Reflections on Academic Writing


One of the most unproductive ways I can think of to begin a review of the two books listed above is to get hung up on definitions. I could start by quoting Donna Qualley’s careful definition of *reflexivity*, which entails further definition of *dialectical* and is then contrasted with (mere) “reflection” and “metacognition.” Or I could begin with Yancey’s review of Donald Schon’s terms *reflection in action* and *reflective transfer* which she then “retheorizes” as *reflection-in-action*, *constructive reflection*, and *reflection-in-presentation*. I could spend a good bit of time trying to figure out whether what Yancey means by *reflection* is what Qualley’s definition critiques, whether Yancey would even accept Qualley’s definition, or whether Qualley would say that what Yancey is talking about is really reflexivity after all.

Are you growing restless already? Well, I said it would be unproductive. Yet each time I sit down to read and think about these two books, I fall into definitional quagmires. Part of the problem is mine, of course. Despite my best intentions, I can’t get myself to simply read for what interests me in a book like this, to skim and browse and hunt up the interesting parts of these texts the way efficient academic readers do. But part of it is the fault of the writers themselves—or rather, the fault of the academic establishment which insists on all this defining and citing and theorizing—whether or not it’s really useful to the question at hand.

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As you can tell, I’m feeling churlish about academic writing. Last year I was complaining about lit reviews—the academic convention that leads perfectly good writers to sink into citation-laden lists of previous studies as soon as they get past the engagingly written introductory chapter or paragraph. Before that it was theorizing that was driving me crazy: writing about teaching as if the specific, concrete details of our classrooms and students didn’t matter. Neither of these books, I am happy to say, is guilty of the worst academic sins. Both are grounded in the concrete experience of the writers, and both offer abundant examples of student work to illustrate what they are saying. Still, both books could be better—and one way they could be better would be to stay focused on the concrete: on the problem, the challenge, the “felt difficulty” in teaching that originally prompted their writing.

In some ways, the “felt difficulties” Yancey and Qualley face are quite similar: how to get students to think about their thinking. For Yancey, this means asking the writer to keep stepping back from her writing, taking different perspectives on what she is doing, has done, or might do in the future to improve her performance as a writer. For Qualley, it means getting the writer to consider other ways of thinking about the subject she is writing about, and getting her also to reconsider (though not necessarily change) her own thinking in light of those other perspectives.

In both cases, the pedagogical goal is a worthy one, but I confess I’m more interested in it as a practical problem than a theoretical one. And I am especially intrigued, in both books, when the writers allude to the teaching circumstances that led them to their subjects.

In Yancey’s book, those circumstances are referred to quite explicitly. In the beginning, Yancey was drawn to reflection “for what it promised (but often failed) to add to portfolios” (15). She was also frustrated by her university’s writing proficiency requirement and her own inability to help students meet that requirement. “[A]s I met and talked with these students,” she says, “I began to see that there was too little correspondence between my reading of their texts and their accounts of what went into the making of that text. Not that my reading was totally wrong, you understand, but that it was perilously incomplete. With their talk—with what I am calling reflection—the reading became fuller, at least” (17). The more she thought about reflection, Yancey discovered, the more interested she became. Hence, this extended reflection on reflection, complete with multiple definitions, lots of theorizing,” and some useful sample assignments that teachers who share Yancey’s interest in reflective writing might want to try out.

If reflection doesn’t always have the impact we would like it to have, it may be because it’s too focused on improving writing at the expense of improving thinking. That, at any rate, is one implication of Donna Qualley’s argument. For Qualley, what students need to experience in a composition
class is a sense of engagement with the “other,” whether that be an actual person or culture, an opposing argument, or a nagging voice inside the writer’s own head.

Students do need to take their subjectivity into account to “think well in a discipline,” if thinking well means constructing one’s own thoughtful understanding of the subject matter. But like any instrument of interpretation, our subjectivity is capable of seeing some things but not others. That is why this subjectivity needs to be a reflexive subjectivity. (25)

Like Yancey, Qualley is reflective about what brought her to the topic she is writing on. In her opening chapter, “Understanding Reflexivity,” she writes, “Although I have embraced many of [Donald] Murray’s specific ideas on writing and the teaching of writing over the years, the most valuable and convincing aspect of Murray’s work for me has always been his example of self-initiated, ongoing inquiry into his own writing process and teaching” (2). In the pages that follow Qualley proceeds to recount, in classic Murray fashion, a story about her own failure, at the age of 22, to understand the otherness of the Australian culture, and her later realization that this limitation had something in common with her grandmother’s racist and classist ideas. In both cases, she says, what was missing was the vital element of reflexivity—“the act of turning back to discover, examine, and critique one’s own claims and assumptions in response to an encounter with another idea, text, person, or culture” (3).

Although I see what Qualley is doing with this story—modeling the kind of reflexive inquiry she wants to teach—I find I’m impatient with it in the way I am sometimes impatient with Donald Murray’s stories. It’s one thing to use personal exploration to find your subject, to stay grounded in what you want to say, but it’s another thing to ask your readers to follow you on such journeys.

It would be audacious of me to claim that the story Qualley should have told is one that is only hinted at in the book. But I must admit I am intrigued by the story of how she came to the pedagogy she now practices. It’s a situation many of us would be familiar with—a writing teacher raised on Murray (or Elbow or Macrorie or any of the so-called “expressivists”) finds herself teaching in a changed pedagogical landscape, a landscape dominated by Bartholomae and Petrosky, as well as other advocates of so-called “academic writing.” How does such a teacher reconcile what she values in that older pedagogy with what she is attracted to in the new? How does she avoid the binary thinking that Bartholomae and Elbow have fallen into, despite their best efforts to the contrary?

For avoid it she does. Like Tom Newkirk and Sherrie Gradin, with whom she once taught at the University of New Hampshire, Qualley manages
to do gracefully what so many of us have failed to do in the composition wars of the nineties: to show how personal/reflective writing and academic/critical writing feed and nourish each other. And she does it not just by arguing for it in theoretical terms, but by demonstrating it in her own writing and in her own teaching.

Which brings me to a final point.

We’re all so afraid these days to talk about “what to do on Monday morning.” Simply describing how we teach, explaining why we make the choices we do, and reflecting equally on our successes and failures seems somehow insufficient. Is it just because we’ve read too many lame articles describing “a writing assignment that works”? Or is it that we fear we will be dismissed as “lightweight” by English Department colleagues who think teaching is not intellectual work?

Whatever the reason, it’s a shame. For isn’t this what we still ask ourselves when we sit down to design a new syllabus, prepare a class session, or write up a new assignment? How do I get these blank faces animated? How do I get these hesitant writers engaged? How do I get these minds moving in new directions, tackling new ideas with confidence and humility?

If these are your questions, as they are mine, then you will find something of value in both these books—and perhaps especially in Qualley’s. If you get bogged down in definitions in the beginning, just keep on reading. Soon you will find yourself in the company of a thoughtful, dedicated, imaginative teacher of writing—one whose class you might like to sit in on some dark, gloomy Monday morning.

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