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"Lashing Out at 'Intellectuals'": Facing Fear on Both Sides of the Desk

Cover Page Footnote

Stephanie Paterson is an associate professor of English at California State University, Stanislaus, and co-director of the Great Valley Writing Project.

“Lashing Out at ‘Intellectuals’”: Facing Fear on Both Sides of the Desk

Stephanie Paterson

*So I've been thinking about this business of intelligence for a long time:
the way we decide who's smart and who isn't.
– Mike Rose*

The Background

The assignment was to write a one-page reading response in a graduate seminar I was teaching in the History and Research Methods in Rhetoric & Composition. That term, we were looking at how and why key theorists and practitioners in the field of composition seemed to disagree on what counted as knowledge and as research, as well as on what pedagogical practices should be implemented in a writing classroom. This gateway class was aimed at challenging and acclimating new graduates to the field. I guess it's not insignificant that I centered the course around the theme of “cross-talk” in composition theory because this essay is a mediation of the ensuing cross-fire between a teacher and her student sparked by these readings.

Many of the students complained of a dizzying array of cross-talk. How could so many people in the same field see the world so differently? But as Villanueva writes,

[C]omposition studies has divided itself, either to find out what writing is, or how to teach it better, or to discern the degree to which it either removes or bestows power. Composition studies finds its historicists, current-traditionalists, cognitivists, expressionists, social-constructionists (who tend to be epistemicists), empiricists, anti-foundationalists, and leftists, among others. Academic books on composition studies tend to historicize, theorize, polemicize, or synthesize, as well as proselytize. Composition is complex and diverse. (xiv)

My education had taught me to favor the great chaos, but I will introduce a student who detested the confusion. Perhaps both the scope of the course and the repetition of the concept of cross-talk played a role in my student's response. Who wouldn't bristle at polemics and proselytizing? We read with different agendas. I return to her paper now in hopes of remembering my own fear at entering into a graduate level conversation for the first time and in hopes of better understanding how to be an inclusive educator in an exclusive environment.

Stephanie Paterson is an associate professor of English at California State University Stanislaus, and co-director of the Great Valley Writing Project.

The Student's Reading Response

I received more than I asked for (or bargained for) in a one-and-a-half page harangue with the title “Lashing Out at ‘Intellectuals.’” I include both Amber's full reading response to the week's reading on Cushman's article and my full teacher feedback to illustrate a class that alarms and puzzles me still today.

Lashing Out at “Intellectuals”

. . . the future of our ability to produce new knowledges for and about ordinary people—and the availability of education to ordinary people—may well depend on how effectively we can . . . make our work intelligible to nonacademics. (Berube qtd. in Cushman 821)

It seems a simple practice to me. If you're trying to sell something, develop the biggest market of consumers possible to ensure your success. Make a cookie that many people like, write romance novels, create a gadget that no one can live without. So why don't “intellectuals” do this? In our readings, I see a scene from *Star Wars*. Darth Vader and Obi Wan are dueling it out with their light sabers. One author attacks the other. Swing after swing of the weapon, but at the end of the fight in *Star Wars*, one walks away and the other grows stronger. The authors are left with nothing. Their long, complicated, and often pretentious attacks upon one another have only resulted in killing them both. There is no truth left.

Not only is there no truth, but there aren't many readers. I don't know many people who willingly submit themselves to this type of textual violence on a regular basis, and certainly no one outside of the “academy.” Most of the authors alienate themselves from the reading public because their writing is just not comprehensible. They deliberately exclude the public from the ideas they are trying to promote. But, especially in the field of education, doesn't it make sense to create an educated public on the relevant issues in education so that change can be implemented? If some “intellectuals” are calling for radical changes within the educational and societal systems, shouldn't they put that spark of revolution in the hands of those who might actually be able to push and make it ignite? What sense does it make to exclude the majority of those whom these ideas would affect?

