The Literature Workshop
Teaching Texts and Their Readers

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Introduction
Principles for Practice

I shall begin this introduction with the forbidden gesture of an apology for its length and its focus on theory. But I feel obliged to offer readers some account of the intellectual genealogy of the principles of practice that inform this book and a conceptual frame for the practices that this book exemplifies. In truth, I think that the rationale for the practices modeled here will emerge for attentive readers as they read the chapters that focus on practice, and (as the body of this book will make evident) I much prefer and trust that sort of empirical process for communicating the theory behind my practice. But some readers want to know what they are getting into conceptually and why it might be worthwhile before they set out on an intellectual journey with an author. It is for these readers and for the clarity of my own thinking about the model of instruction that has come to characterize my own teaching that I have written this introduction. Readers who do not have much patience with theory and intellectual history may be better advised to read this introduction after they have read the remainder of the book, when the workshops that constitute the heart of this volume will have, I hope, justified an interest in where they came from and how they may be characterized conceptually as a genre of instruction. After all, I wrote this introduction (as most introductions are written) last, after I had written all the other chapters of the book. So it might also make sense to read it last.

For those who insist on reading this book in the order provided by the table of contents, I'll start as interestingly as I know how, with a story—a personal story that may explain much of what I am trying to do in this book and how I came to care about doing it. Then I'll turn to a more general characterization of the critical and pedagogical milieu in which all of us who are English teachers (of a certain age at least) have operated over the past three decades or more, during which my own teaching has become increasingly built around literature workshops.

A Pedagogical Awakening

Early in my own teaching career (with a couple of years of high school teaching already under my belt), when I was in graduate school and teaching freshman English in a university as a TA, I found myself one day in the not unusual situation of teaching a difficult belletristic essay I had never myself been taught. I was not unprepared, of course, because I had read the essay the night before and gotten myself ready to teach it. Yet in the middle of teaching this particular class of freshmen, all of whom had impressed me as stunningly bright and thoughtful young people (though not so much younger than I was at the time), I suddenly began to wonder why it was that I seemed so much more competent as a reader of the text than they did. I knew that they were no less intelligent than I, and I could think of nothing in my education, in this particular essay, or in my interpretive skill that could account for why I was able to interpret for my students what they appeared to be incapable of interpreting for themselves. The difference between us, I realized (and promptly told them), lay largely if not entirely in our roles and in what we saw ourselves responsible for. Given my responsibility to interpret the text for this class of extraordinarily bright undergraduates, I had worked hard at the task the night before and come to class prepared to discuss the essay in ways that would illuminate its difficulties and advance our inquiry into textual or conceptual problems that deserved further interrogation. But convinced as I was that these students were all as intelligent as anyone I knew, I realized that any one of them could have done the same sort of work I had done the night before and learned the text in that way far better than they would learn it through my delivery of my interpretation and understanding to them.

What struck me most powerfully at that moment some forty years ago was a paradoxical irony that I have experienced over and over again since then: that the intellectual work I was doing as a teacher was teaching me more than anything I could do for my students would teach them! If my job was to ensure that my students were learning as much as possible, then I had to find ways to switch roles with them, to have them take the kind of responsibility for such tasks as making sense of texts and figuring out textual and conceptual problems that I regularly undertook in my role as the teacher. I undertook these tasks in order to help my students learn the texts I was teaching them. But as long as I was engaged in the task of teaching them what my efforts to construct meaning had yielded for me, all I could do was show them what I had learned. What they would know, therefore, was that I had learned it, and their notes would record some of what I had learned. But the experience of learning was mine, not theirs. They were to a very large extent merely witnesses to it.

Some ten years after this transforming pedagogical epiphany, by now a professor on the verge of tenure in a university English department, I was still worrying about that same problem and spoke about it publicly in an address I was invited to deliver to my campus community, under the title "On the Advancement of Learning Through the Abolition of Teaching." My argument in that talk was that as long as teachers are teaching, students are not going to learn, because the kind of experience teachers

have that enables them to learn what they have to teach is the experience that students need to have, if they are to be the ones who learn. Given the way teaching and learning were conducted in most classrooms, I argued, the experience of being taught was merely an experience of witnessing and possibly recording the teacher's learning, and not an experience of learning for oneself.

I have spent most of my professional life trying to solve this fundamental paradox of teaching. Fortunately, I have been able to work for nearly four decades in academic settings and as a member of professional communities where the struggle to resolve such paradoxes and problems in teaching has never been a source of embarrassment or private agony, but a respected intellectual enterprise and a focus for professional inquiry, experimentation, and research. I am speaking particularly of the overlapping communities of specialists in the fields of English education and composition studies, where such topics have always been at the center of professional discourse, and most especially of the community of site directors and affiliated teachers and researchers of the National Writing Project. As a member of the NWP community, I have been blessed for nearly twenty-five years with colleagues who have nurtured and challenged my thinking about the paradoxes of teaching while offering me a copious supply of practical strategies and a model for a classroom culture that I have been able to draw upon to reframe and resolve those paradoxes in ways that have profoundly influenced my teaching and every chapter of this book.

