

## Teaching and Learning as a Man

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## TEACHING AND LEARNING AS A MAN

Robert J. Connors

**H**e was one of the guys. Burly, thick-necked, he sat in the back of the room in a line with several other guys, wearing the school sweatshirts or the purloined green surgical shirts that were the mandatory badges of individuality in that era. He slumped in his seat, watching me through lowered eyelids. Though he did not volunteer much in class, he was not sullen or challenging, as some of them were. He came to conferences and was pleasant and docile, though he never quite met my eyes. His question was always the same: "What do you want me to do?" He would agree eagerly to any suggestion I made on a draft, and the more specific the better. When he had gotten as thorough a set of marching orders as he could draw from me—and I, young prof, was happy to dispense my gems of wisdom in good detail to those astute enough to ask for them—he departed quickly and with relief.

In those days, I required journals from my freshman students. Twice a semester I called them in, and, as the current wisdom of those days went, I did not grade them or even write responses, but merely noted length and wrote a long terminal comment. Twice a semester I spent a good deal of time reading the journals and writing those comments. His journal was like many others, filled with venting about the unfairness of his world, quickly written descriptions of places he would plunk himself in (the dining commons, the Parade Ground, the campus barber shop—always good for a journal entry), and adventure stories about dorm water fights, dangerous drunken outings, incredible rock concerts. I read it all carefully, noted

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whether it met the requirements for length and number of entries, and wrote my long comment at the end, telling him my opinions of his journal and wishing him a good summer.

Last day of classes. The grades are all done, the papers handed back. They take a few minutes to do their fill-in-the-blanks evaluation forms while I leave the room, then I return, wish them well, tell them to come and see me if they have any future writing problems. I have lugged the large bundle of their journals to the room. "Everybody got journal credit," I announce, "good show! I'll give them back to you and let you go early." I call the names, give back the notebooks as students file past and leave. I call his name, and he comes up, takes the black-and-white marbled book, heads for the door. At the door he pauses, then, studiously, slowly, his left arm with the notebook comes up to a forty-five degree angle. He dangles the unopened journal for half a second, then releases it. *Bang* into the hollow metal wastebasket by the door. For the first time, his eyes meet mine for a moment. Then he turns and leaves the room.

As I dazedly passed out the rest of the journals, my head swam and emotions eddied about me in waves of hot and cold. The bastard. The bootlicking brown-noser. The disrespectful little twit. Acting interested and submissive to get his grade, and then when he knew he had gotten it, letting me know just how much of his work was an act, and how little he cared for my opinions about his "improvement as a writer."

I wanted to show him. I wanted to make him toe the line. I wanted—for his sake, of course!—to teach him that fleering the teacher is bad policy, son. Maybe I could finagle his grade, find some problem there not seen before, yes, surely that classroom participation was not worth a full B . . .

But my weapon was gone. The temporary artificial dominance that the institution had given me over him had dissipated. The grade was figured, and if I were to refigure it sheerly out of pique, I could not respect the vision I needed of myself as Fair Arbiter. As I sat in the now-empty classroom, the swirl of final departures dying away down the hall, I knew only that I felt empty, felt rejected, felt useless—and responded to those emotions by allowing myself to feel primarily angry.

That day, I have now come to think, was the beginning of a long process of noticing, paying attention to, and finally focusing on my relations, and the relations of male teachers in general, with male students. It was not comfortable. I had to notice the ways in which male students submit, grudgingly or willingly, to the artificial dominance of a male teacher. I had to notice what sorts of writing young men did, wanted to do, felt they should do. I had to notice how my male students were in the middle of constructing themselves as men—and how difficult and lonely a job it often was. I had to notice how, tacitly or openly, they resisted me and the authority I represented. I had to notice how they sometimes wanted to reach out to a teacher as a mentor or figure of mature wisdom and how seldom they could allow themselves to.

And I had to notice my own attitudes toward the complex relation of power and knowledge my teacherly position forced all of us into—my own desire to initiate, to mentor, to provide a role model, to formalize and hand on rules—and to assert my own hierarchical place, construct my own manhood, find my own spot in the world.

There is not much in the way I was trained as a teacher about how to deal with these issues. My practicum course mentioned discipline issues, but they were general. Erika Lindemann and David Foster and Beth Neman discussed general teaching strategies in their books, but none of them spoke to the subtle and constant questions I would face as a man teaching men. From classical rhetoric and its picture of balanced arguments through the student-centered dialectic of process-oriented teaching, questions of masculinity and the teaching issues that surround it were omnipresent but hardly mentioned.

That was the seventies and early eighties, when gender issues were hardly considered in composition studies. More recently, of course, gender has received intensive attention from the developing feminist theoretic of the past two decades. We are beginning to get detailed accounts of female students and the pressures exerted on them, of women teachers and the problems they face with male students, or of the interaction of male and female students. Feminism has begun to provide a rich discourse about women, but the place of men in this discourse has been marginal. I have seen little that speaks of the underlying sets of questions and challenges that are brought home to me every time I face a group of young men in my classes. Who am I supposed to be? Master? Father? Camp counselor? Buddy?

These sorts of questions—what kind of teacher, what kind of mentor, what kind of man was I supposed to be?—were not being answered for me either in the discourse of education or in the discourse of feminism. A natural reflex for me as a scholar is to try to understand situations historically, so I went to the library to try to find out what I could about men teaching men. I found that there are definite historical reasons for some of the confusions that male teachers and male students are feeling today, reasons grounded in the nature of composition itself and the ways it defined itself as it succeeded rhetoric as a college discipline.

