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Conflicts and Crises in the Composition Classroom

—and What Instructors Can Do About Them

EDITED BY
Dawn Skorczewski and Matthew Parfitt

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Introduction

*Hominem dum docent discunt.* (Men learn even while they teach).
—Seneca (4 BCE–65 AD), Letters 7.8.

About halfway through Dawn’s graduate course in The Teaching of Composition, a student asked, “Why is it that you don’t tell us more stories about your struggles in the classroom? This is how we really learn about what it means to teach writing.” Several other students chimed in their agreement. For a moment, silence settled on the room. Dawn found it hard to say why anecdotes about her teaching had not been more present in this classroom. Perhaps it was because discussing her experiences as a teacher might make her appear egotistical. But it seemed also to reflect a natural desire for self-protection: What would students think of their instructor, the Director of Composition, if they saw her failures exposed in a class designed to teach them how to teach?

In effect, these graduate students were articulating a theory of learning how to teach that is grounded in a notion of difficulty. Their question suggested that “difficulty” does not represent some failure on the part of the instructor to perform adequately, but emerges instead as a necessary by-product of the composition instructor’s close involvement with student learning. The writers in this collection share the conviction that stories about a teacher’s moments of crisis in the classroom afford invaluable sources of knowledge about our craft. It’s the difficult moments that often resonate most deeply with us (sometimes even cause us to obsess), and to seek out close colleagues for advice or reassurance. And when we are willing to show ourselves to be flawed, evolving, and still struggling to learn, we enter into some of the most exciting and powerful conversations about classroom practice that we can have—conversations that really make a difference in what we do. The premise of this book is that the subject matter of these rewarding conversations reveals our pedagogical assumptions and convictions, and enables us to reexamine them.

This collection invites readers to explore several aspects of a teacher’s difficulty in the classroom: how it emerges, what we are experiencing and observing as it occurs, and what we learn from these encounters with it. It offers true stories from writing teachers who have turned crises into occasions for revisiting their most deeply held pedagogical convictions and assumptions. Robert Coles (1990) argues that we might best look for our theories in stories,
rather than seeking stories to suit existing theoretical tenets. This book seeks to capitalize on this “thick” quality of narrative. Stories, we would suggest, are the threads that connect the concrete experience of classroom practice to the abstract generalization of theory, but they are threads that can be twisted and turned in any number of directions. The essays in this book may tease insights and lessons out of their narratives, but such lessons remain grounded in narrative and therefore closer to practice. Thus, these stories might be read as the starting points for reflection and discussion, rather than end points. The writers invite us to look closely at critical moments, to think with them about how to address the difficulty they present, and to consider how we can improve our teaching by attending to the fears and doubts that lie just beneath the surfaces of our classrooms.

It is often tempting to suppose that problems in the classrooms reflect the instructor’s inexperience, laziness, or poor judgment, or the students’ inexperience, laziness, and poor judgment. When we do this, we approach difficult situations in the classroom from competing directions: the teacher’s or the student’s. Rarely do we consider the students and teachers together as a unit—a group of people making meaning together. Yet when we do think about classrooms this way, we begin to investigate some of our oldest pedagogical wisdom from an entirely different perspective: not what “they” might have done, or what “you” or “I” might have done, but what we, together and separately, bring to each encounter in the classroom.

The situations discussed in these essays are familiar to many readers: they concern students who insist on doing an assignment other than the one required; students who persistently dominate discussions; students who react violently against their peers in a workshop; and students who divide against each other along racial, ethnic, or gender lines. Although we are intimately connected to such situations as writing teachers, we know from experience that there are no simple solutions to such problems. The fact that we share similar challenges as teachers but cannot solve our problems quickly and simply lies at the center of this book. Dynamic systems theorists R. C. Schank and J. B. Cleave write: “Nearly everyone would agree that experience is the best teacher. What many fail to realize is that experience is the only teacher” (1995, p. 181).

