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Disrupting Understanding: The Critique of Writing as Process

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In two recent *JAC* articles, Candace Spigelman and Thomas Rickert arguably speak to each other in compelling ways about claims that can be made for liberatory writing pedagogies and their goal of empowerment. Both Spigelman and Rickert believe that writing pedagogies should foster possibilities for transvaluation, but they also advise a healthy dose of skepticism when considering writing that ostensibly reflects a student's heightened critical awareness. In their view, such writing may well be, as Spigelman suggests, evidence of capitulation or, in Rickert's words, of a student who is "well aware of the language game" that is played "for the sake of teacher and grade" (338, 296). Their advice foregrounds a vexing relationship between, on the one hand, the role of emancipatory classroom teacher and, on the other, institutional and disciplinary authority. For Spigelman, this problematic raises important questions regarding the responsibility of writing teachers to intervene in the ethical development of students. Ultimately, Spigelman reasserts her allegiance to critical pedagogy, advocating ethical intervention as a moral imperative necessary to counter oppression and injustice. Rickert, however, advances a more radical proposition. More specifically, Spigelman's speculation regarding students' commitment to the ethical implications that their writing discloses—her "wondering whether . . . students continue to view their writing as performance" (338)—takes on greater revolutionary

fervor in what Rickert calls a "post-pedagogy of the 'act,'" a pedagogy that would make possible transformative acts of transgression *and* that would recognize and value them as such. Although a third *JAC* article, Anthony Petruzzi's "Kairotic Rhetoric in Freire's Liberatory Pedagogy," does not address classroom practices per se, it does examine the way in which liberatory pedagogy's transformational possibilities coincide with passivity and accommodation, features that characterize what Petruzzi calls "quotidian consciousness" or the "limit-situation" of the everyday. Because Petruzzi's purpose is to theorize the Freirean notion of "critical consciousness as a *rhetorical* concept," he does not regard passivity and accommodation in quite the same way that Spigelman and Rickert regard them, which is not to say that Petruzzi does not characterize them as limiting (349; emphasis added). Petruzzi understands passivity and accommodation from a phenomenological point of view. That is, they are fundamental aspects of the everyday *doxa* of each individual's existential situation, the "commonplace" knowledge of taken-for-granted opinions, ideas, values, and so on—hence the passive apprehension of *doxa*. Petruzzi also explains that new knowledge becomes embodied in everyday *doxa*, with quotidian consciousness and critical consciousness constituting the same hermeneutic circle. This notion of embodiment has been described as sedimentation by phenomenologists such as Edmund Husserl and Alfred Schutz. Sedimentation is a significant metaphor in that it extends the analogy of "stream" of consciousness, which comports well with the notion that quotidian consciousness does not actively engage in hermeneutical critique. Quotidian consciousness, as stream, nevertheless is not static, though its sedimented knowledge may be described, as Petruzzi does, as a state of "*stasis*," sedimentation, or embodiment occurring to new knowledge once it is accommodated by *doxa*. Petruzzi states, "Once knowledge occurs, its being shifts from an incarnate processual act of cognition to an object that is embodied . . ." (372). Thus, Petruzzi does not devalue quotidian consciousness, although he does consider it limiting. Indeed, it is co-implicated with critical consciousness in processual acts of cognition.

In this response to these three articles, I want to reexamine process theory and pedagogy in light of some of the common characteristics of the kind of liberatory pedagogy that Spigelman, Rickert, and Petruzzi point toward. I recognize that to some readers this effort might be considered reactionary or, at best, redundant. In all honesty, I have sought other ways to respond, since I am not entirely comfortable with the risk I take in advancing an allegiance to what has been so thoroughly critiqued that its

