Demystifying the University

David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky *Ways of Reading: an Anthology for Writers* (3rd ed.)

"What does it mean to accept student writing as a starting point, as the primary text for a course of instruction, and to work with it carefully, aware of its and the course's role in a larger cultural project?"—Bartholomae, "What is Composition...?"

The teaching philosophy implicit in *Ways of Reading* is that students learn to be strong, active, and critical readers through the activity of reading and writing (5). Bartholomae and Petrosky call their method of encouraging students to engage in the combination of reading, thinking, and writing, *strong reading*. The theory of reading proposed by the authors and enacted in the book is that reading is not simply a matter of lifting meaning from the page, instead, reading is a social interaction, it is a process of constructing meaning that requires writing and talking about what you have read. In other words, after the student reads a piece, writing about it enables the student to "begin to see the outlines of the author's project, the patterns and rhythms of that particular way of seeing and understanding the world" (2). Yet the aim of *strong reading* is not only understanding what the author is saying about a subject and how the author is approaching or "seeing" the subject, but the author's approach to the subject in relation to the student's own subjectivity—the author's way of seeing in relation to the student's. *Strong reading* involves dialogue, the push and shove of reading as the student actively struggles with the piece she/he has read through writing and revising. In this theory of reading final authority (agency) and responsibility rests with the student. If the authors introduce a way of reading as a process of constructing meaning through writing, the meaning that matters is the meaning constructed as the student invents the university, as he/she tries on, challenges, and adds to the author's understanding of the subject (10).

The essays included in the book were selected because they are pieces that fundamentally changed the way people think and write (5). Each of the pieces was selected because they provided a dramatic experience for the reader, challenged a way of understanding or seeing a subject pushing the reader to revaluate their own thinking and understanding. The authors warn students of the difficulties involved in reading serious work. There is a sense of incompleteness, an uneasiness with not fully comprehending a piece after the first reading that the student working to become a strong reader will have to become comfortable with. For strong readers accept that not fully understanding an essay and learning to "put a premium on individual acts of attention and composition" is a crucial part of the process (9).

The questions and writing assignments following each essay are structured to encourage students to learn how to read with and against the grain. Reading with the grain involves asking students to engage with the author's ideas, working with them, trying out their way of seeing the subject, experimenting with sifting their own experiences through the author's interpretive lens. In contrast, reading against the grain echoes Bartholomae's call for a practical criticism that guides students to ask questions of the discourse as discourse. In reading against the grain assignments, students are asked to engage in dialogue by reading critically, questioning the author's ideas, pointing out alternative ways of seeing the subject and noting the limits or silences in the author's point of view. Teaching students to read with and against the grain, the author's propose, makes the difference between reading as a reproductive skill and reading for the kinds of understanding that is the goal of a liberal education (13).

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The authors offer three different kinds of writing assignments: assignments that ask students to write (focus) on one essay, making connections assignments that ask students to read one essay through the frame of another, and longer sequence writing projects that ask students to put several readings in dialogue and construct their own point of view over time (16). If the book is designed as an introduction to characteristic ways of reading, writing and thinking in academic life, the assignment sequences are designed to give students a close approximation of the texture and rhythm of academic life (20). The assignment sequences expand on the making connections assignments by asking students to participate in a more extended academic project that asks students to incorporate more readings and develop their own point of view in conversation with the views of professional writers. The aim of the assignment sequences is to invite students to try on the ways of seeing, thinking, and writing characteristic of academic life and to do so by bringing the voice of the student into the academic conversation (76).

While guiding students through a process demystifying the discourse of the university is one objective of the extended assignment sequences, their ultimate purpose is to encourage students over time to develop a position from which to speak about the subject with authority (768). And developing the student's voice and position as writers who can speak with authority is the overarching aim of all the writing assignments in this book for their is no reason for a student, in the company of the writers included in this book, "to remain silent" (Ibid.). Thus while the assignment sequences move students through selections from Ways of Reading, the student essays, their attempts to enter the ongoing professional conversation on the subject, provide the other major text of the course (Ibid.).

In "Inventing the University," Bartholomae writes that, "all writers, in order to write, must imagine for themselves the privilege of being "insiders"—that is, of being both inside an established and powerful discourse, and of being granted a special right to speak." Those familiar with Bartholomae's approach to teaching composition will recognize it in Ways of Reading in the way the text centers student writing, "the very discourse within which the students, as writers, operate" and in the text's emphasis on developing the student's voice and authority within ongoing professional conversations.

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3 David Bartholomae, "What is Composition."