers in the third edition no longer include any recognition of textual ambiguity and multiplicity. “The Elements of Imagery: Fire and Water,” written by an unnamed student, is offered as a “superior” response to the final assignment in the course. As the teacher commentary on this paper observes, it argues “that fire and water imagery symbolizes the mutability and intensity of human emotions throughout *Like Water for Chocolate* by Laura Esquivel” (3rd 125). Absent in both the teacher commentary and the student’s paper is any sense that a different reader might interpret this imagery differently. Teacher commentary instead focuses on purely formal features of the text: how each paragraph “develops a particular example,” how the paper is “focus[ed] on two specific symbolic elements that control the structure of the entire essay” and “provid[es] clear definitions of each term,” and so on (3rd 125). The merely “good” essay is faulted for being “somewhat conventional” in its interpretation, but it is less conventional than the perfection of the paper praised as superior. It acknowledges that text can have effects on a reader as opposed to existing in ideal coherence despite any reader at all; it also

acknowledges that cultural narratives—the “traditional marriage” that “usually contains a husband and a wife”—are put into question by the novel under discussion: Rachel Ingells’s *Mrs. Caliban*. The

teacher commentary discusses this paper in purely formal terms as well, pointing out “the writer’s lapses into summary,” “failure to define ‘identity,’” “lack of adequate textual support,” “weak transition between paragraphs three and four,” and so on (3rd 133). Student performance and teacher commentary shift to a product-oriented, formalist understanding of writing as reading shifts to the “commonplace” approach Godzich describes.

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In 1994, the assignment sequence in Writing 39B begins to surface an approach to reading that displaces a more critical discussion of text, which the *Student Guide* would seem elsewhere to support. However, even initial discussions in the first edition of the *Student Guide* do not appear to draw on the greatest potentials of poststructuralism to support a distinctively generative approach to reading. That absence may have contributed to a return to a potentially mystifying approach to reading based on immediate intuition.

### **Assessment: learning to follow procedures**

The *Student Guide* also publishes performance standards for use in assessing student writing. These standards include sample student essays, written commentary on the essays, and a grading rubric that describes the attributes of five levels of performance: “Superior,” “Good,” “Competent,” “Marginally Passing,” “Non-Passing.” Publication of shared standards and rubric-based grading protocols is not unique to Irvine. It has been an important part of efforts across

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the United States to promote assessment-driven reform. However, this discourse on assessment accounts for an additional, significant influence on the outcome of the *Student Guide* revision process. Beginning with revisions made in 1995, competing discursive pressures proceeding from a commitment to rubric-based assessment, on the one

hand, and hybrid process theory, on the other, extend the assessment discourse on explicit representation of expected performance to virtually all aspects of instructional discourse. Increasingly, the prose of the *Student Guide* is replaced by bullets and organized by lists of dos and don'ts. Reading and writing are atomized and proceduralized in an apparent effort to tell students how to succeed. Product-oriented instructional discourse constellates around the reifying effects of hybrid process theory embedded in the assignment sequence. The odd effect is to make reading and writing disappear in a thicket of procedures.

Students receive the most explicit instruction in “analysis.” Every edition of the *Student Guide* suggests that the writing of students who learn to do analysis will change dramatically. Students who do not perform analysis by the end of Writing 39B cannot pass the course. One example of procedural instruction in analysis appears under the discussion of effective quotation:

The most important rule to remember is this: if you quote, *you must demonstrate that you understand the lines you quote, and the best way to do that is to comment on the quotation*. Quotations are never self-explanatory—if they were, there would be no need for your analysis. (4th 74, emphasis in the original)

The rule sets forth a narrative procedure: follow quotation with commentary, the purpose of which is to demonstrate understanding. The “commonplace” approach to reading is reprised here, as students are required to demonstrate reading comprehension rather than interpretation of text. The following excerpt is offered in the *Student Guide* as a model text that exemplifies appropriate performance of this procedure:

In his book *Principles of Psychology*, first published in 1890, the psychologist William James tries to explain how the mind experiences itself. He argues that “consciousness does not appear to itself chopped up in bits.” Instead, “it flows”: “a ‘river’ or a ‘stream’ is the metaphor by which it is most naturally described” (1:239). Here James turns something hard to understand into something familiar: a river or a stream. He says these words are “metaphors” to show that the mind is not actually flowing water. In this way, he makes something invisible (thoughts, feeling) visible (moving water). (4th 75)

The passage substitutes a self-reflexive analysis of the force of metaphor for a discussion of James and exemplifies the student’s apparent effort to follow the procedure set forth in the rule about quotation: that the student understands how meaning is constructed and therefore understands the meaning of the quoted lines. While the student’s commentary is perhaps indicative of an emergent understanding of metaphor, it does not explain the point, “hard to understand,” that James is making, nor is it especially indicative of textual analysis that will serve the student well in other courses.

