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Review of Teaching the Way: Using the Principles of The Art of War to Teach Composition by Steven T. Nelson

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into an afternoon spent inside the Oz of an internet browser, ping-ponging between the click-bait distractions of endless relevant tidbits, Miller's narrative bounces from Clementi to Hillary's email to Bill's cigar to Anthony Weiner's sexting to Chris Christie's Bridgegate and back and forth and all around between seemingly endless examples of private-messages-gone-public. It's jarring, and I believe that is one of the most important messages we take from Miller: the screen-centric world our students live in is as jarring as it is abusive to our sense of personal boundaries.

Perhaps Miller's message is that *because* of the shift to screen-centric universe where privacy has dissolved, we are compelled via the compassion we have for our students to see and understand their world and what compels them to act in the ways they act. Because they live in a world where they never had a paper-centric sense of privacy the way we had, they cannot be expected to behave in the ways we expect. Why, for instance, do young people seem so indifferent to ethical and moral lapses in exposing others' private lives? In a world where sex tapes and hard-core porn are easily visible on any internet browser via an ever-increasing number of virtually uncountable websites and platforms, we begin to see how indifference replaces a paper-centric sense of privacy and thus how it replaces outrage when that privacy is transgressed.

If we are to help them—truly help them and not just provide pieces of info that is interesting just to us—we must see from their perspective. Miller helps us do that by showing us how the internet-mediated world has disabused us of our paper-centric and old-fashioned expectation of privacy. Ultimately, Miller's exhortation on the perils of screen-centric indifference upends the notion that our students are to blame for not being able to thrive in the paper-centric worlds we may have created for them in those layered and multiplicitous Canvas course shells. We must meet them there in Internet Oz, understanding the landscape between us and the dissolution of boundaries between indifference and compassion.



Nelson, Steven T. *Teaching the Way: Using the Principles of The Art of War to Teach Composition*, Ten 16 Press, 2022. 198 pp.

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First, an admission, or perhaps a confession: my enthusiasm for teaching composition has been waning in the last year or two. I don't know if it was the pandemic coupled with the resulting year on Zoom or the cumulative effect of teaching writing for the last decade and a half, but somewhere along the way it became a different experience. All too often after grading or having a lesson plan fall flat, I would repeat the first two lines from Geoffrey Sirc's underappreciated review article, "Resisting Entropy," when he says "Teaching writing is impossible. You have ten to fifteen weeks to do ... what?" Despite countless hours prepping, grading, investing in student progress, I am too often left wondering what was accomplished and what the students will take away from the course. Indeed, as Sirc observes a little later in the same essay, "one's faith in the enterprise is always

tested, and hope is hard to sustain" (508). Such sentiments have become especially pertinent in the last couple of years, but thankfully in a moment of *kairos*, *Teaching the Way* crossed my desk just to remind me why this teaching endeavor is still worth all the effort.

Using Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* as a framing device, Nelson's book conveys the hard-won wisdom of someone that has been running thoughtful composition classes for a quarter of a century and does so in lively conversational prose. As a result, Steven's book never runs the risk—as far too many books concerning writing pedagogy do—of getting unnecessarily bogged down in theoretical jargon or the latest trend. No, *Teaching the Way* is a solid work of practical advice for anyone interested in what kind of teacher you should strive to be, how to best plan out a semester's worth of instruction, and, most importantly, how to view our students. It is not, however, overly prescriptive, or heavy-handed in any way. As such, I think the ideal audiences for Nelson's book is two-fold: first, new writing instructors who are looking for concrete examples and guidance. For instance, I plan to assign this book to our university's second-year MA students who are enrolled in a practicum for instructing first-year writing students. Second, there are those, like me, who are experienced teachers but could use a bit of revitalizing from time to time.

