

## Editors' Introduction: To What End?

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In this issue, you will have the opportunity to read an unusual piece in our Reviews section. Written by the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign Pedagogy Collective, it is a coauthored, multivoiced text that rehearses descriptions of a set of key terms taken from the authors' reading of professional writings on teaching.<sup>1</sup> The collective was formed during a required course for graduate students seeking to teach a literature course in the English department. As they describe it, "The major goal for this course was to introduce students to the critical debates in literature pedagogy." As such, students were asked to synthesize their learning through writing a critical book review and a teaching philosophy with an annotated bibliography. Using excerpts from the students' teaching philosophies, the review essay in this issue was organized to expose and elaborate those "critical debates in literature pedagogy."

Reading this essay from the UIUC Pedagogy Collective reminds us of how difficult it is to construct a philosophy of teaching. While on the job market, most of us have to write something like a teaching philosophy or create an introduction to a teaching portfolio. At the very least, we are asked in interviews such questions as, "Explain your approach to teaching the introductory survey." How do we construct such overarching philosophy statements without sounding naive, overly idealistic, or abstract? If we embrace an antifoundationalist pedagogical stance (and even if we don't), how do we employ the stance we take? When we turn to theorists (say, to Paolo Freire or Gerald Graff, two whom the collective mentions), do we really believe (that is, *enact*) the principles they espouse?

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The debates the graduate course on teaching literature emphasizes are exactly the kinds of questions that remain open in the paragraph above. At the least, reading other pedagogical theorists forced these new teachers to work out a provisional way of defining their purposes in teaching — a *passing theory*, to use Donald Davidson’s term. One purpose of *Pedagogy* is to theorize the practice (and principles) of teaching, to craft a language for describing it properly. The writers in the collective are doing just that — for the first time as new teachers.<sup>2</sup>

That is, all of these questions ask us as teachers to define the *purposes* of an English course; in doing so, we construct a definition of “the student” created by those purposes. One of the collective members sets up a binary to represent the “two — possibly competing — poles” in the debate over purposes: between those who believe the goal is to teach the student to “become a change-agent in school and society” (Shor 1996: 206; qtd. in “Forging a Pedagogical Community”) and those who see English courses in instrumental terms, as a means “to prepare people for certain social and professional roles” (Smith 1997: 318; qtd. in “Forging a Pedagogical Community”). The collective opts for a philosophical position in between these two poles, but even then it highlights the questions: Should we see our students’ purposes as our own? What happens when our purposes clash with those our students bring? Whose interests are served by defining students (and ourselves) in certain terms (as, say, “change-agents” or “professionals”)?

Richard E. Miller (2004: 375), another pedagogical theorist whom the collective uses to illuminate these pedagogical questions, twists the terms of the debate over purposes by exposing an economic reality that may force us to view our “teaching philosophies” more pragmatically:<sup>3</sup>

With the state backing out of the higher education business and tuition climbing as best it can to make up the difference, the time has passed when public institutions of higher education can afford to disregard the question of whether their graduates leave feeling they were well served during their years in the academy. . . . The new economy, in other words, has brought with it a significant change: it has made institutions of higher education suddenly much more dependent upon student satisfaction. The equation is seemingly straightforward: if our students leave our institutions dissatisfied with the quality of the education they’ve received, they are unlikely to become future donors; and, if they don’t become future donors, then both the range of students served and the learning opportunities provided by public universities will continue to contract.

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As Miller notes, many have written on the dangers of defining students as consumers. First, learning is, at bottom, about momentary *discomfort* and *dissatisfaction*. Students cannot necessarily judge the value of a course at that moment of immersion—its effects may well be realized later. Therefore, building a philosophy of teaching around customer satisfaction seems to thwart the developmental goals we hold for students. Second, a consumerist model places the classic humanist aims of educating the whole citizen in a subordinate position to the goal of preparing future workers. This certainly chafes for us English teachers, we hyperliterate 1 percent of the population who have (ironically?) managed to translate our own investment in higher education into relatively secure white-collar faculty positions that afford us the time to read, write, and think about the subjects we love.

Miller reminds us that “for the vast majority of students in public institutions, attending college continues to be a considerable investment of time, energy, and money. These students and their parents, reasonably enough it seems to me, expect to get something in exchange for their many different investments, something besides, that is, lectures on the perils of vocationalism and airy statements about the transcendent rewards of the life of the mind” (375). So what *is* it that we can offer them instead? Is there a pragmatic response that doesn’t also obscure the ideal of “the life of the mind”?

*Pedagogy* has always aimed to wrestle with such questions of purpose and of practice. In this issue, not only does the UIUC Pedagogy Collective bring the questions to the fore in its conversation on the definition of a philosophy of teaching, but the articles and other features continue to ask fundamental questions of best practice and theoretical justification. For instance, Simon Hay opens the issue with a commentary that asks, “Why study *literature* in such a world [as ours]?” He goes on to show why the answer to that question is necessarily complicated by such issues and themes as those recognized by the UIUC Pedagogy Collective:

Of course, the way I’ve framed the question prejudices certain kinds of answers; my frame suggests that there should be both an *ethical* component to any answer (how does reading rate as an ethical activity?) as well as a *practical* component (how does reading do anything to change the world?). Students are therefore hesitant about offering an *aesthetic* response; my frame makes the claim that they study literature in order to appreciate beauty, in the face of global poverty and injustice, more callow than they want to imagine themselves being. But eventually someone will offer something like an Arnoldian argument about culture: we study literature because literature is the best of what’s been thought and said in the world. The question turns into one of value and of judgment: what makes something “the best”? What are

the categories, what are the comparisons being made, and *to what end*—before our discussions can begin, students need to realize these are open-ended questions, not simply rhetorical ones.

To what end, indeed? Regardless of philosophical orientation, economic or political exigency, subject matter, or student demographic, we must keep this fundamental question in mind—and in play.

### Notes

1. For example, the collective explores such key teaching themes as embodiment, conflict, democracy, dialogue, silence, authority, and the image of the student in the classroom.
2. We have argued here and elsewhere (Taylor and Holberg 1999; Holberg and Taylor 2006) for more emphasis on teaching as a required element in graduate education; this seminar on teaching literature is exactly the kind of course that all PhD programs in English should offer to complement coursework and practical training in teaching composition. In addition to the texts used in the UIUC course, described in their essay in this issue, see also Schilb 2001 and Showalter 2001.
3. This is particularly true for those of us who teach at public institutions. In fact, Miller's (2004: 365–67) argument begins by describing the disparity between the working conditions in the writing programs at Princeton and Rutgers, fueled by the difference in the neighboring universities' endowments.

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