I am a storyteller. As a storyteller, my object is obviously to tell my story. To do this effectively, I have to be understood. Simple concept, no? I guess not, because if everyone saw it my way I wouldn't have to be writing this response. I am trying, really forcing myself this semester, to read the assigned essays for this class. I agonize over almost every single essay to try and understand it. I sit with a dictionary by my side, even though it goes against my principles, to try to get through the complicated language that I am trying to acquire. I hope that, if

nothing else, I will become a better reader by the end of this course. At this point, I don't really know how much progress I have made.

You'd think that by half-way through the semester, I would be able to tell you how much I have improved. I'm not saying that I haven't, but I definitely think that my progress is overshadowed by the resentment I feel towards authors who have deliberately written to be inaccessible. Well, maybe that wasn't their conscious goal, but I can't believe that their writing style and word choice weren't influenced by a perceived “status” or “authority” that had to be created or maintained. Whatever happened to gaining status because of overall comprehensibility? Wouldn't you have more “status” if you were read by a larger audience, an audience that could hold you as an authority? But no, the barbarians must be held at bay. If they can understand you, you have become a “nonacademic.”

I actually freewrote about this today during a break. I am trying to get past the mounting frustration and resentment I feel. I realize that most of this is self-inflicted. I knew when I signed up for my classes that this semester would be hell. My premonition was uncannily accurate. I knew that I would have no time for anything but reading, pumping out responses, and producing projects and presentations. What I didn't know when I started out was that I'd be learning a completely new language and be exposed to a completely new culture this semester. I am currently in a severe state of culture shock. I am lashing out at my readings. I cannot play the “believing game” because I am too busy hating the author for being so damn boring.

I am the perfect example of why “intellectuals” should be writing for a broader audience. I will one day be in a classroom, and I have the power to institute, spread, and market the ideas of “intellectuals.” I will never do that if I can't understand them.

Teacher Response

Her paper felt like both an attack *and* a plea. What strikes me in retrospect, with the distance of two years between me and this writing, is that I got stuck in the attack and didn't adequately address the more important plea. What happens when a student assaults the teacher on the page? What happens to the student-teacher relationship when the professor responds in kind? My aim in reflecting on the reading response “Lashing Out at ‘Intellectuals’” and how I handled it is to expose the recursive work involved in processing personal attack. In the same way Elisabeth Kubler-Ross maps out stages of grieving, I am attempting to articulate the not-so-fluid stages of processing student hostility and teacher hostility. The verb *handle* is no accidental choice. I suppose that is exactly what I did. I took care of her. I “told her” by typing a response that was just about as long as her writing assignment. I wonder about this now, just as I wondered how to proceed then. Was I teaching her? Was this act opening a space for learning to occur? Was I defending something? Who was lashing out at whom? Here is my response:

The Gospel According to Amber

I realize that most of this is self-inflicted. (excerpt from student's paper).

I read your last RR differently in different moments.

I can empathize with your frustration at writers who write in ways that are unnecessarily complicated and “showy” and offer no sustenance. In fact, I just recently received a book I had ordered that I have been looking forward to for a long time. Ten pages into it I have to put it down because the academese seems so gimmicky and strained and I have to work so hard to make meaning. I will come back to this book later. Like you, there is too much to read and too little time to really process the material.

It is easy to rail against “impenetrable” readings. It is harder (but more worthwhile) to read for what is useful, valuable, insightful, or provocative. The writing teacher-self wants to comment on the shape of your argument—developed through ad hominem attacks and generalizations. There is a flawed logic built into an argument against writing that replicates a *Star Wars* sword fight and then inflicts the same “textual violence” on its reader.

In another moment, I want to commend you for including a reflective self-assessment: “What I didn't know when I started out was that I'd be learning a completely new language and be exposed to a completely new culture this semester. I am currently in a severe state of culture shock.” Your awareness of this state is A+ work. To enter into our weekly readings and encounter the historical (perennial) debates in the field of Composition and Rhetoric is to wade into the center of the stream of “culture.” Each week reveals a new kind of “cross-talk” & this only occurs when there is a clash of cultures on multiple levels.