It is worth noting here that potential readers do not have to be familiar with *The Art of War* or Sun Tzu at all in order to get the value of Nelson's work; and, in fact, Nelson rightfully dispels any possibility of misinterpretation: this is not a book that uses the metaphor of war to define the relationship between students and teachers, rather, as the book clarifies early on, Sun Tzu's philosophy is "not so much a book about warfare, destruction, or violence as it is about strategy and human nature, leadership and morality, and directing the energy of the universe to where it needs to go" (17)—all things that, as teachers, we are *de facto* invested in as well. The only war Nelson is interested in waging is one against the forces of Bad Writing and, in that war, the teacher and students are on the same side. It takes a wise instructor, however, to persuade students that they are in on this struggle as well and "by making them active participants in the process, by making them *want* to write" (17) we are simply and competently doing our job. Nelson convincingly argues that Sun Tzu can help us accomplish this.

For instance, the second chapter, "How to Present Yourself," uses Sun Tzu's definition of a good leaders as someone that uses the twin notions of *deception* and *formlessness* to enable students to become invested in their own writing. Anyone that has been teaching long enough knows that students often try to "figure out" the teacher—their values, their world views—in order to write towards those things as a shortcut to the hard work of thinking and writing. In other words, students strategize for grades rather than Good Writing. Here Joan Didion's guidance towards what inspires Good Writing is crucial as she notes, "I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking, what I'm looking at, what I see and what it means" (qtd. in Nelson 36). This is impossible to do if writing is to conform solely to a teacher's ideals. To thwart this motivation, Nelson draws from Sun Tzu and advises that teachers aim for a kind of deception in that we stand back, "putting them in positions to figure things out on their own and do the work they need to do to grow as writers" (29). As Nelson observes, "it might seem easier to simply *tell* them what to do, but they won't learn that way" (30). In many ways this kind of deception is where the real work of writing gets done and the outward façade of the course—the syllabus,

the weekly schedule, the Student Learning Outcomes—provides the opportunity for this deeper level of personal engagement with writing and the resulting growth that can occur for us as writers and as people.

Similarly, *formlessness* here means to not explicitly reveal why students are doing certain writing tasks, but to design the course in such a way so that students stop asking for the reasons or consulting the SLO's on the syllabus, but rather learn by doing instead. As Nelson says, "I always ask myself if I would get bored completing the assignment. Would I have to think critically and creatively to complete it? If the answer is no, I come up with something better" (44). Throughout the book, Nelson not only tells us *that* he comes up with something better, but he *shows* us just what those things are and invites us to adapt them to our classes.

This kind of demonstration is, for me, the strength of *Teaching the Way* and while there are other examples that exist—Thomas Newkirk's wonderful *Nuts and Bolts* comes to mind—this is a welcome addition that also delivers, in Nelson's use of Sun Tzu, a philosophical foundation in a unique way that goes beyond being merely instructional resource material. It is also worth noting here that, in addition to the audience mentioned above, teachers and scholars interested in Barry Kroll's influential *The Open Hand: Arguing as an Art of Peace* might also find this volume a useful companion.

Work Cited

Sirc, Geoffrey. "Resisting Entropy." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 63, no. 3, 2012, pp. 507–19.



Dively, Rhonda Leathers. *Creativity and The Paris Review Interviews: A Discourse Analysis of Famous Writers' Composing Practices*. Anthem Press, 2022. 204 pp.

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Only by fate and fortune would an apprentice receive the opportunity to review the work of a master. Nearly 14 years after sitting as a doctoral student in her Creativity Theory course, I am pleased to review Dr. Ronda Leathers Dively's text, *Creativity and The Paris Review Interviews: A Discourse Analysis of Famous Writers' Composing Practices*. Dively has written and published on the topic of Creativity Theory since the late 90s and is notably one of the pioneers for applying Creativity Theory in the composition and expository writing classrooms.

As a former student in her theory class, I recall Dr. Dively saturating the chalkboard with her expertise, while providing her students with plenty of readings, visuals, creative projects, and reflection assignments. *Creativity and The Paris Review Interviews* echoes her voice that I vividly recall, offering extensive qualitative research through in-depth discourse analyses of interviews featured in *The Paris Review* that "work to illustrate and