WHAT'S MISSING FROM THIS PICTURE? THE ABSENCE OF TEACHER "ERROR" IN REPRESENTATIONS OF PRAXIS

The composition texts I will discuss here are not textbooks—in other words, books for students—but teacher-texts, written by composition specialists who identify themselves as teacher-researchers for, presumably, a similar audience. This kind of text models, on one hand, approaches to the literacy classroom based on reflection, practice, and analyses of student texts as teachers, and usually extensive collaboration with colleagues along the way. It also models, however, a way of representing the classroom in terms of theoretical and/or methodological principles that guide the authors' understanding of the classroom, as well as the various disciplinary discourses and practices they draw from.

Books such as Mina Shaughnessy's Errors and Expectations, David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky's Facts, Artifacts and Counterfactuals, and Marie Ponsot and Rosemary Deen's Beat Not the Poor Desk are, in the best sense, models of self-reflective literacy instruction, in direct contrast to what Ann Berthoff disdains as the acontextual recipe-swapping of methods, assignments, and exercises (Making). They all claim to rely, in one way or another, upon long, intensive, systematic studies and the evaluation of student writing as well as on much "reflective practice," as Louise Wetherbee Phelps has described it, in dialogue with colleagues and written dialogues with themselves. They exemplify ideals expressed in the literature of the field: connecting theory with practice.

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However, as composition has developed into a field of study, it has mirrored the hierarchization of knowledge so common to other disciplines, even though, as the texts above demonstrate, the early impulse seemed to be to keep teachers at the center of knowledge making. Ruth Ray, as well as Louise Phelps and Patricia Harkin, have noted the “defensiveness” of composition teachers towards theory and theorists, acknowledging the deep divide between teachers and scholar/researchers (Ray 23). But all three count this resistance as a welcome critique of theory’s tendencies to “dictate human life rather than trying to explain or understand it” (Phelps qtd. in Ray 22).

Yet has this divide always existed in teacher-researcher inquiry? Is the divide a consequence of long-term institutional and socio-political forces on writing programs? In her “prosaic” history of teacher research, Cathy Fleischer comments on the competing and conflicting disciplinary theories and methodologies that have informed her reflective practices over a long career of teaching writing. It would appear, then, that the tensions noted by Ray, Phelps, Harkin and others are not necessarily new to teacher-researcher in composition. Neither is it new that full-time university teacher-researchers, as opposed to part-time or K-12 teachers, are at the center of published texts. Still, the increasing call for more attention to “situated” knowledge in composition studies (Fleischer) suggests that the early models have not held for most practitioners in the field, and that teacher research is still poised on the margins of composition inquiry.

Reclaiming Richness in Early Teacher Research

Revisiting texts that have become, arguably, canonized within composition studies, either by citation, pedagogical use, and/or major awards, is thus a useful way of reconsidering composition studies’ continuing forays into other disciplines (most recently cultural studies, critical theory, and history). To what extent has disciplinary knowledge enabled teacher research and to what extent has it maintained a rigorous hierarchy of knowledge even as it has sought to establish new understandings of the “situatedness” of composing practices?

Ventures into other disciplinary discourses and research methodologies are hardly new to the field; instead they are part and parcel of what has made composition a “field of study” if not, as Stephen North has commented, a *bona fide* discipline, or even, as Patricia Harkin suggests in relation to praxis, a “post-disciplinary” inquiry. North’s claim that composition studies has borrowed from competing and conflicting
disciplinary approaches to knowledge seems to have been largely accepted. Yet what composition studies is, what it aims to accomplish and for whom, cannot easily be reduced to the sum of its disciplinary parts. So I am revisiting these three texts for the purpose of rethinking ways other disciplines continue to shape composition's sense of its own boundaries. I am also speculating as to what complexities, nuances, and contradictions—in other words, "errors" so valuable within the rising tide of teacher-research narratives—may have been lost.

