



teacher

The contested meanings of *teacher* represent important ways scholars and instructors have (re)positioned the role of writing teacher in its relations to academia and students; they represent who and what writing instructors have been, are, and want better to become.

The constructions of this keyword consistently begin by imagining a hyperbolically bad teacher of the past or present away from which the writer's contribution will help readers move. In 1969, Sidney P. Moss, for instance, portrayed composition teachers as "one of the most conservative bodies on campus," as people who, "in a kind of idiot repetition," resist innovation and "persist in their pedagogy in the face of failure remarkable only for its predictability" (215). Seven years later, Janice M. Lauer similarly represented composition teachers of the past as people who wrote and read journals full of gimmicky, operated by rules of thumb with no theoretical base, perpetuated the courses they had as freshman, were slaves to faddish textbooks, and who entered the classroom despairing that there was nothing they could teach (342). In 1978, Donald C. Stewart maintained that the typical writing teacher, in many cases, had no knowledge whatsoever of composition history and theory (175). Soon after, Maxine Hairston (1982) contended that "most teachers of writing" help "promote a static and unexamined approach to teaching writing" by defining "writing courses as service courses and skills courses." The "overwhelming majority" of composition instructors, she argued, were "not professional writing teachers" since they did not research or publish or know the scholarship or read the journals or attend the meetings in the field (78-79). Writing in 1986, Hairston likewise portrayed composition teachers as people who until very recently "have not known what they were doing," as overworked, exhausted, resentful "slaves" and disillusioned, self-pitying "faculty martyrs" (119).

The most influential demonized version of teacher, however, has been the teacher-as-authority: the teacher as "a storehouse and proctor of course-content knowledge, released in rationed doses" (Eulert 65) and poured into

the empty vessels of students' skulls; the teacher as "the principal defender of good taste, an evangelist of tradition, an heroic voice speaking up for order" (Murray 118). Naturally, some writers have attempted to construe this version positively. In 1963, for instance, A. M. Tibbetts stated flatly, "the teacher is the authority. He is the boss, the expert, the editor, the one with experience, the one who knows.... He is full of judgments, and he is not afraid of using words like *good*, *bad*, *right*, *wrong*" (371). But these advocates lost out in the end to those who transformed the teacher-as-authority into someone who fettered students with a host of "counterproductive prescriptions, prescriptions, and pet peeves" (Adams 264).

This quintessential teacher of the "old paradigm" marked the far end of the pendulum's swing. But from here the pendulum began its sweep into "new paradigm" redefinitions of the teacher-as-non-authority as composition scholars began hyperbolically reconstructing this keyword in the opposite direction. As early as 1967, for instance, S. Leonard Rubenstein contended that the good composition teacher should be "not merely profoundly ignorant," but also "superficially ignorant." "He should not only lack wisdom," Rubenstein said, "he should lack information." Thus, a good composition teacher "needs his students' help.... The students he teaches teach him" (127). The teacher is, then, at best, "a fellow learner, a collaborator" (128). Two years later, Donald M. Murray explicitly articulated the political strand of the teacher-as-non-authority, arguing that "[e]very writing teacher should be a revolutionary, doubting, questioning, challenging," and thus creating a "constructive chaos" in which students can work (118-119). Teaching writing as a process likewise inspired versions of the teacher-as-non-authority, such as "the Delphic Oracle who does not give answers but riddles... to provoke the writer beyond his clichés" and the midwife who can only stand by "hoping for the birth of the insight" (Lauer 342).

Thus, writing instructors are typically offered two mutually exclusive definitions of teacher in composition scholarship—one bad, one good—from which to "choose." Composition scholarship still generally lacks a functional synthesis of these extreme, polarized portraits. In 1983, however, Peter Elbow offered one solution. He said that writing instructors embrace (rather than struggle with) the contrary, "conflicting mentalities" in *teacher*, only, becoming fiercely loyal to both halves of this keyword: to both teachers' "maternal" obligation to students and their "paternal" obligation to knowledge and society, to both their role as supportive and nurturing "allies and hosts" to students (327-329) and their role as "hawk-eyed, critical-minded bouncers at the bar of civilization" (339).

There are other important constructions of teacher beyond this fundamental antithesis which should be noted. First, there is the pervasive trope of the composition teacher as reader and teacher of reading (writ large), as interpreter and critic of texts (in an expansive sense). Lad Tobin, for example,

redefines the teacher as a (mis)reader of students' texts, "students themselves, of [one's] own unconscious motivations and associations, and, finally, of the interactive and dialectical nature of the teacher-student relationship" (335). *Teacher* in composition studies has come to include the notion of someone who reads (and teaches students to read) writing, culture, and the world alike using the most advanced tools of rhetorical and/or literary criticism. Another important recent construction is teacher as a proselytizer for (and supplier of) a particular epistemology and ideology. James A. Berlin (1982, 1988), for instance, has argued for an understanding of the composition teacher as someone who is necessarily an ideologue, who unavoidably privileges one rhetorical/economic version of reality over others. Furthermore, Marguerite H. Helmers has documented how composition scholarship often self-servingly portrays the writing teacher as a powerfully creative hero who triumphs in the quest to discover the cure for his or her students' deficiencies. Sheryl I. Fontaine has also noted how the common representation of teachers as people who "reaculturate" students into academic discourse communities comes "dangerously close" to constructing teachers as "missionaries" who willingly share the Word with those whose words are less valuable" (92). Of late, *teacher* in composition studies has also come to mean theorist, researcher, and knowledge-maker, has come to signify someone whose epistemological work, moreover, "challenge[s] a number of assumptions underlying the traditional (positivist) paradigm in education" (Ray 175). Finally, composition teachers have been represented as exploited economic entities, as "slaves" and "serfs" (Kyle 339), as "pickers, piece-workers, [and] sharecroppers," as "an amorphous and transient labor force, demoralized by work loads and depressed returns" (Sziak 27). Invented by senior faculty and administrators as "an insulation against the ravages of retrenchment" according to Dennis Sziak, the "disposable composition teacher . . . [represents] the greatest labor-saving and money-saving device since the folding chair" (26).

In sum, the diverse range of meanings of *teacher* in composition studies reflect just how complex the job is, represent the many, often contesting roles writing teachers are called upon and/or forced to play.

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