
Perhaps Lad Tobin’s book should be titled Things That Make Us Uncomfortable, for it seems his work focuses on all those issues that don’t make it into scholarly articles, doubts and problems all composition instructors face but few admit—for an admission is tantamount to a confession, and confession evidence of personal and professional failure. And it is just this that makes Tobin’s words so comforting: a comrade admitting openly what we all experience “privately” in our own teaching.

Tobin’s work is an examination of the interpersonal relationships inherent in the classroom and that affect what we teach, how we teach, and how students respond. Focusing on the three relationships that are most within the classroom—teacher/student, student/student, teacher/teacher—Tobin examines how these relationships affect how we (mis)read students and their work, how we conference and grade, how students compete, collaborate, and respond to teachers and each other.

Drawing on his personal experience as writing director at Boston College, Tobin presents experiences all composition instructors can relate to: distress over a grade-centered student, euphoria at seeing another student make a discovery or connection, frustration with very rough drafts on equally poor topics, and the fulfillment of learning something from a student’s essay. Yet Tobin goes beyond these standard hallway topics to those that are seldom vocalized. For example, when one of Tobin’s students presents a paper with racist stereotypes—perhaps aimed at him—we recognize that precarious, dangerous place where we sometimes stand, the place that nothing in graduate school has prepared us for, a place where the wrong move may do irreparable damage to a student for the life of the course, maybe longer. Similarly, in Chapter 4, “What We Really Think About When We Think About Grades,” Tobin lists questions that, like it or not, enter our minds when we grade: “What grade does this student expect?”; “How will this student feel when he hears this grade?”; “What action might this student take as a result of this grade?”; “Do I agree with this student’s politics and values?”; “Does this student act like he or she likes me?”; “How would I feel if I were this student and I got this grade from me?” (65-66). And, as Tobin points out, “it’s not that writing teachers are unaware” of the power of their relationships to affect their actions; “it’s just that we hope if we don’t talk about it, it will go away” (32).

Tobin’s focus on interpersonal relationships, at the same time, deconstructs the idealized myth of the process-writing classroom. As he examines student/student relationships, Tobin suggests that the sacred cow of the process movement, collaboration, is often treated as a utopian
activity in which all participants are equally motivated and selfless. In reality, the collaborative effort can be fierce ground for competition.

Writing Relationships will be comforting indeed to new teachers of composition who are wondering why the “process” described in CCC looks remarkably different from the process they find in the classroom. As for veteran instructors, Tobin’s book will be a refreshing change.

—James Larkin
Texas Christian University
Fort Worth, Texas

Resisting Writings (and the Boundaries of Composition)—Derek Owens; Dallas: Southern Methodist UP; 1994; 278 pp. ISBN:087074-343-0.

For those interested in inquiring into forms of discourse beyond those immortalized by conventional scholarship, Resisting Writings is a timely work. Free from the didacticism and combative sermonizing that pervades scholarly publication, the pertinence of Owens’s ideas are realized by the proximity of his observations. Akin to the “open text” discussed in chapter five, Resisting Writings is a collection of observations that by their common locale call toward a reevaluation of composition studies. In roughly two hundred pages, Owens rushes through discussions of afrocentric discourse and the status and struggle of “feminine” discourse in patriarchal systems, offers a synopsis of postmodern efforts toward reworking a path of composition for the future, and concludes with approximately forty pages of suggestions for implementing these “alternative” forms of discourse into the academy. This flurry, nonetheless, is neither incoherent, nor sketchy. Rather, any discomfort produced in the reader, by the abundance of forms discussed, may be the most poignant commentary on the crimes committed by those teaching composition through ethnocentric or patriarchal templates.

Owens begins his discussion with an extended metaphor describing his own view of interaction between discourse communities: “A great many islands, some in chains, some scattered in isolation. Each island representing a particular discourse focus” (3). With this “survey of the landscape” Owens introduces his intent:

The notion that we are scholars and teachers of “writing” in any global, pluralistic, or multicultural sense is simply false. We