Throughout most of Western history, the field of rhetoric was the property of men. The historical discipline of rhetoric was shaped by male rituals, male contests, male ideals, and masculine agendas, and women were definitively excluded from all that rhetoric implied. From its inception in the probate courts of early Syracuse, the techniques of rhetoric were evolved for a single purpose: to create persuasive arguments, to develop and win cases, to put forward opinions in legislative fora, to stake out turf and verbally hold it against opponents in public contest. To use a term popularized by Walter Ong, rhetoric was a quintessentially *agonistic* discipline—one concerned with contest. It was ritualized contest, yes, but contest nonetheless. Argument and debate are verbal agonistic displays, and as Ong has shown, ritual contests of all sorts have been central to Western culture for as long as we have recorded history.

In his book *Fighting for Life*, Ong traces the strands of agonistic ritual contest between males that exist in nature and in the convoluted, codified forms of nature we call culture and civilization. He begins by discussing the radical insecurity of male consciousness, which is always subconsciously aware that males are individually far less important to species survival than are females and that they thus represent surplus reproductive value (57–64). Ong has made a powerful case that important elements of human behavior have been unconsciously informed by the radical insecurity and status needs of males, and that agonistic self-display has been the resulting tendency. Put most simply, masculine consciousness tacitly perceives most of life in terms of contest. From day to day, the agonist wins or loses in the constant struggle for power, physical comfort, ego-satisfaction, territory. Staking out “turf,” physical, intellectual, social, or emotional, and defending it against all comers seems to be connected to male consciousness in some deep way that females seldom have shared. In *Fighting for Life*, Ong traces a number of the forms through which this agonistic male consciousness has expressed itself, the various ritual contests each culture has evolved to allow males to “prove” superior masculinity. These contests may be overtly physical tests of bravery and ability to withstand pain (the land-diving of the Pentecost Islanders and the self-mutilating Sun Dances of the Plains Indians) or ritualized physical contests (all forms of sports, from the Olympic games to fraternity beer-drinking contests)—or the agonistic verbal contests that have been a part of so many cultures and continue to be an important part of our own (103–15).

Here, on the level of verbal display and contest, is where Ong’s argument for agonistic male consciousness begins to intersect with the teaching issues we face. *Fighting for Life* makes a persuasive case for the continuing existence of agonistic verbal display between males in most contemporary cultures. An important portion of Ong’s argument concerns the ways in which this agonistic stance has informed education. Academic agonism was historically not just a matter of grades, which are a relatively recent phenomenon, but arises, as Ong puts it, “from a disposition to organize the subject matter itself as a field of combat, to purvey, not just to test, knowledge in a combative style” (121). From the medieval period forward, college and university courses were conducted as ceremonial ritual contest, in which the teacher and student—both, of course, male—were adversaries. Older students were expected to announce and defend theses against attacks by their professors, and from this practice we get the now-vestigial practice of oral defense of PhD exams and dissertation—a last agonistic remnant of that older oral culture.

Older rhetorical education for all-male groups took several forms, some theoretical, in the form of lectures and memorization, and some practical, in the form of debate and oration. Whether the methods were practical or theoretical, rhetorical instruction meant contest. In both the lecture hall and the classroom, students were set against the master and against each other. Teaching and testing were much

more public under this all-male system than they are now. Up until the mid-nineteenth century, most final exams were oral and public. Any man with the credentials might press the candidate with questions, as George Schmidt recounts: "College graduates in the audience, like the masters of arts in the medieval universities, were privileged to inject questions of their own or to criticize the answers of the candidates" (100). Today, of course, such testing is minimized, and we tend to see professors who engage deeply in it as pathologues; for us, the "defense" of the PhD dissertation or Master's thesis is a curious relic, an atrophied survival of a harder time no one remembers. Few doctoral candidates really have to stand and fight for their theses against determined professorial foes, and it is hard for us to imagine what a student-teacher bond of distance and hostility might mean for college life. (For more detail on this agonistic college culture and its downfall in the nineteenth century, see my essay "Women's Reclamation of Rhetoric in the Nineteenth Century.")

College and university culture, from medieval times until after the Civil War, was a culture that pitted man against man in a constant series of ritual tests of worthiness—in the classroom, on the platform, in the debate hall, in the dormitory. In Latin or in English, the agonism was always present. It existed in the argumentative rhetorical theory stretching from Cicero to Whately, in the truncated pragmatism of the elocutionary movement, in the abstract persuasion-based assignments that professors gave, in the forms of thesis and defense, lecture and recitation, in the purring slash of the professor's oral rebuke, in the barking give and take of the debate club's hall, in the silky logical entrapment of the perspiring bachelor's candidate, and in the roaring denunciation of backsliding that issued from the pulpit. College was a man's world, and if it was "red in tooth and claw," it was also a world in which men knew the rules and could use them to define their places in the hierarchy of educational worth.

And what happened to this agonistic educational culture? The older methods of academic defense and attack died out with startling rapidity, says Ong, because of the entrance of women into higher education. After over two thousand years as the central element in schooling, contestive education died out in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, retreating in almost exact proportion to the advances of coeducation in high schools and colleges. Colleges began to mix women and men in the 1840s, and classrooms would never be the same. Contestive, combative educational methods that had worked satisfactorily for all-male schooling now seemed violent, vulgar, silly with women looking on. A man could attack another man verbally, and was expected to, but to attack a *woman*, either physically or intellectually, was thought ignoble.

By 1900 most colleges were coeducational, and this world was a far cry from the old all-male world of higher education. Primarily, it was much more complex. Male psychological agonism did not simply disappear, but it had to be canalized

into less overt channels. The most obvious of these—the places where the old male mind still showed most clearly—were intercollegiate athletics, which boomed after 1870, and the “secret Greek letter fraternities” that sprang up to exclude women from at least *some* sanctuaries on each campus. As more and more women entered colleges, the public agonistic tradition was abandoned and less contestive educational methods were pioneered. Instead of the oral, argument-based, male-dominated education of the pre-1850 period, education post-1850 was much more irenic, negotiative, explanatory. Thus the educational structure we inherit is an amalgam of newer irenic values and half-understood survivals from a more agonistic time in education.

