Chapter Six

Handling Professional Issues

Much Madness is divinest Sense—
To a discerning Eye—
Much Sense—the starkest Madness—
'Tis the Majority
In this, as All prevail—
Assent—and you are sane—
Demur—you're straightway dangerous—
And handled with a Chain—

—Emily Dickinson

John Mayher, in *Uncommon Sense: Theoretical Practice in Language Education,* critiques the common perception among students, teachers, parents, and the general public that "real" learning must be both boring and difficult, not fun: "The common sense equation seems to be that if it's painful, it's productive; if it's fun, it's trivial and a waste of time" (52). Most of the recommendations discussed so far in this book are controversial for reasons Mayher discusses. Instructors who consider incorporating the spirit of these strategies into their own pedagogy must come to terms with them both practically and philosophically. They may have to defend to students, colleagues, administrators, the general public, or even to themselves, their supplementing of print-based methodologies with "multiple channel" alternatives.

As we saw in the last chapter, Bruce Pirie and Peter Smagorinsky, who contributed two articles in the special multiple-intelligence issue

of *English Journal,* each had to address skeptical or dismissive comments from colleagues. Stephen North also recognized the risk that the "performance practices" his students created may be viewed as "gimmicky" (2000, 191). Indeed, it is easy to find such skepticism, as well as "common sense" assumptions about intelligence and what constitutes "real" learning in professional journals as well as in the mainstream media. This chapter will help prepare those committed to using multiple literacies for typical reactions to their use. It will suggest ways to frame the issue for students, colleagues, and administrators.

Reactions to Multiple Literacies in the Academic and Commercial Print Media

Reactions to the *English Journal* multiple-intelligence issue described in the last chapter continued for two months after it was published. As Linda Hecker points out, those letters to the editor, both supportive and critical of the strategies described, provide a good overview of disagreements regarding learning (46). Four of the five letters are generally supportive of the practices described in the issue. In his lengthy letter, however, Alan Pierpoint critiques Gardner's multiple intelligence theory as an excuse teachers can use for not holding "today's youth accountable for the demands of print literacy." He says, "The picture is easier than the essay," and that "non-verbal assignments" do not do "the serious work" of an English class, which is to "teach writing" (12). What is interesting here is not Pierpoint's objection to multiple intelligence theory, but his assumption that writing is "the serious work" of an English class, and apparently essay-related work is the only way to "teach writing." He seems to assume readers hold the same definitions of *writing* he does, limiting it to only those intellectual conceptualizations that can be rendered in print. His easy juxtapositioning of the "picture" as being "easier" than the essay, his conviction that only the essay can "do the serious work" of English and fulfill the "demands" of "print literacy," reveal his unquestioning acceptance of literacy commonplaces.

He is not alone. As bell hooks points out, few reformers of higher education have taken a serious look at the role "fun" or "pleasure" might play in higher education. She says, "*Excitement* in higher education was viewed as potentially disruptive of the atmosphere of seriousness assumed to be essential to the learning process" (her emphasis, 1994, 7). She argues later in *Teaching to Transgress* that instructors may not experiment with innovative strategies because of what their own students might think: "I think our fear of losing students' respect has discouraged many professors from trying new teaching practices" (145).

Multi-modal strategies are easily ridiculed. In her essay in the *English Journal* M-I issue, Barbara Osburg is mostly arguing against ranking and assessing students, but she takes a cheap shot: "And if we want to know if a kid can do algebra, he's still got to work a problem, not sing a song about π" (14), as if anyone had seriously suggested that. In a cartoon by Kerry Soper in *The Chronicle of Higher Education,* one of twelve panels depicting "Things You Shouldn't Say at Your Dissertation Defense" has a candidate saying to his committee: "This morning I decided to trash the written version and communicate the sum of my work through interpretive dance" (B11). These jokes work because they misrepresent and extremize multi-modal strategies, and they imply that these activities will completely take the place of written work. They also rely on readers' shared assumptions and unquestioned ideologies concerning the superiority of print literacy.

Unquestioned ideologies are everywhere in general-interest magazines. In an essay entitled "Dumb and Dumber," the editors of *U.S. News and World Report* point to "fresh evidence" social critics cite as indicators of a downward intelligence slide in the United States:

> New York recently found that more than half of its fourth graders flunked standard English. In Massachusetts, 43 percent of teachers failed performance tests. Among Americans under age 30, nearly half get their political news from the late-night talk shows. And so it goes. (20)

It would take an entire chapter to respond adequately to this string of "evidence," and to be fair, the editors later acknowledged recent American Nobel prize–winners and successes in business and industry. They use these three sentences mostly as an attention-getter to their essay, which is subtitled, "An invitation to a dialogue on America's intellectual capacity."