limitations can readily be rehearsed by anyone who is even modestly acquainted with recent composition scholarship. However, I have not felt a satisfying level of commitment to alternative ways of reading the articles. For me, what is most compelling about the essays is the extent to which they identify features of critical or liberatory pedagogies that resonate with and enrich my understanding of writing as process. Certainly, some of those features are already obvious. For example, Spigelman cites the critical political agenda of expressivist writing instruction as a point of continuity in the political and ethical motivations that “continue to drive contemporary composition studies” (323). Furthermore, one cannot help but notice that the concern about critical pedagogies reproducing the very forces of oppression that they seek to oppose echoes a central critique of process pedagogies that John Trimbur, for example, has made. Trimbur observes that “process teachers attempted to relinquish authority unproblematically, in order to empower the expressive capacities of their students. These teachers, however, ran into some very real problems. For one thing, students often reinscribed the authority that process teachers were trying to vacate, for the very simple reason that they knew their composing process would eventually result in a product for evaluation . . .” (110). I want to say here that I do not equate process theory with expressivism—nor am I suggesting that Spigelman does. Expressivism is, rather, one strand of process, but it is one with which, for many compositionists, all strands tend to be conflated, as I believe Trimbur’s statement illustrates. At one level, this point is trivial, for I believe that Trimbur refers to process as some had theorized it up to a certain point in time, and I agree with him that many process theorists had “failed to theorize” adequately the complexities of, among other things, “the problem of the teacher’s authority in the writing classroom” (110). At another level, however, I think that dismissing process theories and pedagogies by conflating all of them with expressivism, or by pointing out limitations of other strands of process as they were conceptualized during, say, the 1970s and mid-1980s (for example, cognitivism, which as we now understand, over-codified “the” writing process) can limit instructional practices aimed at intervening in students’ ethical development. Even though some scholars apparently continue to acknowledge that writing is a process, the general trajectory of “post-process” scholarship nevertheless has been to regard that characterization as such an obvious “given” that important implications of theorizing process and classroom practices are overlooked.

Petruzzi will probably not be criticized for speaking of “incarnate processual acts of cognition” or for describing a continual “oscillation between an authentic understanding of incarnate discourse and an inauthentic everyday understanding of embodied discourse,” even though such characterizations of the “event” of critical consciousness, in my view at any rate, have a familiar ring to them (372). Petruzzi, however, is not applying in any explicit way his rhetorical examination to writing instruction. Indeed, he uses Amy Tan’s novel *The Kitchen God’s Wife* to illustrate (effectively, in my view) how *kairos* opens spaces for critical consciousness necessary for deliberate inquiry and the transformative potential that inquiry offers. I am not faulting Petruzzi for this strategy, which in any event is consistent with his work in the area of nonrepresentational hermeneutics, but I do believe that *thinking* about application in general ways at the level of teaching practices would be helpful to writing teachers who struggle—as, for example, Spigelman, Rickert, and I do—with conflicting feelings about moral imperatives, the power and limits of critique, civic responsibility, duplicity, complicity, and so on in the context of emancipatory pedagogy. I also believe that working toward classroom practices that offer ways to intervene in quotidian (uncritical) consciousness in order to open possibilities for *processual* acts of cognition (critical consciousness) requires reaffirming the importance of emphasizing writing as process.

Let me acknowledge first that Spigelman, Rickert, and Petruzzi, while examining similar themes, do not, of course, share exactly the same perspectives. With regard to Rickert in particular, I am taking liberties by applying his ideas, along with Spigelman’s and Petruzzi’s, to classroom pedagogy, especially by connecting such pedagogy to process theory. Rickert makes a parenthetical aside when discussing Geoffrey Sirc’s “Never Mind the Tagmemics, Where’s the Sex Pistols?” that suggests a dismissal of process pedagogy. This comment occurs in a discussion of a highly provocative response written by a student named Quentin to an assignment given by David Bartholomae. Rickert writes, “Sirc compares them [the lines in Quentin’s essay] to the lyrics of a Sex Pistols song, calling the essay the excess that our pedagogy cannot process (I would note that Sirc’s pun on ‘process’ is a statement about the limits of process pedagogy)” (310). Certainly the title of Sirc’s essay (and much in the article) warrants Rickert’s interpretation that Sirc’s use of “process” is a pun. I think it is also clear that Rickert supports that view, and I think that both Rickert’s parenthetical remark and Sirc’s pun represent, enthymematically, shared views among many compositionists that pro-

cess theories and pedagogies warrant quick dismissal. What's more, connecting Rickert's notion of a "post-pedagogy of the act" to process does not forge the only uneasy alliance. It seems to me that virtually any effort to make Rickert's post-pedagogy yield deliberate classroom practices would somehow miss the mark of what Rickert advocates. Unrehearsed and unrepeatable, a post-pedagogy of the act would "refuse accommodation entirely in favor of a radical abandonment" (313). More anarchistic than what even the term "post-pedagogy" suggests, "non-pedagogy" perhaps better describes what Rickert proposes.