Composition, whose forebear was rhetoric, was particularly affected—even in some sense created—by these changes. When women entered colleges, they demanded the full range of courses that men had been used to taking—including rhetoric, which had theretofore excluded women almost entirely. The older oral rhetorical tradition of debates, declamations, hierarchies of expertise, agonistic testing, public contest, would not do. What burgeoned instead at American colleges after 1870 was a newer sort of rhetoric, one suitable for women and mixed classes—the rhetoric of written composition. From 1880 to the present, we have seen the development of composition-rhetoric and the corresponding diminution of purely oral agonistic rhetoric in nearly all American college curricula. Composition-rhetoric, which is interiorized rather than public, multimodal rather than purely argumentative, taught on a one-to-one editorial basis rather than on a public and critical basis, is a much more irenic discourse than the older oral rhetoric.

The gender issues that accompanied this shift have been recognized and discussed recently by a variety of feminist scholars. Historians now have realized that composition-rhetoric evolved during the period 1860–1900 largely around coeducational sites and that the actual teaching of composition has been the most feminized area of college instruction outside home economics for almost a century. The first PhD granted in the field of composition-rhetoric was to a woman: Gertrude Buck in 1898. By 1920, more than half of the articles in the *English Journal* were authored by women. Warner Taylor in 1929 found that 38 percent of all composition instruction in colleges was being done by female instructors, and that percentage has risen to over 60 percent today (Miller 123). Directors of writing projects testify that over 80 percent of the people who attend them are women.

More importantly, over the last twenty years feminism has come to inform many of the deep structures of the field, and today the teaching of writing is not only feminized but increasingly feminist. What Susan Miller calls “the sad women in the basement” are no longer the only female compositionists; women in the 1990s have both the numbers they always have had in the teaching ranks and increasingly real scholarly and institutional power. The licensing power of doctorates

in composition has helped create the current field of composition studies (see Nysttrand et al.) as a subfield of English that is rapidly taking its place as a coequal of literary studies, and most PhD programs in composition studies are producing as many female graduates as male—or more. At the same time, the growth of feminist discourse, both theoretical and practical, though it came later to composition studies than to literature, has been extremely rapid—perhaps the most striking movement in the field over the past decade.

This is wonderful, of course. But the shift from a male-dominated rhetoric to a feminized and feminist composition studies has illuminated women's issues in writing while leaving many male teachers uncertain of how or whether they fit in. Few men I know are certain about whether they *can* be feminists, and the decline of older agonistic teaching methods has not produced any model that defines male roles as clearly as those old contestive pedagogies did. Gender does provide a powerful speculative instrument, but I know few men in academia who are sure of their right to wield it or confident in their stance when they do.

Let me speak personally—one of the great gifts that feminism has given to all of us. To be truthful, I must admit that feminism only takes me, as a male teacher, part way toward a satisfying self-definition. I first became aware of what was then called “women's liberation” in college during the late 1960s, and I immediately recognized the importance of the critique that was being mounted. I have been reading feminist work for almost twenty-five years now and have long considered myself a strong advocate of women's issues. But I seldom felt that much of what I read was “about” me in any personal way. Feminism, as I experienced it, was a politics and a system of stances and perspectives not much different from Marxism or poststructuralism. From *The Second Sex* to *In a Different Voice*, I could read and appreciate the analysis or the argument without feeling personally very involved. I could, and did, argue for feminism because I believed in much of what feminist writers were saying about gender equality, but my assent came from my head, not my heart. I knew that as an audience for feminist writers I was a pretty tertiary concern.

When, in the late 1980s, I ran into some writings by people now identified with men's studies or the men's movement—Herb Goldberg, Robert Bly, Sam Keen—I was surprised to find myself much more personally affected by what they were saying. I found an emotional connection in the ways that men's movement writers explored gender issues that had seldom been there for me as I read women writers discussing women's issues. Questions of constraining roles, of subtle social expectations and tacit fears, of quiet desperation, of blighted relationships and deadly, silent family dramas are there for both men and women. The women's movement gave support for bringing these issues out of the darkness, but the actual discussions that went on in feminism were nearly always about how these issues impinged on women's lives. Men might be in the picture as oppressors, or as support staff, or (very occasionally) as fully drawn figures with problems of their



own. But feminist analyses have overwhelmingly dealt with women's roles, issues, and problems. As they should have.

The men's movement writings were trying to give men the same access to discussion about their meaning as gendered beings and about the myths and constraints that have made them and damaged them. That's why they spoke to me in a more emotionally powerful way—because I, as a man, was their primary audience. From men's movement writings I went on to men's studies, of which I had known almost nothing. Intellectually, men's studies engages in cultural criticism by foregrounding gender in historical and cultural settings. Both men's studies and the men's movement thus far have largely concerned themselves with the construction of manhood in modern culture, and many of their concerns have been in the areas of men's interactions, mentoring and bonding issues, fatherhood issues, and issues of power and aggression as they play themselves out among men and between men and women. All of these areas have suggestive applications for me as a male teacher in my relations with all students, but I have found men's studies particularly useful in understanding the work I try to do with male students.

I have come to believe that we—and I specifically indict myself and many male writing teachers—have not been serving male students well. In large part this is because we are reactive. Male intellectuals have been listening to the feminist critique of patriarchy for a long time now, and the result is that we distrust ourselves and our own worth as men; we distrust our own abilities to mentor younger men. We have been told by many sources that the problems of the world arise from machismo and from male sexism, and the natural consequence of hearing this line so consistently is that we shrink from considerations of ourselves as men—as older men, as men of knowledge, as men representative of manhood. Such self-definitions often seem dangerous in the light of what feminism has taught us, but by backing away from engagement with them we have also backed away from powerful heart-reasons for doing what we do.