The Professional Context

If we look at the broader field of English studies over the past quarter-century, we see an entire professional community pedagogically perplexed over what Judith Langer (1990) once referred to as a kind of schizophrenic split between the teaching of writing and the teaching of literature at every level of instruction. As a profession, we have for the past twenty or twenty-five years tended to teach composition in ways that are process-oriented, learning-centered (or learner-centered), and collaborative while we have continued (at least until recently) to teach literature in a way that has been product-oriented (directed toward having students produce approved or standard interpretive and critical statements), text-centered (concerned with the text and interpretive and critical positions on it and not with what students might be learning through instruction about how to read it), and both competitive and top-down (with alternative readings seen as competing for the same discursive space and students competing with each other to produce readings that will win the approval of the instructor, whose own interpretive position remains the correct one [Hynds 1991; Blau 1994b]). That split has troubled many thoughtful high school teachers who have felt that their literature instruction is less vital and engaging for students than their composition instruction, and it has yielded for the college and university communities bipolar English departments, if not separated programs, with one culture of instruction prevailing in composition classes and a contradictory culture of instruction the norm for literature classes.[1]

The most influential and successful attempts of the past thirty years or more to reform literature teaching—particularly in secondary schools—have drawn on Rosenblatt's transactional theory (1938, 1978) to develolp a rich body of student-centered practices (especially Probst 1988) that honor the individual responses of students over the authoritative readings that teachers once thought it necessary to communicate to students as valid literary knowledge. But response-based classrooms, as much as they have accomplished in humanizing teaching and fostering student involvement are sometimes limited or misleading in what they accomplish intellectually, given their self-referentiality and the illusion they foster of an entirely independent and naïve reader whose response has not already been shaped and situated by the culture of school and other less visible cultural forces (Gilbert 1987; Patterson 1992, 1993; Purves 1993). Moreover, insofar as they may invite unexamined and culturally biased readings, purely response-based approaches to texts may also be inadequate to the sensitive cultural challenges posed in courses featuring multicultural literature (Hynds and Appleman 1997; Appleman, Hynds, and Marshall 1998) and equally inadequate for largely the same reasons to the demands of more traditional instructional programs focused on ancient or canonical literary works (Purves 1993; Rabinowitz and Smith 1998).

More recent attempts at reform have sought to institute practices drawn from the critical theories that have lately become dominant in graduate study in university literature departments, inviting students to engage in psychoanalytic, Marxist, feminist, deconstructionist, and other post–New Critical approaches to literary texts. In the hands of tactful practitioners with a well-informed sense of pedagogical priorities about what students of literature most need to learn, contemporary literary theory has undoubtedly enriched and revitalized literary instruction in many English classes in college and even in secondary schools (see, for example, McCormick, Waller, and Flower 1987; Moon 1990; Pirie 1997; Soter 1999; Mellor, Patterson, and O'Neill 2000a, 2000b; Mellor and Patterson 2001; Appleman 2000; Carey-Webb 2001; Scholes, Comley, and Ulmer 2002). But many literature classes committed to teaching theory and especially those that teach a particular theoretical perspective as the preferred or approved approach for the study of literature have also been vexed by some troubling pedagogical problems for teachers as well as for students.

The first is that most contemporary critical theories are driven by ideological goals or defined by a larger intellectual project in which very few undergraduate students (not to mention high school students) are likely to be invested and to which more may be openly hostile (Durst 1999). A more obvious problem for teachers is that these theories are also built on the most advanced thinking in such fields as philosophy, social theory, and psychoanalysis, which few English classes, as presently organized, have time to explore beyond the few reductive principles that may appear in the back of literature anthologies or that can be summarized in lectures. Thus, teachers who require their students in introductory literature courses to produce literary essays employing one or another of the recent ideological or poststructuralist theories are often the recipients of student essays that constitute a parody of genuine literary dis-

course and an exercise in what Ken Macrorie (1970) calls "Engfish," the language of students who are adopting an academic idiom that they barely understand in order to produce pretentious and usually ill-formed utterances that have almost no connection to anything they genuinely think or feel.

While my book acknowledges its roots in the transactional theory and democratic ideology of Louise Rosenblatt, it seeks to remedy the limitations of many response-based classrooms by reclaiming some more traditional critical values at the same time that it draws freely on insights and practices made available by contemporary critical theory. Its focus, however, is not on theory but on *practice* and specifically on practices for use in secondary schools and the first two years of college that will have the effect of changing the culture of instruction in literature classes, with two goals in mind. The first is to renovate the culture of instruction in literature to render it more consistent with the process-oriented, collaborative, and learning-centered practices of exemplary writing classes, largely in the interest of solving the pedagogical problem I have described as that of making students rather than teachers the responsible agents for learning in classrooms. And its second related and possibly more important goal is to make literature classrooms into communities and cultures that are more conducive than literature classrooms traditionally have been to the development of a particular constellation of literary skills or habits of mind that I shall propose as the primary constituents of literary competence and as instrumental and consequential to the study and learning of literature throughout an educational career and literate lifetime (see Chapter 10).

