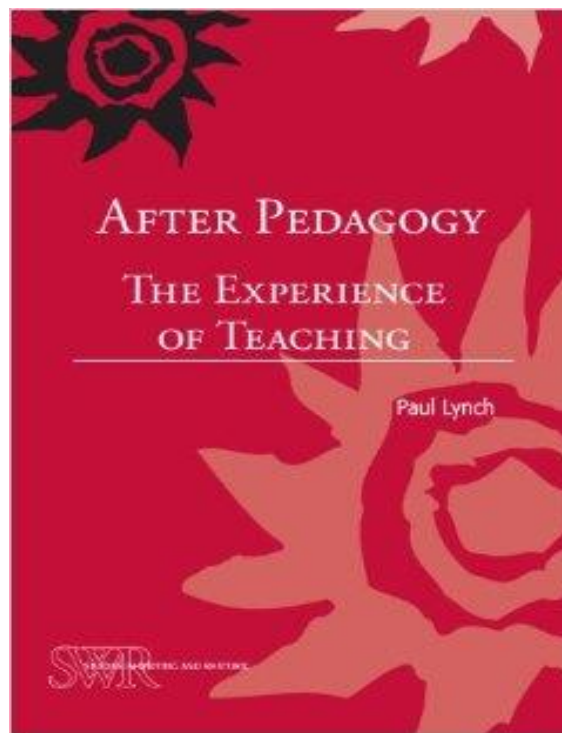


Review of *After Pedagogy: The Experience of Teaching*

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In this slim, but thoughtful volume on the postpedagogical “crisis” in composition pedagogy, Paul Lynch raises the subject of reflection by riffing on the phenomenon of the Monday morning question: What is a teacher to do with the pedagogical theory du jour in the crucible of the classroom? This question, Lynch notes, construes a failure to immediately transform the latest theory into practical application as a failure of theory writ large. As he points out, the field of composition has been long troubled by the division between theory and practice despite numerous efforts to heal that rift. Part of the problem lies, of course, in the fact that the subject of composition studies is, essentially, pedagogy, though, as Sidney Dobrin (2011) has asserted, this focus on the teaching holds writing scholars captive to such quotidian managerial concerns as students and classroom techniques.

For most teachers these days, at both the secondary and postsecondary levels, such a larger existential argument about the relationship between theory and practice seem esoteric and out of touch. What matters for many (thanks to legislative and administrative mandates) is results, as measured by test scores, data points, job placement statistics, and debt-to-salary ratios. With higher education feeling the pressure that has long been felt at the elementary and secondary levels to justify its methods and quantify its value, theory is only valuable if it can be assimilated into a praxis that produces measurable results. If compositionists are to abandon pedagogy, won't that simply make the field as useless to the bean counters and STEM proselytizers as philosophy and the classics? Will we be digging our own disciplinary graves if we turn our attention away from the practical aspects of writing instruction? And, even if we do shift our focus to theory, the fact remains that we still have to teach students the writing skills that are often defined and mandated from on high and on which our value, in a culture of quantification, depends.

What such an insistence on measurement and practical application misses, however, is the other term that identifies our field - rhetoric. The rhetoric in rhet/comp is what Lynch attempts to restore here by way of another “R,” reflection. Rejecting both postcomposition nihilism and a rigidly systematized

approach to writing instruction, Lynch here argues for a postpedagogical practice that focuses on what comes after the actual teaching moment. In the “Prologue,” Lynch seizes on *kairos* and experience to situate pedagogy as a “post” practice activity focused on “repurposing and learning from everyday living” (p. xix). Here, Lynch establishes the foundations for this vision of pedagogy as an emergent act, noting that he will draw heavily on the work of John Dewey to establish an argument for pedagogy as casuistry (and for reclaiming the concept of casuistry from disrepute), as experiential and case-based “practical reasoning” that can help us develop an academically rigorous approach to pedagogy that resists the tendency to turn praxis into a one-size-fits-all formula. While the idea of reflection as the real site of teaching and learning may be hard to square with current problems in and attitudes toward higher education, Lynch takes on a difficult problem and draws effectively on the work of some key figures in rhetoric and composition scholarship. The rest of the book presents his effort to construct a rigorous approach to pedagogy that both accepts and refuses to give into the problematic argument that teaching is fundamentally situational, provisional, and contingent.