We should also note that the task with which we are confronted as teachers of young men is demanding today in a way it has not been in the past. In our contemporary academic culture, teaching men can be a confusing task and one filled with cognitive dissonance. As every teacher knows, a class full of young men is not always the Peaceable Kingdom. Often the classroom fills with resistance, self-display, testing, and tacit aggression. As Roy Raphael says in *The Men from the Boys: Rites of Passage in Male America*, “many young males today still feel an urge, a yearning, a mysterious drive to prove themselves as men in more primitive terms” (xii). The guys in the baseball caps whispering in the back of the room are not just talkative; they are engaging in what Robert Brooke calls “underlife behavior.” Says Brooke,

By so doing they assert something about their identity. Underlife allows individuals to take stances toward the roles they are expected to play, and to show others the stances they take. . . .

The point is not to disrupt the functioning of the classroom, but to provide the other participants in the classroom with a sense that one has other things to do, other interests, that one is a much richer personality than can be shown in this context. (144, 148)

Brooke does not differentiate underlife activities by gender, but I have certainly noticed more willingness on the part of male students than female to walk the brink, chance the transgressive gesture, or push the disruptive element. Our culture trains young men to do that.

For this reason, really *engaging* with younger men in a writing course (as opposed to merely being “nurturing” or to blandly impersonating a grading-criteria computer) takes a kind of self-confidence that many male teachers of writing find hard to achieve. Being the teacher *does* give us what I call TAD—temporary artificial dominance—over male students, but the dominance, though real, is short-lived and based on sterile institutional power rather than on earned respect or personal choice. Many students resent the artificial dominance of the teacher, and male students are often more explicit in their behavioral interrogation of it. Additionally, many male teachers are uncomfortable with their institutional power and constantly work to give it away.

One solution to the problem of student-teacher relations in a course is to formalize the course structure as thoroughly as possible, with very specific rules and guidelines that control the entire relation of teacher with student. I don’t want to suggest that this kind of teaching is injurious. Formulating, testing, and passing on the rules and conventions of a discipline—that is, naming the parts of the world for oncoming generations—is a respectable and necessary part of teaching. But it is also easy to hide behind the rules and conventions, or behind our circumscribed institutional roles. From one point of view, the academic discourse branch of the social constructionism movement in composition studies is exactly about this sort of retreat. These “ordered” roles allow us to bypass issues of our *own* self-definition; defined as “Herr Professor Doktor” or as “Good Buddy Bob,” academic initiators, Namers of the Rules, we can put off consideration of whether we are comfortable in our roles as older men, can put off the question of how difficult it is to define ourselves in the eyes of younger men (and I hesitate here even as I write this) as men of wisdom.

(Female reader, are you a woman of wisdom? I hope you are, and I hope you can call yourself that without the need for a self-deprecating smile or a self-critical jibe. If you are capable of thinking of yourself as a woman of wisdom, then the greater part of the feminist objective has been accomplished. I can only say from my side that it is nearly impossible for me to call myself a man of wisdom in any serious way. I have been to school for twenty-one years; I have read from Plato up to Foucault; I have set up to profess to the young; but if you ask whether I am a man of wisdom I will smile and mutter something rueful and act as if that question

has nothing to do with my life as a man or as a teacher. I think most male teachers would respond the same way.)

If male teachers are having problems constructing ourselves as men of wisdom, our male students are having problems simply constructing themselves as men. It is widely acknowledged, I think, that the college years present young people with their most complex challenges of self-definition. Such self-definition is difficult for both women and men, of course, but because of the ways boys and men are acculturated, the construction of manhood in this culture is immensely lonelier than the construction of womanhood. Throughout history, women's worlds have been considered the personal and interpersonal, emotion and relationship, sociality and self-development, and though feminism has allowed women to transcend these personal worlds it has never encouraged leaving them or ignoring their importance.

Young men, on the other hand, are seldom encouraged to consider the personal worlds of feeling and relationship in any except the most narrowly focused ways. Few of them have been encouraged by their culture to go beyond an immature stage of their development. As Robert Moore and Douglas Gillette put it,

The devastating fact is that most men are fixated at an immature stage of development. These early developmental levels are governed by the inner blueprints appropriate to boyhood. When they are allowed to rule what should be adulthood, when the archetypes of boyhood are not built upon and transcended by the Ego's appropriate accessing of the archetype of mature masculinity, they cause us to act out of our hidden (to us, but seldom to others) boyishness. (13)

Many of the cultural forms that used to ease the passage to manhood in our society—hunting groups, men's clubs and lodges, religious societies, even daily working contact with a father who teaches the son agriculture or trade skills—have pretty well broken down. Outside of a few surviving rites of initiation such as Jewish bar mitzvah and Catholic confirmation, which are usually poorly understood and often rote, young men have no respected and sanctioned social rituals to let them and their societies know they have transcended boyhood and become men.

Traditionally, only men have had the power to bestow manhood on other men, but these young men must do it for themselves, because for them trustworthy elders are hard to come by. The worship of youth and beauty and physical achievement so prevalent in our culture, coupled with the distrust of age and tradition introduced by my own generation, has made the idea of older men as role models exceedingly problematical. As a result, young men's natural desire to find older men to admire and pattern themselves after has been frustrated, or has fastened on unreal giant-figures such as film stars or sports "heroes"—Rambo or Van Damme or Shaq—or on peer group figures who exemplify whatever qualities of daring or carelessness or brutality are currently admired.

