

## Teaching the Action Horizon

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We believe that teachers of *The New Humanities Reader* may need to undertake a significant rethinking of what it means to run a course in Expository Writing. When new teachers draw on memories of their prior schooling for help in how to teach this material, they may find that few examples come to mind. Beginners may not get much guidance, either, from current academic writing on pedagogy or from the monuments of popular or literary culture—not “Dead Poet’s Society,” nor *Culture and Anarchy*, nor even *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

We all know what “teaching” means in general; what it means in particular is another thing. Some of us buy into the idea that teaching is an “experience,” and that teaching well means chucking out the questions in the book and deeply interacting with the students. Others look at teaching in the opposite way: for them, the teacher represents an august institution, to be embodied as convincingly as possible. Still others think of teaching as a means to social change, starting with a change in the attitudes of their students. Then there are the teachers who see themselves as purveyors of the basics: the paragraph and the restrictive clause are their alpha and omega. Teaching lends itself to so many views precisely because much more is at stake than the subject of instruction. The course may be English 101, or Modern British History, or Theories of the Mind, but how we teach (as opposed to what we teach) largely depends on our assumptions about social life in general, assumptions that often pass unnoticed and unconsidered, even in a period that prides itself on its reflexivity.

Among the many assumptions that have shaped teaching in the humanities, we believe that two have had a particular impact. These we would like to call archivalism and specialization. “Archivalism” refers to the idea that the world is made up of discrete “cultures” or “civilizations” and that each of them possesses a core of founding knowledge on which everything that has enduring value must build. For those persuaded by archivalism, the past can take on a quasi-sacred character: figures from antiquity may loom large, while contemporary people look like pygmies by comparison. If archivalism is an ideology that tells us what should count as genuine knowledge, “specialization” is a way of organizing work that enables us to reproduce and extend the knowledge we happen to value. Specialization is certainly possible in the absence of an archive: long ago the sciences gave up on the idea that physicists or microbiologists should study their fields historically, starting with the earliest discoveries and working their way up to present. Alternately, we can treat any archive as a body of general knowledge that every person ought to know. Until quite recently, all literate Westerners were expected to study the Latin classics; among the Chinese, every scholar had to range across the whole Confucian canon.

In subtle but far-reaching ways, archivalism shapes the ways we teach. Many people automatically believe, for example, that we cannot think clearly about politics today without having first read Plato’s *Republic*, Aristotle’s *Politics*, Augustine’s *City of God*, Machiavelli’s *The Prince*, and so on. Needless to say, these works have enormous value: not only do they bring to light the sources of beliefs we probably take for granted now, but they also restore to us useful paradigms our more recent predecessors have thrown away. Nevertheless, it is still quite possible to understand contemporary politics without a knowledge of these works. Plato, after

all, had never read Plato, and many people who have never heard of ancient Syracuse--the site of his proposed Republic--can readily grasp the dangers of a “tyranny of virtue,” a tyranny created by those who believe that their fellow citizens must be protected from themselves.

In effect, archivalism tells us that before we can know one thing, we must first know something more basic. And “knowing,” for the archivist, is a painstaking activity that involves holding fast to every scrap of information. It’s simply not enough to get the main idea when we read: we need to trace out in fine detail how each step in the author’s thinking leads to the next. From the standpoint of archivalism, we cannot be said to understand a text until we can restate it in our own words--until we can prove, in other words, a “mastery” or “command” that signifies the fusion of our consciousness with one small portion of the archive.

