In *Misunderstanding the Assignment*, Doug Hunt, composition director at the University of Missouri-Columbia, aims to “represent the experience of a composition class, not from the theorist’s point of view, but from the points of view of several students and their teacher” (xii). Assisted by ten graduate students, in the spring of 1999 Hunt studied the experiences of six students in a first-year composition class led by teaching assistant Rachel Palencia. Hunt’s representation of this class relies on a record built from videotaped class sessions; interviews with the students and Palencia before, during, and after the course; student writing; and Palencia’s written reflections. The result is an interesting account of making meaning through the artifact of the writing assignment. As Wendy Bishop writes in the book’s foreword, this study reveals “what is so difficult to see in our own classrooms: the ways in which simple events and understandings misfire; the complicated repercussions of a single pedagogical moment; the necessity for finding methods that allow the ‘above ground’ and ‘below ground’ of our curriculum to make sense together” (ix). While Hunt allows these two perspectives to emerge, his “theorist’s point of view” inevitably emerges as well; specifically, Hunt’s use of developmental psychology to analyze student “misunderstanding,” and his halting engagement with issues of social difference, limit the complex representations of students and teachers he hopes to reveal.

Chapter 1, “Transplants,” features interviews with six students in Palencia’s class, revealing familiar assumptions about writing, grading, and teachers that students bring to the university. Further, while readers may assume the overwhelmingly white, middle-class, teenage population of the University of Missouri to be homogenous, Hunt’s interviews highlight class, ethnic, and regional differences among students, and reveal the pressure-filled realities students write within—from working full time, to adjusting to new intellectual responsibilities, to confronting moral, social, and political differences that comprise campus life.

These students’ private realities take public shape in chapter 2, which describes the first week of Palencia’s composition class. Her course, a cultural studies approach to composition, uses writing to “[look] at people in relation to the society or culture in which they live” (19). This week Palencia gives the students their first essay assignment, to “explore how [the] myth of the family is both perpetuated and challenged in two thematically connected television shows” (21). Using the assignment itself, a model student essay, and an in-class viewing of a 1950s family-centered sit-com, Palencia slowly scaffolds student learning on this topic. While my grasp of her practice would have benefited from a copy of the syllabus, assignment sequence, and programmatic guidelines, watching how...
one teacher constructs entry points into an assignment is always fascinating. I can imagine this chapter included in a graduate course in teaching composition, paired with theoretical pieces on creating active learning environments.

That first week, Palencia’s students responded vigorously to the question that initiated the inquiry—what are the myths of the ideal family that we live with? (25)—but confusion emerged as they tried to match contemporary sit-coms with the 1950s model offered by Palencia. Because of their generational distance, her students’ knowledge of the “1950s family” was as caricature and stereotype; in problem-solving the inquiry from their own points of reference, students debated about separating out a “mythic” family from a “stereotypical,” “ideal,” and “typical” one (35). It is in these pages of transcript that the struggle for meaning over the core question of the assignment emerges, providing a valuable study in how a teacher negotiates the terms and boundaries of an assignment. At this point, Hunt’s term “misunderstanding” seems a limited way to make sense of the student discussion. From my view, the pedagogic challenge of the first week became less about getting students to “understand” an assignment than negotiating its meaning and adjusting it to accommodate their differing experiences and points of view.

At the close of chapter 2, Hunt explains student confusion over the “ideal family” as a problem with students’ psychological development. Relying on the work of psychologist Robert Kegan, Hunt argues that when students generate multiple, confused meanings from an assignment, it indicates a transitional stage in their development as thinkers. Kegan’s stages of psychological and social development place college students in the space of the “interpersonal,” where they are still learning to “evaluate [them]selves from the eyes of others” (37). Hunt’s determination that students are confused by the assignment because they lack intellectual maturity seems to limit the complexity of diverse student voices in chapter 1, encouraging a homogenized template for understanding students, far from the “bottom up” view of classrooms that Hunt aims to represent. This lens assumes that an assignment is something that could have meaning apart from its interaction with readers, as if it was reified, knowable in and of itself; as a result it prevents us from seeing that it is precisely this verbal and written negotiation of the key terms of the assignment that allow its meaning to emerge—that, in classrooms based on process like Palencia’s, meaning must to some extent be collaboratively constructed.

