A Teaching Subject: Composition since 1966

Joseph Harris

Why we teach writing in college in the United States (a puzzling phenomena to instructors in higher education in most other countries) is perhaps the most crucial and controversial question for composition scholars and teachers to answer. In this book, Joe Harris aligns himself with "a dissenting tradition in English that has argued for looking closely at the uses students and ordinary people make of language" (xi) and argues for a strongly civic purpose for teaching writing. Beginning with the questions of how and why people might be encouraged to change their uses of writing and "the sorts of work students and teachers might do together in a college writing course" (x), he advocates that the college writing classroom be seen as "a public space where students can begin to form their own voices as writers and intellectuals" (116) and where they are urged "not simply to defend the cultures into which they were born but to imagine new public spheres which they'd like to have a hand in making" (124).

This stance on the purpose of college writing classes inflects and enhances Harris's delineation of "the competing uses and meanings of . . . [five] key words in the teaching of writing" (97)—growth, voice, process, error, community—accompanied by an afterword on contact zones. In his discussions of the debates surrounding these terms that have framed and continue to frame the ongoing conversations about the teaching of writing, he is careful to show how each position positively answered a need in the context in which it developed and how changing contexts and conflicting needs gave rise to alternate positions.

At the Dartmouth Seminar in 1966, the differing histories of British and American educators came into conflict, as the British growth theorists proposed a model that, with its emphasis on developing students' natural abilities, reminded American researchers of the progressive teaching they wished to reject. Nevertheless, Harris points out, "Many of the concerns and methods of the growth model have by now been accepted [in the U.S.] as parts of an almost official pedagogy" (13) of the writing process, though this acceptance has been limited to matters of pedagogy and not applied to the goals of English studies.

The ongoing debates between Peter Elbow and David Bartholomae have exacerbated the divide between the conception of voice as "authentic" or as socially constructed, but, as Harris points out, "these two views also hold much in common—most importantly, a sense that the subject of composition is not only writing but the person who writes, that in changing how they use language students can also change their
sense of who they are” (42). Harris also emphasizes that in the context of the 1960s, expressivist approaches to teaching writing like Elbow’s were not solipsistic but explicitly political, a “defense of the student in her struggles to assert herself against what was seen as a dehumanizing corporate and university system” (27).

Harris sees research on the writing process as picking up on the concerns of growth theorists and expressivists with students’ “own writing” while at the same time attempting to legitimate composition studies as a research field. He argues that, “It is in this highly charged and somewhat contradictory context—a new field trying to legitimate itself in the academy, a set of reformers trying to change the schools—that Emig’s work takes on such importance and interest, since she was at once committed as a teacher to the therapeutic value of writing as a mode of self-expression and as a researcher to the need to study the means (or process) of that self-expression with a scientific detachment and rigor” (58).

The contemporary debate on error in writing was animated by open admissions, and Harris acknowledges Mina Shaughnessy’s “clear sympathy and respect for such students” at the same time as he lays out the alternative positions that question the simple assimilation of non-mainstream students to the existing standards of academic discourse. He nevertheless argues that we need to learn better how to respond to persistent complaints about grammar in student writing, and reminds us that it is the use of language standards as a badge of identity (much like the stars on the bellies of Dr. Seuss’s Sneetches) that “so powerfully charges the debate on error” (90).

Harris’s discussion of the idea of community in the study of writing, first published in CCC in 1989, has been influential in problematizing one of the god-terms of current composition theory. Harris points out that the idea came into the field of composition from the literary-philosophical work of Stanley Fish on “interpretive communities” and the linguistic work on “speech communities” “without fully taking into account the differences between the two” (101): interpretive communities are idealized sets of discourse conventions enacting a shared worldview, while speech communities are formed by the practices of actual physical communities. In this discussion, Harris argues more directly for his own position than he does in the other chapters: he argues against “the notion that our students should necessarily be working towards the mastery of some particular, well-defined sort of discourse. It seems to me that they might better be encouraged towards a kind of polyphony—an awareness of and pleasure in the various competing discourses that make up their own” (104).

Harris’s commitment to writing as intellectual work and to encouraging students in writing classes to see themselves “as people who bring not only experiences but ideas to the classroom, whose work as intellectuals does not begin and end in school but continues on outside it” (22) is clear in all his discussions of these terms: he argues that
growth theory glosses over the consideration of conflicts and differences that are essential to doing intellectual work; he states that expressivist pedagogies of voice become “an anti-intellectual project” when they defer critical discussions, as do pedagogies of contact zones when they do not allow meaningful conversation among differing positions; he laments that in focusing on formal matters, process approaches “fail to explore in any real detail how writers might change not only their phrasings but their minds” (68); and he voices his preference for teaching students the abilities associated with the writing of critics and intellectuals rather than the “correct” conventions of academic discourse. These critiques are further instantiated in the “interchapters” that focus on his own teaching experiences, and one might say of his advocacy of teaching practices that elicit intellectual work from students the same thing that he complains of in Emig’s and Flower’s practices: “The process you teach turns out to depend on the sort of product you want” (67).

But I prefer to (mis)read this comment not as a critique but as a description of how, as Harris has shown throughout his discussions, teachers inevitably fit their practices to their perceptions and experiences of the particular context in which they work. Harris’s position on writing as intellectual work and on students learning to negotiate the diverse discourses they encounter responds quite clearly to the influences of the Amherst school (which he encountered through his study at New York University and through his colleagues at Pittsburgh), to the current influences of cultural studies on composition, and to the widespread attention to diversity stimulated by the increase in non-mainstream students in college classrooms around the nation.

The contribution of Harris’s book lies in how he alerts us to the situatedness and contingency of our practices as writing teachers. His always insightful and gracious discussions of the work in composition since 1966 encourage us to the same intellectual work that he encourages in his students: we are led to reflect on our practices in the teaching of writing not simply to defend them but to imagine how we might change them to better respond to the changing contexts of our own and our students’ lives.

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