Nevertheless, in the course of presenting and reflecting on models for practice and in advancing a model of literary competence, virtually every chapter of this volume also participates, of necessity, in some of the most pedagogically relevant conversations of modern literary theory. "Theory is what breaks out," Gerald Graff (2001) says, "when agreement about such terms as *text*, *reading*, *history*, *interpretation*, *tradition*, and *literature* can no longer be taken for granted, so that their meanings have to be formulated and debated" (2060).

The introductory literature courses that are the focus of this volume may not be sites where sophisticated theoretical debates ordinarily break out over fundamental critical terms, but they are surely sites where agreement about the meanings of such terms cannot be taken for granted. They are also sites where an introduction to some of the difficulties of formulating such meanings is appropriate both to initiate students into the conversation of the literary community (Graff 1992), so they can begin to function as at least peripheral participants (Lave and Wenger 1991), and to sophisticate with added subtlety and complexity their understanding of and appreciation for literary texts and literary discussions. More importantly, if one is actually committed to constructing a classroom culture that honors literary processes, creates frequent opportunities for collaboration among readers, and is centered on the learner or on what is happening in the heads of students as they read and respond to literary works, there is no way to avoid raising for students and for their teachers a number of theoretical questions whose answers have practical consequences in designing lessons, in directing the behavior of readers, and in defining instructional outcomes.

The Literature Workshop

Consistent with its pedagogical orientation, this book presents most of its teaching practices and principles in the context of dramatized re-creations of workshops for teachers, where readers become participants in and witnesses to workshops that have actually been conducted with students and teachers much like themselves and (possibly) the students they teach. These workshops, in other words, are not descriptions of practices, but enactments of the very practices that teachers are reading these pages to learn and which they are encouraged to learn as participants and engaged observers rather than merely as readers. Each workshop also includes retrospective reflections on what has transpired during the workshop proper, to offer teachers an explanation and rationale for the efficacy of the workshop activities and an understanding of the goals and outcomes of the workshop in the context of a larger theory of literary competence and instruction.

As an introduction to the teaching approach demonstrated in most of the chapters of this book, let me at this juncture invite readers to participate for a few minutes in a brief segment of a textual and instructional event of the kind that I am calling a literature workshop. This particular workshop addresses some of the difficulties that students characteristically encounter in reading poetry—difficulties that might tempt them to declare themselves incompetent readers, inadequately skilled or insufficiently prepared for the poems they are typically expected to read and understand in literature courses.

A Literature Workshop in Progress

The room may be at a college or university or at a conference center or in a public school. The participants might be college freshmen or sophomores in an introductory literature class or high school students in a typical English class. Or perhaps they are student-teachers or experienced teachers in a postgraduate or professional development program on the teaching of English, and what they are participating in is a demonstration of what might transpire in an introductory college course or a high school college prep class in English. The workshop has been in progress for some time as you join the group as a participant-observer. The leader or teacher (T) gives you a welcoming nod and then begins to sum up what you missed.[2]

> **T:** OK. So we have experienced a number of ways that a poem or any text might pose difficulties for its readers. It might employ unusual and confusing syntactical structures that need to be painstakingly unpacked, as we saw with the passage from *Paradise Lost*. Or its lexicon—its vocabulary—might be archaic or simply unfamiliar to us. How can we expect a modern reader to know that a "bare bodkin" doesn't refer to anything like indecent exposure? Or we may find that a poem or some other text is intertextually dense, drenched in allusions or references to other texts or literary traditions that student readers are not likely to recognize, but that are likely to become more familiar to them over time as they continue

to read and especially as they engage in an organized program of literary study. That was certainly the case with the Coleridge sonnet, "Work Without Hope," where most of you felt you could grasp the gist of the poem, but many of you still felt adrift because you didn't know what to make of all the references to the pastoral tradition of poetry and the poet.

Let's now turn to another Romantic lyric composed eighteen years earlier than the Coleridge poem but one that is much more widely anthologized and more frequently studied: Wordsworth's "My Heart Leaps Up." I once heard a teacher say that this poem is impossible for readers to understand unless they know something about English Romanticism and especially about Wordsworth's own brand of Neoplatonism. Are all of you familiar with Wordsworth's Neoplatonism? Of course not. Well, let's try to read the poem anyway and see how far we can get without a lesson in its philosophical or theological background. I'll read it aloud to you twice.

> My heart leaps up when I behold
> A rainbow in the sky:
> So was it when my life began;
> So is it now I am a man;
> So be it when I shall grow old,
> Or let me die!
> The Child is father of the Man;
> And I could wish my days to be
> Bound each to each by natural piety.
> (1807)

Step 1. (3–5 minutes) Now, read the poem on your own, three or four times. Make some notes on the problems or difficulties you encounter in trying to make sense of it. When you finish, write out any questions you still have about the poem.

Step 2. (7–10 minutes) Now, working in groups of three, share your notes and your questions with your partners. Try to solve all the problems that troubled you and see if any new ones arise. I'll ask you to report out in a few minutes and tell about your problems and how you solved them or didn't.

Step 3. (10 minutes) Report out and discuss.

T: What did you find in your groups? What problems did you encounter and did any of them resist solution in your group? Or did new ones arise? Who is willing to report for a group?

S1: We thought it was a pretty easy poem until the end. Then we had problems, but I think we may have solved them.

T: So do you still have some questions?