Blau's seven habits of mind would help you in this work but each “habit” requires solitude and time for reflection. You stack the deck against yourself by carrying such a heavy course load that affords no time to play “the believing game” (which takes considerably more time than the doubting game). These reading responses should be 50% textual analysis (close reading of our required text) and 50% personal reflection (narration, questions, connections to personal experience). You could avoid the trap of creating a series of verbal fallacies by sticking closer to Cushman's article on “The Public Intellectual” and service learning.

Thanks for sharing with me your recent insight into your Myers-Briggs typology and your accompanying prayer: was it “grant me patience NOW?!” Sharing this with me shows me that you are reflecting on how you learn. It helped me not to take your RR so personally.

Dr. Paterson

Currents of Cross-Talk

Her title is still like a yellow light to me, cautioning me to slow down and read warily. Since it is both my profession and my nature to be intellectual, my mind did an immediate transmutation of her title to read simply: “Lashing Out at You, My Professor.” While she describes academic reading as assault, I’m writing about her writing which felt like an assault. It’s disappointing to me now that I took this multi-layered attack on my text selection, on my field of study, on my profession, and on my own desire and compulsion to wrestle with difficult texts personally. Ironically, and sadly, my reply was largely just another attack. I “lashed out” in the guise of instruction. While the attack is apparent, her plea was less explicit.

Perhaps she was a reckless writer.

I am less sure of this now.

There have been fantastic articles and whole books written on the subject of attack in the writing classroom. I think of Lad Tobin’s “Car Wrecks, Baseball Caps, and Man-to-Man Defense: The Personal Narratives of Adolescent Males,” or collections like *What To Expect When You're Expected to Teach*. I receive these works like life rafts thrown out to the weary swimmer just before she lets go and sinks. I appreciate those in the field of composition who have dared to highlight and study the underlife of teaching and the complexity of the personal-social issues that crop up in the course of teaching (Goffman).

It’s a rather recent realization to learn that what irritates me may not irritate others at all. There is a nexus of old hurts that have formed a swirling formation of sensitivities that are (and I am loathe to acknowledge this) particular to me. One instinct is to look away. The proverbial ostrich approach is to sense calamity and to bury one’s head in the sand. I am not immune to this strategy. It’s another realization that my student has her own nexus of hurts, and, somehow, for some reason, in this exchange we’ve entered a dance in which our separate hurts somehow got activated, or engaged, or explosively fueled.

I have also turned to the Buddhist Pema Chodron in her book *The Places That Scare You: A Guide to Fearlessness in Difficult Times*. Chodron and Tobin, in different but complementary ways, work to discover how to move productively through fiery points without getting burned or annihilated, or without unintentionally annihilating others in return. They both remind me there is a certain amount of shadow work we must all do as teachers because “until each of us owns our own power (negotiates our own identity), we cannot be part of empowerment (negotiating identities with students)” (Wink 173).

What occurs to me now is that I may have chosen to fall back on my education. Instead of compassionately overlooking the attack and focusing on her legitimate fear, I pointed to all of the holes in this already fragile writer’s argument. I think of a Tony Hoagland poem, “When a beast is hurt it roars in incomprehension/When a bird is hurt it huddles in its nest./But when a man is hurt,/ he makes himself an expert” (15). Instead of pointing to a string of illogical fallacies and her damaged ethos (“I sit with my dictionary by my side even though it goes against my principles”), what would have happened if I had taken my own advice and followed Sheridan Blau’s habits of performative literacy, specifically, “a willingness to suspend closure” and “a tolerance for ambiguity, paradox, and uncertainty”? (18-19). What if I had taken a celebratory stance and

commended her for taking a stand and speaking the “I” with conviction?