The assumptions in the editorial supporting those three sentences, however, are not up for debate. First, flunking "standard English" (no scare quotes in their use of those terms) is seen as unquestioned proof of New York's fourth graders' stupidity. The implied binary goes like this: "If you can speak standard English, you're smart. If you can't, you're dumb." There is not even a whiff of a reference to all the research that long ago debunked the commonplace that mastery of "standard English" is an indicator of intelligence (Labov 1966; Smitherman 1999; Gilyard 1996b). Second, if 43 percent of Massachusetts' teachers failed "performance tests," it must be the teachers who are "dumb," never the "performance tests," which control the "smart/dumb" judgment instantly applied by pundits. The third piece of "fresh evidence" that Americans under thirty are getting "dumber" is that "nearly half get their political news from the late-night talk

shows." The assumption here seems to be that anything that appears in the print medium must by definition be more sophisticated than anything on television.

Public whinings about literacy frequently also rely on, and demonstrate, binary thinking. Syndicated columnist Kathleen Parker rips into a pilot program being used at nine colleges to test students' spatial talents, as demonstrated with Legos, as part of their college entrance exam. Her column title, "Legos Test: Wrong Way to Decide Who Goes to College" assumes a "right" way to make that decision, and Parker is simplistically sure about what belongs in that category. Knowledge, for her, is like an on/off toggle switch: "You either can read or you can't; you either can do math or you can't. That's about as simple as it gets" (2000, A8).

Similarly, Cal Thomas begins his column supporting home schooling with a simplistic declaration: "The top three finishers in last week's National Spelling Bee are educated at home." This fact is apparently self-evident proof of the superiority of home schooling—that good spellers have acquired the "real knowledge and the endangered species known as wisdom" that Thomas sees lacking in the "dumbed-down" public schools (A13). He feels no need to defend good spelling as an indicator of superiority, relying instead on his readers' shared beliefs that this "real knowledge" speaks for itself.

As Mike Rose points out in *Lives on the Boundary,* complaints about illiteracy are not new and should be put in context. He notes that the president of Brown University complained in 1841 that "students frequently enter college almost wholly unacquainted with English grammar." Similarly, a Harvard professor claimed that some graduates produced "manuscripts [that] would disgrace a boy of twelve" (cited by Rose 1989, 5). This was in the 1870s. Rose's quotations of similar whining continue for two more pages, during which he also points out that definitions of "functional illiteracy" have changed numerous times throughout the twentieth century.[1]

Rose does not deny that schools have problems, but his point is that post-lapsarian laments—complaints about how great the past used to be and how terrible things are now—have been, and continue to be, conventional reactions to the behavior of young people by older ones. Of course some students *are* failing in school. "But if you can get close enough to their failure," Rose argues, "you'll find knowledge that the assignment didn't tap, ineffective rules and strategies that have a logic of their own; you'll find clues, as well, to the complex ties between literacy and culture, to the tremendous difficulties our children face as they attempt to find their places in the American educational system" (8).

However, the uninformed assumptions and critiques demonstrated in the media quotations above crystallize important issues, forcing us to ask ourselves these questions:

- What are we doing when we teach writing or analyze texts?
- Why are we doing it?
- Whose interests does it serve?
- What social, intellectual, or physical processes does writing (or thinking) involve for us and for our students?

We should raise these questions publicly also. We should challenge pundits on their narrow views of knowledge, learning, and people.

Initiating Criticism

One option to deflecting criticism for using multisensory strategies is to take a more proactive stance, to point to the limits of traditional approaches: the linguistic-oriented few who are privileged in such a system; the lost insights of those excluded; the discriminatory nature of print-heavy pedagogies. For those who like studies, there is a disturbing one in a 1992 *Gifted Child Quarterly* that found teachers expected students "with verbal, analytic, and social abilities" to be more successful than students with "motor and creative arts" abilities (Guskin, Peng, and Simon, 34). Such expectations may make "common sense" in a system that rewards abilities listed in the first set and ignores those in the second. These findings are more chilling, however, when we consider that students who are expected to succeed usually succeed, and those who are expected to fail usually fail. Overcoming "common sense" expectations may be nearly impossible. But we should try to be consciously aware of our expectations for individual students, based as they probably are on our perceptions of a limited selection of abilities. If we are at least aware of the judgments we are making, we may postpone them long enough to allow students' other talents to come to the fore so that they can use them in pursuit of whatever intellectual work we expect them to do in our classes.

Defining Terms

In addition to raising questions about the overuse of text-based pedagogies, those committed to using multiple channels should pay attention to another important professional issue: the definition of terms. Whose terms are used in discussions about how to teach writing or

other courses in English? Who gets to frame any arguments concerning the issue?

