PRAISE FOR TEACHING WITH STUDENT TEXTS

Teaching with Student Texts *offers new perspectives, insights, and approaches to working with and thinking about student texts and representations of student writing. Equally important, it also opens new questions and opportunities for exploration about intersections and divergences among the ways that instructors work with student texts – in individual programs and across programs and institutions. It is a rich, useful, and provocative book.*

—Linda Adler-Kassner, UC Santa Barbara,
author of *The Activist WPA*,
winner of the 2010 CWPA Best Book Award

The new teacher enters the writing classroom, assignment in hand. What happens next? Teaching with Student Texts *understands both the drama and the stakes of this moment, where so much depends on what role students are asked to play in the educational process. Prominent members of the field and new voices alike are represented in this compelling collection of essays, each showing how to make the student text the center of the writing classroom. The editors know that a quiet revolution is set in motion when the focus of instruction shifts from professional writing to student writing. Readers of this volume are invited to join in the work of teaching the arts of thoughtful engagement with the world and its challenges.*

—Richard E. Miller, Rutgers University,
author of *Writing at the End of the World*

The idea that working with student writing defines what happens in composition classrooms may seem so axiomatic that it's hardly worth mentioning. But this is why Teaching with Student Texts *is so valuable. It turns out, as the various contributors show, there is quite a bit to say about working with student writing—to give examples of how to do it, certainly, but as a way to explore what it means to value student writing as an intellectual practice and intellectual resource. This thoughtful attention to teaching with student texts is the book's platform, and, to my mind, its inquiries set a new standard of informed practice.*

—John Trimbur, Emerson College,
author of *The Call to Write*

TEACHING WITH STUDENT TEXTS

Essays Toward an Informed Practice

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sequenced inquiry projects. Their essay centers on three vignettes—one from each of their sections of the same writing course—that highlight strategies for teaching with multimodal student texts. The first describes a collaborative revision activity within a networked classroom, the second a group critique of student work in progress, and the third a collective discussion of a multimedia student presentation.

In "Workshopping to Practice Scientific Terms," Anne Ellen Geller and Frank R. Cantelmo offer another example of teacher collaboration, describing how they worked together to make more effective use of writing assignments and activities in an introductory science course for nonmajors. Geller is a writing specialist, Cantelmo a biologist. They explain how they codesigned a series of in-class workshops with student texts whose aim was less to sponsor revision than to help students identify key terms and concepts used in journalistic descriptions of scientific studies. They used their classroom work with student texts, that is, to help students think more like scientists.

In "Bringing Outside Texts In and Inside Texts Out," Jane Fife describes how, over the course of her teaching career, she has come to make increasing use of both *inside* texts (written by students in the current class) and *outside* texts (written by students in previous classes or published student work). Fife aims to expand students' sense of possibility for their work as writers. She uses outside texts to model genres, to spark invention, and to suggest possibilities for publication, and she uses inside texts to highlight effective writing strategies. Fife argues that if we hope to make student writing more visible, and thus more valued by both students and faculty, we need to look for ways to bring inside texts outside the classroom.

In the closing essay for this section, Rolf Norgaard reflects on how using student texts requires *teachers* to change how we imagine our own work as intellectuals. In "Embracing Uncertainty," Norgaard shows how working with student texts can make teaching opportune or *kairotic.* This means we need to be willing to work in the moment, to improvise, to revise our teaching strategies as students themselves shift and mature as writers. Most important, we need to continually rethink the roles we ourselves play in the classroom, and to see that through taking risks as teachers, we can help students appreciate the intellectual risks they need to take. Uncertainty can be our best ally as we refashion our pedagogies to teach and learn on the page; embracing that uncertainty can help us recognize and utilize the *kairos* of teaching with student texts.