It might be the case, however, that Rickert regards radical abandonment as an informing principle rather than as a completely tenable proposition, inasmuch as he does speak of *designing* pedagogies that would "foster a climate of possibility," of *seizing* moments of student resistance, and of recognizing that any practice or strategy (no matter how oppositional) is "already caught up in, or brings with it, a certain accommodation" (313, 315, 314). Indeed, seizing a moment—and "the 'act' . . . can only be a transvaluation to the extent that it is understood as a *moment*"—is already a disruption of the moment, its momentum disrupted by the interventional act of "seizure" (315). A fundamentally important contribution that understanding writing as process offers composition pedagogy is that such interventions can occur. Unless we make our classrooms a forum for sheer "happenings," I don't see how we can avoid "theorizing" about what we do as teachers. Virtually any decision we make about our classroom practice is informed by some degree of theorizing, explicitly or implicitly, or else we'd simply not be reflecting on what we do.

If compositionists continue to understand writing as a process even though earlier process scholarship has been deemed inadequate, then why has theorizing about process been eschewed or considered passé? In "Is There Life After Process?" Joseph Petraglia states that we now have the "theoretical and empirical sophistication to consider the mantra 'writing is a process' as the right answer to a really boring question. We have better questions now, and the notion of process no longer counts as much of an insight" (53). If it is such an "uncontroversial" answer, why aren't we posing the "better" questions we have now with reference to it? If process has become lore, if it has become sedimented as *doxa*, if, as Petraglia suggests, it "infuses our awareness of writing, it tinctures our thoughts about writing instruction, and trace elements of it can be found in practically every professional conversation," then surely the boredom "we" feel about it can be considered tantamount to the passivity and

accommodation that Petruzzi suggests characterizes quotidian consciousness (53). Instead of filing away the boring insight of process in the spirit of "been there, done that," our new and better questions can and should be asked in ways that foreground our various interpretations of process and in ways that disrupt and critique those interpretations. Rickert is right: "We need *active* moments as much as our students do, . . ." moments that might contribute to critical consciousness in students as well as in writing instructors (316).

Spigelman carefully problematizes the pedagogical task of responding to student writing and, more to the point, to the values, beliefs, assumptions, and implications that student writing discloses. The instructional practices she describes, as Petraglia might predict, do seem informed by process theories as well as by historical and theoretical scholarship from classical rhetoric to contemporary scholarly discussions. "David" probably did not know how fortunate he was to have Spigelman as his teacher for first-year composition; indeed, it is very likely that some of his problems stemmed from being challenged by a pedagogy quite unlike what he may have been accustomed to and even, in all probability, what students were experiencing in other first-year composition sections at the university where Spigelman teaches. In addition, her concerns about the ways in which rhetoric's political and ethical intersections are implicated in and should be used to construct classroom pedagogy lead her to ask important questions. As I consider Spigelman's questions about response and process theorizing, then, I do so with great admiration for her work as a teacher and a scholar.

Spigelman notes that the reemergence of invention in rhetorical instruction during the 1950s and 1960s reaffirmed the ethical, political, and knowledge-making enterprise of teaching writing (323). The questions she raised with David in response to his essay "Eden Was Never A Utopia" reflect her awareness of the potential that inventional questions have in helping students interrogate their thoughts and values. Spigelman describes having addressed David's "historical, factual, and logical assertions," and then having follow-up conversations with David during which she raised salient questions about some of the more troubling arguments David's essay advanced (331–32). Apparently, however, David considered these to be more or less "rhetorical" questions that indicated that his teacher did not "like" his arguments, perhaps because the arguments were untenable or otherwise missed the point of the assignment. In spite of Spigelman's efforts to the contrary, David's

revision of the essay represented his attempt to give his teacher what he thought she wanted (334).

