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Lil Brannon

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Review

Judith Summerfield and Geoffrey Summerfield, *Texts and Contexts: A Contribution to the Theory and Practice of Teaching Composition* (New York: Random House, 1986)

Lil Brannon

You might say I was lucky, directing a writing center in New York where, for the cost of dinner, I could entice friends into the City on late Wednesday afternoons to talk for a couple of hours to the Writing Center consultants. Those were always the best meetings—“outsiders” coming to try out new ideas on us. And we weren’t an easy group either. Most consultants had taught in the public schools and were holding adjunct jobs at night teaching writing somewhere in the City. No easy maxims were going to convince us. We knew what it was really like to teach writing. We also knew what it was like to teach writing to students who were being oppressed by their composition teachers, teachers who had sent their students to us because they had committed errors—frags., awks., and the like. These teachers expected us to plug them into some comma eradicating machine; they wanted us to “fix” up their language; they wanted to tell us how to do our job. I wouldn’t say we were jaded, but we certainly weren’t an easy, always receptive group to talk to.

One Wednesday, I think it was 1981 or 2, Judith Summerfield came to talk to us about narrative. Now the gang in the Writing Center had all their questions and concerns right in their hip pockets before Judith even got there at 4:00: “Narratives are one thing—I can get students to do that; but we have to teach *Expository Writing*.” “Just what we need, another lecture on self-confessional writing; I thought the sixties were over ten years ago.” “Stories, OK, I admit I like them—students’ journals are full of them, and some are quite good—but I can’t get the kids to make the transition from

these stories to what they need to be doing in school.” I can remember Judith opening the session reading to us a story she had written about her grandparents growing up as Jews in Russia. I can remember being moved by the story. I can remember wanting to respond to her writing. Judith asked us to do so, not with our usual tutoring repertoire, but with our own story. We all wrote for over thirty minutes, then shared our stories. I remember never having felt more close to a group of colleagues in my life. I remember the power of narrative.

But like I said, we were seasoned workshop participants. We had questions. Judith was ready for us. She talked about how narrative is central to the way the mind constructs the world. She went on to say that we participate in the world through the stories we construct about it. All writing is at base narrative: either we are participants in the story or spectators of it. The more distant the spectator, the more, potentially, expository the prose. What we forget in the teaching of writing—especially with the smoke screen of the process approach—is that all texts are reactions to prior texts, our stories responses to prior stories. To enable our students to see this fact and to use their personal funding of experience—whether it be from their reading, events of their lives, observations of others—to construct their texts, reminds them of the social nature of all discourse and their own power to participate in conversation, even the conversation of the academy. We left the meeting on a high that afternoon, with a lot to think about.

I think it was two years later, though it could have been earlier, that I talked Geoffrey Summerfield into facing the Wednesday afternoon Writing Center gang. The session was billed as a face-off between Geoffrey’s way of thinking about writing and its teaching and my own. Some of the consultants were taking a graduate class with Geoffrey and they thought there was some gulf between what he was advocating for them as teachers and my own weekly dronings about how tutors might think about enabling writers. Geoffrey and I couldn’t imagine what they saw as this gulf, so we took it upon ourselves to set the record straight this Wednesday afternoon.

I don’t remember exactly how he introduced the session, but I do recall that whatever he said made me feel a bit uncomfortable. I don’t know the words he used exactly, but I do remember I thought he said that he had his students become imposters. They pretended they were people who they weren’t. With something like that as preamble he read us a story which he had read to his students, a letter really, called “Falling Bricks” (which I had first read, by the way, in an anthology that Judith had edited called *Responding to Prose*, Indianapolis: MacMillan, 1983). For those of you who don’t know the letter, it’s a very amusing request for sick leave by a man who, in attempting to repair a roof, gets tangled up in a basket of bricks he is trying to hoist. Geoffrey asked us to write a text in response to it in the role

of the building inspector who investigated the accident. Although we all wrote our reports as if we were the inspector and were delighted in turn by the reports written by students in Geoffrey's writing class, something still remained unsettling for me. I asked a question that went something like this, "So what's the point? Are you saying that we are supposed to have our students simply act?" And I didn't stop there, I went on, "We can tell them, 'Just act like an academic, pretend you are a scholar, and all your troubles will be over.' What ever happened to the idea of writing about what one believes, about writing sincerely about one's actual experiences rather than faking experience, acting." Geoffrey responded by helping me form the concept he was attempting to have us construct through the activity. He said something like this:

First, ...the student was not acting; second, ...the student's [text] was a truth—not in actuality, not in real life, but a truth discovered in or through role, imbued with remarkable moral force, and expressed with a power that was more than merely personal. To raise, in such matters, the question of sincerity is merely to invoke a red herring. What counts is that the words were meant. They made marvelous, urgent, intent sense. They had effect (188)... . The peculiar virtue of role is that it is a way of entering/taking on the conventions, the determining environmental constraints, of a particular task/function or discipline/tradition and genuinely performing—not pretending. The impersonations of role move away from illusion, even though they may start there; the impersonations of acting move toward a more finely tuned, a more complete illusion, even though they may start in some perceived reality... . It may help to remember that actors always speak someone else's lines, the lines are "out there"; in role we speak lines that come out of ourselves, lines that we have already made our own or are in the process of making our own. Acting is a process of replication, role is an act of retrieval. In acting, we represent or mediate another's text; in role, we shape our own utterances. (202)

I remember seeing in Geoffrey's explanation that all writing, all talk, all being is "performed" in role. I saw that he wasn't talking about "let's pretend," but about something much richer, much more powerful.

Those ideas Judith and Geoffrey Summerfield explored with us in the Writing Center have become the central concepts in a fascinating and exciting new book they have written collaboratively, *Texts and Contexts: A Contribution to the Theory and Practice of Teaching Composition* (New York: Random House, 1986). Here is a method for teaching writing supported by theory and illustrated with engaging examples of students' and teachers' writings. Their method is based on four propositions drawn from their command of modern discourse theory, philosophy, and linguistics: (1) that writing as all discourse is produced in context and so is from the start

diagrammatic representation of their use of spectator/participant might look like this:



Those readers, who, like me, have made considerable use of Britton’s participant/spectator distinction, may have difficulty in accepting the terms being used in this way. Though the terms make plausible, good sense in the context of the Summerfields’ argument, one cannot escape the echoes of what those terms have meant previously in our professional conversation.

The Summerfields reintroduce two terms to describe the features of discourse associated with those texts written in the role of the participant or spectator: parataxis and hypotaxis. Though the terms are used frequently throughout the book, I remained confused by them until they were fully and richly defined in chapters 7 and 8. Parataxis is, according to the Summerfields, “the name given to structures of discourse where the relationship between the parts is one of parity, where all the meanings appear to operate at the same level of significance, without foregrounding or backgrounding...[it] is the feature of much spoken discourse, of utterance, where we make it up as we go along, composing utterance at the point of experiencing... . The only relationship between parts that parataxis usually offers is the temporal relationship—time moves the utterance from one moment to the next (146). The shift from parataxis to hypotaxis is the one many teachers wish to enable students to discover, the shift from “noncontextualized immediacy, a hurly burly of impressions and effects” to writing which is “cooler more detached, availing itself of the larger view of hindsight, reflection from a distance,” and structured through subordinating one idea with another so that expressions are created that “represent significant connections and relationships” (167). The Summerfields demonstrate that students have the capacity to create both paratactic and hypotactic texts; indeed that writing makes possible the hypotactic structuring of experience. The assignments they offer first have students write in the role of the participant and then invite them to resee and thus rewrite the experience in various spectator roles, roles which move ever away from the direct experience which was at hand in the role of the participant. Students, therefore, learn to write expository prose by noticing what must be said when one assumes the role of the distant spectator of prior events. A complete diagram, then, of their central argument might look something like this:



The Summerfields say that their role as teachers of writing is to “nudge or elbow” their students “in one or more appropriate directions in search for, and an invention of, larger resonances, meanings, or significances, that both contain and transcend the merely personal... . It is our purpose not to corrode or undermine our students’ values, beliefs, or pieties; rather to ventilate those values with the cool and refreshing air of spirit of inquiry: to ask why, to examine and challenge their own tacit assumptions” (291). Throughout *Texts and Contexts* I was challenged to examine my own tacit beliefs and assumptions; I was invited to explore with the authors a wealth of texts and contexts in the spirit of inquiry, to ask why I do what I do. And I learned a great deal from the exploration, just as, I’m sure their other students do.

Lil Brannon, former editor of *The Writing Center Journal*, teaches at The State University of New York at Albany.