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WORKSHOP AND SEMINAR

Joseph Harris
Duke University

WORKSHOP

Fall 2008. Towards the middle of the semester. I am sitting with a group of four students in a coffee shop on the Duke campus. (I had cancelled our regular full class session so we could meet instead in small groups.) Each of the four students had written a first full draft of an essay and posted it to the course web site the day before. All of them had then read and commented on those drafts. Each student thus came to our meeting with four printouts—one of each of the three drafts they had read and written comments on, and a clean copy of their own piece.

My role was, in effect, to chair the meeting. I asked who wanted to go first, and after a moment or two, Katherine Thomas took a chance and said she would. I told Katherine that she would soon be handed copies of the comments her three classmates had made on her draft the evening before, but that I would like to make sure our conversation added to what they had already written. So I asked her to do two things: (1) identify a passage about two pages long in her piece that she would like us to focus on as readers (the drafts ran from five to seven pages), and (2) tell us what concerns or questions she had about that passage.

In this case, Katherine decided to read the closing pages of her essay. She was concerned that she had introduced a new idea too late in her piece and that her prose was overly formal and dull. I asked the three other students to note these issues on their copies of her draft, and to be ready to mark any words or phrases that stood out for them as they reread her closing pages. Then Katherine read those pages aloud. When she finished, I asked her to be quiet for a few minutes, and to listen and take notes on what her readers had to say.

For about the next ten minutes, each of her three readers spoke to the author from the notes they had made on her piece. I served as

moderator—keeping the readers on track, sometimes asking them to say more or to point to specifics in the text, and once telling the author, when she began to answer a question that had been raised, to remain silent and instead to write down what she wanted to say.

It turned out that Katherine's prose was a little stilted at points, and her readers pointed to a number of places where she might make her writing more direct and conversational. And she had indeed introduced a new idea very late in her piece. But here the solution her readers urged was not to cut that idea, which had been her instinct, but to bring it forward, to talk about it earlier in her essay. This led some readers back to the more general comments they had written on her work the evening before—and I urged them to point to ways Katherine might now restructure her piece around this emerging idea.

After all three readers had offered their responses, I asked Katherine if she had any thoughts or questions. She did, so we chatted some more about her draft for a few minutes. I then asked the members of the group to hand Katherine their copies of her piece, with the notes they had made on it both during the prior evening and in the last few minutes, and we then moved on to another writer and another draft. Since the whole process—framing questions, reading aloud, responses, closing conversation—had taken us about twenty minutes, we were able to talk about the drafts by each of the four student writers in the group in an hour and a half.

I'm sure most readers of this book are familiar with some version of this sort of small group *workshop*. Indeed, I would argue that the workshop has been the default mode for talking about student writing since about 1973—when Peter Elbow described it with such conviction and grace in *Writing without Teachers*. We've even turned it into a verb: *to workshop*.

And there's good reason for its ubiquity. The workshop treats students seriously as writers. Its purpose, after all, is to help them revise and improve their writing. But for that to happen, students also need to learn how to read work in progress with care and generosity. So the workshop offers them practice in both critical writing and reading. And, when things go well, workshopping is fun. It's interesting to learn what other writers in the class are doing, and it's useful and rewarding to have them read your own work closely. In most of my courses, then, I schedule small-group workshops for each major writing project I assign—which usually means breaking the class into such small groups some two to four times per semester.

But there's the rub. If over the span of a fourteen-week semester, I meet with a class twenty-eight times, and four of those meetings are devoted to workshops, then what happens in the other twenty-four—especially if I want to center the course on the writing of the students in it? I've seen teachers respond to this question in a number of ways—most of which, I must admit, have not much appealed to me. Some teachers simply schedule more and more small-group workshops—which can have the effect, it seems to me, of making the class as a whole lose a sense of identity or purpose. Others spend class time talking about readings, which distracts from a focus on the work of students as writers.

