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Review: A Life In School

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You Don't Need a Weatherman to Know Which Way the Wind Blows: An Alternative Response to Jane Tompkins' *A Life In School: What the Teacher Learned*. (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1996).

Reviewed by Barbara Roswell

In his Fall/Winter 1997 review, Byron Stay aptly characterizes *A Life in School*, Jane Tompkins' often riveting narrative of her journey as a scholar, teacher and writer, as therapeutic, readable, and refreshing (67). Teachers and tutors will indeed, as Stay predicts, "find much here that reverberates with their lives" (66). But when Stay notes that "most writing center professionals take for granted that both tutor and client bring a wealth of unspoken needs that have to be addressed before real teaching can take place" (65), and that "it will hardly be surprising to composition and writing center specialists that Tompkins is somewhat unnerved as she attempts to move her attention from her subject matter to her students" (66), he acknowledges a gap in knowledge and perspective that I find ultimately the most provocative—and problematic—aspect of the book. Although part of the charm of *A Life in School* is its sense of discovery, of having formulated—or at least stumbled on—a revolutionary truth that the author is now compelled to share, writing center professionals may question the disingenuousness of this stance. Readers of *The Writing Center Journal* would be well-advised to critique what Eve Sedgwick calls the "privilege of unknowing" that permits Tompkins to operate in (studied?) ignorance of what her writing center and composition colleagues have been doing just down the hall from the "painfully isolated" classrooms she inhabits.

Although engaging and deeply affirming, Tompkins' experiments with decentering her authority and learning from the chaos in her classroom nevertheless come twenty years after Ann Berthoff first published her essay with that title, and almost as many years after Stephen North articulated a pedagogy that focused on "writers, not texts" in his now canonical—or perhaps post-canonical?—"Idea of a Writing Center." I can't help noting that the authors Tompkins identifies as the only four sources on teaching that "speak" to her (xiii)—Paolo Freire, Palmer Parker, Sylvia Ashton-Warner and Maria Montessori—were all on the reading list of my first graduate course in writing pedagogy in 1981. Thus, while Tompkins repeatedly speaks of her individual struggle to create classrooms in which students can assume greater authority and responsibility, these approaches have been among the hallmarks of writing center pedagogy—and of composition pedagogy more generally as well—for almost a quarter of a century. In the hands of compositionists, in fact, these

ideas have moved beyond the status of rallying cries, and have undergone multiple generations of theorization, inquiry and revision. One need only think of Stephen North's "The Idea of a Writing Center," and the many responses to and revisions of it, to trace the complex ways that writing center scholars have probed such key concepts as "authority" or "authenticity" by problematizing simplistic binary divisions (students/texts, liberatory/conservative, process/product) and acknowledging their own situatedness within powerful institutional structures. To follow one of the central images of *A Life in School*, while Tompkins recounts the drama of "the day I walked out of class," one of the central tropes of writing center literature is the ongoing, nuanced struggle to create and stay in complex dialogic relationships with even the most disaffected students and not only to calibrate and recalibrate the delicate balance between the tutor's and writer's authority but also to acknowledge the many silent partners—teachers, texts, disciplinary discourses—that populate any single tutorial.

Tompkins' conversion is to be celebrated, and I am pleased to count her voice among the many who call for education that "is not just task-oriented" and that "provides the safe and nurturing environment people need in order to grow" (xiii, xii). Her passion, and the detailed vignettes she offers of classroom interactions with teachers as disparate as Cleanth Brooks at Yale and Mrs. Higgins who taught third grade in P.S. 98, Brooklyn, are welcome reminders that the questions that fill the pages of *The Writing Center Journal* and *The Writing Lab Newsletter* are, indeed, the enduring questions. Anyone familiar with writing center discourse, with its frequent invocations of front porches and comfortable couches, can take deep pleasure in Tompkins' metaphorical suggestion that we infuse our academic practices with some of the simple courtesies of home: "When you invite people to your house, you greet them at the door and take them in. You hang up their coats and you help them carry their luggage to their room. If they've not been to your place before, you might offer them a little tour and explain the house rules, if there are any, about keeping the windows open, letting the dog out, how to work the coffee maker. These are signs that send a message everyone can read: you matter, your needs are important here" (189-190).

At the same time, I am skeptical about the kind of alliance *A Life in School* offers, especially since Tompkins' text fails to extend these basic courtesies to those less enfranchised than she is and most notably to her colleagues who teach writing. Instead, *A Life in School* reinforces the invisibility of writing centers as sites of support and collaboration, much less as sources of resistance, inquiry or useable theory. When toward the end of the book Tompkins recounts her "discovery" of such support staff as the career development office, the counseling service, the chaplain and the resident assistants as people who "did essential life-sustaining work, and had been thinking for some time about issues that were new to [her],"

she nevertheless maintains the myopia of so many English Department faculty concerning the writing instructors and writing centers supporting their privilege.

Ironically, even as such writing center scholars as Nancy Welch, Alice Gillam, and Anne DiPardo have taught us to value inquiry that makes central the complexly situated, institutional, multivocal position of the writing teacher or tutor, Tompkins ignores the principle articulated by Linda Brodkey that “the power of discourse is not vulnerable to change by teachers who ignore its power; teachers cannot divest themselves of those vestiges of authority that strike them as unproductive by ignoring the institutional arrangements that unequally empower them” (129). I remain skeptical, in other words, because, too often, the writing center community has sought legitimacy through allegiance with a powerful spokesperson, only to discover that when it comes to writing center practice, “You can dress it up, but you still can’t take it out.”

Even as *A Life in School: What the Teacher Learned* tells a tale of transformation, Tompkins concludes her story with an image of sublime isolation. Listen to her final words: “Student lamp, antique chair, and teacher’s desk. That should do” (228). Having spent a quarter of a century challenging this ultimately impoverished, if idealized, image of the writer suffering alone in his garret, writing center professionals would be wise to say, “No, that will not do at all” and to tell the stories of what teachers and tutors in writing centers have learned in school loud enough so that they, too, can be heard and celebrated.

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