In Chapter 1, Lynch outlines the ambivalence toward teaching writing that has long troubled the field of rhetoric and composition. Starting with Quintillian's insistence that rhetoric is non-codifiable, Lynch evokes a current dictum of the digital age when he notes that (like those jobs that we're preparing students for that haven't been invented yet) teaching is likewise relative to the case at hand, not a code of laws that can be applied to any situation and produce the same outcome. The problem here is obvious, however: if teaching (and writing) is purely situational and those situations are inherently unpredictable, is there any point in trying to construct a pedagogy for writing? Lynch makes a smart move in not attacking the postpedagogical heritage that emerges from the work of such scholars as Cynthia Haynes, Victor Vitanza, Dobrin, and J.A. Rice and Michael Vastola, but in applying a Latourian approach of assembling these arguments, both in the sense of bringing them together and of re-assembling their emergence as

arguments, in order to show how we have arrived at this point and what this point even is.

The problem of a postpedagogical philosophy that views teaching as purely situational and unsystemizable is that we exist in a world of pure invention. If we have to make things up as we go along, make things anew in each situation, then we exist in the “House of Lore” in which all classroom experience might as well be superstition: I did this and it worked, so it will work for you! What is missing in this approach is the application of reflection, which allows for abstraction and the emergence of knowledge that can then be drawn upon when a practitioner is faced with a new situation. Lynch argues against a “distracted and purposeless” pursuit of adhocism and introduces the idea of “case-based moral reasoning” (p. 21) as a potential solution to the problem of the ever-shifting ground beneath our feet. If we must ad-lib, then we must do it by drawing on past experience in a way that allows for the construction of theory and for the considered application of – or deviation from – that theory in light of a given situation.

In chapter 2, Lynch continues to assemble the network from which our postpedagogical moment has emerged. Starting with an analysis of Cynthia Haynes’s call for composition to distance itself from what has become its primary focus, argumentation, Lynch sets up the resistance to pedagogy as emergent from the third sophistic school and Lyotard’s paralogy. The formulaic approach to the writing process and to argumentation as the ur-genre of the composition classroom simply re-introduce the grand narrative problem and elide the highly situational and situated nature of every act of writing. The argument that emerges from this heritage of postprocess, in which there is never a single writing process (or genre) that can work for every writing situation, is the idea that the teaching of writing itself is, thus, impossible. Lynch cites Kent’s assertion in *Paralogic Rhetoric* (1993) that writing is unteachable and tracks the evolution of this idea through the work of other writing studies scholars to get to the ultimate problem that arises from this legacy of thought: “What we are left with, then, is the fundamental problem of teaching for uncertainty” (p. 35).

Chapter 2 continues by tracing of the influence of Victor Vitanza’s calls for composition scholars’ resistance to anything programmatic. Lynch notes Vitanza’s influence on such thinkers as Diane Davis, whose “pedagogy of laughter” is another effort to break up (as in laughter) the rhetoric and composition field by allowing for, appropriately enough, disruption. As Lynch notes, however, a pedagogy based on disruption – “a rhetoric of comedy” (p. 45) – still leaves the question of the teacher’s role unanswered. What is a teacher supposed to do in a classroom (and field – writing) in which there is no method, no process, nothing but moments and acts that are always in flux? Lynch begins to chart a path out of this morass through the work of Thomas Rickert and Byron Hawk, who suggest that the act of teaching is a following, rather than a leading, but the problem remains of situating teaching as post hoc. He concludes the chapter with the idea that we must learn from experience yet resist the urge to systematize that experience into a rigid pedagogical method.

In chapter 3, Lynch contrasts the concepts of *tuche* (luck/happenstance) and *techne* (craft) to foreground the primary problem of postpedagogy: how do we create (craft) situations in which learning can happen (luck)? Is it even possible to occasion the opportunities for learning if it is impossible to predict or systematize any act of writing? In this chapter, Lynch will rely heavily on the work of John Dewey to make his claim for the primacy of experience as the foundation of a “sustainable” postpedagogy (p. 64). Acknowledging the complexity of Dewey’s work and the expansiveness of his thought over an exceptionally long career, Lynch does a careful reading of several Dewey scholars’ efforts to reclaim the key concepts in Dewey’s work from the popularized (mis)readings that have taken his focus on the child in the educational ecosystem as exemplary of a stereotypically liberal antipathy to content and rigor. But Dewey’s approach to learning, which focused more on the content as a site of learning than an end in itself, provided a way for compositionists like David Russell and Kent to argue that the subject of the writing course – writing itself – cannot be taught. Lynch is careful, however, to draw out of these scholars’ engagement with Dewey the concepts that may, in fact, provide the foundation for a different

way of thinking about the transactional and constitutional aspects of language and communication.