The essayists in this collection presume that much of what we might call “the problem” can only be understood through an examination of the details and nuances of a particular classroom: the interactions between a unique group of students and a particular teacher.

This is fundamentally a book about revision. As compositionists, we draw from theories of reading and writing that emphasize the value of teaching students to explore difficulty in their own and others’ texts. In “Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers,” Nancy Sommers (1980) explains that experienced writers actively seek out dissonance as they revise their essays; they begin to reshape what they write from that vantage point. When working with student writers, we intervene in the surface appearance of smoothness and steer
them toward whatever problematizes their arguments, so that they can begin a re-
vision that brings greater depth and complexity to their work. This book is about
the need to be equally suspicious of easefulness in the classroom, the need to fo-
cus attention on the moments of difficulty in order to make maximal use of them.
It is precisely the painful moments of dissonance that are worthy of reflection and
that ultimately reveal new perspectives and new practices. Freireian (Freire, 1970)
“problem-posing” pedagogues who offer students positions of authority in the
classroom should also, it seems, take their own problems as teachers seriously—
and for the same reason: teachers must model what it means to learn, to confront
real-world problems as the source of genuine learning, and remain skeptical of the
conventional wisdom.

This book is divided into four parts. The first, “The Uses of Resistance,”
contains essays in which writers explore the lessons learned from some of their
most awkward and vexatious interactions with students. As the title implies,
however, student resistance may become the catalyst for a reexamination of
pedagogy. Part II, “Race, Class, and the Language of Schooling,” explores the
conflicts that arise from the diversities of culture, race, language, and experi-
ence in our classrooms. Part III, “Course Design and Assignments,” explores
how the syllabus, assignments, grading, and goals of a composition course can
both shape and be shaped by moments of difficulty in the classroom. In the af-
fterword, Hugh English examines the very discourse of “difficulty” in the class-
room. Difficulty, he suggests, might be seen as an opportunity to reexamine the
ways that the instructor allows the classroom to become a world created in his
or her own image, and to consider ways that instructors might be able to revise
that world.

If composition is “a teaching subject,” as Joseph Harris (1996) calls it, a
discipline to which the business of teaching is central, and if teaching always in-
volves particular teachers and particular students in particular classrooms, then
its knowledge can never be entirely reduced to theory or even ideas; it must re-
main embedded in experience, in stories. And although these stories give rise to
reflection, there must always be a remainder that might give rise to further ques-
tioning, further doubt, and further reflection. Hence, the essays in this collection,
although they do offer tentative solutions and lessons that emerge from their sto-
ries of difficult moments, do not necessarily “solve” or dissolve the difficulty
they describe. More frequently, the difficulty itself comes to be seen from a
fresh perspective, perhaps as an opportunity rather than a problem, perhaps as
the sign of an underlying conflict or issue. But as stories, embedded in a partic-
ular time and place, concerning unique and complex individuals, they cannot be
entirely superceded by their solutions or abstract lessons. Our hope is that these
essays will encourage readers to participate in the process of reflection and to
continue it in light of their own experience.

Writing is fundamental to learning and knowing, and it occupies a central
position in a liberal education. It is the site where the self meets the world, and
consequently, the writing course is a risky, high-stakes enterprise, perhaps the
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course that more than any other, courts disaster. Because no two teachers, no
two classrooms, no two students are exactly alike, because we must be “learn-
ing as we teach,” the teaching of composition remains endlessly fascinating
and endlessly challenging.

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Conflicts and Crises in the Composition Classroom
Timothy Strossmeyer. Or "Timothy Stressmaker," as I called him to myself. Not his real appellation, of course, but similar. He sat at the very back left-hand corner of the class. A large man and an even larger presence. Cheerful and good-natured to be sure, but one who could not stop talking, ever. As long as the conversation centered on him, as long as I was calling on him, he was, I suppose, a fair student. Yet whenever another student was speaking or I was speaking, he was talking to the woman who sat directly in front of him or to the two young men who sat to his left. A constant stream of talk about parties and snowboarding and movies. An exhausting talker with no listening skills whatsoever. My usual repertoire of tricks to quiet the talkative had failed miserably, and I was thinking of throwing him out of class.