Instead, I got stuck in my history. I am perhaps too sensitive to this species of attack. I have a history of enduring others’ unpredictable rage, and so the very phrase “lashing out” calls up a background of unsolicited emotional assault at the hands of others’ selective focus. It’s my assumption that most people who enter academia aren’t as riled by attack as I am, but instead thrive on this sort of intellectual challenge because of the opportunity it presents to strengthen the edges and limitations of thinking. I watch colleagues literally puff up. Voices rise audibly. Words are used to fortify positions. This is not my bag. Of course, I realize some may consider this reading to be too black and white, and there are always many shades of gray. And perhaps even I am just fooling myself because this short paper written by a new grad brings out a fight in me that I hadn’t realized was there. I experience the tone of my student’s writing as both patronizing and whiny, and I feel called somehow to defend my profession. I am irritated that “intellectual” is placed in quotation marks to question the intelligence of intellectuals. How do other writing instructors keep the lines clean when autobiography and history bleed together in teaching?

At first I think my irritation stems from the fact that my student does not speak from an informed position with compelling evidence. I want to rail against creating gross generalizations stated with factual certainty. She writes of Cushman’s article, “Not only is there no truth, but there aren’t many readers.” Says who? But the issue for me really doesn’t turn out to be a matter of documentation at all. It goes deeper into existential territory. She seems to be saying, “What are you really teaching me and why?”

“Lashing Out at ‘Intellectuals’” triggers self-doubts about the effectiveness of my teaching as a composition and rhetoric instructor on a number of levels. If I was teaching in the “right” way, could I somehow avoid these sorts of verbal attacks either in prose or in the classroom? This is an old default question that Peggy McIntosh describes well in “Feeling Like a Fraud.” In fact, McIntosh’s work undergirds my thinking in this article because she suggests, “[women ought to] trust feelings of fraudulence . . . and analyze them more closely” (1). She believes “that many of our feelings of fraudulence come from deep and wise sources. The trick is to trust the very feelings of discomfort that are giving us the most trouble, and try to follow them where they lead” (1). The discomfort comes from the inherent hierarchical structure and imbalance of power. To “trust a feeling of fraudulence” is to trust that this is not the only way to live or be. However, in this instance with this particular student, I bypassed “the trick,” responding defensively and moving directly to self-annihilation of my sense of self as an effective teacher: “Perhaps I do not spend enough time explicitly teaching about illogical fallacies.” Or, “Perhaps I don’t spend enough time doing audience analysis activities.” This is the self-doubting mind that rushes in to “fix” a difficult situation.

At the same time, I wonder if there are gentle, non-alienating ways to celebrate, even encourage “cluelessness” in our pedagogy? Gerald Graff notes, “Given the inherent difficulty of academic intellectual work, some degree of cluelessness is a natural stage in the process of education. If cluelessness did not exist, there would be no need for schooling at all” (1). I forget my own deep trepidation and angst as a new graduate student. In fact, I forget that I was a practically voiceless, near-mute graduate student. Once, having to write a “talk

autobiography” in a graduate seminar, I titled my paper, “I Choose the Fifth on the Grounds That I Might Incriminate Myself.” While my reputation was that of a predominantly publicly quiet student, I privately cracked self-deprecating jokes to preserve a sense of self that I felt was diminished in this new setting.

There is something built into the nature of graduate school that triggers that paradoxical syndrome that recovering alcoholics call “the egomaniac with the inferiority complex.” The egomaniac thrived on the prestige of graduate-level study. My inferior sense of self was sure they sent the letter of acceptance to the wrong person. On the one hand, it is a great honor to have this time for sequestered study and intense interaction with self-identified “good students.” On the other hand, the whole thing rests on a competitive, scarcity model of the world in which there are limited resources. In my Introduction to Graduate Studies seminar, we got the old “look to your left, look to your right” speech about how the odds of the person sitting on either side of us would ever graduate. I forget.

So perhaps I can’t blame my student for trying to bypass the stages of intense resistance and bewilderment in equal measure. Two themes emerge out of these states of mind and are indicative of a way of looking that is so familiar among the students I work with on a regular basis. Theme #1: Don’t Make Me Work: “I sit with my dictionary by my side even though it goes against my principles” (“Lashing Out”). Amber argues that she shouldn’t have to work so hard to comprehend the text at hand. She feels Cushman intentionally obscures her meaning. Big vocabulary words slow her down. Theme #2: The Need for Sudden Outcomes: “You’d think that halfway through the semester I would be able to tell you how much I have improved” (“Lashing Out”).