Concomitantly, analysis is represented as a matter of discrete reading skills. In 1996, the *Student Guide* offers the following under Analytical Skills:

*Analysis requires complex reading skills that may involve some or all of the following:*

- *explaining implied distinctions that are not clearly stated in the original text;*
- *pointing out a contradiction between two ideas in the same text;*
- *identifying a pattern of words, thoughts, statistics, or images and explaining the significance of this pattern;*
- *examining an author’s use of adverbs and adjectives that reveals a particular opinion. . . . (4th 60)*

To counsel students to attend to the “use of adverbs and adjectives” or other items in this list of skills is not wrong so much as it is insufficient. The student reader discussed by Glynda Hull and Mike Rose in “This Wooden Shack Place” performed many of the above skills but was not thereby enabled to produce a conventional academic analysis of a poem. Through the list, “analysis” becomes a piecemeal activity of hunting for particular items or features that index ideas,

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thoughts, images, or opinions. The list does not acknowledge the deeper and larger interpretive schemata or models through which any of the above discrete tasks take on specific force and produce a reading. Reading is instead reduced to a list of decontextualized techniques and skills that would seem to be an end in themselves, rather than strategies that become meaningful when organized by a specific relation

to text and a specific intellectual project and rhetorical purpose. In essence, the list assumes rather than fosters a relation to text through which the act of academic analysis makes any sense.

Barbara E. Walvoord and Lucile P. McCarthy’s study of writing in four academic disciplines suggests why rendering “process” as an explicit procedure is not effective instruction:

We found that verbal descriptions of a process, whether presented in class or in a textbook, were difficult for students to translate into action. Further, students often treated procedural knowledge about how to do something as declarative knowledge to be summarized, not used to guide a process. We concluded that procedural knowledge often needs to be taught procedurally—by concrete experiences under the guidance of the teacher who leads students physically and directly through the procedure. (238)

The assessment-driven reform movement assumes that rendering expectations explicit will provide students with a clear understanding of what they need to do to achieve the goals of instruction. However, some kinds of learning are not best fostered by that kind of explicitness, not only in writing but also across the disciplines. As the passage from the student essay on James would suggest, explaining a procedure or telling students what to do can be misleading and make learning more difficult. The student evidently transformed “declarative knowledge” about how and why metaphors are used into statements that stand

in the place of a reading of James, rather than transforming those statements into heuristics that can be “used to guide a process” of reading James.

The UCI Composition Program has a commitment to recursive process for more than fifteen years. The re-emergence of product-oriented instruction within the *Student Guide* would suggest a significant tension between process instruction and the effort to make clear for students the expectations for learning as the assessment-driven reform movement requires.

### **Reform and pedagogical culture**

The pedagogical culture at Irvine changed because it was written down. The print version of a culture of much longer duration than the *Student Guide* took on a life of its own through the very effort of teachers in the program to make it more their own through revision. Paradoxically, the social construction of a community’s knowledge, which Irvine’s teachers enacted through the *Student Guide* revision process, surfaced and articulated the deep structure of the

community’s hybrid knowledge—what Halpern and Gramsci might call the implicit as opposed to explicit “mental models” or “theories” of writing—and revealed a latent fidelity to product-oriented traditions. The failure of reform was not a function of a failure to respond to structural-institutional limits or resistance on the part

of administrators. Educational reform failed because the agents of the institution failed to conceptualize adequately the reform to which everyone was in fact committed. More generally, published instructional texts necessarily open a gap between text, meaning, and performance that makes practice and theory both more and less available to teachers and students. The same empirical text is available to all, producing the illusion of consensus at the same time as the complexity of linguistic experience allows for the proliferation of unrecognized diversity. This fusion of wide consensus and unrecognized diversity may have preempted any felt need for a critical response. Review of the *Student Guide* revision process suggests, therefore, that faith in the perfect legibility of any instructional document is misguided and that useful instructional discourse must be mindful of its necessary limits.

In addition, deference to the programmatic norms of collaborative, amicable, inclusive revision at Irvine and seemingly universal acceptance of the

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collaborative outcome may have pre-empted a sense of personal responsibility for the text itself, as Bauman has argued, and is endemic to postmodern institutionality. If postmodern subjects are decentered enough to be inscribed within the discourses that organize institutional norms, the subjective difference necessary to individual moral-critical responsibility is compromised. Trimbur has suggested the norms of collaborative learning may sponsor nothing so much as untrammelled “group think,” the fact that no one who worked on the *Student Guide* expressed any significant criticism being suggestive. In *From Silence to Words*, Min-Zhan Lu argues that a critical relation to one’s discursive archive is grounded in conflict, as subjects surface and (re)articulate the effects of competing discourses and are “repositioned” within them. Lu develops her argument about the practical efficacy of conflict in relation to “marginal” students from nondominant groups in response to critics who argue for the value of consensus and dissolution of conflict (presumably available to “normal” subjects at the center) (“Conflict and Struggle”). The experience at Irvine offers a case in point of the poststructuralist truism that the margin is the center, the apparent opposition between difference/identity, conflict/consensus being the (normalizing) effect of the margin-center dichotomy itself. Curricular leaders for Writing 39B produced highly divergent readings of the same student text while making appeal to virtually the same language in the *Student Guide*. As Bauman argues, the professionalized force of amicable collaboration at the “center” not only occulted significant conflict, it may have preempted the autonomy of individual, critical-moral subjects.