The other influence on humanities teaching is specialization. Just as many advantages can accrue from the effort to hold tightly to the past, so specialization is a proven strategy which has produced in the short space of a hundred years an unparalleled increase in knowledge. But specialization, no less than archivalism, also rests on assumptions we might do well to weigh more carefully than we have. It presupposes, for example, that the making of knowledge is a task properly reserved for specialists, and that the point of education is to disseminate such knowledge “downward” to the untutored masses. In an age of specialization, people tend to make sharp distinctions between expert knowledge and mere popular opinion, and between research and teaching. Especially at the introductory levels, teaching is assumed to serve two purposes. The first of these is to identify and recruit future specialists, those who show sufficient promise to justify a long and relatively costly program leading to the Ph.D. The second purpose, which might qualify as public relations, is to promote among non-specialists a great enough degree of

respect and sympathy to ensure the survival of the discipline itself. Different branches of learning offer different rationales for their reliance on specialization. Among scientists, the rationale is generally logistical: they might refer to the complexity of scientific questions, the time-consuming character of the research process, and the ever-rising price of indispensable equipment. By contrast, specialists in the humanities have often donned the robes of secular priests, or else they have claimed for their writings the same avant-garde character once reserved for cutting-edge works of art.

In creating *The New Humanities Reader*, we have come to the conclusion that the archive no longer exists: there are, in fact, a great many archives and none can claim preeminence. By the same token, there can scarcely be an “advanced guard” anymore when the rest of us have ceased to stand together in one place—“advanced” relative to *what*? And at any rate, the status of all archives past and present is probably a moot question, since “knowledge” itself no longer means what it meant in pre-modern times. Today, the preservation of time-honored lore matters far less than the making of new knowledge. Even the humanities have moved quite far in this direction by attempting to represent the work they do as “research” rather than “scholarship.”

At the same time the two of us had reached these conclusions about the archive’s fate, we also observed that specialization has progressed so far and so fast that expertise itself is now an arena of competition and not a monopolistic enterprise as it was throughout the previous century. Just as there is no longer such a thing as *the* archive anymore, so there is really no such thing as *the* expert on, say, the treatment of cancer, or that state of world health, or the condition of the environment. Although many people view these developments as a disaster for the humanities, we see them as profoundly hopeful changes. The proliferation of sources of authority means that

instead of waning away, as many observers have predicted, the public sphere might become more robust than ever before. No single government agency, for example, can dictate policy on the environment, and even the world's foremost scientists disagree about crucial circumstances regarding events like global warming. Given the far-reaching and long lasting consequences of many decisions we are now obligated to make, even the most powerful players need to secure at least the appearance of a democratic consensus.

We believe that the appropriate response to such a crucial historical moment is a pedagogy that imagines ordinary citizens like our students as the shapers of policy rather than as mere critics, passive observers, or discerning consumers. To be a shaper of policy means that one possesses the capacity to act upon the world in ways that do justice to its real complexity. Precisely because the motive for policy is always a problem that requires action, a pedagogy of critical consciousness is unlikely to prove adequate, reflecting as it does the perspective of the insurgent recipients of directives from above, often understood to be the victims of an all-encompassing false consciousness. And precisely because real-world action always involves an element of risk or uncertainty, a pedagogy stressing argument alone will also miss the mark. Real-world problems begin as anomalies and contradictions rather than as established positions. Choosing sides, or choosing weapons, in a prior, well-defined debate is not the same as finding the domains of meaning—the contexts of understanding and explanation—that are best calculated to make action possible, ethical, and effective. We hardly need to add that there is never such a thing as infallibility. Very different plans for action may prove equally persuasive at first, and later, in execution, equally successful—or ruinous. The test of a program for action does not lie in its invulnerability to critique (since all programs can be shown to have flaws) but in its ability

to give coherence to the evidence.

“Teaching the action horizon” does not mean that everything our students read and write should take the form of a proposal: “We should pay service workers a living wage,” “The environment must be saved.” We mean instead that students entering college today should read materials directly concerned with the most important problems of our times, and that the discussion of these materials must move beyond the formalist concern with rhetorical or aesthetic techniques—that is, with how a text is put together. But we also feel the need to distance ourselves from the poststructuralist obsession with perspective as the true subject of inquiry. We admit that information can never be presented in a value-neutral way, but we believe that the question of truth has to be retrieved: the point of reading about genetic engineering is not, finally, to have a better grasp of the politics of representation behind the discourses on genetics. Far more pressing and consequential is the need to decide whether genetic technology is going to unravel the fabric of life across planet, or whether it may end forever many forms of suffering. To “teach the action horizon” is to treat interpretation and evaluation as means to an end, not as ends in themselves.