No doubt she has been schooled in the “dogma of transformation” or what Thomas Newkirk calls “the expectation for transformation, a goal that is, ironically, shared by both the expressivists and socio-epistemic cultural studies ‘camps’ in composition studies—though the means of transformation in both is different” (263). There is an expectation that growth should be immediately apparent. And in a sense, she’s right. I would expect her to articulate how she has grown in her thinking at the halfway juncture in the semester. I would expect her to tell me how much she has improved. But then there is this other voice that knows better. Because I am a gardener, I am aware that things take time to grow. You don’t just toss seeds and expect germination to occur overnight. Nevertheless, my student illustrates what to her is a seemingly straightforward situation:

It seems a simple practice to me. If you’re trying to sell something, develop the biggest market of consumers possible to ensure your success. Make a cookie that many people like, write romance novels, create a gadget that no one can live without. So why don’t ‘intellectuals’ do this? In our readings, I see a scene from *Star Wars*. Darth Vader and Obi Wan are dueling it out with their light sabers. One author attacks the other. Swing after swing of the weapon, but at the end of the fight in *Star Wars*, one walks away and the other grows stronger. The authors are left with nothing. Their long, complicated, and often pretentious attacks upon one another have only resulted in killing them both. There is no truth left. (“Lashing Out”)

Her simple line of argumentation is both attractive and appalling to me.

There's something quintessentially American in her argument. She has reduced complexity to bite-sized pieces. If you want _____ (blank) outcome, do _____ (blank). It is interesting that she points to cookies, romance novels, and gadgets. These three consumer items are marketable outside of the realm of academia. One follows a recipe, another a predictable plot, and the last item is designed to make life easier. They are all purchasable products. I think she shows what David Bartholomae calls "the pressure of language to be pat, complete, official, single-minded" ("Against" 196). My goal: An RR that is less pat, less complete. I see part of my work as helping this new graduate student celebrate and embrace "complexity, uncertainty, idiosyncrasy, [and] multiple-mindedness" (196).

My student's point: In her reading response she argues that academic writers ought to write in such a way that others (academics and non-academics alike) will both be able to comprehend what they read without a great fight, and to feel eager to read what the author can share. Who can blame her for feeling this way? I have my own history of railing against writers whose prose seems intentionally impenetrable. It is telling that she chooses this epigraph:

the future of our ability to produce new knowledges for and about ordinary people—and the availability of education to ordinary people—may well depend on how effectively we can . . . make our work intelligible to nonacademics (Berube qtd. in Cushman 821)

She is making a case for inclusion and against exclusion and continues,

I don't know many people who willingly submit themselves to this type of textual violence on a regular basis, and certainly no one outside of the "academy." Most of the authors alienate themselves from the reading public because their writing is just not comprehensible. They deliberately exclude the public from the ideas that they are trying to promote. But, especially in the field of education, doesn't it make sense to create an educated public on the relevant issues in education so that change can be implemented? If some "intellectuals" are calling for radical changes within the educational and societal systems, shouldn't they put that spark of revolution in the hands of those who might actually be able to push and make it ignite? What sense does it do to exclude the majority of those whom these ideas would affect? ("Lashing Out")

She argues that the writers we'd been reading give her "no place to stand." The specialized language of academic discourse communities is felt as exclusionary. She points to a perceived social violence brought about through words. Wendy Bishop says, "I teach myself theory—or at least voluntarily take myself by the scruff of the collar into deeper conceptual waters" (22). But Amber is baffled by the self-sponsored intellectual discomfort brought about when one enters deep conceptual waters.

Two years after this exchange, Amber agreed to join me in revisiting this teaching moment. I asked her to write what she remembers about "The Gospel According to Amber." At the time of this writing, she was two weeks away from graduating with an MA in English with special concentrations in TESOL and Rhetoric and Teaching Writing.