I have talked with few young men of college age who think their fathers are good role models or who want to be like them. In fact, the majority of young men

have no adult figures in their lives after whom they wish to pattern themselves, and no way that seems satisfying to fit themselves into the adult world. Lacking such an invitation into adulthood, our young men try to construct their own manhood on the basis of peer wisdom—nearly always a bad source. They try to invent their own initiation and ordeal structures, to achieve in the eyes of their peers what the culture at large denies them, striving “after a catch-as-catch-can image of manhood through a patchwork of ad-hoc initiations” (Raphael 23). They do it by risk-taking, by contest, by sport, by revolt, by artsy alienation. Many seek out reassurance from their peers in the form of groups, gangs, self-created organizations of all sorts. As Anthony Rotundo explains in *American Manhood*, many youth-culture organizations in the past included some social controls—men’s lodges, religious organizations, literary societies, YMCA-type clubs all included some older members (67–74). Today, however, our college men have only one extremely limited choice in terms of male organizations: fraternities. We have all seen the results of fraternity membership. As one of my students said about his hazing experience, “They could initiate me into brotherhood, but not into manhood.”

One of the results of failed initiation is an emotional constriction. Of the shades of the emotional spectrum, the only hues that most young men feel they may express openly are anger and humor. With little permission to talk about their feelings beyond these “controlled” responses, many college-age men are completely out of touch with the issues that are creating them—and too often creating them as driven, confused, misogynistic, xenophobic obeyers of orders. As a result, much male-to-male contact among students consists of different forms of posing, image creation, and agonistic contest. Despite the confidence they feel they must always display, however, few young men are sure that they are doing well in such contests to demonstrate their manhood.

I saw this clearly in a course I taught last semester that emphasized male gender construction. After the class read a book by Sam Keen, I asked all male students to sit on one side of the room and all female students on the other. “How many people on this side of the room,” I asked, gesturing toward the left, “feel comfortable thinking of themselves and calling themselves women?” The sixteen women blinked, shrugged a bit, looked at each other in slight puzzlement, then all raised their hands. “All right. How many people on this side of the room feel comfortable thinking of themselves and calling themselves men?” The fourteen men stirred uncomfortably in their seats. Throats were cleared. They looked sidelong at one another. And finally, three of the fourteen raised their hands.

Most of these students were senior English majors, but in the discussion that followed it came out that even at twenty or twenty-one these men were still uncomfortable thinking of themselves except as “guys”—an age-neutral and even mostly gender-neutral term. Unlike the women, who simply felt that women was what they *were* now that they were not little girls, the “guys” weren’t quite sure.

"It's sort of like being a man, calling myself a man, is something I have to earn," one of them put it, "but I'm not quite sure what I have to do to earn it."

What *do* they have to do to earn it? And who should we be, then, as male teachers of male students? It is this question to which we all keep turning, and it is this continuing question about the making of masculinities that men's studies and the men's movement are trying to take on. The task is not easy, because the academic mind is still uncertain about the appropriateness of masculine studies. I have heard men's studies attacked as "the macho analysis of machismo," and as a back-formation like the National Association for the Advancement of White People. "Hasn't all scholarship in the West been men's studies?" asks a colleague, "and aren't you just taking energy away from feminist issues?" "Why not just call it gender studies?" asks another. I have gone into bookstores and asked for the men's studies section only to be eyed narrowly by the clerk as if I'd asked for snuff porn before being told that they might have some of "that stuff" down in Sociology. The Women's Studies section takes up three whole double racks, but men's studies is still fortunate to get three bottom shelves.

And all of us, of course, have been invited to join in the more or less constant laugh-fest ongoing about the men's movement and men's weekends. I've collected an office door full of cartoons satirizing such things over the past two years. Of course there *are* elements of the men's movement that are easy to make fun of; the drumming, wildman stuff, spearchucking, and so on, can often seem like Rousseauistic throwbacks. And there are elements out there in the culture only too happy to make fun of them, aren't there? But after thinking about it, which side do you feel more empathy with? The side of *Esquire*, which would like you to laugh at men who feel distorted by the *Esquire/Playboy* culture? Or those who are seeking (yes, sometimes silly-seeming) ways to escape it?

Yes, men's studies and the men's movement are in their early days; yes, we are still casting around for how we should do things, think things through. It's easy to portray us as selfpitying oppressors, balding wimps, failed hippies, whining jerks. But think back to the early days of the women's movement and to the completely unsympathetic presentations the media gave it. In the 1960s, feminists were often presented as crazy or evil—bra-burners, Warhol-shooters, ugly girls with grudges, man-haters. There are powerful vested interests threatened by the men's movement, and they are the same interests that the feminist movement threatens. Next time you see someone sneering at the silliness of the men's movement, ask yourself, *cui bono?* Who gains from this representation?

Again speaking personally, I have come to believe that there is much I can learn, as a man teaching men, from these movements. Men's studies and the men's movement have helped me bring some of my own uncertainties and questions into the open, and I hope to see more discussion about the ways in which gender affects both women and men as we try to teach and learn about writing. To begin the conversation, some of the most immediate questions we face are these:

*Why are our male students often stereotyped as insensitive, or passive, or defensive?*

There is a great danger in stereotyping students, as we all know, but it is easier to casually assume stereotypes about young men than about almost any other group. The one “group identity” joke that is still politically safe is the one with men as its butt. Certainly it was easy for me to angrily place my journal-dumping student into the large category of “dumb yahoos” and think no more about him beyond that identification. We are not often invited to go deeper—especially not by the young men themselves. But as Bruce Ballenger puts it so well, there is nearly always “another face sweating under the mask” of public masculinity, and it is a face we need to try harder to see (11).

Striving to see that face is often not easy for many academic men. As Joseph Harris wrote to me in a critical but helpful letter, English department academics tend to react to male students of a traditional kind as “versions or embodiments of the working-class male, the rough father of the intellectual son and feminized professional.” If, like many of us, you were a nerdy kid picked on by the tough guys, dealing from a position of (provisional) power with their contemporary incarnations is a relationship filled with unspeakable issues.