Cathy Fleischer's metaphor of a picture album is helpful here in describing my project: composing the fragments of teacher research in these three texts into "stories which pull together the fragments as I have tried to connect what at first may have seemed disconnected, as I have searched for the patterns which impose meaning on individual images" (2). The absence of what scholars would typically consider "errors" in thought is what I will highlight in these texts, what Shaughnessy championed as ultimately "logical" rhetorical moves by non-writers and what Patricia Harkin calls "informed intuit[ive]" (128) aspects of the otherwise logical story of teacher research. It is the absence of such "errors" that fragments the stories of these texts, and it is through these absences that I will reconnect, in a new way, the stories they tell us about the role of teacher knowledge in relation to disciplinary, or what Phelps calls "formal," knowledge.

This is not to fault the authors for using other disciplines to help frame their students' problems but rather to note the difficulties involved in telling a story of composing that can adequately represent what Harkin calls the "overdetermined" occasions of composition praxis (134). It is a problem of both methodology and of representation. As Cathy Fleischer notes, perhaps the problem is how to get beyond representation to what she calls, borrowing from ethnographer Stephen Tyler, "evocation." Gesa Kirsch and Joy Ritchie echo similar concerns about the ethics of current modes of research representation. Given our past, as embodied in these three texts, is it possible to imagine a richer, more deeply embedded story of what happens when people write and when teachers intervene, as well as a better way to present it?

**The Classroom "Exposed"**

These narratives were, in their times, necessary fictions of a smooth continuity between teaching, research, and scholarship. All authors appear as figures who move readily between the worlds of practitioner and researcher/scholar: Shaughnessy as empiricist;
Bartholomae and Petrosky as critical theorists; and Ponsot and Deen as literary artists and critics. Clearly all have done important work in articulating a theoretical basis for literacy instruction. Yet at what cost did they construct this fiction of a theory-practice “fit”? What pressures contributed to the construction of these fictions? And finally, what consequences might their representations have had for teachers who have sought (and may still seek) to put their curricula into practice?

Much is lost when the more problematic relations between theory and practice are overshadowed by disciplinary approaches to knowledge, problems that become obvious once the described curricula are applied by others. For example, Delores Shriner and Matthew Willen, in, “The Facts on Facts: Adaptations to a Reading and Writing Course,” conclude, “Those who wish to experiment with Facts, as we did, should not look to it as a blueprint for action, but rather as a point of departure” (237).

But with new stories, what can be gained are new insights into the nature of inquiry in literacy. We become, in effect, more self-aware about not only what is possible to know but how: what is observed is not “native” habits of students (or “nature” in its idealization) but the classroom “exposed to our method of questioning” (qtd. in Knoblauch and Brannon 17-18), as Werner Heisenberg noted about quantum theory and which C. H. Knoblauch and Lil Brannon apply to phenomenological approaches to teacher research. Thus, the absence of “error” in accounts of praxis tends to conceal the method of questioning; the effect is a picture of classroom life that loses its “situatedness” in favor of demonstrating the “correctness” of a theory or principle.

Shaughnessy’s Cartesian Legacy

I will start, then, with Shaughnessy, even though critiques of the essentialist assumptions of her work have already been offered by Bartholomae and Lu, because I think the ambivalence that both Bartholomae and Lu note about Shaughnessy is still apparent in Bartholomae’s own project of introducing students to “academic discourse.” I want to emphasize, however, that at the time it was written, Shaughnessy’s work represented an important intellectual and rhetorical move to gain legitimacy for writing instruction, student writers, and their teachers; in this way, Shaughnessy used empirical inquiry to articulate a theory of practice that ultimately made sense to administrators who may have, at any moment, revoked remedial classes.