When I wrote that reading response, I felt angry, alienated, and excluded. I had entered the Composition classes as part of my degree requirement and had decided to pursue a dual concentration, not because I had any intention of teaching Composition but because I realized that the degree would make me more marketable in an unstable job market. I did not identify with the new discourse community in which I found myself immersed. I had easily assimilated in the TESOL community; my language and teaching backgrounds provided me with a point of understanding and common goals, and my experience allowed me to easily and quickly rise to the level of my most competitive peers.

I had none of this understanding, commonality, or experience to share with my peers in Composition. Most of these students had been in classes together before, and they spoke a different language. They spoke in jargon and of concepts that I couldn't understand because 1) I'd never taught writing or (composition) in an institutionalized classroom setting. 2) I had not had the opportunity to read a wide array of literature in Composition studies. 3) I could not imagine myself as their (colleague). They seemed unwelcoming and elitist to those of us from TESOL, and I was intimidated because most of them were at least ten years older than I was.

Her argument and subsequent reflection actually echoes the same claims Graff makes in *Clueless in Academe: How Schooling Obscures the Life of the Mind*. Graff begins, “This book is an attempt by an academic to look at academia from the perspective of those who don't get it” (1). He explains, “The subject is cluelessness, [or] the bafflement, usually accompanied by shame and resentment, felt by students, the general public, and even many academics in the face of the impenetrability of the academic world” (1). Graff's argument is Amber's argument, namely, that “academia reinforces cluelessness by making its ideas, problems, and ways of thinking look more opaque, narrowly specialized, and beyond normal learning capacities than they are or need to be” (1). This is a valid complaint. She challenged what she regards as unequal power and privilege, and I unwittingly lashed out at her.

Unsent Letters

This student cried on several occasions. She cried when she received my typed response. She cried again when she read an early draft of this article. In fact, she uses the word *devastating* to describe reliving this exchange. I'd like to believe we both are stronger and braver than we initially may have thought. I would like to believe next time I will respond differently. This writing provides an essential critical distance. When this happens again, and this will happen again because so many students struggle to acclimate to the new norms of academic culture, I'm not sure it will have the same negative charge for me.

I keep looking hard at this scene of teaching, and she miraculously joins me in this process. Her analysis of what happened intrigues me. She tells me now that she wrote me the following letter to process my response to her writing.

She shares this unsent letter now in an effort to offer a fuller picture of her experience of this exchange of words.

Dear Dr. Paterson,

I would like to take some time to address you in regards to the letter that you attached to my response.

In my response, I intended no attack on your authority. I regret that you have taken my response as such. More accurately, I would classify my response as the unfortunate and poorly placed reaction to a mixture of hurt feelings and frustration that stem from your commentary and my own interactions with the texts.

I am aware that you may not have consciously insulted me, and so I think it only fair to share my interpretation of the situation. Although the fact that I got a check instead of a check plus smarted, this was not the source of hurt feelings. In that first “check” response, I knew when I turned it in that it was not as well written as usual, and I anticipated a lessened grade. It was not the check, but the commentary that upset me. By your pointing out my use of the “chummy we” and then systematically removing the word “we” from other responses, I received two messages:

1. You do not wish to be considered part of a “we” with me.
2. I am not in the position to consider myself part of any “we” within the academy or society as a whole.

As we are studying Freire and the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, I see my frustration with some of our texts as the beginnings of the rejection of the complacency that has previously plagued my education. I would like to think that I have the opportunity and the right to question the supposed authority of the authors who seem to prize their elevated status and limited readership. I appreciate the comment that you, too, have experienced this frustration.

I would like to add that although I chose to “rail against ‘impenetrable’ readings,” I have neither ceased to read them nor carry away useful ideas; I have only failed to focus on that aspect of the readings in my response.

I believe that I have altered the approach that I previously used in writing my responses, which you liked, in the attempt to experiment with my writing. I had hoped that you would allow me to experiment with ideas, opinions, and styles, and that I would not have to lock myself into a specific format to make you happy.

This clash that has occurred between you and me was not intended on my part. I hold a great respect for you but feel that you have interpreted my response otherwise. Likewise, I may have misinterpreted some of your comments that have left me feeling ashamed, alienated, frustrated, and extremely disappointed. I hope that by facing this problem directly we can move past this point in our relationship.