There are those who would say that issues such as genetic technology are not the proper concern of a *writing* course. Our proper concern, or so this line of thinking goes, is with methods of communication rather than with any particular subject matter. These colleagues want to teach their students how to use words, sentences, paragraphs, and strategies of argument, but without addressing issues so complex that the writing is likely to suffer. We believe, however, that this way of thinking is a little like teaching prospective artists how to “use colors” without asking them to actually paint, say, a vase of yellow roses or a group of people seated on the grass of a

Paris park [some] shady summer afternoon. The whole point of painting is to make visual images; the point of writing is not writing for its own sake--Why would anyone want to do that?-but to write about something. And that "something" is always a specific problem or contradiction in the actual world. For this very reason--because the occasions for writing are content- and context-specific--the all-purpose formulas and rubrics which have so often been the stock-in-trade of the writing teacher promise to impart an easy mastery that strikes us as basically dishonest. Everyone knows that an essay should have a main idea, a body of supporting argument, and finally, some kind of conclusion. Everyone knows that prose should be coherent, persuasive, and well-organized. But no one on this earth knows with perfect certainty how to write an essay that makes a point about, say, war and evolution, and that draws extensively on Mary Kaldor and Franz de Waal in order to make that point. Only a perspective altogether divorced from the horizon of real-world action, and especially from action in the public sphere, can sustain the exclusion of "content" from the scene of writing. That this exclusion has such a long pedigree does not make it any less world-evading.

We believe that a pedagogy which asks students to imagine themselves as genuine actors in the public sphere should begin with the process of creating connections--connections of a special kind. Action in the public sphere, as opposed to practices of an instrumental nature, might usefully be understood as a response to problems which are never simply given as fact but which appear only at the point of intersection between different domains of meaning. Consider this example: for genetic engineers, the practices of manipulating genes pose problems mainly of a technical kind, problems in a single domain of meaning. By contrast, the innovations of genetic engineering become problems for the public sphere only after we connect them to some

other, discrete domain of meaning, such as the economic problems of farm communities in the West, or the ecological crisis overtaking rainforests in the tropics. We always need to bear in mind, however, that because the public sphere exists only at the interface of separate domains, the problems we find there are themselves perpetually a matter of debate. The nature of such problems, and even their existence, can never be “proven” to everyone’s satisfaction.

Another way to explain this process of making connections is to say that teaching people to be actors in the public sphere begins with teaching them to locate the sphere itself. The public sphere is not a place, nor is it any particular medium or discourse. Instead, the public sphere is a virtual location, one that has to be created over and over again. At first glance, a book chapter by the primatologist Frans de Waal may seem to many of our students completely unrelated to Mary Kaldor’s discussion of changes in contemporary warfare. When we tell students to find connections and to explore the ones they consider most important, their efforts are bound to be hit-or-miss. Some connections will turn out to be unsustainable, some will end in triviality, and some may open up broad new areas of meaning and new possibilities for action in the world. But because of our own socialization, we may not fully appreciate that simply to look for these connections is already to imagine ourselves differently, as the makers of knowledge rather than a passive (or resentful) receivers. The truth is that there is no right way to connect the texts assembled in our anthology, and no one can predict where the connections may lead. Many students—and many teachers—will find this open-endedness unnerving. But we believe that this encounter with uncertainty, unimportant as it might seem as first, is an encounter with the freedom of the citizen, in sharp contrast to the cocoon of security which envelops both the consumer and the therapeutic subject.

The Freirean tradition of pedagogy stresses problem-posing as a method, but in the public sphere, as connection follows connection, problems will pose themselves. Connection, in other words, produces questioning. If we place Kaldor alongside de Waal, we can hardly prevent ourselves from wondering if the evolution of warfare in our time has in some way been shaped by biological evolution. Other questions may present themselves as well: Does the world situation today call into doubt de Waal's speculations about altruism? If biological evolution is at variance with our political and social needs, does it actually always have the last word or can we change the course of our development as a species? Approaches to instruction more traditional than ours often envision the writer as a person with an established point or argument who needs to present it persuasively. But the truth is that arriving at a position is a long and complex process that must be taught and learned, a process of deliberation which we might view as hallmark of any healthy public culture. Deliberation without awareness of others is autistic, but persuasiveness without the struggle to learn from contradiction is bound to be destructive on many levels.