S2: Some of us still aren't sure what "natural piety" can mean.

S1: I know what "piety" means, but I don't get the "natural" part.

T: What does "piety" mean?

S2: It means religious, like a priest or minister is pious—or is supposed to be.

S3: Wordsworth means that he learned to be religious when he was a child, from seeing rainbows and things like that. So his piety sort of comes from nature rather than the church or Sunday school.

S4: But why does he say "and I could wish my days to be bound each to each"?

S3: Because he learns from his experience each day, going from when his life began to his adulthood to old age. And he learns to be religious at every stage, because he always has these religious feelings, like when he sees a rainbow.

S4: So why does he want to die?

S5: He doesn't want to die! He says "or let me die." He'd rather be dead than not have his heart leap up when he sees a rainbow.

S4: Now I get it!

T: Is that how most of you get it? OK. Is that it? No other problems arose in your groups?

SEVERAL STUDENTS: Yeah, right! No! Yes! Of course!

T: Well?

S6: The big problem for us was we wanted to know how the child could be father of the man.

T: For how many of you was that a problem, at least for a while? That's most of you. Of course. Please notice that there aren't any difficult words in that line or that sentence. And you also understand it perfectly as a syntactic or grammatical structure. That is, you know perfectly well what it means to say that someone is the father of someone else. Any five-year-old child can understand such a sentence. So why do you say it's a problem for you?

S2: It's backward. A child can't be the father of an adult.

S7: It doesn't say adult; it says man. And most men are children anyway, so their children have to parent them.

T: Ah. Is that what your group came up with? Or is that your own feminist reading?

S7: It's my experience. But never mind.

S8: We said it was Jesus, who is a child and is also our heavenly father. Because God is both the Father and the Son.

T: And how does that connect to the rest of the poem?

S2: That was our question.

S8: He gets his piety from God, who is both the Father and the Son.

T: Go on.

S8: God creates nature and gives us the religion we get through nature. But it all starts with Jesus, who is a child, like us. I don't know. It just seems like the right way to read that line.

T: Are you all comfortable with what we are hearing about how to interpret the line "The Child is father of the Man"?

S7: I'm comfortable with the idea that God gives us what we get through nature. But what does that idea have to do with the idea that Jesus was once a child in the manger and yet is also the father? I can't see the connection.

S9: We thought that the child refers to the speaker as a child.

T: Can you elaborate on that?

S9: Well, it says that he became religious because of his childhood experience of being inspired by rainbows. They gave him a feeling like religious awe. I know exactly what he means from surfing and also from hiking in the Sierras. And the feeling stayed with him as an adult. So he can say he learned it from his childhood. So the child he was himself is like his teacher or parent.

T: What do the rest of you think of that? Does it make sense? Do you accept that reading?

S10: We came to the same idea in our group. We are the products of our experience as children. Our adult personality as well as our neuroses are the products of childhood experiences and traumas.

T: Are the rest of you now buying that reading? I see lots of affirmatively nodding heads. Why are you buying it?

S11: It fits. It makes sense.

T: It's plausible, isn't it? Is it more plausible than any alternative presented? I agree. It has explanatory power. It fits with the other facts of the poem as we understand them. It therefore persuades us. And do we need to know something about metempsychosis or Wordsworth's Neoplatonism to understand it? Or about the Romantic emphasis on the natural powers of children? I think a lecture on those ideas as an introduction to this poem might distort your experience of the poem rather than open you up to what the poem is actually saying and doing.

You may be interested in knowing, by the way, that one of the meanings of *piety*, at least through the nineteenth century (according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*), is filial devotion or reverence toward one's parents. Do you find that an applicable definition here? I think so, too. And did you have to know it to read the poem? Not at all, even though it may now be an interesting and enriching gloss on a term used in the poem, though it might be a mistake to take that definition as the primary or dominant meaning of *piety* in this context.

So are we seriously disadvantaged as readers of this poem by our own historical position, by the fact that the poem was written two hundred years ago? Is the language closed to us? Are the experiences it honors or the ideas it advances foreign to us? Not at all. In fact, aren't we at this moment in cultural history better

prepared to understand its most difficult line than most well-educated readers in 1807 might have been? Notice how Dory talked about neuroses and traumas. That's the discourse of twentieth-century psychotherapy or psychoanalysis, and it reflects the general influence of Freud and Freudianism on modern thought. Isn't it a commonplace of our age that our childhood experiences shape us psychologically into the people we are as adults? Not that you need to be aware of Freudian thought to unpack what most readers usually identify as the most important and most problematic line in this poem. Wordsworth himself died before Freud was born. But my point is that as modern readers, we may be extraordinarily well-prepared rather than culturally impaired when it comes to interpreting an idea such as the one we find in this early nineteenth-century poem about how we are shaped psychologically and spiritually by our childhood experiences. So why was the line still difficult for so many of you? Why did it puzzle you, if only for a while?

S2: It's a paradox. A child can't be the father of a man, literally, or at least biologically.