Shaughnessy’s Errors and Expectations is a narrative of the triumph of rationality and Cartesian approaches to empirical inquiry: all
mysteries, in time, are knowable; careful attention and disciplined observation will result in the discovery of the meaningfulness of student errors and the diagnosis of their causes. Shaughnessy was writing at a time when chaos in writing instruction prevailed, when some teachers who were themselves unprepared were mired in despair and/or cynicism about the educability of these “unprepared” students and, tacitly, about their own inability to teach. Her text seeks to comfort those struggling in this chaos by reassuring them that student errors revealed a logic that could be decoded, rather than randomness and uncertainty; thus, instruction was possible. It is, in microcosm, a narrative of liberal humanism, of faith in the scientific method as the ultimate means of finding truth, as exemplified by Descartes: Meaning is, finally, possible; with accumulated experience and data, with disciplined, objective methods of questioning, all is knowable, all problems solvable.

However, the logic Shaughnessy assigns to student error reflects assumptions about her method of inquiry and, in turn, about its theoretical basis. She claims to have “found” the logic of student error through her empirical research; the categories and classifications of error were not represented as the result of student work exposed to a particular method of questioning, but instead as a pre-existing logic that her empirical studies “revealed.” Following the methods of empirical science, she eliminates references to student texts which fall outside these patterns of logic; these would be considered exceptions to the rule, scientific anomalies. In keeping with Cartesian narratives, Shaughnessy does not discuss the range of alternative interpretations and speculations about student writing that no doubt she and her colleagues shared. Again, in keeping with scientific method, the logic “found” in student errors is what counts, not the contradictions of the inquiry itself. Despite Shaughnessy’s claims to authority as a teacher (or perhaps teacher-researcher), the narrative of her inquiry privileges the “formal” knowledge of the scientist over the phenomenological, or “procedural knowledge” (Phelps) of classroom life by collapsing the contexts that inform this research. Scattered, fleeting references to particular students, classroom events, and dialogues with other teachers occasionally surface, momentarily reminding the reader of the phenomenological origins of Shaughnessy’s research, the endless interpretations that were possible, the contingent nature of the logic she reveals, only to be submerged again within proof about the rightness of the logic “revealed.”

As Bartholomae and Lu have already noted, Shaughnessy’s method of inquiry reflects a theory of language as neutral and transparent,
a window into essential meanings that students and teachers alike may know but cannot formally articulate. Writing for Shaughnessy is a process of translation: from oral to written speech, from home language to academic discourse, from informal, local perspectives to formal generalities. These assumptions about language support a largely conservative political standpoint, stressing the primacy of correctness as a means of cultural preservation and maintenance of the status quo. Students’ language learning is constructed as the means of access to a basically stable, fixed culture that they may enter but not change significantly. These assumptions ultimately conflict with Shaughnessy’s overtly liberal statements of purpose: to empower students by giving them access to a range of linguistic choices offering them control over codes that otherwise control them. The conflict between her method of questioning (and its assumptions about the nature of language) and her liberatory goals as teacher can be described this way: if language only reveals pre-existing, empirical truths, then learning to “translate” between different ways of using language merely “reveals” linguistic choices that are also predetermined. More simply, one can’t use language to say anything that hasn’t already been said, since language merely reflects “reality” and is not constitutive of it.

The complexities of the classroom and the ways its theories and principles of action are developed become flattened by Shaughnessy in favor of her faith in Cartesian inquiry within classroom contexts. Her narrative represents a politics of accommodation in the absence of the struggles and choices—i.e. “errors”—of herself and her colleagues as teachers. Students learn to accommodate ways of speaking and writing characteristic of the academy and “mainstream” culture; in exchange for this accommodation, they gain access to the privileges of that world. The problem with such accommodation is that nothing in that world has to change and students, in uncritically accommodating the demands of mainstream culture, deny differences that mark them as Other.

Gaining Control, Losing Power: Teacher Researcher Heroics

Despite Bartholomae’s critique of Shaughnessy, he and Anthony Petrosky have perpetuated Shaughnessy’s legacy of privileging theory over the phenomenological contexts that produced and informed that theory. The result is a narrative that suggests that theory, instead of being formed by reflective practice, is more an application of formal theory to the “practical” world of the classroom. Facts, Artifacts, and Counterfacts, then, is an extension of Shaughnessy’s apologia for the
legitimacy of remedial instruction as part of the mission of public higher education; it seeks to legitimize such instruction by using formal theory to explain and defend it.