To judge from Irvine’s revision process, fostering greater understanding of the instructional role played by the necessary differences between theory and practice, statement and performance, intention and enactment would promote their greater integration by teaching the limits of discourse as well as its practical efficacy. The precision and coherence of written statements would be crucial to successful practice because any pragmatic scene will necessarily exceed what those statements can codify. Clarification of what exceeds practical integration would be contingent on the precision of ideal statements that establish the principles and force of theorized practice. Merely “reflective practice” may not give sufficient attention to the constitutive power of discourse, the limits of pedagogical statements, or the potential of new theory and practice to operate at odds with the discourses on language and literacy that teachers, administrators, and students already have and bring to a discussion.<sup>9</sup> The complexity of linguistic experience makes it likely that institutionalized re-

form discourse will include much more profound disjunctions than simple disagreement can define. Effective reform must consider not only major concepts and assumptions but the plethora of minor and arbitrary rules that are taken for granted and accepted as inevitable.

The *Student Guide* revision process at Irvine also suggests that discourse is more volatile than Foucault or Althusser would allow. Discourse was not formally closed, circular, and self-regulating in the program's revision process because neither individual discourses nor the subjects who appropriated them were as unified as they appeared to be. Rather than developing or simply adding new theories to the many lived, specific, institutional, and pedagogical discourses through which teachers are supported on a daily basis, one might study pedagogical and institutional cultures with a view towards examining the relationships between theory and practice in a given local setting. The experience at Irvine suggests that the effect of any reform discourse may have less to do with its ideal or pragmatic coherence per se, or with the "understanding" of individual teachers or students, and more to do with the general conditions of possibility and the local, specific conditions of the pedagogical culture through which it is appropriated in the world of volatile contingencies that gives it life.

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## **Notes**

1. This is not the place to argue whether assessment-driven reform is "conservative" or "liberal." One can argue that assessment-driven reform is liberal because it compels explicit statement of expected outcomes, which is empowering in relation to practices that are mystifying in not making outcomes clear. One can argue that any institution of large-scale assessment is conservative in requiring large-

scale normalization. One can situate process pedagogy, collaborative learning, and decentered authority in similarly contradictory terms. These examples suggest the extent to which the postmodern world has eroded the stability of standard political positioning and the necessity of examining the precise local functioning of practices in specific pedagogical cultures, as John Clifford has argued.

2. The program is organized around a three-course sequence: Writing 39A, a basic writing course; Writing 39B, the entry-level first-year course; and Writing 39C, a second first-year course in research writing and argument. The program also teaches a computer-enhanced version of 39A for students who are most challenged to pass the course and an intensive course that combines 39A and 39B.

3. All subsequent references will appear as the *Student Guide*. Citation presents the edition number followed by the page number, e.g., 1st 24.

4. The “Winter 1997 Curriculum Study in Writing 39B,” of which this article was originally a part, was reviewed by UCI’s Institutional Review Board for human subjects research.

5. In response to drafts of this essay, the campus writing director, John Hollowell, suggested that different course directors brought different kinds and degrees of knowledge to their work as editors. Hollowell is undoubtedly right about that, but the revision process included virtually the entire curricular staff of the program, while the book itself was used by everyone. No group or individual in the program expressed or even hinted at anything but satisfaction with the outcomes of revision. Indeed, the *Student Guide* has been a source of considerable pride for instructional and administrative staff who contributed to its creation and revision. It is that pervasive satisfaction that is paradoxical, given the professed critical orientation of Irvine’s pedagogical culture.

6. This approach has often been called “current-traditional.” See Robert Connors’s “Introduction” to *Composition-Rhetoric* for a discussion of the invention of the term and the history of its use, along with his reasons for suggesting that this portmanteau concept is suspect (4–6).

7. As Sharon Crowley observes, *Pre-Writing* represents “the first attempt since the late nineteenth century to theorize composition in the university” (“Around 1971” 195).

8. One asks students, for example, to imagine a scene on a familiar street: crowds of people stopped in the street, blocking our path. People in the crowd all seem to be straining to see something that we cannot see. Students generate narratives about what might be going on, that can be compared and contrasted, developed, and discussed as such, as the course begins to construct “seeing” as reading/writing and reading/writing as something other than “seeing” what’s on the page. This

approach engages students in externalizing and reknowing their interpretive models rather than simply imposing a new model on them.

9. I am thinking here of works such as George Hillock's *Teaching As Reflective Practice* and Cathy Fleischer's *Composing Teacher Research: A Prosaic History*. My criticism is not designed to discredit "reflective practice" per se but to identify a possible blind spot in the concept of "reflection," to the extent that "reflective practice" may prompt a belief that discourse merely "describes" what one appears to "see," "intuit," or "think."

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