enter a kaleidoscopic world where a classroom is anywhere that learning is taking place—from world literature classrooms to elementary school classrooms and homes for the aged—and a teacher is anyone facilitating that learning. At a time when those of us in the trenches of composition and education must worry about how we present our work, our discipline, to those on the “outside,” In Praise of Pedagogy offers a fully fleshed-out picture of the highs and lows of classroom teaching today. Thus the contents of the book itself, the poem upon compelling poem, the engrossing flash fictions, provide a powerful argument for the uses of creative writing to illuminate our teaching lives in ways that other writing cannot. In this way, the book may well call the “English instructors at secondary and college levels” back to writing about their own classrooms. But more than that, the book transcends its audience. I cannot help but wish that somehow others might pick up In Praise of Pedagogy out of curiosity—or have it handed to them. The same reporters and administrators and parent-citizens who presume to know what goes on in today’s classrooms and consequently how to “fix” them might be surprised and even moved by the portraits of teachers and students struggling to learn together, at times celebrating the learning, at times mourning the learning that has been lost. From these portraits they may just determine what we all already know: that there are no quick fixes or one-size-fits-all solutions; that today’s students and teachers, work together in a complex, varied world that offers no easy answers. In fact, in ending her introduction, Bishop recalls an epigraph from Robert Hass’s poetry collection Praise, in which a “‘Captain’ is asked how he will deal with his encounter with an immense beast ‘terrifying and unpredictable.’ The captain thinks a minute then says: ‘I think I shall praise it’” (Hass qtd. in Bishop 20)—advice Bishop hails as useful for “engaging this unpredictable beast we call teaching.” In Praise of Pedagogy is useful for all of us deeply engaged in teaching lives, in celebrating and writing about those lives. Somehow, we must not end its uses there but allow it to reveal that teaching life for others.

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Donald Finkel’s overarching theme in his text Teaching with your Mouth Shut stems from John Dewey’s belief that “no thought, no idea, can possibly be conveyed as an idea from one person to another” (x). Finkel explores, through both theory and praxis, possible methods for moving from the realm of “telling” students to “teaching” students. Early in his text, Finkel defines good teaching as “creating . . . those circumstances that lead to significant learning in others” (8). While this phrase
may appear reductive, it gets to the heart of a complex professional question that I would like to explore through Finkel’s description and analysis of “teaching with your mouth shut”: What is the role of the instructor in a composition classroom? While his text is not specifically about teaching composition, Finkel discusses theories, activities, and strategies that could easily be situated in a composition course. Important to understanding the text is Finkel’s carefully contextualized situation stemming from his experience as an instructor at the University of Washington and his work in the innovative seminar structure at The Evergreen State College—an institution where students are evaluated with narrative comments rather than grades. Aware of the importance of institutional context, Finkel continually asserts that his book should not be used as a “teaching manual” but rather to provoke reflection on what constitutes effective teaching and to remember that “learning is the end, teaching is the means to that end.”

As with many composition teachers, Finkel utilizes inquiry and reflection as central activities in structuring teaching activities to promote learning. In fact, inquiry acts as the catalyst for all class activities in Teaching with your Mouth Shut. He begins with a chapter that delineates the theoretical underpinnings of the text while contextualizing his work in terms of his own teaching experience. The following seven chapters walk the reader through a number of concrete classroom activities and experiences. However, Finkel is careful not to adopt a “this way will work for everyone” attitude; instead, he scrupulously lays out a critical framework for his own curricular architecture and cautions the reader from understanding each chapter as a blueprint for successful course design. He ends the book by providing a critically reflective summation of the text and then, in his appendix, asks the reader to enact this critical reflection of this text through a series of learning activities.

The book leads the reader from macro to micro and back again to macro course design issues. The constant interplay in Teaching with your Mouth Shut resonates with George Hillocks’s Ways of Thinking, Ways of Teaching, in that Hillocks’s study of teaching methodologies in a variety of institutional settings recognizes the importance of a teacher’s representation of the knowledge or outcomes associated with a course. Hillocks writes that “a major factor in determining differences in the macro- and microcurricula of various classrooms is the epistemological stance of the teacher” (109)—in other words, how the teacher understands knowledge to be made or transferred radically impacts all aspects of a class. Finkel shares many of Hillocks’s points but especially his belief that how a teacher constructs knowledge within the class will profoundly impact the way in which the student learns that knowledge.