Still other teachers run a series of whole-class workshops, in which twelve or fifteen or twenty students offer advice to a single writer. This has always struck me as overkill—how many responses to one draft can any of us really absorb and use? I've also wondered what the twelve or fifteen or twenty students whose work was *not* being talked about were supposed to take away from the conversation. The power of a workshop stems in large part from its intimacy and immediacy. You work hard as a reader and you are repaid at once by the responses you get to your own writing. A large group throws this discursive economy out of whack. We have, on the one hand, a writer besieged by feedback and, on the other hand, a large group of readers who must wait until next week, or next month, or until who knows when, for their own writing to be discussed.

SEMINAR

So, what then? How can you talk about student texts in class in ways that are of direct use to everyone in the room? Most of my attempts to do so take the form of a writing *seminar*. In a seminar, a teacher leads a conversation about a text written by one of the students in the room. But the point of this talk is less to offer the writer advice for revision than to frame a lesson on writing for everyone in the class.

The difference might be put this way. The question that drives a workshop is "*How can we help this writer revise?*" The question that drives a seminar is "*What can we learn as writers from this text?*"

In running a seminar, then, I try to help students see something new about writing—an insight they're not likely to come to on their own or through the process of trading responses in a workshop. Let me point to two forms this work often takes.

Multitext seminar

In one sort of seminar, I work with excerpts from the writing of several students in the class. As I read through a set of drafts, I identify a number of passages, each usually a page or less, in which students are grappling with similar issues or trying to make similar moves as writers. I assemble these excerpts into a handout I bring in as the text for our talk in seminar. What's key is that there's an idea or issue connecting the passages—a problem in writing that many or most of the students in the class are confronting right then. And, if I've chosen them well, the excerpts on the handout will show not a single correct solution to that problem but a range of responses to it.

For example. In fall 2008 I taught a first-year writing course in which I asked students to draw on George Lakoff 's *Moral Politics* (2002) in analyzing a text or figure from the Obama-McCain presidential campaign. (To reduce *Moral Politics* to a bumper sticker: Lakoff argues that our competing political views are rooted in differing metaphors of the family—that conservatives uphold a view of society centered on the image of a strict father, while liberals appeal to the idea of a nurturant parent.) But to take on Lakoff's approach as a thinker and writer, students first needed to define, in their own terms, exactly what that approach was—which was the task I set for them in one of their early writings for the course. To do so, I suggested that students think about the questions driving Lakoff's work, the ways he tends to answer them, and the kinds of materials he cites as evidence for views.

As I read through their drafts, I quickly saw that many students were struggling to identify the materials Lakoff uses for evidence. That made sense—for what really does count as convincing evidence for arguing that certain metaphors underlie how people think about politics? That was a question students would need to answer if they were to understand Lakoff as readers and to draw on his approach as writers. So I put together a handout for our next class with brief excerpts (about 150–200 words) from five separate drafts, each of which approached the question of Lakoff's materials differently.

For instance, Ryann Child had this to say about Lakoff's materials:

> Lakoff will repeat a point many times through the use of several different examples. When describing the importance of moral wholeness in strict father conservatism, Lakoff quotes seven different words recognizable by the reader as commonly used by conservatives in politics. All of the words provide a direct link back to the strict father value of an untouched moral foundation (Lakoff, 90-91). As in this example, Lakoff in the first three sections of his book relies solely on words used by conservatives and liberals as evidence for his position. (Child 2008)

I actually needed to pose the question several times—"What does Ryann identify here as Lakoff's materials?"—before one student decided that maybe the answer I was looking for really was *that* obvious, and finally replied, "Words." Pleased, I forged ahead, and asked, "So was that what the rest of you said?"—which was of course met by a series of unsure glances or intense unblinking stares at the xeroxed pages on the table. So we moved to the next excerpt, by Alex Galonsky, who wrote:

> *Moral Politics* is chock full of metaphors . . . The two primary metaphors in the book are the strict father family metaphor and the nurturant parent family metaphor. Lakoff also uses a variety of less significant metaphors, such as the ones used to describe morality. For example, Lakoff uses a myriad of metaphors to qualify the mother metaphor of "moral accounting," such as retribution, restitution, and reciprocation. Lakoff also uses sub-metaphors for the primary family metaphors. (Galonsky 2008)

By then students were catching on. Alex says that Lakoff's materials are *metaphors*, they quickly asserted. But aren't metaphors made out of words, I asked? Yes, but metaphors also combine images and ideas in ways that single words don't, they explained, so Alex's point differed from Ryann's. And *that*, of course, was precisely what I'd hoped they would notice.

