

laborers in a common cause, and we will have to enlist the help of professional and accrediting organizations. It won't happen if most refuse to take up shovels and start moving the earth. To that end, I call readers' attention to events such as Campus Equity Week (celebrated this year October 27-31, 2003), a time when teachers on every campus should "bring attention to issues of the use and abuse of contingent faculty appointments, fairness, and quality of education" and should organize "events or actions" appropriate for local conditions and audiences (CCCC Web site). If you are in doubt about what to do on your campus, read this book.

Provo, UT

WORKS CITED

- Conference on College Composition and Communication. College Section Home Page. 20 September 2003. <<http://www.ncte.org/cccc/index.shtml>>.
- Flyvbjerg, Bent. *Making Social Science Matter: Why Social Inquiry Fails and How It Can Succeed Again*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001.
- Ohmann, Richard. "Citizenship and Literacy Work: Thoughts without a Conclusion." *Workplace: A Journal for Academic Labor* 4.1 (2001): 28 pars. 20 September 2003. <<http://www.louisville.edu/journal/workplace/issue7/ohmann.html>>.
- Sledd, James. "Disciplinary and Exploitation: Compositionists as Good Professionals." *Workplace: A Journal for Academic Labor* 4.1 (2001): 39 pars. 20 September 2003. <<http://www.louisville.edu/journal/workplace/issue7/sledd.html>>.

Conflicts and Crises in the Composition Classroom—and What Instructors Can Do About Them, edited by Dawn Skorczewski and Matthew Parfitt. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Heinemann, 2003.

Reviewed by Joe Marshall Hardin, Northwestern State University of Louisiana

Dawn Skorczewski and Matthew Parfitt's *Conflicts and Crises in the Composition Classroom—and What Instructors Can Do About Them* is a collection of classroom narratives, but it is also more than that. The text is also an argument for the power of personal narrative to create disciplinary knowledge. In their introduction, the editors assert that classroom narratives such as those contained in this collection demonstrate clearly the link between theory and practice: narratives, they write, "are the threads that connect the concrete experience of

classroom practice to the abstract generalization of theory" (x). That we are meant to learn from these stories is evident from the subtitle, and the editors report that the authors of these essays "share the conviction that stories about a teacher's moments of crisis in the classroom afford invaluable sources of knowledge about our craft" (ix). So this is a book about stories and their value as disciplinary knowledge, although it is also simply a collection of stories from which other teachers might learn.

Recently, the value of personal narrative as scholarship has been a disputed issue in rhetoric and composition, with some scholars calling for the use of personal experience and narrative voice as a way of resisting the masculinist discourse of mastery they see in the rhetoric of traditional scholarship and in theory. Increasingly, we see calls, such as the one made by Sheri Stenberg and Amy Lee, for "critically reading our teaching in the same careful way we've learned to engage scholarly and literary texts in English studies . . . to develop ways of studying our teaching, or reading our pedagogical interactions and our pedagogical development (exploration, critique, revision) as texts" (328).

I have no argument with the assertions that personal narrative can create knowledge and that teaching is an intellectual activity worthy of scholarly study. In fact, I must believe in the academic value of the personal essay because I generally employ it in my own classes in the form of a literacy narrative assignment. In assigning personal writing, my hope is that students might explore the possibility that their experiences can, like the essays in this collection, produce meaning beyond the purely personal. I believe in the ability of my students' narratives and of the narratives in this collection to do academic work. For my students, writing a personal narrative will also provide an example of the level of personal commitment I want in all their class work, a commitment that is evident in the narratives collected by Skorczewski and Parfitt.

In her introduction to the recent special edition of *College English* devoted to the personal in academic writing, Jane E. Hindman asks for a way of reading that will accept that alternative scholarship might hold rewards for those who are willing to defer their usual expectations of what scholarship should be. She asks readers of scholarship that employs "embodied rhetoric" to produce readings that are likewise "embodied." Such readings would seek to empower authors of alternative scholarship, employ self-reflection to examine how readers position themselves in relation to alternative texts, and examine how that position is motivated by the reader's material conditions. I'm happy for the direction that Hindman provides because I'm initially uncomfortable, as she suggests many readers are, when reading alternative modes of scholarship that rely heavily on personal narrative, as do those collected in *Conflict and Crises in the Composition Classroom*.

Like the essays collected here, my students' literacy narratives are useful to me as a scholar—and as a writing program administrator charged with teacher training and program design—because they almost always reinforce what I already know about the danger of using writing and reading as punishment and about the deleterious effects of authoritarian teachers, bad writing assignments, dull grammar instruction, and irrelevant readings. Still, I'm rarely surprised by my students' literacy narratives, which usually contain a familiar cast of characters and follow a half-dozen or so well-worn plotlines: the student who loved to write or read until a "bad" teacher or boring assignment squashed the student's enthusiasm; the student who re-discovers reading through a now-favorite book or who learns to find creative release by writing poetry, songs, plays, essays, or short stories; the wise student who advises the reader that learning to communicate will be a valuable academic and vocational skill; the teacher who inspired and encouraged a promising student, etc. These are all familiar stories to anyone who has ever assigned the literacy narrative, and although the assignment often produces essays that are somewhat predictable, it is still a useful genre—both for the author and the reader.