Pragmatically, this means that we need to give students the opportunity to explore the connections between different texts without demanding that they move toward closure prematurely. A first-year student exploring the connections between de Waal and Kaldor can hardly be expected in the first month of the semester to come up with a coherent argument that synthesizes both texts in an accurate way. Our experience is that this complex task must be segmented into simpler assignments culminating, after six or seven weeks, in the sort of synthetic essay The New Humanities Reader has been designed to elicit. What we have in mind is a sequence of assignments. The first might lead to a paper of three or four pages in which

students begin to explore the connections within a single text. After discussing Kaldor in class, we might ask students to write about the obstacles posed by traditional forms of nationalism in a climate that requires international cooperation. Then, in a second assignment, students might begin to explore connections between Kaldor's analysis of change in the conduct of war and de Waal's thoughts about the evolution of emotions. Only in the third and final paper in the sequence would we expect to see something like a true thesis or argument, supported by extended discussion of two or three texts.

We believe, in other words, that instead of shielding beginners from complexity, a writing course should give them the tools to deal with it. The tools we have in mind, however, are not the venerable "modes"--narration, description, cause and effect, and so on. The truth is that all human adults have the capacity to perform these elementary cognitive tasks without any special instruction, precisely because the requisite abilities are "hardwired" into our brains. Neither do we think that Aristotle's topoi, the Burkean pentad, or Girouvian "border crossings" add anything to skills and capacities people already have. Implicit in these approaches, different as they are from one another, is the shared assumption that a conceptual order or logic of inquiry must be imposed from above or outside on brute, inert, chaotic fact. Some may believe that this superior order is eternal, and some may conceive of it as a contingent social construction, but in either case the "content" to be formed is conceived of as formless in and of itself.

We are convinced, however, that coherence has to be discovered rather than imposed. As writers try to answer questions that present themselves when they explore the connections between different texts, they may feel for some time that they really are condemned to endless incoherence. But if they persist in the effort to find answers, an implicit order will begin to

emerge. Such an order is “implicit” because it does not exist in advance of the process of questioning, yet it is also more than an artifact of the writer’s own ingenuity. An implicit order will begin to show itself only after the meaningful evidence reaches something like a critical mass. Needless to say, no one begins this process as a blank slate, free from all preconceptions. Instead, an implicit order typically emerges from an ongoing “dialogue” between the outcomes the writer expects at first and the possibilities made available by the information at hand. Far from starting to write with a clear thesis in mind, most people need to sustain this dialogue long enough, through many revisions large and small, for something new to emerge.

Deliberative writing is experimental. It requires a willingness to allow ideas to unfold wherever they might lead. Although it has become conventional, even clichéd, to speak of writing as “exploration” or “invention,” conventional pedagogy often remains strangely silent about the particulars. We believe that teachers should make “saying something new” an explicit goal of a writing course. Naturally we want the writing our students do to be clear, coherent, and mechanically correct, but we are also convinced that the most eloquent turn of a banal phrase, or the best-crafted arrangement of trite ideas, has far less value in our society than the capacity to produce genuine knowledge—to produce, that is, new ideas, or to give old ideas a fresh significance. To imagine, however, that the capacity to say something new lies out of reach for all but a few Ph.D.s is to flatter ourselves in a way that does real violence to the truth. For a long time, much of the knowledge produced by the academy has been highly predictable and ritualized. In order to break with this legacy, the sciences have had to transform themselves, creating new disciplines almost overnight while abandoning long established fields that no longer hold much promise. To the humanities, by contrast, change has come far more slowly,

despite putative “revolutions” in methodology that have left standing the walls separating the disciplines.