I admit that I had made several mistakes that had little to do with Timothy Stressmaker. The first was to advertise a first-year general education course entitled "Adventure Literature." My chair was pleased because the course filled past capacity. My course would support the more thinly populated upper-division "The Anglo-Saxon Greats," "T. S. Eliot's Criticism," and "Eighteenth-Century Poetic Humor." I knew a lot about adventure literature and I thought that the subject would be an excellent way to introduce students to the pleasures of literary analysis. What I had not considered was that the recruiting video for our small, mountain college had precious little footage of scholarly types in libraries, of whom we had quite a few, and a lot of footage of snowboarding dudes and dudettes, shred Betties and Bobs (telemark skiers), and Class V boaters. Although the serious types flocked to "Twentieth-Century Poetry," "Representations of Women in the Nineteenth-Century Novel," and "Shakespearean Drama," my course mainly attracted students more interested in outdoor adventures than adventures of the mind. Not that these two interests are mutually exclusive, but in the case of my "Adventure Literature" course, they were nearly so. Although I attempted to make connections between challenges...
of the body and challenges of the intellect, I made precious few inroads into the 18-year-old snowboarder mind, and I made a note that my next course would be entitled “Grammatical Constructions of the Petrarchan Sonnet.”

My next mistake was to make group work the main structure of the course. Not bad in itself, but the room in which I taught was long and narrow. It was packed to capacity and I was stranded at the head of the classroom with Timothy Stressmaker as far away from me as a student could be and still be in the classroom. In a related mistake, I set a pattern of allowing students to choose their own groups, so rearranging them met with resistance not only from Stressmaker, but from most of his peers as well.

I also had begun the year with a much too low-key, laid-back approach. My professor persona was exactly wrong for this particular class. Whereas I had hoped to convey that I was open-minded and encouraged various perspectives, instead I seemed to have suggested that absolutely any comment was fine regardless of topic. Whereas I had hoped to convey that I was not tediously tied to regulation, instead I seemed to have let it be known that attendance was optional, arrival time was at the students’ convenience, and that handing in papers written in crayon, then folded in half was acceptable. In short, whereas I had hoped to convey that I imagined my students as adults with legitimate concerns and ideas, instead I had managed to demonstrate in a very short time that if my students preferred junior high to college, that was perfectly all right with me.

Yet having begun my career at a private school, where a healthy number of students had been discharged from public institutes for disruptive behavior, I was no stranger to discipline problems. I rallied my forces and began to use the techniques I had learned from my year of private school purgatory.

I first tried to garner peer pressure. When Stressmaker opened his mouth inappropriately, I stopped talking and looked at him, all the while breathing deeply and thinking of my summer vacation or the last novel I had read. For most students, this technique works. They realize that they are being disruptive, are embarrassed, and quit talking. Stressmaker, however, went right on chattering. So I went on to Phase Two. I stared. A blank, long stare. The impenetrable kind. The kind that suggests that the student is in deep, deep trouble kind. Meanwhile, I continued to breathe. Predictably, the other students began to tell Stressmaker to be quiet. Eventually, he did quiet down, but the remedy lasted fewer than six minutes and he was back at it again, talking, talking, talking.

The next couple of days continued thus, and I ran through what I found to be a rather more meager repertoire of ideas than I had at first estimated. I took Stressmaker aside and asked him to stop disrupting class. I told him to be quiet in front of his peers. I made him switch seats. All of these remedies gave us temporary relief, but none of them quieted the loquacious Stressmaker for more than a few minutes. He continued with an endless stream of blather, disrupting my concentration, becoming a joke to his classmates.
I decided that I had had enough of Stressmaker, that I had given him a
number of chances, and that I was going to ask him to withdraw from the class.
My syllabus included a clause, adopted by my department, that allowed me to
dismiss disruptive students, and Stressmaker certainly qualified. Yet in spite of
the fact that he well-emulated a phonograph with no off switch, I basically
liked him. He was beginning to say things in class that genuinely contributed
to class discussion. And I did hope that he could be turned into a good student.
Of course, I knew that my primary duty was not to Stressmaker, but to the
majority of students who deserved to learn something about literary analysis.
Yet I decided that another day of Stressmaker would not hurt anyone all that
much.