T: That's true. And yet he can in so many ways. Even biologically in the sense that we have to be children before we can be adults. So we are in that sense our own progenitors, too. OK. Did most of you find the line puzzling at least for a while? Virtually everybody. And how many of you figured it out by yourselves before you met with your group? Only a few of you. And how many of you were in groups where the discussion illuminated the line for you? That's pretty good. And how many of you knew this poem before you got here, so it never gave you a problem? Only one of you? That surprises me. So, how did all the rest of you figure it out, whether you did it by yourself or in collaboration with others? What did you do to figure it out and what resources did you draw on?

S11: We drew on Charles. He knew the poem already and told us.

T: And you believed him?

S11: Well, it seemed logical.

T: What happened where you didn't have Charles in your group?

S4: We just talked about it and tried to make sense of it and considered alternatives—like the idea of God the Father and God the Son—and it just came to us that the line wasn't mysterious or symbolic or anything, but true.

T: How did it "just come to you"?

S4: We talked about it a lot and tried to make sense of it.

T: And that, ladies and gentlemen, is one of the points of this exercise: to let you see that poetry is often difficult but not inaccessible to readers who are willing to read it thoughtfully—to do the work of making sense of it. And that sense-making work is sometimes most demanded of us by lines where the language and syntax are most familiar to us. And the difficulty of such lines is often not an

indication that you are missing some crucial information about the poet's culture or religion, but an indication that the poem says something that is simply difficult to grasp or says something in a way that forces you to think hard in order to grasp it. But why, you might ask, didn't Wordsworth just tell us his idea more directly, in language that wouldn't even momentarily confuse us or cause us interpretive trouble?

S12: Because he's a poet and wants to make reading difficult.

T: I think there is actually much to that idea, though not because poets simply want to be obscure. But first, couldn't someone argue with some justice that the line isn't any harder than the idea it expresses? In fact, its difficulty might be said to derive from the economy and memorable simplicity of its expression. That is, Wordsworth employs only seven words to express an idea that it would probably take us several sentences to explain. And the rambling language of our explanation might itself be hard to understand and be quickly forgotten, while Wordsworth's line and its meaning are likely to stay with us for a lifetime.

Another way to explain the difficulty of the line is a version of Randy's perhaps flippant observation that poets like to make their texts difficult for readers. In fact, it's a commonplace of criticism that the job of a poet or any artist is to make the familiar strange and the strange familiar. That means that the function of art, including literary art, is either to enrich our lives and minds by using images and ideas from the world we know to expand our experience beyond the limited sphere of the life we actually live or to compel us to experience more vitally the ordinary life we do live by having us pay closer attention to our familiar experience.

The Russian literary theorist Viktor Shklovsky ([1917] 1994) cites a passage from Tolstoy's diaries where the great Russian novelist describes cleaning a room and then not remembering if he had cleaned it or not, so automatic and unconscious had been his activity in performing such an everyday chore. To the extent that we live our lives in such a habitual and therefore unconscious way, notes Tolstoy in his diary entry, we have not lived at all and our own lives are to us as if they had never been. Building on that point, Shklovsky argues that the function of technique in art is to "defamiliarize" our experience by representing it to us in unique and difficult ways "to increase the difficulty and length of perception, because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged" (264). In other words, poetry challenges us with its difficulty at least in part to demand our attention and thoughtfulness, that we might pay close attention to the poem itself and thereby become more alive to the experience of reading the poem as well as to the life experience the poem represents. "Art exists," says Shklovsky "that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony" (264). We can add, I think, that it also serves to enliven our experience of ideas and to demand our close and prolonged attention to what we think as well as feel.

This workshop will have served its purpose if it has given you an experience of coming to understand a line that you may have felt unable to understand but that revealed itself to you through your own expenditure of time and effort (perhaps in collaboration with others). I also hope the workshop has helped you to see that poetic difficulty is not usually evidence that something is missing in you as a reader, but that what you are perceiving as your own unfortunate problem may be a built-in feature of most genuine literary experience. Yes, it is also the case that a poem may sometimes include words and phrases that are not part of your lexicon or make intertextual references that you aren't familiar with. But as we have seen, these obstacles to reading are generally recognizable for what they are and don't usually pose a fatal impediment to your participation in the poetic experience. Syntactic difficulties can sometimes seem to turn a poem into doubletalk, but these are usually resolvable with enough persistence and attention on the part of the reader. And the common difficulty of not being able to make sense within the frame of your own experience of a line that seems grammatically and lexically accessible is a difficulty you can usually address productively through resources that have always been yours. I am speaking, of course, first, of the most powerful resource at your disposal: your own concentrated attention and capacity to think. Nor should we forget the resource we are to each other, nor the intellectually productive process of discussing a problem with intelligent colleagues.

What Is a Literature Workshop and Where Does It Come From?

Looking back at what transpired in the workshop segment reproduced above, one might wonder how the discourse of that classroom is different from any other typical English class where a poem or some other text is being discussed and explicated. The teacher may seem to lead students (whether they are actually students or teachers in a professional development workshop) to produce what the teacher apparently regards as an acceptable reading of a poem. The slice of classroom life reconstructed here might then be characterized (or criticized) as a class conducted in the spirit of the old New Criticism, where the text is examined carefully under the guidance of an expert interpreter to yield a meaning that would appear to be already there for sufficiently attentive and well-informed readers to apprehend (for an alternative and more positive view of the presented exchange about poetic meaning, see Chapter 9). In that sense it may appear to be a highly traditional class, even if it happens to include some unusually vocal contributors and an opportunity for all the participants to work for a while in small groups.