Those walls should come down. We would say that the humanities for the last hundred years have tried to emulate the sciences by following the path of rigid compartmentalization, a path the sciences themselves may now have abandoned in favor of continuous fusion and splitting. And increasingly, within the humanities as well, the neatness of our compartments has come under suspicion. Many of us have begun to ask whether the humanities ought to play a different social role than the sciences, remote and obscure as they often seem. Few non-scientists expect to understand the fine points of particle physics or microbiology, but the humanities may do their work best when they give understanding pride of place. The humanities, one might say, are inescapably committed to the perpetual renewal of understanding. To put it more simply, our proper concern may very well lie with those varieties of knowledge that contribute to the sharing of ideas, outlooks, sensibilities, and, yes, modes of action. If this is the role of the humanities, then contempt for the beginner or the non-specialist seems to especially inappropriate and self-defeating.

One aspect of writing is having something new to say; another is saying it in ways that renew the cultural and linguistic worlds we share, and that we must continue to share in order for our society to exist at all. The very idea of an action horizon implies a common horizon of understanding within which people can cooperate. Some theorists, however, notably Jurgen Habermas, have in our view overemphasized the need for consensus as a prelude to cooperative action. The truth is that in order to act cooperatively, people don't need to agree about anything except their shared need to act. In all human endeavors, the participants can always be expected

to bring with them a wide range of expectations and aspirations. Rather than imagine “persuasion” as the writer’s final goal—getting everyone to agree—we would suggest the alternative of simply “being understood.” In our view, good writing doesn’t need to make an iron-clad case. The idea, instead, is to present the best fruits of deliberation in ways that a reader might find, not flawless and not even necessarily appealing, but merely reasonable. A reasonable case is one that makes clear the stages in its development, that offers supporting evidence, and that presupposes a respect on the reader’s part for the writer’s efforts.

We consider reasonableness the most appropriate standard for claims in the public sphere. The reader, like the citizen, should always have the opportunity to say, “That’s just not for me.” But in an atmosphere characterized by mutual respect and the freedom to explore ideas without fear of ridicule or recrimination, the process of deliberation can become enlivening for everyone involved. In this spirit, our paradigm for discourse in the public sphere is not conversion but conversation. The participants in a conversation might not end by agreeing with one another, but they may come away with new insights to be used in the conduct of their lives afterward. If this sharing of ideas is not the function of the humanities, then perhaps their time has passed. But if the humanities become “arts of living,” their future—and the future of English 101—seems to us quite bright.

By linking composition to the tradition of the fine arts, we may appear to have taken sides with the so-called expressivists in a prolonged controversy that has dragged on, in our view, far too long. We do not conceive of English 101 as the best place to foreground the existential struggle for a personal voice, although we recognize the importance of that struggle. At the same time, we believe that writers need to have a personal stake in the issues they happen

to be writing about. Implicit in our anthology is the idea that we become the persons we are primarily through our actions—our choices and deeds—in the real world, and not through our ability to represent ourselves, on paper or in some other venue, through the manipulation of tropes. Since the Great Depression, bib overalls may have “traveled” from the sharecropper’s field and the factory line to the pages of *Vogue* and *GQ*, but migrant farmhands and textile workers for the most part have not made the same upward journey. In our flacking of “identity politics,” there has been too much concern with identity and not enough with the second term.

By invoking the arts, in other words, we do not mean that the crafting of selves should be any more important in a writing course than the crafting of “beautiful” prose or “striking” conceits. Rather, what we see as most valuable in the tradition of the arts is its emphasis on creativity and agency. We believe, moreover, that by representing the arts as an ethereal realm occupied a few special people, the humanities have for too long overlooked—and sometimes actively suppressed—the creative abilities and aspirations that everybody has in abundance. While it may be true that most students in English 101 will not turn out to be the Thomas Carlyles or Northrop Fryes of their generation, the same holds true for most of their teachers. We are convinced, nevertheless, that everyone benefits in the long run from freeing the creative energies of ordinary people. In the short term, of course, our students may not thank us for making this freedom our goal. But in the weeks and months to come, please remember that we were all once beginners, and that if we continue to think and learn, we will remain beginners for the rest of our lives. Good luck.