But we must speak of them. We must strive to get beyond our own reactivity. Our male students are at a very complicated transition point in their lives, questioning their parents’ and peers’ moral norms and struggling to construct their own. They are changing in response to college culture, in response to the assumption of adult responsibility. They are struggling with what is for some their first exposure to discourse about gender issues and the feminist analysis. They are, to point out the obvious, very much in process, and the public personae they create try to mask this transitional uncertainty. But as writing teachers, we can and should see the uses of this process for them as both writers and readers. Certainly our roles as academic initiators are real and valid ones—but perhaps we should not so soon dismiss other possibilities for more personal mentoring. This may sometimes be uncomfortable, if we are successful at getting “beneath the mask” in male students’ writing. But the payoff can be real. As Michael Kaufman, speaking of preventing male violence, puts it,

Emotional discharge, in a situation of support and encouragement, helps unglue the ego-structures that require us to operate in patterned, phobic, oppressive, and surplus-aggressive forms. . . . Only in situations that contradict these feelings—that is, with the support, affection, encouragement, and backing of other men who experience similar feelings—does the basis for change exist. (47)

If writing teachers, who have more opportunity to see into students’ minds than most other teachers, do not take the responsibility to attempt mentoring, then who will? If we do not work to knock down the stereotypes, who will?

*Are there specifically “male” genres of writing?* Since I have often had a hard time reading what my young male students want from me, I often feel conflicted as I try to evaluate the venting papers, the macho-thrill, self-display, and adventure papers that they write when asked for personal essays. Personal experience assignments

bring out a few tropes over and over again from male students: the wise elder story, the big challenge story, the I-learned-a-lesson story, the best friend story, and the different quest and journey narratives—most told as if they provided their own contexts and meanings—that teachers see again and again. For me, intervening in the process of these narratives has been difficult, because neither the writer nor I is really sure what the narrative is supposed to *do*. *Why* is this story being told? How do I, as teacher and elder, validate its meaning? Is that what I'm supposed to do at all? What gives me the right?

We—and our students, who seldom know any more than we do what real male teacher-to-student engagement on life issues might look like—often seek escape from the uncertain world of mentoring relationships by avoiding personalism completely. As men in this culture, in fact, we are trained from an early age to do precisely this: to focus on task, to put aside personal feelings (consciously, at least), to learn the rules, to do the required job of work, to “take care of business.” Liam Hudson and Bernadine Jacot, in their book *The Way Men Think*, call this way of being in the world a result of “the male wound.” The male wound, say Hudson and Jacot, exists in most men as a result of male children having to counteridentify with their primary infant caregivers, their mothers. Little girls can model themselves after their mothers, but little boys must tear themselves from that model to become men (44–52). The results of the male wound are both good and bad for men: in negative terms the wound creates physical and psychological hardness, personal insensitivity, and misogyny, while on the positive side the wound results in enhanced ideas of agency, a constant flow of psychic energy, and an attraction for abstract passions and mechanism—all of which we can see in the non-personal writing of our male students.

In light of Hudson and Jacot's idea, it is easier to see why many men turn with relief from the chthonian messiness of personal writing to the structures of rhetoric, the methods of exposition, the classical or Toulmin model of argument. Men love algorithms. Can I put the refutation section up front? How many times does the comparison have to alternate? Does Process Analysis always use the passive? How many grade levels does three comma splices drop me? Does every warrant need backing? Tell Me How To Build It, our male students say, so I can give it to you, you can judge it, and we can both be on our way. Thus we tend to seek escape from the uncomfortable personalism of real mentoring by turning to distanced, rule- and convention-governed writing—exposition and argument.

It is a commonplace that young men in our classes *want* to write adventure or achievement narratives, quest stories of different sorts, or arguments that allow them to remain emotionally distant or to vent strongly-held opinions. But how much have we constructed these as the male genres we expect? How much do we know about what influences gender conditioning has had on male writing? We need to look more closely at the history of writing instruction and reexamine our ideas

of what is “naturally” male. More importantly, we need to try more imaginatively to consider *why* we assume male genres to exist and analyze what such kinds of writing mean or are trying to express. Rather than scornfully dismissing the sorts of attitudes toward work and striving that undergird those sports-apotheosis papers, why not ask *why* our young men seek closeness with others through sports, form their identities through these competitions?

*What are the stances available to teachers of male students, and which are the most useful?* All teachers are aware that they can move between different roles as they teach, but not all men who teach are consciously aware of the roles they are given permission to slide into in relating to students. I can be the Nurturing Understander, the Institutional Representative, the Formalist Hanging Judge, the Buddy-Buddy, the Distant Scholar, the Daddy Surrogate. There are movements and trends in the sorts of permissions we are given, as well; a century ago I could have chosen the Impersonal Examiner, the Brilliant Lecturer, or the Demanding Humiliator, but very few younger teachers are now given permission to use these roles or to see them as desirable.

Very little has been said about the ethical demands or purposes of such roles. We have moved away from the agonism that informed male teaching and learning up until 150 years ago, but for many male teachers and students, the vortex of conflicting roles left behind has been confusing. What does it mean to mentor a student? What gives us permission or power to do it? How much challenge should exist between teacher and student? How much should teacher and student seem equals? What are the psychological effects of the temporary relationship of dominance that institutional power creates between teacher and student? And, most centrally for me, do male teachers have enough confidence in themselves as men really to accept the responsibility of teaching younger men, and the burden of being models of manhood for their students?

This issue becomes most pressing and practical when we conference or evaluate student papers. Each of our male students is trying to earn the right to call himself a man, but the rules of how manhood is earned are desperately unclear. The result, when we see it in the writing men do in our courses, can sometimes be silly, or disgusting, or horrifying. How are we to deal with the essay defending Rambo films as realistic history, or the argument paper that proposes that Marvel Comics are better than DC Comics, or the paper that pretends to be horrified by fraternity hazing but devotes three lovingly crafted pages to detailed descriptions of it and ends by saying that “the short-term effects of pledging can be beneficial”? Or the following paper, by which I still feel amazed:

#### Horsing Around

It was a cold winter day and my two friends, Bill and Jim, decided to skip school with me. I got out of bed and acted as if I were going to school, but instead I went to Bill's



house. We sat in his living room drinking alcoholic beverages at 8:00 in the morning, Jim came over at 8:30 to join us.