The essays collected in *Conflict and Crises in the Composition Classroom* are useful to me as a teacher—and I expect they will be useful to other teachers—because they support what we have learned about the value of self-reflexive teaching, about the usefulness of being willing to abandon prepared pedagogy, and about the rewards of treating each student as an individual and each class as a new experience. But like my students' literacy narratives, the essays in *Crises and Conflicts in the Composition Classroom* also tend to include stock characters and well-worn plotlines. In many of these essays there are two levels of narrative, and both are familiar: the first level generally describes a disruptive event, usually predicated by an obstinate, disruptive, resistant, and/or challenging student. Generally, the conflict works itself out in the classroom dynamic or in personal conference but not before the teacher and class or teacher and student face a moment of crisis. Often (it's surprising how often), the teacher's first reaction is to toss the disruptive student out of the class. Instead, the teacher decides to work within the conflict (after all, it's quite difficult to toss students out of the classroom), and the problem works itself out because or in spite of the teacher, or it doesn't work itself out and the teacher is left to reflect on his or her failure. The second level of storytelling gives us access to the inner workings of the teacher's mind as he or she reflects on the pedagogical problem by accessing composition theory, which is often represented in the standard quote and citation format of traditional scholarship. For me, this is one of the most uncomfortable rhetorical moves in these narratives, for it's moments like these, in Brad Peters's contribution, that point

painfully to the constructedness of these stories and to the artificiality of the "thread" that links theory to practice in these narratives:

Thinking quickly I asked them to take out a sheet of paper and explain what they felt were the major problems, as well as the most acceptable aspects of the class. . . . Then I hesitated for a moment. Should I stay and respond to the recommendations after they finished writing them? Should we battle it all out? If I weren't present to conduct our dialogue, wouldn't Gary dominate it? Who would speak, besides him? Who would remain silent? I recalled Susan Jarratt's (1992) warnings that "we can't always control the way discursive power works in our classes. . . . We can't always undo the institutional authority of our roles through our instructions and our assurances" (p.111). (23)

Is this what a self-reflexive moment is supposed to feel like—a direct quote, complete with page citation? Obviously, this a rhetorical device: a trope or some sort of shorthand for the linking of theory to practice. But for me at least, these passages point to what I think is a generic problem. In these moments, it seems as if the narratives want to partake unproblematically of both the personal narrative and the discourse of mastery they are trying to subvert.

In the end, there is generally some advice that can be offered or ascertained from the narratives about how teachers in similar situations can understand the issues that incited the conflict, or the reader is left to ruminate on the issues for him or herself. Often, these issues relate to the need to decenter classroom authority or with the difficulty teachers encounter when they either fail to adequately decenter their teaching or when they seriously underestimate the need for or pervasiveness of institutionalized teacher authority. On both levels, the characters too often tend to take on iconic dimensions, a common element of classroom narratives that is discussed to good effect in Linda Adler-Kassner's contribution, "Race in Class." Adler-Kassner's essay is one of several in the collection that, itself, seems uncomfortable with the genre of classroom narrative and the way it constructs and then "uses" students to "come to some pithy, extractable, transferable solution" (79). These narratives are at their best when they directly address the constructed nature of their characters and their stories, as Adler-Kassner's narrative does, or when they contextualize the classroom narrative within the institutional and cultural setting, as Deborah Gussman does in her essay "The One Who Got Away":

What I do know is that the problem of failure and responsibility I have described here cannot be solved by students' individual efforts, or by the efforts of individual teachers, no matter how heroic or well-intentioned. It requires institutional change, including addressing

complex issues such as workload, the use of adjuncts, job security, and the expectations of hiring institutions. (85)

Sadly, too few of these narratives examine the institutional and cultural roots of these crises and conflicts, nor do they significantly address the way representations of classrooms, teachers, and students are regulated and prefigured in the academic setting and by popular culture. If we are being asked to read classroom narratives in a different way, then authors who write them must begin to do so in ways that subvert or challenge our expectations of that genre, too. While a few of the essays, such as those by Gussman and Adler-Kassner, begin to address the way classroom narratives are confined by their traditional representations in academic and popular culture, many of these narratives seem to rely on the traditions of this genre to accomplish their goals and then add quotes and citations to “link” them to theory.

Initially, I was also troubled by the fact that students in these stories are often described in negative terms. They are an “exhausting talker with no listening skills whatsoever,” an “angry, passionate, combative person,” and an “obnoxious, deliberately rude white guy with deer-blood on his jacket and Missouri mud ingrained into his labor-cracked hands.” They are a “sarcastic,” “aggressive” “difficult,” “resistant, argumentative, disrespectful, and downright irritating” lot, who “face a range of emotional and socioeconomic barriers to their education,” express “racist sentiments,” “turn group activities into grumbling sessions,” and “publicly challenge” the teacher. But I finally came to believe that the honesty of these descriptions and their often humorous undertones supply the narratives’ greatest ethos. At these moments, we can believe that these are the real voices of teachers facing crisis moments in their classrooms, and anything less than honesty would further undermine the value of these stories.

In the end, I’m uncomfortable with the predictability of most of these essays, with the way they seem unaware of their larger academic setting, and with the way they partake of established cultural representations of what happens behind the typical classroom door, and I worry that these representations have already constructed a nearly indestructible iconography of teacher-student relations and good teaching. I’m also troubled by the way the linking of practice and theory is too often represented as a facile and timely recollection of pertinent scholarly work. Most troublesome, though, is the fact that too few of these essays address the ways these conflicts and crises are related not to issues of teacher authority or student intractability but to institutional and cultural authority and to the forces of ideological reproduction and economics at work in our educational system.

Natchitoches, LA

WORKS CITED

- Hindman, Jane E. “Thoughts on Reading ‘The Personal’: Toward a Discursive Ethics of Professional Critical Literacy.” *College English* 66 (2003): 9-20.
- Stenberg, Shari, and Amy Lee. “Developing Pedagogies: Learning the Teaching of English.” *College English* 64 (2002): 326-47.