The rest of the seminar moved more quickly. As we read through the next few excerpts, we noted how Cydney Ross emphasized Lakoff's use of examples from ordinary life and common-sense anecdotes, and contrasted this with how Arjun Chandra highlighted Lakoff's references to the media and current events. Finally, while Steven Feister felt that Lakoff can be "a bit light when it comes to background research," he did acknowledge his use of "works by liberals and conservatives, such as *A Theory of Justice* by John Rawls and *The Bell Curve* by Charles Murray," and his citation of "previous works from his field of cognitive linguistics" (2008). By the end of our work with the handout, then, we had identified five distinct forms of evidence used by Lakoff: words, metaphors, anecdotes, current events, and scholarship.

I thought students had done strong work as readers of Lakoff and one another. But this was a course in writing, so I wanted them to reflect on

how they might apply these ideas to their own essays. So I asked them to get out the drafts they had written and locate where they talked about Lakoff's materials. Jot down some notes, I told them, on how, given this conversation, you might now change or add to what you said. This applied to the five students whose writing I had excerpted, too. I then gave them some more work to do for our next class, which was to find one text from the fall presidential campaign that illustrated Lakoff's approach and one that posed some problems for it—and to be ready to talk about how these materials fit (or didn't fit) into the set of categories we had just developed.

I think that such teaching moves, which direct students back to their own work in progress, are what ground a seminar in the actual practice of writing. But I also think it's worth noting what did *not* happen in this seminar. I didn't ask students, for instance, which forms of evidence they felt were more or less important or convincing. That seemed to me a question for them to wrestle with later, in their own work extending Lakoff. My aim at the time was to illustrate a range of possibilities. And I didn't ask students to offer the writers of the passages we read advice about how to develop their ideas. This was not a class focused on revision, but one centered on the problem of evidence.

Some of the seminars I design are centered, like this one, on writing problems tied tightly to the particular texts and issues we happen to be talking about. Later in the Lakoff course, for instance, we held another seminar on ways of writing about Sarah Palin—who seemed to many students to confound his categories of strict and nurturant parents. But there are many other issues that recur in almost every course I teach: How do you begin an academic essay? How do you end one without simply restating what you've already said? How do you distinguish your own position from those of the writers you are responding to? When do you quote and when do you summarize? How do you comment on passages you've quoted? These are not questions about how to make particular pieces stronger, they are questions that anyone trying to write intellectual prose needs to think about—and thus that a group of writers can talk about usefully together.

Single-Text Seminar

There is a second characteristic form of a writing seminar that also takes on such questions, but in a somewhat different way—and that is through the close reading of a single, complete essay. (Or, in some

longer classes, perhaps two or three such pieces.) In many ways, this sort of seminar discussion—with its focus on the work of one writer—might seem much like a workshop. But there are important differences in format and aim. First, the seminar is led by the teacher, who usually chooses the text to be read and has a specific set of questions to raise about it. Second, the aim of those questions is to raise an issue in writing that everyone in the room can apply to their own work in progress.

Let me offer another example from the Lakoff course. The week after we worked with the five excerpts on evidence, I brought into class the full draft of a student essay commenting on a *New York Times* article about the divided responses of Roman Catholic voters to Joe Biden's candidacy for vice president. The author of this essay, Taylor Duhe, already knew how to do a number of things comfortably and well: she began by summarizing what Lakoff says about religion and politics, outlined the article from the *Times*, showed how this article illustrated several of Lakoff's ideas, then showed how Lakoff's ideas explained the article, then explained how the article and Lakoff were connected, then . . . well, you start to see the problem: the article Taylor had chosen to write about seemed to fit Lakoff's theory so seamlessly she was left little more to say about either text than that they agreed with each other.