Yet that description of the instructional transaction we have just witnessed ignores more than it reveals about the event as an occasion and opportunity for learning. It specifically fails to notice several crucial features of the event that render it a workshop rather than a traditional literature lesson. First, note that the segment of workshop reproduced here begins with an interpretive problem (What do you make of this poem and what problems does it present for you?) presented to students for

their individual solutions and for their collective reflection, calling on them to work on the poem and their problems individually and then collectively, eventually reporting on what difficulties they encountered in the poem and how they went about trying to solve them. In other words, instruction began with a double problem posed by the workshop leader, focused ostensibly on the meaning of the poem and at the same time on the phenomenology of the problem itself: how the workshop participants experienced the problem of discerning or construing a meaning, including what dimensions of the problem were in fact problematic for them, what processes or strategies they employed in seeking a solution, what impediments they encountered, what resources they drew upon, and so on.

Furthermore, the segment of workshop shown is part of a larger workshop on a constellation of different ways in which poems or poetic passages may pose difficulties for readers. In the context of that larger lesson, the challenge of the Wordsworth poem is valuable as a case study conducted by the participants—a study of a certain kind of difficulty that a poem may pose for readers and a case study for each student participant of how he or she operates and might operate, individually and as a part of a group, in reading lines that pose such a difficulty.

So if we want to identify the features of a literature workshop as a genre or form of instruction, we can say:

1. There is the posing of genuine questions or problems that face readers of literature individually and in groups as they engage in literary study or participate in the discourse of literature.
2. There is the demand that workshop participants monitor how they experience the problems set by the assignment, along with the related demand that:
3. Participants reflect on and talk about or write about the problems they encountered and how they addressed them.

The focus of the literature workshop, in other words, is at least as much on the process of reading and producing discourse about literature as it is on the substance of the discourse produced. But it is never solely about processes and it is never about the results of a reading detached from observations, reflections, and queries about how those results were achieved.

Note that a workshop requiring students to engage in what amounts to metacognitive processing—thinking about and reporting on their own thinking in their encounter with a problem—positions students and teacher in a pedagogical relationship that entails a shared or distributed expertise. It thereby takes a large step toward dismantling the top-down structure of the classroom in a way that my lecture of some thirty years ago desiderated but could not operationally imagine. The students become valued experts because only they can know and can report on their own experiences as readers engaged with the problems they encounter. The teacher's expertise is called upon, first, in this instance at least, in selecting texts and posing problems that represent promising opportunities for acquiring particular kinds of knowledge, as well as

in offering commentaries, glosses, and reflections that supplement and frame the experience of the workshop in some larger conception of disciplinary knowledge in literature.

My view of the workshop as essentially a combined case study (of texts as instances of certain challenges) and self-study or phenomenological investigation sometimes tempts me to identify the instructional model demonstrated in the following chapters not as the *literature workshop* but the *literature laboratory*, thinking of a laboratory as a site where experiments are performed and findings examined in the interest of advancing knowledge both about texts and about ways of reading them (see Elbow 1995). And in my own classes (as on occasion here) I sometimes do identify activities of the kind I dramatize on these pages as experiments, and I sometimes speak of class sessions as laboratories. But, finally, I prefer to identify the genre of instruction I demonstrate here as the literature workshop, in part because I want to identify my instructional practice with the pedagogical tradition of the writing workshop, and even more because I want to identify my practice and method in this book with the learning community and professional development tradition of the National Writing Project. And this brings me to a maverick theory of practice and a model of professional discourse that inform the rhetoric, organizational logic, and presentational method I have employed in constructing all of my workshops and in writing this book for fellow teachers.

An Antitheoretical Theory of Practice: The Writing Project Model of Teacher Development

The first site of the National Writing Project was founded in 1974 as the Bay Area Writing Project at the University of California, Berkeley. Its founder, James Gray, who was decidedly and stubbornly antitheoretical in his own orientation, founded the Project on the antitheoretical and pragmatic theory (he would insist it was simply what he had observed to be true) that the crucial knowledge needed to improve the teaching of writing in the nation's schools, from elementary schools through the university, already resided in the expertise and best practices of experienced and successful classroom teachers at all levels of education and emphatically not in educational theorists and researchers. It became the function of the Writing Project, then, to identify expert teachers or "classroom practitioners" and bring them together to share and refine their practices and expertise and eventually disseminate them to colleagues (Gray 2000).

But Jim Gray (who was then a supervisor in teacher education in English at the University of California, Berkeley) and his first cohort of colleagues in the Bay Area Writing Project found almost immediately that in order for them to demonstrate and share their best practices with one another in a usable and credible form, they had to be able to articulate the principles that informed their practices. Without a set of principles or a theory to frame demonstrated practices, the practices that were demonstrated and inevitably transformed in their adaptation or translation from one class-

room setting and group of students to another—like the story passed along from one teller to another—would easily lose their originating focus and pedagogical purpose, becoming mere busywork or serving contradictory and self-defeating purposes. It therefore became a distinctive function of the leaders at National Writing Project sites to assist teachers in the Project in reflecting on their practice and uncovering and articulating the theory or principles that inform the best practices they employ in their own teaching and propose to demonstrate to their colleagues. The theory of practice informing the work of the National Writing Project begins, therefore, with practice; and it looks for the tacit theory behind the practice in the experience and intellectual history of the practitioner, in the learning needs and lives of the students in the practitioner's classroom, in the practitioner's own values and goals, as well as in the research and theory available in our professional literature.