At the same time that I was teaching Adventure Literature, I was prepar-
ing to teach a composition course which would feature sections of Paulo
and Punish. At first glance, it seemed obvious to me that my mostly white,
male students who drove to class in Ford Explorers and recreated with state-
of-the-art, titanium mountain bikes had little in common with Freire’s
“oppressed.” Bentham’s inmates seemed much closer cousins.

Panopticism, Foucault writes, “is polyvalent in its applications; it serves
to reform prisoners, but also...to instruct schoolchildren, to confine the
confine the insane.” I admit that I dreamed for a while of the “marvelous
machine,” of catching Stressmaker up in a “power situation of which” he was
himself “the bearer,” of inducing in him “a state of conscious and permanent
visibility,” of making my students into “thousands of eyes posted everywhere,
mobile attentions ever on the alert,”—in short, of creating the conditions for
“the perfection of power” that would “render its actual exercise unnecessary”
(Foucault 1995, pp. 201, 202, 214).

What I did not recognize initially was that in spite of my architecturally
deficient classroom, I had, in fact, attempted several panoptic disciplinary
techniques. With my blank stare, I effectively had became the guard in the cen-
tral tower who “sees everything without ever being seen” and I had enlisted
students as “the instrument of permanent, exhaustive omnipresent surveil-
lance” (Foucault 1995, pp. 202, 214). What I had not induced in Stressmaker
was a “permanent state of visibility.” He had not become “the principle of his
own subjection” (Foucault 1995, p. 202). He had, in no sustained way, inter-
nalized disciplinary power.

For Foucault, of course, panopticism is an insidious and dangerous form
of power that insinuates itself into the deepest levels of the social body. “It
is not,” he writes, “that the beautiful totality of the individual is amputated,
repressed, altered by our social order, it is rather that the individual is care-
fully fabricated in it, according to a whole technique of forces and bodies”
(1995, p. 217). The stated goals of my first-year literature class involved
teaching students to appropriate the methods of literary analysis by entering
into dialogue with other students, with me, and with the texts. To some extent, I was training my students in the discipline in Foucault's sense of the word. I was asking them to enter into the discipline of literary studies that involved disciplining the self to use particular methodologies. As I clearly understood from the case of Strossmeyer, the discipline of analysis was not unrelated to the discipline of the body. My most successful students not only appropriated disciplinary ways of seeing and writing, but also disciplined themselves to go to class, do the reading, write the papers, and act appropriately in the classroom. My primary goal, however, was not the "perfection of power." It was, in fact, empowering students with disciplinary methods that I hoped that they would appropriate, see the strengths and limitations of, and eventually go beyond.

One of the tensions in my teaching and in liberatory education, in general, is in teaching students the method of a discipline while allowing them freedom to use the methods and even to overturn them. As tempting as Foucault's "guarantee of order" might have been to me in the Strossmeyer situation, a panoptic classroom was not what I ultimately desired. I knew that a schoolroom in which there was "no copying, no noise, no chatter, no waste of time" by "assuring the ordering of human multiplicities" would also prevent the chaos necessary in the kind of learning that I wanted for my students (Foucault 1995, pp. 201, 218).

I turned, once again, to Friere (1970), who advocates a breaking down of the teacher–student dyad in favor of what he calls "problem-posing" education. "The teacher," Freire writes, "is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach" (p. 67). Students and teachers see themselves as part of the world that they are involved in remaking. Freire explains, "Problem posing education affirms men and women as beings in the process of becoming—as unfinished, uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality" (p. 72).