But was that really the case? I had also brought copies of the *Times* article into class. When I asked the group to look through it for anything that did *not* align well with Lakoff's thinking, several students noticed that several of the Catholics interviewed fitted Lakoff's description of nurturant liberals, with one exception—their opposition to abortion rights. I suggested that Taylor had the beginnings of an essay exploring this disjuncture. (And, in fact, she continued to work this one question as her main writing project for the semester.) I then asked her classmates to turn back to their own work to look for similar moments where Lakoff's ideas didn't quite explain the texts from the campaign they were reading or viewing. For those were exactly the points, I argued, where they might have something to add to his thinking.

The job of the teacher in a single-text seminar is to identify moments in an essay that can lead to more thinking and writing. What Taylor most needed to do was not to fix what she had written, but to add to it. That was also pretty much the task facing most of her classmates at that moment in the semester. The format of the seminar allowed me to point to the need for them all not merely to correct their prose but to develop their ideas.

BOTH/AND

I suspect that good seminars help set up good workshops. Recall what Katherine's readers urged her to do in the workshop I described earlier—to take the idea at the end of her piece and put it front and center. That's ambitious advice. It's also the kind of thinking about writing a teacher can encourage in a seminar—to urge students to become bolder, to say more, to point out problems with a theory, to suggest other ways of seeing.

My point here is simple enough. The workshop and seminar do different things. As writing teachers, we need to do both. The focus of a workshop is on the individual *writer*. It's a space for practical advice. The seminar, though, is more of a metaspace. Its aim is to help the *readers* of a text understand something new about the craft of writing. Of course, the writer in a seminar will no doubt hear useful advice about his piece, much as the readers in a workshop can learn from the drafts they read and respond to. But there is a difference in emphasis, in focus and aim, down to the ways the two formats tend to come to a close. In a workshop, the writer usually thanks her readers for their feedback. In a seminar, the readers usually thank the writer for sharing her work.

Several writers in this volume—Bruce Horner, Margaret Marshall, Chris Warnick—offer more insights into how to structure a writing seminar, while still others—Maggie Debelius, Anne Geller and Frank Cantelmo—explore varying forms and uses of workshops. My aim here in distinguishing between workshop and seminar has not been to argue for one format over the other, but to suggest that we need both.

This claim might seem innocuous, but I'm not sure that's the case. Our field tends to link teaching formats to intellectual and ideological positions. Over the years, I've talked with many writing teachers who refuse, on principle, ever to put students in small groups, and with many others who refuse to do nearly anything else but. I learned the value of the seminar format when, near the start of my career, I taught in a composition program at the University of Pittsburgh that, for many in the field, seemed to oppose everything Peter Elbow and workshop teaching were about. (For some, this was a good thing, for others, bad.) Indeed, the 1995 debate between Elbow and Pitt's David Bartholomae articulates a series of choices that many writing teachers still feel they must make—between a commitment to student voice or academic discourse, to freewriting or revision, to personal narrative or cultural criticism—all

of which often then get mapped onto the choice between workshop or seminar. To draw on another set of Elbow's terms, the workshop tends to get cast in this debate as a version of the *believing game*—a mode of teaching that is warm, supportive, empathetic, collaborative, and student-centered. In contrast, the seminar can seem to enact the *doubting game*—cool, critical, analytic, agonistic, and teacher led.

My argument here is for both/and. We need workshops to support students as they draft and revise their projects as writers; we need seminars to teach them about the moves and values of academic writing. Once we distinguish the sorts of work with writing we can do best in each format, we can decide how and when to use both.

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