This book is influenced by the National Writing Project model of professional development most obviously in presenting pedagogical ideas to colleagues largely in the form of demonstration lessons that model actual classroom practices, and then in reflecting on those demonstrations and their origins as a way of drawing a rationale or theory for practice from the demonstrated practices themselves. Many of its chapters can be said to represent attempts to re-create for readers the experience of participating in a typical Writing Project professional development workshop (focused on the teaching of literature).

Situated Learning in Communities of Practice

The kind of workshop that is reenacted in these chapters also puts into play an additional related theory of learning and practice that is implicitly embraced by the Writing Project professional development model and informs every chapter of this book. This theory accounts for the way that every Writing Project site functions as a community of learners, where colleagues representing all levels of education collaborate as writers, teacher-researchers, reflective practitioners, and the disseminators of professional knowledge in the interest of their own professional development and that of their colleagues in schools and colleges within and beyond the regions they serve.

These practices defining what a writing project is and does were developed largely without a prior articulated theory of practice by the first cohorts of Writing Project teachers at the University of California, Berkeley. Their practice grew instead out of the mutual professional respect that governed the work of the Writing Project teachers in and beyond their summer institutes, based partly on Jim Gray's example and partly on the high standards he imposed in selecting participants (Gray 2000). But their practices also arose from the hunger they collectively felt to replace the intellectual isolation that classroom teachers characteristically experience with what they imagined to be the collegial experience of university faculty who belong to a community of scholars (a community that the university itself has historically aspired to become, but in its modern bureaucratized corporate incarnation no longer even dreams of becoming). Out of these collective aspirations and values James Gray and his colleagues

of the Bay Area Writing Project created a model for all National Writing Project sites that had even more force than a theory,[3] while it also anticipated a good deal of emerging and subsequent research and theory on the sociocultural dimensions of learning (Bloome and Egan-Robertson 1993; Santa Barbara Classroom Discourse Group 1993). It anticipated most dramatically a rich strand of research and theory about "situated learning," a term that refers to a view of learning as fundamentally social and derived from participation in what researchers in the field (Lave and Wenger 1991) call "communities of practice." In fact, the unprecedented success of the National Writing Project in influencing the practice of teachers over extended periods of time and transformatively enhancing their professional expertise has made Writing Projects themselves ideal sites for research on situated learning and on the character and opportunities for learning provided in communities of practice (Neves 2001; Staley 2001; Lieberman and Wood 2003).

Among the findings confirmed by this body of research is the unsurprising fact that teachers who participate in Writing Project invitational summer institutes and follow-up programs tend to regard their experience in the Project as the most powerful and satisfying learning experience of their academic lives and that they therefore tend to aspire to comparable sorts of experiences for their students, seeking in their classrooms to create a culture that is modeled after the Writing Project itself (Blau 1993, 1999; Floriani 1994). Having experienced what it means to learn in a community of learners, teachers are inclined to count such learning as more authoritative and authentic than any other and to think of such learning as the proper aim of their own instruction. They therefore become determined to turn their own classrooms into learning communities that will function like a Writing Project, where respect for the intelligence of every learner is the starting place for all activity, where every member is seen as a source of knowledge and expertise, and where all learners are expected and required to take responsibility for their own learning as well as for assisting others to learn. In such a community, learning entails the production of knowledge as well as its reception, and knowledge is always seen as provisional and subject to challenge and refinement (Blau 1999; Lieberman and Wood 2002).

With a similar respect for the power to learn that resides in learning communities, I have attempted in most of the chapters of this book to dramatize or recreate through constructed transcripts the experience of participating in a Writing Project workshop in a community of colleagues. More significantly, the classroom lessons demonstrated through those workshops are in every instance designed to nurture and support a classroom culture for students that enables the classroom to function like a Writing Project, which is to say, as an intellectually healthy and productive learning community, where the curriculum is largely defined by opportunities for learning (Dewey 1938; Tuyay, Jennings, and Dixon 1995; Jennings 1998; Dixon, Frank, and Green 1999) that are made available to students through their active participation as members (Kutz, Groden, and Zamel 1993).

An Additional Rule for Practice

One more principle or rule for practice in the Writing Project community deserves mention here as an introduction to the chapters that follow. It is the rule that Writing Project teachers, in conducting inservice workshops for colleagues, never present or demonstrate anything that they don't do themselves as teachers in their own classrooms. The motto of the National Writing Project is "teachers teaching teachers," explicitly and publicly eschewing the tradition (no longer so widely practiced, thanks largely to the influence of the NWP) of professional development programs in K–12 education that characteristically put working classroom teachers in the professionally humiliating role of being told how to teach (according to the latest theory or body of research) by university researchers or curriculum specialists who were themselves not teaching in K–12 classrooms and sometimes not teaching at all. Such workshops have been notoriously useless for teachers, because even if the theory presented and the research findings cited might be interesting and valid, such experts have little credibility with classroom teachers and, in fact, have almost no experience to draw upon on the question of how their ideas translate to practice with real students.