As we drank beer like fish, we decided we were bored. The three of us had a total of about three dollars, so we could not go anywhere, even out to eat. To help make the time pass, Bill got out his twelve-gauge shotgun and started to clean it. Then a bright idea came to me, so I said, "We have enough guns and ammunition, and we have plenty of wooded area to go shooting in, so let's go!"

We got in Bill's jeep and drove down Party Road to get to the woods. Bill and I both had twelve-gauge shotguns, and Jim had a twenty-two rifle. We were out walking in the woods and Jim saw a crow, black as night, land in a tree. He aimed, shot, and killed the crow. I walked over, picked up the blood-soaked bird, and sat it with its wings spread wide in a small twig tree. I loaded my gun, walked back fifteen to twenty feet, turned, and fired. The bird was blown into about twelve pieces, just like a jigsaw puzzle. The ground was covered with powdery snow, so when the bird was shot a blood spray pattern covered that area.

After this adventure, we walked farther into the woods where we spotted a horse in an open field. Jim dared me to shoot it, but I told him that the horse was too far away to hit. As soon as I said that, though, the huge black and brown horse slowly trotted toward us. Bill was approximately one-hundred feet away from me, and did not know what I was about to attempt. It was a good thing that he did not know, because he is one of those "follow-the-rules" kind of guys. Then Jim said, "Go ahead Adam, I dare you."

Without thinking of the seriousness involved, I raised the gun to my shoulder, took a careful aim, and KABOOM! I nailed him in the left hind quarter and he let out a yelp like a dog getting its tail sliced off. At first I thought I might have killed the animal, but I was too afraid to stick around to find out. All I remember hearing after I shot the gun was the horse yelping and Bill shouting; going into hysterics about what I had done.

At this time we hurried back to the jeep and drove quickly to Bill's house without being caught. Needless to say, Bill doesn't want me to go shooting with him anymore. While in the jeep, Jim was laughing so hard that he wet his jeans. We finished up our unusual and impromptu hunting excursion by cleaning the guns and drinking more beer.

Looking back now, the whole thing seems pretty funny, but I also regret it. I feel bad about hurting the horse and I think the incident probably wouldn't have happened if it hadn't been for the combination of boredom, beer, boyhood.

Horriying? Yes, of course. This paper, which came to my attention as one of the 21,000 papers Andrea Lunsford and I collected for error research in 1986, presents the teacher with immense questions that go quite beyond the obvious issues of political ideology that have been argued over lately. How this writer came to be who he is, and what we as teachers can or should do about it, is the question. What is the teacher to say about the casual male brutality evident here, brutality of a kind unimaginable from a female student? What is a teacher's duty regarding the moral contents of essays written by young men? How do we reconcile the intelligence and

sophistication of some of the writing with this garrulous and self-satisfied tale of puerile cruelty? What are we to say to this student?

The easiest tack would be exactly what the teacher in this case seems to have done with an earlier draft: tell the student to provide a “theme,” in this case some sort of adult regret, that would transform the purity of the narrative into the teacher-favorite narrative genre of “I did bad and learned a lesson.” This is what Adam did, especially in his last paragraph. The teacher’s comment: “Adam—Your theme is better-expressed in this draft than in the earlier one. The problem is that besides adding a theme, you have also added some errors—some serious.” The rest of the comment deals with paragraph unity and comma splice errors. All of the marginal comments are handbook numbers.

How tempting it is merely to stick handbook numbers on a paper like this, to call for a clearer theme! How simple such a task is in contrast to a fully engaged response from an older man to a younger man. How problematic such an engaged response would be; dare we ask questions of our students like, “Why do you shame yourself so?” or “How have you acted to right this wrong?” How many teachers have any of us ever had who dared to engage us on this level? How much do young men wish to be engaged on such a serious level? (As I remember my own young days, I recall pining for such engagement and discussion—not pontification or lecturing, but serious engagement on the life issues I faced. I also recall getting almost nothing of the sort from older men.)

But these are, and please notice the expression, academic questions. For most college teachers of writing, that engagement with the young, that willingness to name the world for them, is hard to imagine. It is in some ways what academic men are least used to and may even have been trained to distrust programmatically. It is easy today to attack any claim to foundational certainty as megalomaniacal or hegemonic or theoretically indefensible, and it is particularly easy to attack such attitudes in men as more evidence of patriarchal valorization of the subject.

*Does teaching young men effectively call for pedagogical techniques different from those effective with young women?* Teaching interventions in a writing course must finally, of course, be individualized if they are to be useful. Typing all male students as barbarians, or aggressive strivers, or brown-nosers is not useful; like female students, each one is different. But I have not been able to keep from noticing that men and women often react differently to different sorts of pedagogies.

This difference is very clear in the ways that men and women relate to pedagogies based on collaboration. In distinguishing between “hierarchical” and “dialogic” methods of collaboration on writing tasks, Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford in *Singular Texts, Plural Authors* avoid gender stereotypes as much as they can (132–35). Even so, it is impossible for the reader not to associate dialogic collaboration, in which “the group effort is seen as an essential part of the production” (133), with

feminism and women's ways of knowing, and hierarchical collaboration, with its product-based goals and clearly defined subordinate and superordinate roles, with the ways men do things. Ede and Lunsford's discussion of these two collaborative methods is sensitive and subtle; they do not demonize hierarchical collaboration in spite of their admiration for (and use of) dialogic collaboration. But because it *is* dialogic, feminist, and "subversive," dialogic work clearly seems more valuable to them, as it does to many teachers of writing. The problem for male students is that many do not come to dialogic collaboration easily, or come to it at all, and if egalitarian, communitarian, consensus-based collaboration is part of a teacher's expectations of group work, male students will consistently disappoint. It is not how men have been trained to do business, and expecting that we can blunt the aggressive individualism that *is* their cultural training in a few weeks is unrealistic.