Critical inquiry viewed against the backdrop of process theory entails an affective investment in writing, an investment that is itself an integral part of what is interrogated. As much as Spigelman attempted to set the stage for such investment, in David's case it did not occur (except in the sense that he was pragmatically invested in his grade). I cannot say whether Spigelman directed her students to engage with the texts that she assigned in ways that led them to foreground explicitly their own knowledge, beliefs, values, attitudes, and experiences vis-à-vis the theme of multiculturalism. I take it that this was but one theme among others in a semester's course that "teaches writing in the context of examining the impact of home and community on constructions of identity"; thus, any comments I make must be qualified by the obviously limited view that I have of Spigelman's classroom (327–28). I can say, however, as Spigelman does, that David grappled with the thoughts of the authors he was required to read more than he engaged in critical reflection about his own values and ideas. Spigelman states, "As his essay reveals, David, like many of his classmates, had an imprecise grasp of the political and cultural implications of these concepts and images" (328).

Petruzzi's examination of the concept of *kairos* suggests that affective investments can result from dialogic encounters that throw into relief internalized values. Whole class or small group discussions, while they certainly would be filled with value-ridden statements, would not necessarily result in explicit articulations of the values that student discourse discloses. Many students who actively engage in class discussion, then, may genuinely not recognize what values and beliefs their statements suggest, and what does seem to be suggested may not reflect the values and beliefs that the students, on critical reflection, would agree they actually hold. Of course, this is also true for written discourse. For example, David, as Spigelman tells us, repeatedly indicated that he was surprised to learn that Spigelman "thought his essay racist, even as [they] rehearsed afresh the fallacies in his original argument" (335). Critiquing the fallacies in an argument does not necessarily result in critical awareness of the values that might be seen to underlie the argument. After all, perfectly good values can underlie fallacies, too.

I do not believe that either of David's essays disclosed much that can be attributed to the values and beliefs he held. For David, the essays represented academic exercises that he performed for the teacher for the

sake of a grade. Spigelman states that she wonders if "even in classrooms where we take student writing seriously, where we actively respond and challenge ideas, and where we encourage such responses among peers, students continue to view their writing as performance" (338). Yet, to the extent that the writing options that Spigelman gave her students did not involve considering exigencies of a rhetorical situation other than writing an essay based on what they had read and discussed in class (the students were asked "to consider metaphors commonly attributed to American society and to determine which metaphors might be most useful for contemporary culture"), David's failure to think about his writing as "performance" might have been anticipated (328). Academic discourse does not preclude discourse conceived of as performance, but writing pedagogy that does not foreground writing as a process may not convey to students that their "real" investments matter; indeed, it may not enable students to discern what their real investments are.

David defended his writing to his teacher by explaining that he thought she wanted "something happy and frilly and that *really* didn't go anywhere, but just kind of showed *support from other sources*. . . . Not *really* taking into account what it is, but just being able to *support it* . . ." (334; emphasis added). David did not seem to have a sense that his essays were "real"; instead, he appeared to regard them as the means by which his writing abilities would be assessed, an assessment that he thought depended largely on how well he supported what he said. The care and respect Spigelman gives to her students' work certainly should mitigate against this conception, but I can't help but think that David might have been better able to conceive of his writing more along the lines of the performance that Spigelman had actually wanted if he had performed and received responses to inventional (and simultaneously interventional) acts of critical inquiry before submitting his essay. Petruzzi shows how dialogue can "unground" and "destabilize" everyday understanding, inaugurating the potential of critical consciousness and therefore of transvaluation. The transitory aspect of actual spoken dialogue, however, especially in a classroom where dialogue is seldom one-to-one, makes it difficult to yield the kind of result with students that Petruzzi is able to illustrate using a novel. The hermeneutic process that Petruzzi examines entails in(ter)ventional acts of critical reflection—that is, retrospective critiques of *doxa* that are concomitantly oriented to future decision making and transvaluation. Foregrounding writing as a process enables teachers to emphasize such critical inquiry because instructional practices explicitly informed by process can be designed to intervene in responsive

ways in student inquiry. By so doing, students also perform and learn in(ter)ventional practices.