In reaction to such a professionally disrespectful and counterproductive tradition of professional development, the Writing Project adopted very early on the policy that teachers affiliated with Writing Projects and conducting professional development programs representing the Writing Project would never present any ideas for teaching that they had not employed and refined in their own classrooms with their own students. Furthermore, in making presentations to teachers, Writing Project teacher-consultants are expected to call attention to the particular context for their teaching and acknowledge how their professional authority is situated in that particular context and how much what they are presenting therefore represents local knowledge.

This book honors the Writing Project tradition of teachers teaching teachers in several ways. First, every strategy or approach to teaching that I present in this book is a version of what I actually do on a regular basis and have done over a period of years with my own students in ordinary classrooms. I am not presenting recipes or advice about what any teacher should do. I am instead demonstrating in every workshop of this book what I regularly do myself and expect to continue doing (with refinements and variations resulting from new experiments) with my own students in an introduction to literature course that I teach every year for University of California undergraduates, most of whom are sophomores (eighteen to twenty years old). Some of these students are beginning their academic careers as English majors. Most of them are non-English majors, who are enrolled in the course to satisfy a general education requirement in the humanities or another requirement for a course that includes intensive work on writing.

I have also employed many of the strategies and writing assignments presented in this book with more advanced undergraduate students in an English course called Practical Criticism and in senior seminars for English majors. In addition, I regularly

conduct all the workshops presented in this book in a graduate course in English education for students enrolled in a combined master's and English teaching credential program in the Graduate School of Education on my campus. And most of these students subsequently adapt many of these workshops for use in the middle school and high school classes where they teach English as student-teachers. I have also conducted many of these workshops myself with various groups of high school students in classrooms and in special programs in various parts of the country where I have been invited to serve as a guest teacher.

Finally, all of the workshops presented in this book are also re-creations of workshops I have been conducting over the past fifteen years (some only recently) for working classroom teachers at professional conferences (especially at national and regional conferences of the National Council of Teachers of English), at sites of the National Writing Project, and in other professional development programs in schools and colleges in virtually every state of the Union. When I pay return visits to these conferences and campuses and meet workshop participants at subsequent professional meetings, teachers at every grade level from middle school to college tell me appreciative stories about how they have successfully adopted in their classes the teaching strategies I demonstrated to them in my workshop. So while I acknowledge that whatever pedagogical expertise I offer here represents local knowledge earned largely in college classrooms with the (mostly) privileged students I happen to teach, I have good evidence that most English teachers who teach across the spectrum of American middle schools, high schools, community colleges, and four-year colleges will find that the demonstration lessons re-created here are usable as shown or adaptable for use in at least some of the classes they teach.

Notes

1. The split in university English departments is particularly ironic in light of the growing focus of the literature faculty over the past thirty years on literary theories that have generally sought to disestablish the authority of texts and authors in favor of readers. Yet, in spite of the dominance of such theories and in spite of the proliferation of the related new and fertile interpretive frames for readers to use in interpreting or reconstituting literary texts, the culture of literature instruction in colleges and universities seems hardly changed and remains largely product-oriented, text-centered, and top-down. This surely demonstrates the power of cultural norms and practices over members of a culture and their resistance to change. It also supports the thesis of this book that what needs to be addressed to revitalize the teaching of literature is not so much theories about reading or literary discourse, but the culture of instruction.
2. The dialogue reproduced in this workshop segment is drawn from notes, transcripts of videotaped classes, and my memory of numerous workshops over the years and therefore represents a composite or typical workshop scene rather than any particular workshop with any particular group. Any names used to identify participants are, of course, pseudonyms. For the sake of simplicity I usually tag the participants as S1, S2, and so on.
3. The assumptions and principles of the National Writing Project, while never described in the public discourse of the Project itself as a "theory" (the very term would arouse the ire of founder

James Gray), nevertheless collectively constitute a coherent and comprehensive theory of professional development and would count as a theory according to most theoretical models of what theory is and does (see Mitchell 1985, 6). Miles Myers, who was one of the founders with Jim Gray of the Bay Area Writing Project and of the California and National Writing Projects, also asserts (personal correspondence, July 25, 2002) that while James Gray insisted on an anti-theoretical and teacher-friendly rhetoric for the Writing Project and would approve of my account of its untheorized practices, those practices were nevertheless justified even in fairly early funding proposals "by three theoretical frameworks." These Myers identifies as follows: "(1) The theory of a 'Professionalization Project' and practice communities (built largely on the work of Milbury McLaughlin and the bottom-up theorists of the late 1960s); (2) The theories of Learning (Vygotsky, Dewey, Moffett, Graves) emphasizing Activity Structures and Scaffolding; and (3) The Theories of Composition—Christensen, Moffett, Don Murray, Kinneavy, O'Donnel-Strong-O'Hare (sentence combining), others."