When Lynch notes in chapter 3 that Dewey's empiricist critique of philosophy requires that we put theory into practice in order to test it through experience, he lays the foundation for an exploration of how experience and reflection can come together as a potential solution to the problem of the impossibility of teaching. Dewey views language as a means of acting, not simply communicating. Language is experience and it is a means of sharing that experience. If experience is emergent from language acts, then that experience is "available for meaning" (p. 79). The task, then, is to take the primary experience that emerges from language acts and to transform it into "secondary experience - experience-as-equipment for living" through reflection and a continual process of re-testing against future experience (p. 79). In this way, we create a method, but a method that is open to revision and that, like writing, is part of a recursive ecosystem in which new experience refashions the old and the old shapes what new experiences are possible. Postpedagogy emerges as a way of making experience both a response and precursor to learning.

In the fourth and final chapter, Lynch makes his case for casuistry as a "method" for a non-methodological approach to teaching. In a sentence that teachers everywhere and at every level will adore, he scathingly critiques the notion of the "teacher-proof curriculum" as "contemptuous and contemptible" (p. 98) due to its utter disregard of the experience that teachers bring to the classroom, experience that could and should form the foundation of a non-formalistic approach to learning that makes room for contingency and improvisation. We cannot turn experience into an algorithm because algorithms cannot adapt to the unexpected or unaccounted for in the way that a case-based approach to teaching can. We need a pedagogy, Lynch argues, that recognizes the recursivity of experience and allows for prior theory to become passing theory and vice versa. Tracing the history of casuistry from Aristotle's *phronesis* through Cicero and early Roman Catholic philosophy, to the Jesuits and their nemesis Pascal, Lynch sketches a more nuanced picture that allows him to argue for casuistry

as an ethical approach to teaching, one that allows for exceptions within an economy of experience-based rules, and that allows for those exceptions to then become folded into the fabric of experience through a "taxonomy" of cases that form a genealogy of connections.

Lynch acknowledges that taxonomy may evoke Foucauldian nightmares for compositionists sensitive to classification systems and the way that they exert power, and he makes recourse to Donald Schön's concept of "repertoire" as a way out of that particular concern, but there is no good way to reconcile a fundamental problem with casuistry-as-pedagogy: the problem of knowing "surprise by knowing the familiar" (124). Though Lynch attempts to get out of the house of lore, when one enters the house of knowledge, there is always an ordering that makes some things knowable and others unknowable. This may give some compositionists pause as it does insist on othering, even though it allows for the other to be acknowledged and embraced (or, less pleasantly, perhaps, co-opted). Still, by the end of this chapter, Lynch has made room for an approach to pedagogy that, through a focus on problem-solving and making student experience primary, is perhaps the most ethical approach to teaching that I can imagine. By applying rigorous application of analysis to experience in the classroom, we can re-situate the site of learning as post-pedagogy.

This is a complex and challenging way of thinking about the art and craft of teaching. It perhaps requires us to be artists more than craftsmen, in that while both may use similar techniques, the goal of art is to evoke a more heightened response than mere replication of something, even if that replication is finely wrought (think here of that beautifully crafted, yet conventional, five-paragraph essay). However, this is where theory collides with the practical issues raised by an increasingly formulaic approach to higher education. For the many teachers who are adjunct and part-time, or bound by rigid and pre-fabricated curricula, or required to use online course content created by others, or who are subject to evaluation and review criteria based on standardized data points, it may be nearly impossible to implement such a reflective, adaptive, and situational approach to pedagogy. The maxim Lynch proposes near the end of

the text, “A lesson should never work three times” (p. 136), will certainly not go over well with the curriculum designers who wish to standardize pedagogical practice for “replicable” results.

Still, Lynch’s text is a valuable contribution to current discussion of composition pedagogy. As Santos and Leahy (2014) wrote in their discussion of a postpedagogical approach to web writing, “Writing is an elusive, complex practice, not the stilted activity codified by so many textbooks” (p. 85). Postpedagogy has been an effort to address the fact that effective writing pedagogy must be as mercurial, contingent, and emergent as its subject, but in practice it too often

succumbs to the axiom that writing is simply unteachable. In *After Pedagogy*, Lynch attempts to answer the question of “how we bring rigor to the expression and experience of contingency” and suggests that we combine art and action, data and method through a continual rethinking of past experience in the face of the new (p. 137). While this [anti]method may be difficult to implement, teachers of writing (and administrators of writing programs) would do well to attend to his arguments for how we can, through rigorous application of reflection to experience, perhaps craft a method for occasioning and understanding the unexpected.

References

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