Young men are simply more drawn to individual work and to hierarchies. Indeed, any writing teacher can illustrate this gender differential by setting up workshop groups segregated by gender. My experience is that the all-women's groups may or may not collaborate dialogically, but that the all-men's groups will certainly proceed hierarchically. A leader will emerge, roles in the project will be assigned, methods will be set up—the whole mechanism of rationalistic Western problem-solving will appear before your eyes. Even the careless or absent member who just "mails it in" in terms of group work is performing a role, and all of us have seen the phenomenon of the "male star" student, one who consistently goes out of his way to create an image, to impress us with his charisma and abilities.

I have also noticed that young men usually want clearly defined individualized credit for the work they do and the roles they play in groups. "Group credit" often seems to them unfair. This cultural training in individualism appears in many forms—and many of them serve young men badly in school settings. The "star" role does not work for everyone. Like the young man who dropped his journal with such telling force into my wastebasket, some of our male students have evolved a serf mentality: to act inexpressive, to take orders for as long as they have to, to give as little as they can, and to rebel in the ways available to them. Newly minted as "adults," they are naturally conflicted by school roles, since the tacit code of male honor they are taught in this culture demands pride, individuality, and resistance, but most find themselves in situations of dependence, powerlessness, and servitude to goals they may not understand or accept.

One of the results of this conflict is that men lag far behind women in educational achievement. Though we hear more in the popular press about the self-esteem problems of young girls in school settings, in fact girls consistently do better in most school subjects than boys. Women's mean high school class rank has been higher than men's (by a minimum of ten percentage points) at least since the early seventies (Adelman 3). In the 1992 NAEP, twelfth-grade girls outperformed boys by 10.2 points in reading and 21 points in writing on a 500-point scale (National

Center for Education Statistics *Report* 462, 486). Since 1978, more women than men have completed bachelor's degrees each year, and today men are a minority—around 46 percent—of both bachelor's and master's degrees awarded (National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest* 245). Honors Programs are even more clearly split, with the one at my own school over 65 percent women (and as much as 80 percent in humanities disciplines). Women's GPAs at my university average 2.90, while men's average 2.65. Men are simply falling behind in college education.

Why is this happening? As Willard Gaylin puts it in *The Male Ego*, the cultural signals that young girls are given to be cooperative rather than physically aggressive often result in more flexible social and interpersonal abilities:

In many ways this better prepares women for modern life than male biology does. We do not live in a world in which power is measured by grip, height, or size of biceps, but by position, accomplishment, intellectual achievement, and the like. The early lessons the little boys learn about becoming men may tragically become the spears on which their self-respect will be impaled in modern adult life. But the lesson of those early days persists, and men will be trapped testing themselves on an obsolete power basis throughout their lives, if only in symbolic language and metaphorical actions. (35)

The power of these conflicts to harm young men can be seen in the tacit attitudes that many teachers have about their male students. Many have no idea who to *be* in their relations with their students. Most of us have stories about our most disgusting brown-nosers (or were they really just wonderful enthusiasts?), but many are also familiar with what Mary Hiatt calls "the student at bay," usually male, who feverishly agrees with everything a teacher says and takes directions gratefully, does as little as he can, never volunteers, and who leaves the course having given as little of his real self as possible.

How do we get through this serf mentality, break through into the underlife of students? It will probably not be possible until we admit that our young men have different attitudinal responses to teaching and learning than our young women students. Since men's studies and the men's movement are both concerned with the structures that culture uses to construct manhood, it seems natural that we might look to these movements for help in understanding the struggles our students undergo as they submit themselves to the complex institutional structure of higher education.

We must thus ask ourselves: what are male learning styles? As Carol Gilligan and Belenky et al. have suggested, women seem to learn more happily and naturally in related, collaborative, and nurturing environments. Academic feminism has tended to extrapolate that data into a pedagogy that assumes that female learning styles should be normative, but an honest inquiry into the success of this project reveals serious problems, at least for young men. Inexpressivity, for instance, is a learned behavior in men that serves several functions, but we often tend to read it

as simple coldness and write off the student as insensitive (Sattel 355). Our readings of male students are often too simple; males simply do not respond in situations involving motivation, self-disclosure, or collaboration the way that female students do, and to assume that they must learn to in a single semester is unrealistic. Whatever our critique may be of the cultural assignments our young men have received, punishing them as individuals because they don't meet our new standards is unfair. Our job must include understanding them.

These are only a few of the issues we face that men's studies can help us shed light on. If we are to grapple effectively with the attitudes of young men, we cannot continue to view them merely as order-takers, or sulky vandals, or cultural naïfs who can be easily reformed with a dose of cultural studies. The fact is that we are still struggling today with the meaning of the shift away from all-male education that took place 150 years ago, and at this point we have not foregrounded gender issues equally for men and women. The feminism within and the feminization of composition pedagogy that have become such powerful parts of composition studies today have not yet made much room for male students—or male teachers. Although it is understandable why male attitudes, fears, and psychological structures have been either ignored or subjected to offhand dismissal in the discourse of contemporary composition, the result has not been more effective understanding of our students. As writing teachers, we have a unique opportunity to assist or thwart our students' searches. It will require, however, more than our current assumptions that we want to turn out seemingly genderless "writers," or that pedagogies that make collaboration and subordination of the individual normative will work equally well for all. Like it or not, we will produce writers who are young women and young men. We need to confront directly what this means to us as older women and older men. We need, for the first time, to confront gender issues wholly.

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