In his introduction to *Post-Process Theory: Beyond the Writing-Process Paradigm*, Thomas Kent asserts that writers know “lots of codifiable shortcuts” that help them “communicate more efficiently during the act of writing,” and he lists three of them: “our knowledge of conventions, our ability to manipulate genres, our facility with words” (2). Kent makes this assertion in the process of differentiating between the notion that there can be knowable, codifiable shortcuts and the notion that there is a “codifiable or *generalizable* writing process,” which of course there is not (1). In(ter)ventional acts of critical inquiry are certainly not shortcuts that help writers communicate more efficiently, but they can foster affective engagement, challenge existing *doxa*, contribute to new understanding, and in other ways lead writers to conceive of writing as a discursive act. Such inquiry takes time, and, as a teacher, I know of no way to engage students in critical inquiry other than to foreground writing as a process. This does not mean that I think there is a codifiable process any more than I think Kent’s saying that “writing is a thoroughly interpretive act” means that he thinks “hermeneutic guesswork” is codifiable (2). But I disagree with Kent when he says that “the uncodifiable moves we make when we attempt to align our utterances with the utterances of others . . . do not constitute a process in any useful sense of the concept, except perhaps in retrospect.” Such “retrospective” moves, made possible by process, disrupt *doxa* and enable the (rather inefficient) hermeneutical activity of critical inquiry. Kent does not assign much value to his comment about retrospection: “By ‘in retrospect,’ I only mean that when we look back on a communicative situation, we can always map out what we did. We can always distinguish some sort of process that we employed” (3). Retrospection is indeed not very meaningful if we are only trying to see what we did or even, uncritically, how we did it. Foregrounding writing as a process in order to facilitate critical inquiry in a writing classroom does not require “maps” of a process. It does require interventions over time that disrupt the quotidian stream of consciousness—processual interventions that include critical inquiry into ways of reading processes and products (and their means of production).

Although they do so in different ways, both Petruzzi and Rickert speak of the importance of “moments” of rupture that give discourse its active and ethical dimensions. Petruzzi understands these moments as *kairos*, and Rickert’s descriptions of them are consistent with character-

izations of *kairos* as well. I do not want to diminish the value of spontaneity and surprise, but it seems to me that the aleatory aspect of *kairos* precludes intervention, as does its “rightness” of timing. For Petruzzi, *kairos* “is central to critical consciousness,” whereas *stasis* characterizes quotidian consciousness, both co-implicated in critical inquiry (352). Petruzzi notes that his sense of *stasis* is consistent with what has been suggested by John Gage. Quoting Gage, Petruzzi defines *stasis* as “an invention technique that in ‘its most frequent applications . . . was reduced to a technical formula for coming up with commonplaces’” (373). Gage’s point here does not serve as a critique of invention but of misapplications of *stasis* as a way to find a topic, to lay down a thesis, or to find material to support a thesis. Gage, it will be recalled, values *stasis* as a component of invention through which questions “at issue” can be disclosed. Furthermore, in “On the Difference Between Invention and Pre-Writing,” Gage suggests that different applications of *stasis* reflect different conceptions of process: “Many of those who advocate ‘pre-writing’ in preference to ‘invention’ as a term to describe a process of discovery actually have in mind a very different kind of process from that which interested classical rhetoricians when they spoke of ‘invention’” (4). What Gage refers to in part is the role *stasis* has in rhetorical exigency—that is, an affective investment in inquiry that depends on the immediacy of a real discourse situation.

Again, I believe that the kind of academic discourse in which students write essays on teacher-determined topics can involve exigency if process is emphasized. Inventional practices that prompt students to raise questions about their taken-for-granted understanding (and by this I mean *doxa*, which includes affective constructions as much as “factual” knowledge), about points of conflict between their understanding and those of others, or about points of conflict within their own understanding invoke dialogic elements that, for Petruzzi, might be said to “authenticate” a discursive situation. One such dialogic element is response, though it should be noted that responding to students’ inventional practices may present the ethical dilemmas that Spigelman articulates even more than responding to student essays does. That is, insofar as students’ engagement in inventional practices make explicit their values and beliefs at stake in a discourse situation, responses that are “in kind”—that is, that “take up” the exchange with explicit regard to affective understanding—convey to students that the discourse situation is real; but student work that strives toward articulating and interrogating affective understanding may compel responses that include the kind of “necessary directionality”

that Spigelman discusses in an even more direct manner than responses to completed essays do (see Spigelman 336, 340). Spigelman displayed a great deal of sensitivity to David's understanding, but she reports that her "carefully constructed questions, aimed at rationality and factuality, did not prompt greater interrogation of his assertions" (335). Given that David's revision was, to his mind, giving his teacher what he thought she wanted, his lack of critical inquiry does not seem to be only a matter of resistance. David did not have the in(ter)ventional skill to recognize what his assertions disclosed well enough to interrogate them.