Chapter 3 features week two of Palencia’s class, when students present their tentative analyses of their family-centered sit-coms. The chapter makes an argument about tolerance: how students evidence toleration of ambiguity in their cultural analyses and how that might reflect their tolerance of social difference in their lived experience. Hunt opens this argument with a stinging reference to a “gay black graduate student” in his program who declared a “zero tolerance of intolerance in his class” (40). He contrasts this stance with Palencia’s, whom he praises for learning to “tolerate even intolerance” (41). This anecdote is followed by an excerpt from Palencia’s conference with Ray, a student who reveals his homophobic distaste for the composition instructor he had prior to Palencia, and
an excerpt from an article in the student newspaper written by Palencia’s student Michael, who cruelly lambastes a Native American student who argued against the mascot tradition in college sports. These two excerpts are placed in no pedagogic context, the chapter abruptly shifting to the week’s class presentations. Excerpts from transcripts reveal one failed oral analysis of a sit-com after another. Hunt makes sense of this class session by providing quotes from famous writers on the difficulties presented by the research portion of the writing process. As in chapter 2, I felt that Hunt’s response erases the very complexity that his representation of Palencia’s class session suggests. For example, students conducted their research on sit-coms in isolation and individually; instead of seeing students as not ready for the task, could a collaborative approach to this activity have yielded more analytical depth? Could the dialogue that collaborative work engenders helped students to engage issues of social difference in ways that gave them needed perspective on their sometimes intolerant (homophobic, racist) perspectives? In this chapter Hunt acknowledges, and then limits, the reality that cultural studies approaches to composition—like Palencia’s—rely on working with students to negotiate the social differences that emerge in analysis and experience. Indeed, Hunt is generally unclear about how to address the politics of social difference. For example, throughout the book he prefaced each description of a class session with an italicized, thumbnail sketch of the political, social, and campus news of the day. Although it was interesting to see the timeline of the war in Kosovo and the Clinton impeachment hearings, Hunt’s use of this frame is confusing, suggesting a cultural dialogue that isn’t present in the theory he uses to make sense of students’ engagement with the assignment.

With presentations and workshops completed, chapters 4 and 5 feature Palenica assessing the essays she collected and holding conferences with students on revisions. Hunt uses William Perry’s developmental schema of dualism, multiplicity, and relativism to make sense of transcripts of student conferences (92-95). In this chapter I was more compelled by the portions of Palencia’s teaching journal that Hunt provided, in which she describes what she learns about her assignment from reading students’ essays. Frank and reflective, Palencia makes cogent observations about her own assumptions about the assignment. Palencia is a competent instructor; as both a graduate student and a woman, she is also part of a class of university workers that have been continually underpaid and undervalued. Compositionists have written eloquently about the persistent tendency to exploit women, graduate, and part-time workers in the academy, feminizing composition as a field in the process. While Palencia’s class could hold up to the scrutiny a book-length study invites, I wonder about the ethics of asking Palencia to open her class to such scrutiny. Her writing throughout the book is copious, her analysis interesting: why not make her a co-author? Or, why not invite a tenured composition faculty member to open his/her class to this level of scrutiny, someone less institutionally and professionally vulnerable?
Chapter 6, “Seeing Green,” has a different pace and format from the rest of the book. Representing class experiences from February to May, the chapter combines final interviews with the six featured students, conference and class discussions on the second assignment, and excerpts from student papers. Unlike the other chapters, in which we watch the class wrestle with the essay assignment, in this chapter we consider one student writer at a time. I was most interested in reading how students’ different discourse communities and literacy experiences affected their writing processes: Rob’s deep involvement in his church habituates him to write in “testimonial” form; Carl’s childhood debates with adults during family get-togethers show up in his deft analyses; and Toni’s experience in psychotherapy shapes her reactions to feedback on her writing. This chapter is a good example of the importance of making a space in our pedagogy for understanding the literacy experiences our students bring to class, the tacit rules and assumptions they operate within.

In the appendix and afterword Hunt and Palencia present final comments on their teaching and research experiences. In explaining how students worked within and against her assignments, each blames the occasional breakdown in understanding on one of the graduate student investigators (a “critical pedagogue”) on Hunt’s research team (149). Twice in the book Hunt criticizes graduate students who bring their politics into their teaching, but Hunt too has a politics, one that rests on a constellation of privileges that allow him to construct Palencia’s class, position its participants, and assess its outcomes. That his ability to do all this rests on the site of composition’s underclass—the adjunct/student instructor, the female compositionist—is a reality that needed to have been addressed within the book’s appendix, “Some Comments on Methods and Ethics.” The artifact of the assignment—and the community of practice that is built around it—is a key space for reflecting on how teachers create conditions for meaning making in writing. Despite its shortcomings, Misunderstanding the Assignment gives teachers of writing stories and descriptions to further problematize their own practices and assumptions.

Chico, CA


Reviewed by Rebecca G. Taylor, Gustavus Adolphus College

Tutoring Writing: A Practical Guide for Conferences is a comprehensive, useful book. The book is intended primarily for those who administer writing centers or teach courses that prepare tutors, and it’s most appropriate for those whose institutions offer a required first-year writing course. Tutoring Writing explains what