

Foreword

As I explained to Patricia Dunn during our discussions regarding this foreword, I had two very strong responses to the book you have before you. On the one hand, I was simply impressed: delighted by its readability; struck by the range of material it draws upon and marshals to such good effect; and, most notably, entranced by its narrator, who manages to be gracious, generous, even self-deprecating, but also pointed, passionate, and critical in the best of academic senses. A bit of this part of my reaction, no doubt, can be attributed to the self-indulgent pride of a former teacher—I was lucky enough to work with the author when she was a doctoral student—but the book would warrant it in any case. It is a good read, a terrific performance.

On the other hand—and precisely because it was so effectively written—the book made me squirm. I had no trouble understanding that its narrator was pointedly, passionately critical of the way I am inclined to teach writing—or, more precisely, of the way I am inclined to teach writing to people whose favored modes of learning are not the same as my own. Midway through the second chapter, Patricia offers a sketch of the kind of people who end up teaching writing, and poses for them some hard questions:

Composition specialists today were most likely yesterday's linguistically talented students moving up in a linguisto-centric school system that privileged our way of knowing. But what if schools used only math or only drawing or only dance as a way of knowing? How would our word-loving brains have reacted? Would we have had the success in school and the confidence in ourselves that we needed to seek higher degrees?—to pour our energies into this language-loving discipline?

Talk about hitting home. Certainly I was one version of that student, and indeed I am always ready to point to all sorts of quasi-analytical explanations about why: extended bouts of illness as a child that promoted lots of reading time; my mother, who was an inveterate reader; and encouragement from an extended family (so that when my same-age cousins got toy shotguns one Christmas at the big family gathering, I got a set of paperback classics). In any case, and for whatever reasons,

written language was my thing, and school was indeed the place where it paid off in the most durably reinforcing ways. I was good at school insofar as school rewarded certain kinds of writing—certain kinds of text-making performance, as I’ve come to think of them—and I pursued such performances insofar as I liked being good at school.

On those grounds alone, then, I fit Patricia’s profile. Perhaps more to the point, however, I am acutely aware of the extent to which time and occupation and inclination have conspired to make the teacher I have become even more the linguisto-phile (if that is the right play on linguisto-centric)—even more the “English dork,” as my children say—than I ever was as a student. So, for example, I have had any number of days in the past twenty-five years—certainly hundreds, maybe thousands of them—during which I spent more of my waking hours alone and writing than among people, interacting . . . and was really happy about it. Or, to take a somewhat different emblem, I am far more comfortable right this moment, at this keyboard, than I will be later today at lunch with a job candidate, say, or in my classroom, or at the faculty meeting. In short, to a degree that I could never have imagined back when I was my version of that linguistically talented student, textual space has become home to me: it defines not only what I do, but also, and in a very profound sense, it defines who I am, and does so in ways that very directly affect my teaching.

All of which is by way of saying that for someone like me, at any rate, a book called *Talking, Sketching, Moving: Multiple Literacies in the Teaching of Writing* constitutes a much-needed wake-up call, a stern reminder that the world of print-based prose I experience as so familiar, natural, and comfortable absolutely will not seem so warmly hospitable to most of my students. Indeed, in ways and for reasons that this book is at some pains to document, a good many of them will experience that world as remote, alien, and threatening. Written language will not have been their thing as it was mine. Rather, as the book’s title suggests, their aptitudes and inclinations, their ways of learning and knowing and being in the world, will take other forms, and would be better represented in their talking, sketching, moving, and so on. If I am to help them learn to write, therefore—and not, say, confirm for them (again, probably) that my world of print-based writing simply isn’t their kind of place—then I need to devise a pedagogy that not only recognizes those inclinations and aptitudes, but seeks to harness them. And this book is an excellent point of departure for both of those destinations, Chapters 1 and 2 on the former, Chapters 3 through 6 on the latter.

Nothing about the alterations Patricia Dunn proposes will be easy. When I declared that the book makes me squirm, I meant it. I don’t like to be told that I am preserving my comfort in the classroom at my stu-

dents' expense—especially when the case presented is so convincing. I like it even less when I am shown how to remedy that situation, because it means . . . well, because it means giving up my comfort, and I have surely earned that, no? “Well,” my onetime student in essence replies herein, “no, you haven’t, and you don’t really want it. Teachers need to continue developing too, always, not only because it is a duty, but because learning with and from our students is where the joy lies. So come on, old man, get ready to talk, and sketch, and move.” And of course—don’t you hate it when this happens?—she is absolutely right.

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