According to Spigelman, students' preparation for their writing assignment included reading essays about "racial bias, cultural identity, and language." There is no mention of students' having investigated their own "politically conservative and culturally insular" community, a community among other similar "homogeneous" suburban areas that surround an ethnically diverse city where various hate groups "rally and live undisturbed in the surrounding territories" (328). David's essay does not address his own community, though there is ample indication that his uninvestigated everyday understanding of his community infuses his essay. The point here is not that in order to be a committed performance an academic essay must contain concrete references to first-hand experiences; rather, the point is that deliberate discursive action will not occur if there are no inventional practices to help students align their lived experiences with what they read. The example of Bartholomae's student, Quentin, is, in my view, far more troubling than that of David. With compelling and penetrating insight, Rickert elaborates on the transgressive qualities in Quentin's discursive "act," but I want to consider just one assumption that Rickert makes: that Quentin's essay evidences "a sheer hatred of writing itself—on what writing is in the academy, on what we make of writing in our pedagogies" (312). I think there can be little doubt that Rickert is correct about this, but Rickert does not address Bartholomae's pedagogy. As I mentioned earlier, Rickert makes a dismissive comment about process pedagogy in the context of a discussion of Quentin's essay, but as it's described by Bartholomae, the instruction Quentin experienced did not present writing as a process. After reading an essay by Sartre, Quentin was instructed to respond to a teacher-posed question: "If existence precedes essence, what is man?" (Bartholomae 5). I think it is safe to say, given Bartholomae's description of the assignment and the extensive revising that Quentin did, that this was an in-class writing assignment.

Quoting from Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Petruzzi states that "'any situation' in which individuals are prevented from 'engaging in the process of inquiry' is a form of alienation: 'to alienate human beings from their own decision-making is to change them into objects'" (352). What I am struck by in Quentin's essay is his hatred toward the distance he feels from what he read and must write about. The concepts "man," "good," "evil" are abstractions that he didn't care about; "they or meaningless words or phrase." Also, "[t]he stories in the books" are "meaningless," and "[t]his paper is meaningless, just like the book." Quentin's alienation is then solidified, not by his final words "I lose again," but by Bartholomae's choosing not to respond to Quentin's paper, saying only "I could only ignore it" (Bartholomae 6). Rickert's and Sirc's "'punk pedagogy,' predicated on DIY (do it yourself)" may have offered more to Quentin by granting Quentin "the possibilities" for an act of writing that would be his *own* act, for valuing and recognizing it as such, I believe, would indeed entail "lighting up" the resistances Quentin produces. But that kind of instructional practice is not exactly a do-it-yourself pedagogy (291, 315). It would require disrupting the act, conceiving of the act as an act in process, and offering Quentin processual opportunities of critical intervention and response.

In Spigelman's view, David's writing definitely produced "active moments." Spigelman's exchanges with David led her to reflect critically on her instructional practices and on the hierarchy of values she holds as a teacher. The same can be said of Bartholomae's experience with Quentin, inasmuch as Bartholomae comes to hold a favorable view of such inventional practices as Mary Louise Pratt's arts of the contact zone (Bartholomae 12–15). In(ter)ventional practices do not merely presuppose that, of course, writing is a process. They foreground writing as process, disrupting the "flows" of power and control in the writing classroom, imparting, as Petruzzi puts it, an "affective shift from seeing oneself as a master of everyday understanding, to realizing that one does not have mastery over the meaning of existential situations" (356–57). Whatever the deficiencies of various strands of process theory may be, losing sight of writing as a process can lead to impoverishing the process of critical inquiry, and it is the improvement of students' ability to engage in that process that many compositionists want most of all for their students.

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