Sincerely,
Amber

Amber now offers the following retrospective:

I am very embarrassed about the response I wrote. I’m still not sure what reaction I anticipated or what good I thought submitting that response would get. I now think that maybe I unconsciously wanted to get back at her because I did not understand why considering myself a part of “we” was so wrong. Gee says that at any moment we are using language we must say or write the right thing in the right way while playing the right social role and (appearing) to hold the right values, beliefs, and attitudes. Thus, what is important is not language, and surely not grammar, but saying (writing)-doing-being-valuing-believing combinations.

At that time, I did not share any of these aspects of behavior with Dr. Paterson. Maybe, having felt excluded from the discourse community she represented, I wanted to show my complete rejection of it. Maybe I wanted to express that when someone is excluded from a group, they leave, give-up, and refuse to play the game. I felt that I was not allowed to experiment and try to identify with this new community, and so I chose not to engage at all. Envisioning myself as an outsider prevented me from engaging with the community.

Reading Through Fear(s)

The central question of a warrior's training is not how do we avoid uncertainty and fear but how do we relate to discomfort? How do we practice with difficulty, with our emotions, with the unpredictable encounters of an ordinary day?
(Chodron 6)

I think this investigation of student writing is really more about the teacher. I want to highlight the need for more teacher research inquiries into the powerful emotions of educators-under-attack, and specifically, the lifetime work involved in taking care of one's psyche so as not to lash out unconsciously at students who are struggling with change. Chodron calls this “training in the middle of the fire” (5). To be what Chodron would call “a warrior” teacher, one has to be “willing to cut through personal reactivity and self-deception” (6). It is easy to look back and to see that the common denominator we both shared was fear. As a teacher-researcher drawn to study these sorts of moments of tension in the writing classroom to see what they can teach me, I gravitate to the advice of Chodron’s *The Places That Scare You*:

Confess your hidden faults.
Approach what you find repulsive.
Help those you think you cannot help.
Anything you are attached to, let it go.
Go to the places that scare you. (opening epigraph)

This is why I have to recognize, in the middle of a fairly uninterrupted

attack, my student's implicit plea, "I am trying to get past the mounting frustration and resentment I feel. I realize that most of this is self-inflicted. . . . What I didn't know when I started out was that I'd be learning a completely new language and be exposed to a completely new culture" ("Lashing Out"). Perhaps this is the crux of the matter. "Lashing Out at 'Intellectuals'" is a poignant salvo about preserving a sense of self that is suddenly diminished and challenged in an unfamiliar and uncomfortable graduate setting. She shows what David Bartholomae outlines in "Inventing the University"—the great struggle that so many students feel trying to enter a stream of discourse that feels distant and alienating. In hindsight I realize she wasn't aiming at me necessarily; I just happened to be in the way.

My opening epigraph asks, "who's smart and who isn't." Now I wonder why we both seemed wrapped up in this question when I'd rather be involved in a different set of questions. My new questions revolve around how to cultivate the kind of emotional intelligence needed to confront new paradigms, new languages, and perceived attack without retaliation from the student or the teacher. Wise teachers cultivate a critical intelligence without fear, but how exactly do they do this? Chodron says, "The main point is always how we work with our minds" (116). I think this is what "intellectuals" do. Perhaps Amber and I got stuck working with emotion without meta-cognition.

I offer this as a cautionary tale for other teachers to be on guard against the tendency to "click into solid views of justification or blaming, [because then] our minds become very small" (Chodron 116). My experience with this student reminds me that learning "is or should be both frustrating and life enhancing" (Gee 6). The challenge "is finding ways to make hard things life enhancing so that [we each] keep going and don't fall back on learning and thinking only what is simple and easy" (6). For me, "engaging in the struggle to understand more is the heart of responsible pedagogy" (Wallace 23). Positioning myself as a teacher researcher who studies these sorts of molten moments in writing and in my relationships with students has been instrumental in providing a creative way of going to the places in teaching that, quite frankly, scare me. ☹

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