Although the historical context for Facts has shifted from the crisis and chaos of Errors, remedial instruction is still marginally situated and thus vulnerable to the whims of administrative and legislative power plays. As with Shaughnessy, the choice to represent literacy instruction as guided by formal inquiry (in this case, that of critical theory) and to flatten the classroom narratives (in part by placing supporting essays by teacher-researchers in the back of the book) is a political one: remedial classes can only acquire institutional currency through formal inquiry. The plot is one of survival, with the teacher-researcher as agent of change; but theory, finally, saves the day. One gains control over remediation in terms of institutionalizing it more firmly—but at a loss of power to students, teachers, and their "local" communities. It is the heroic intervention of formal discourses that saves the knowledge of reflective teachers from complete extinction. In exchange, this knowledge loses its power to generate readers' own theorizing when it sheds the contexts that inform it. So, although teachers are cast as heroes of social justice, they nonetheless are denied access to the stories that model the development of this theory in the messiness and chaos of classroom life. Theory puts the house in order.

This loss of power, of course, is contrary to the stated agenda of Facts. But like Errors, Facts represents the choice of either survival or extinction in the context of crisis, combined with a message of hope and redemption for the future. It removes alternative readings of student work, disagreements with colleagues, ragged edges of curriculum implementation, teachers and students who failed or did poorly in favor of a rhetorically constructed continuity between critical theory and its practical application.

Of course, it is unreasonable to suggest that these texts should or even could include all the "errors" I've discussed that transform teacher research narratives. My point is that such texts, however, follow particular discourse conventions that reflect the methods of inquiry and the theoretical frameworks they privilege. I'm sympathetic to the hard, political choices made in the service of rescuing remediation. But even these choices are rhetorically constructed, and the reality these texts represent creates a dichotomy in which the only choice presented is one of control versus power—and the power lost is the power to pose, rather than simply solve, problems of remediation. Problem-solving matters deeply,

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but such discourse should not be privileged at the expense of self-critical, problem-posing discourse that reflects upon the nature of its own inquiry.

**Between Synthesis and Analysis: Literary Inquiry**

In contrast to Shaughnessy and Bartholomae and Petrosky, Marie Ponsot and Rosemary Deen take a somewhat different approach—not through empirical study or appeals to critical theory but through literature. The narrative that underlies their political and rhetorical choices isn’t one of crisis, survival and heroic intervention; rather, it’s one of learning pleasure and play towards greater clarity and power in linguistic choices. They recognize language and, in turn, teaching as a form of mutually enriching mediation between students and teachers as opposed to heroic teacher intervention. They model the ways that literary forms are learned indirectly, through synthesis and the accretion of “elemental” skills, rather than as direct pathways from theory to practice. And to the extent that they’d claim all writing is literary, generic distinctions become more arbitrary and less “essential.” In this sense, they support the argument that teaching, like language, is less an effort of heroic intervention and more a process of mediation between students and their discursive choices. They argue that their approach is suited to a democratic society in which diversity reigns because in imagining the elemental on a individual basis, the resulting product is necessarily endlessly varied.

*Beat Not the Poor Desk*, which was published in 1982, after Shaughnessy and prior to Bartholomae and Petrosky, represents important statements about praxis that, on one hand, extend Shaughnessy’s ideas, yet on the other, are ignored by Shaughnessy’s other, later heirs. For instance, what later books on praxis (such as Bartholomae and Petrosky) exorcize are references to “skill” which, admittedly, is a highly problematic term, easily appropriated for the more mechanistic, functional “service” in which composition courses are generally inscribed. Nonetheless, Ponsot and Deen make a real contribution to describing that “middle step” between the synthesis of doing and the analysis of what’s been done. They effectively challenge old myths upon which curricula have tended to be organized, namely that “a systematic way of teaching makes an analysis of the material to be learned and of what students don’t know, decides on an order of priority or of difficulty, then presents the material in that order step by step” (Preface).