The implications of Finkel’s text for the composition classroom are most evident in his discussion of course design. In fact, Finkel firmly illustrates early on in the text where his pedagogy lies when he reports that “educational research over the past twenty-five years has established beyond a doubt a simple fact: What is transmitted to students through lecturing is simply not retained for any significant length of time” (3). Finkel does not totally dismiss lecturing, but he does see it as
occupying only a tiny role in class activities. Lecturing as an ineffective primary teaching strategy should be no surprise to many FYC instructors; however, the struggle to best achieve student learning is constant. Thus, Hillocks’s recognition that this struggle is fundamentally an epistemological one coincides with Finkel’s recognition that “people only learn by thinking for themselves, the teacher’s task is to set up conditions that provoke thinking” (151).

This recognition has been discussed by numerous other compositionists, critical pedagogy theorists, and others. What is helpful in Finkel’s text is that he augments this key epistemological recognition with a number of strategies for individual teachers to enact. While utilizing expressivist strategies, Finkel also recognizes that students must see a social connection with the material covered in a course. In Chapter Three, Finkel advocates encouraging students to connect course material to their life experiences as a way to connect to larger course/program objectives. The instructor’s job lies in constructing the possibility for that event to occur. And, as anyone who has struggled with that situation knows, Finkel realizes that therein lies the difficulty of “teaching with your mouth shut”: creating a course where students are engaged and the instructor shares in the inquiry of the course.

While he discusses the instructor’s role in creating this type of course, Finkel also makes clear that students must take responsibility for their learning. Finkel’s emphasis on inquiry-based courses illustrates methodology to construct composition courses around particular questions in order to accomplish course or program goals in a meaningful way for students.

The most direct link with the composition classroom occurs in Chapter Five, “The Art of Writing.” Many of the strategies Finkel discusses in this chapter will not be surprising to most composition instructors—using peer groups, teacher response letters, and emphasis on the writing process. However, the way he understands writing as an avenue for both student and teacher to collaboratively inquire about the material they are covering and about the process that they are enacting together forces us to step back and think about the macro-curricular issues involved in designing our composition courses and/or programs. Finkel reinforces the notion that writing instruction, as a component of a course, must be dialogic and collaborative. His text represents a powerful statement in recognition of the amount of work that comprises successful writing assignments and assessment.

Equally important to his discussion of writing for the position of the composition instructor is Finkel’s critical examination of the difference between power and authority in the classroom. Finkel devotes Chapter Seven, “Refusing to Teach,” to making a distinction between these two concepts and providing a case study on separating the two in class. John Dewey’s legacy in Finkel’s text becomes most clear in this chapter as he explores how an explicit realization of the difference between power and authority will “pave the way to democracy” (119). Finkel defines power as “grounded in present realities;” i.e., grades, while authority is that “which . . . justifies or makes legitimate a particular state of affairs” (121).
Often, these two ideas become knotted in the classroom, and Finkel recommends subtly untying them; at the same time, he recognizes that the teacher never totally retreats from a “power” relationship with the student because of institutional struc-
tures. However, by making the distinction and relationship visible to students, an
instructor can facilitate inquiry in a more democratic manner.

The student’s role in understanding the teacher’s role in a classroom also
becomes a point of discussion for Finkel in this chapter. Students often have a fairly
rigid idea of what a “writing” teacher should be and how they should act. While
many of us may be uncomfortable, either in theory or practice, giving up “power”
in the classroom, students likewise often struggle with that issue because they
are not familiar or do not trust the type of classroom Finkel describes. This issue
becomes most evident in composition courses in terms of instructor evaluation of
essays. Finkel stops short of discussing sharing some of the evaluation power with
students but, certainly, engaging students in frank discussions about individual as-
signments and the overall course grade continues along the same thread that Finkel
begins in this chapter. Allowing self evaluation and collaborative construction of
rubrics also seem to be reasonable possibilities and extensions of Finkel’s work.

A discussion of power and authority leads me back to my original question:
what is the role of the instructor in a composition classroom? Of course there is no
easy answer. However, Teaching with your Mouth Shut does provide a framework.
First, instructors must be critically aware of the context in which they teach, which
might mean being aware of student demographics and program/institution possibili-
ties and constraints. Second, Finkel’s text emphasizes the role critical reflection
must play for instructors and students in both individual and collective examination
of the course workings. Finally, Teaching with your Mouth Shut consistently rein-
forces the sense that student and teacher must work together in an atmosphere of
inquiry, not always as equals in knowledge but as partners working towards course
goals. Finkel’s lively text encourages instructors to constantly reflect, reframe,
and reimagine the courses they teach. It thus becomes a worthwhile text for both
the new and veteran composition instructor and administrator.

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WORKS CITED
Hillocks, George Jr. Ways of Thinking, Ways of Teaching. New York: Teachers