I had thought quite a lot about Freire's pedagogy in terms of teaching the methodology and content of my discipline in the sense of field of study. I had thought very little about it in terms of discipline in the sense of behavior. As I knew, both from Foucault and in a different way from Freire, those two senses of the word were separate only in my mind. In practice, they were always already intertwined. I decided to take what Freire said seriously in the Strossmeyer situation. I needed to stop thinking of my student as an object that needed to be controlled and, instead, think of him as in a process of becoming. I also needed to think of myself as open to being taught.

So I asked Strossmeyer to speak to me after class. I explained that I thought his behavior was making it difficult for the rest of the class to learn. He expressed his dismay. I asked him to come up with a plan for halting his inappropriate conversation—a plan to which I had to agree. He said that he wished to continue sitting in his corner and that he would simply stop talking.
If he talked once when he was supposed to be listening, I could throw him out of class. I protested that I thought he should at least change seats so that the temptation to talk would be less, but he insisted his plan would work and he would take the risk of failure. We shook hands on the deal. Timothy Strossmeyer, I am happy to say, stayed for the duration of the course with few relapses.

Freire argues that because meaningful education takes place in dialogue and because “authentic thinking” cannot be done by the teacher for the student that the “subordination of students to teachers becomes impossible” (1970, p. 64). In the Strossmeyer situation, I did not go as far as Freire probably would have liked in relinquishing my authority. I was fully prepared to throw Strossmeyer out of class. However, I did begin to see Strossmeyer and myself differently. I saw us both as changeable and I saw the classroom as “an unfinished reality” (Freire 1970, p. 72). I also began to envision Strossmeyer as a “re-creator” (Freire 1970, p. 62).

My experience with Strossmeyer made me recognize that the pedagogy that I used in the classroom for teaching my course was at odds with my pedagogy of classroom behavior. In my first year of high school teaching, I had been hired without a teaching certificate and had had no training in classroom “management” or in pedagogy. I survived by talking to more experienced teachers, by attending a workshop on discipline, and by trial and error. I had learned, without knowing it, to take an eclectically Foucaultian approach to discipline.

In graduate school I began to read pedagogical theory as part of my training. My pedagogy—as teaching disciplinary material—was transformed and it was much closer to Freire’s philosophies than Foucault’s. What I came to understand in working with Strossmeyer was that my methods of dealing with classroom discipline had changed very little. When I thought about making Strossmeyer into a “good” student, I thought about making him into a person who appropriated discipline and knowledge and about a person who behaved appropriately in class. In those early weeks, I wracked my brain figuring out what I could do that would change Strossmeyer’s behavior. I worried about him as a student, and I worried about the effect he was having on my class. I was, without knowing it, treating myself as the subject who knows and Strossmeyer as the object to be controlled. While demanding that Strossmeyer be responsible for his own learning, I was only too happy to take control of his behavior.

I won’t say that the course ended up on my list of “Best Ever.” It did not. The class was still plagued with problems. It was full of students who were woefully unprepared academically and emotionally for a college-level course. Many of the students failed to read the material assigned in spite of daily quizzes and journal assignments. Some of the students discussed personal topics of interest rather than the assigned topics in their small groups, even though they had to make presentations to the class. Too many of the students dropped
the course midsemester or failed. Yet I do think that there was a change in the
class dynamic after the contract with Strossmeyer made it possible for inter-
ested students to gain something from the class and several reluctant students
to become interested as the course progressed.

Now, at the beginning of each semester, I begin by explaining that I am
interested in all students learning, but ultimately, students take control of their
own learning. I also explain that the class must be an environment in which
anyone who wishes to learn is allowed to do so. Personal conduct is also each
student’s responsibility. When students are disruptive in class, I sometimes still
try to garner peer pressure. It often works. When it does not, however, I no
longer lose sleep trying to figure out how to cope with the problem. I directly
involve the student, who becomes the agent of his or her own authority.

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