However, their narrative, with its emphasis on pleasure and imagination, is unlikely to persuade deans and university administrators
when basic writing falls under fire as an enterprise unworthy of higher education, although it may certainly persuade some of the teachers Phelps describes who might initially resist theorizing about their work. Furthermore, Ponsot and Deen express great faith in the power of exposition as the public voice of rationality and “the disinterested discovery of ideas defended only by the cogent evidence” (202). In this regard they fall in line with Shaughnessy, and Bartholomae and PetroSky, in privileging the “reasonable” voice of academic discourse as the “public” voice for a democratic society. Ponsot and Deen in fact acknowledge such “disinterested” inquiry as a privilege of the academy; but it is a privilege that, since the publication of their book, has been repeatedly assaulted by a increasingly stratified economy and a public worried about getting their money’s worth from educators who often seem “disinterested” to the point of not caring, absorbed in research that seems to bear no relevance to real-life problems. Paradoxically, what Ponsot and Deen elevate as the discourse necessary for reasoned discussion in a democratic society is not embraced by that society as an “efficient” way to get things done.

What’s missing from Ponsot and Deen’s narrative, then, is the role a teacher must play in persuading students that such a discourse is useful in their world while at the same time understanding why its uses are necessarily limited by structures of power and authority. In other words, while rational discourse can influence decision-making significantly, the value of any particular argument is always subject to inequities in the social order—that is, who has the power to say what and why. The best made, most “elegant” (to borrow their term) arguments may fall on deaf ears, since arguments are never made in a political vacuum but are themselves representations of ideological struggles in society. Their emphasis on the practice of forms rather than exploration of topics or ideas makes sense as an argument against writing classes as introductions to literary analysis. However, it also precludes the uses of reading for other purposes, to understand how discourse and culture inform each other, and the legitimacy, as John Trimbur and Elizabeth Ellsworth have both noted, of “nonrational” discourses of protest and resistance which are deeply “interested.”

Ponsot and Deen emphasize the “disinterestedness” of exposition at the expense of disregarding the inherent “interestedness” that mode conceals so well in the public arena. As with the other authors, Ponsot and Deen had sound political reasons for their choices: to persuade teachers of English that the production of literature mattered “even” in composition
classrooms; to help struggling, overworked teachers find pleasure in teaching writing; to make writing an important activity and writers and writing teachers important figures in the academy (and perhaps in the culture at large). Certainly the need for rational discussion has never been stronger in this country. However, the powers and self-interest which propel such discourses have to be confronted as part of the process towards understanding the uses of conflict in successful negotiation.

Reclaiming (Again) Story as Inquiry

What all these pedagogical texts reveal, finally, are assumptions about the nature of inquiry. In the case of Errors and Expectations and Facts, Artifacts, and Counterfacts, the narrative of formal theory rescuing practice is problematic because it cannot directly reveal the world of practice, only practice through a particular method of questioning. Their emphasis on student error and the heroic role of teachers saving students from incoherence, not to mention injustice, narrates a story of compensation: the dark cave of the classroom incomplete in and of itself without the light of scientific method or postmodernist thought. The problem with this story is that it represents the reflective, theory-generating practices of teacher-researchers as an extension of formal theory rather than a distinct mode of inquiry whose results can’t be directly translated into formal analysis. In this respect, Ponsot and Deen’s narrative has much to offer “resisting” teachers who more likely would recognize the value of literature as a mode of inquiry rather than empirical studies or critical theory. This is not to say these latter modes of inquiry have no place in teacher-research. It is to say, however, that the resulting narratives must provide richer stories that better “evoke” (Fleisicher) the teacher-researcher’s implicit narratives of learning and teaching and situates them within their particular institutional, social, and historical contexts.

