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In Talking, Sketching, Moving, Patricia Dunn challenges Compositionists to take seriously the multiplicity of channels for doing intellectual work in the writing classroom. She implores us to utilize physical, spatial, visual, representational, oral, and collaborative methods—in addition to writing activities—to teach students writing. Failure to do so, Dunn argues, perpetuates social injustice: “Using multiple ways of knowing also addresses a pedagogical injustice that is both systemic and local. Throughout most of the educational system, and especially in writing classes, students are forced to use linguistocentric tools to perform virtually all intellectual tasks” (8).

In her introduction, Dunn describes her book as an argument. She sets the scene with a critique of ideological commonplaces she identifies in Composition, but is careful to be overtly self-reflective about her own pedagogical commitments and beliefs. In describing her sense of responsibility as a writing teacher, for example, she explains her aim “to help [students] approach present and future writing tasks, in or out of college, with confidence, skill, rhetorical savvy, and yes, some healthy skepticism and critique about what our culture seems to value” (7). Dunn asserts that using a “multi-modal pedagogy” is her “main contribution against hegemony [because it] challenges the unaddressed privileging of those who use written words well, and the conventional discrimination against those whose talents involve other representational systems” (7). Pedagogically speaking, then, Dunn argues that using such an approach helps writing teachers grant to more students access to the power of words, and not using such an approach harms students who don’t already have access to that kind of power.

Dunn’s argument is three-fold. First, as a field, Composition has failed to address adequately our bias toward textual ways of knowing. Second, when compositionists cite theorists from other fields who address multiple channels to knowing, we selectively emphasize the aspects of their work which best fit with our own textual biases. Third, following Paulo Freire, to offer students a pedagogy which might deliver on Composition’s goal to help students gain linguistic power, we must expand the field’s efforts to accommodate different ways of knowing through an enriched praxis. Ultimately, she makes these arguments in order “to advance a course of action in Composition and English Studies” (4). And, although it is not clear from this book what this new course of action might entail for our theoretical and research agenda, Dunn provides a rich pedagogical practicum (three full chapters) for the types of practices such an approach would enjoy.

Chapter 1, “Challenging Theories of Knowing,” is Dunn’s rhetorical salvo in the debate about Composition’s theoretical privileging of “word-based epistemologies.” Based upon an analysis of Victor Villanueva’s Cross-Talk in
Comp-Theory, a popular anthology of foundational articles in Composition Studies, Dunn begins the chapter with the following claim:

Generally speaking, Composition believes that writing is not simply one way of knowing; it is the way. In Composition theory courses, readings attest mostly to writing’s benefits. That commonplace may be what makes it so difficult for us in Composition to see word-based epistemologies in any way other than liberatory and promoting social justice. (15)

Dunn proceeds to critique such commonplaces—“the primacy of language” and the “social construction of knowledge”—on the basis of their linguistic biases regarding the construction and expression of language. It is not, however, that Compositionists have failed to acknowledge other ways of knowing, but that as a field, we have not “fully pursued or taken seriously” the implications of alternative ways of knowing for our research and pedagogy.

By way of example, Dunn presents brief discussions of a number of other authors’ work: Howard Gardner’s on “multiple intelligences”; Antonio R. Damasio’s on the role of emotion in thinking; Thomas G. West’s on visual thinking; and Oliver Sacks’s on Temple Grandon’s work with beef cattle. With this collection in mind, Dunn then returns her attention to Composition to explore our own analysis of thinking and/or meaning making. In a section titled “Finding Lost Threads in Composition Theory,” Dunn selects a number of areas of inquiry and a variety of researchers in Composition that have produced insights about alternative ways of knowing—Writing Across the Curriculum, Peter Elbow, Janet Emig, Automated Speech Recognition technologies (Charles Lowe), and Lev Vygotsky—but, she claims, those very insights have faded into the background in lieu of what they have to tell “us” about the “importance of writing and its constructedness.” Although these short re-tracing of threads (both old and new) were interesting, they seemed more a transition to the next chapter. Because Dunn identified areas in our field where people have addressed the issues she advocates, I wanted her to present a more engaged picture of the substance of that work.

Instead, chapter 2, “Paulo Freire’s ‘Multiple Channels of Communication’” continues the argumentation strategy: rehabilitate the work of thinkers instrumental to our collective epistemology and our politics which specifically addresses alternatives to text/writing-based approaches to meaning making. Using, as a foil, Freire’s discussions concerning his work with students unable to read or write, Dunn poses the question concerning why Composition promotes writing as an exclusive way of knowing. Through a critique of Freire’s reception in Composition, Dunn re-emphasizes his commitments to dialogue, the “need for confidence in writing,” “co-intentional” learning, and to “ongoing inquiry.” Dunn ends the chapter writing, “In Composition today we need both skepticism and hope. We’re too steeped in critique, too sure that it is others who are naïve, too certain that other people’s research is epistemologically flawed and therefore has nothing to do with
our own. We’re being too easy on ourselves” (55). It is a more complicated image of Freire’s work that she offers as a beacon for us to strive toward. In this book, Dunn exemplifies such striving.

In the next three chapters, Dunn presents—in a conversational mix of anecdote, explication, reproductions of student work, personal reflection, and disciplinary argumentation—lively descriptions of the techniques she has used or been introduced to that employ alternative ways of making meaning. While each chapter addresses different aspects of the writing process (“Generating and Organizing Text”; “Revising and Editing”; “Analyzing Readings”) each offers multi-modal strategies for how to use the skills and practices students bring with them to class, as well as strategies to challenge students’ thinking about their writing and the subjects about which we are asking them to make meaning. The activities Dunn presents are provoking in their variety, in their potential to engage students in ways of thinking about their own written work, and in their productivity. For these chapters alone readers will want to look at this book. Many of her strategies, though, seem familiar. For this reason I wonder if the problem Dunn identifies in Composition has more to do with a disconnect between the work we do in our classrooms and the work we read about in our journals. Either way, Dunn raises a question about the kind of attention our field has given to multi-modal approaches to the intellectual work of the writing class.

The final chapter, “Handling Professional Issues,” offers Dunn an opportunity to provide defensive strategies for those readers persuaded by her argument. Using as a point of departure the public reactions to a special issue of English Journal on multiple-intelligence (described in this and the previous chapter), Dunn spends time strategizing ways of turning the tables on those who would be critical. Three of the proposed strategies are for us to “look beyond Composition” to fields offering relevant research, for us to heed the calls by those in our field who argue for renewed attention to empirical research, and for us to continue to make our voices heard in debates about education and learning.

Dunn makes a strong argument for more considered attention in Composition to multiple pathways for intellectual activity. Her process has been one that engages in a kind of disciplinary self-reflection, but for me, she doesn’t quite produce the kind of theoretical reengagement that she calls for. Maybe I am already one of the converted. Maybe she, too, rests too easily on critique. While the three chapters on exemplary alternatives amount to a collection of compelling classroom practices, I finished the book wanting a clearer articulation about ways our research and scholarship might be changed, our new “course of action.” There were glimpses throughout this book of areas of study, of theoretical work not yet given much attention in the field, of provocative problem posing. But, only glimpses. In the end, I think this book offers a vivid portrait of an engaged teacher who makes an important argument and who has great strategies for how to both talk the talk and walk the walk.

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