Of course, well-known teacher-research texts such as Mike Rose’s Lives on the Boundary have paved the way for a flurry of interest in teacher research that had been emerging as inquiry for nearly two decades at that point. More recently, Ira Shor’s When Students Have Power narrates an entire semester of one humanities class devoted to the topic of “Utopia.” In both cases, I found the stories of students’ struggles and resistance to what is cast as oppressive social and institutional policies and practices poignant and moving, as well as the learning they ultimately attain. I carried the images of both teachers and students around with me for weeks afterwards, their stories mingling with, focusing, and posing
problems to my own teaching.

Such texts enable a dialogue that I often yearn for among my colleagues but find difficult, even at times impossible to begin. Yet ultimately the heroic posture of these teacher-researchers and their “formal” knowledge recaptures the spotlight for two main reasons: it is clear that their methodologies trap the subjects of their research in the researcher’s quotation marks, subjected to, without recourse, a heroic narrative that they have no stake in authoring; also, the “errors” in students’ interpretations and analysis of their own stories are decidedly absent. No students are arguing within and against the narratives of these teacher-researchers’ texts. The ultimate “good guys,” of course, are the ones who tell the story. On the other hand, Cathy Fleischer’s “prosaic history” lends an important perspective on the changing tides of teacher research over the years, as she becomes more and more aware of the limits of her methodologies as well as her representations of them. Interestingly, I was as engaged with her early stories as her later ones, yet her narrative ultimately focuses less on her as the heroic teacher-researcher (and her shift to university teaching and “formal” knowledge) and more on the development of teacher-research itself, a dynamic, ever-changing subject that through Fleischer’s text takes on a great deal of vitality and promise. I have also enjoyed reading the accounts of Ruth Vinz in teacher-education practicums and Patricia Stock’s experiments in public schools; however, current and future teachers who took a course I taught with these texts strenuously objected to what they regarded as theory-driven discourse (Vinz) or impossible and, to them, undesirable approaches to curriculum development (Stock). While I don’t agree with these teachers on all accounts, I do think their resistance is understandable, given the difficulty even the best teacher-research texts have in RE-presenting (after Ann Berthoff’s “RE-searching”) teacher inquiry as more than the practical application of somebody else’s theory.

Revisiting the “Middle Step”

I close with a speculation. Earlier I questioned what may have been lost in teacher-research from the early days that these texts recall as well as what might be reclaimed. One reviewer of this article noted that, unlike Shaughnessy and Bartholomae’s texts, Beat Not the Poor Desk “had far smaller appeal”; it was “a category apart” from the other two texts. Perhaps that is because, in part, what’s been lost is the trust that Ponsot and Deen had in literature as a vehicle of, not simply subject to, inquiry. Literature does, indeed, stand as a “category apart” from
"formal" knowledge of the disciplines, even apart from literary studies. Perhaps it is worth revisiting what contemporary writers of literary works are up to, the new ways of "evoking" experience that have been emerging for some time, and trusting such writing as that "middle step" between analysis and synthesis that composition studies needs to tell its own story in ways that teachers, scholars, writers, and researchers can more fully engage.

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Notes

1 When Phelps distinguishes "practical wisdom" from "formal knowledge" to categorize the different knowledges of teacher-practitioners and researcher-theorists, I am uncomfortable with the binary oppositions these categories imply, namely that theory and practice are easily separated. They may not necessarily form a smooth continuum, but neither are they antagonistic opposites. Like Berthoff and Freire, I see them in a dialectical relationship.

2 C. H. Knoblauch and Lil Brannon also provide thought-provoking examples of self-critical teacher-research narratives in Chapter Three, "Images of Critical Teaching" in Critical Teaching and the Idea of Literacy (Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, Heinemann, 1993). However, when teachers in two separate teacher-research classes that I taught read this book, they couldn't get past what they regarded as the "heavy-handed" political overtones of the book—another indication, perhaps, of how limited teachers are in their own sense of agency outside the classroom.

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