Mary Minock initiated discussions of a writing-across-the-curriculum program at her institution by posing key terms for her colleagues to discuss and define. She explains that this process helped open conversations with colleagues who held different views of writing and learning. She began by focusing on the common terms "audience," "self," "context," and "community" to help "work toward a rhetorical estimation of our differences" (510). Similarly, we might respond to, or begin, conversations about multi-modal strategies by opening up definitions of "writing," "reading," "text," or other terms relevant to literacy discussions. We might find that while we in Composition think of "writing" as a complex of activities, intellectual processes, and perspective jolts leading up to and including a drafted product, our colleagues think of "writing" as the dressed up "expression" of the "content" they teach, or worse, the surface niceties of style, or cosmetics of copy editing. Trying to define "writing" jointly, or at least discovering where our conceptions differ, might be a good place to begin.

It is also important to define relevant terms with our students. Addressing bald claims about writing and literacy that appear in the media might be a good way to begin. Twenty years ago, C. H. Knoblauch and Lil Brannon advised teachers to "define [their] commenting vocabularies" when writing on student papers (1981, 1). Such advice might be extended to encourage negotiated definitions of terms brought up in class ("writing," "reading," "grammar," "correctness," etc.) as well as the historical context supporting different constructions of those terms. Students deserve to be privy to underlying reasons their classes are the way they are. Then they can make informed decisions to support or reject those reasons and to negotiate course design. We need to help students deconstruct epistemological assumptions behind word-based pedagogies and whose interests these pedagogies serve. Students need to talk about theory. They need to see theory at work in classroom practice and vice versa. Louise Phelps advises discussing theory with students: "It seems to me inevitable that a teacher should introduce Theory, in the sense of formal, focalized knowledge about discourse, to students; there is no way to avoid it other than utter silence" (234).

Joining Public Debate

Most importantly, we need to make our voices heard in public discussions of literacy, which are usually of the post-lapsarian lament variety described above. Pundits should be challenged on blithe uses of the phrase "standard English," on naive assumptions about "performance

tests," on extremized and ridiculous examples of multisensory strategies. They should also be called on the apparent, and usually limited, definition of the terms they use.

Rhetoricians Michael Bruner and Max Oelschlaeger argue that definitions are everything in a public debate. In critiquing the "owls versus people" false dichotomy that environmentalists need to overcome, Bruner and Oelschlaeger write: "Our point is simple: *whoever defines the terms of the public debate determines its outcomes*" (their emphasis 218). Therefore, if uninformed readers of syndicated columns believe, as the columnists seem to, that "writing" means conformity to "standard English" and "grammar rules," it is up to us to call those terms and phrases into question, using the studies and arguments discussed in earlier chapters of this book and elsewhere. But we must choose rhetorical proofs appropriate to the readers of the particular forum in which the column or article appeared. In fact, figuring out how to make such arguments might be projects worthy of courses in writing or rhetoric.

Designing such context-specific projects with students is one way to address the real or imagined "epidemic" of cheating and plagiarism "sweeping through our schools" (for example, see the cover story in *U. S. News & World Report*, November 22, 1999). If a writing assignment is designed anew each semester, finding it in an online research paper catalog becomes increasingly difficult. If the assignment is performance-based, it is impossible.

Taking advantage of the ongoing and escalating panic regarding plagiarism is another way we might proactively address issues of writing, literacy, and alternate strategies before they are framed in someone else's terms. Coming at these issues through public debates of the plagiarism "epidemic" might accomplish two things. It would draw attention to the over-emphasis of print-based literacy, and it would create openings for multiple-channel projects because they are, at least for now, off-the-wall enough not to be found in term paper mills.

Protecting Precious Print

In *Standing in the Shadow of Giants: Plagiarists, Authors, Collaborators*, Rebecca Moore Howard argues that "patchwriting" (almost word-for-word copying with a few changes) is something many academics practice with impunity, or are rewarded for through frequent publications. Yet, when students do it, they can be expelled for "cheating" or "plagiarism." Here I want to bracket my reservations about the breadth of her claim, though I agree with the essence of her argument, in order to address another point she makes. Howard says calling patchwriting

cheating "serves liberal culture gatekeeping purposes: it is a means of determining who is *already possessed* of high literacy. It brands those who are still acquiring high literacy not as learners but as criminals, thereby fettering their acquisition of high literacy" (her emphasis xxii). I would like to extend her point a bit by arguing that obsessive attention to the letter of the plagiarism law (which I must admit I have been guilty of) overemphasizes print literacy, at the same time it undervalues other literacies. Instead of deflecting self-righteous critiques in the popular media concerning our alleged capitulation to student plagiarists, we should transform the plagiarism "crisis" into an opportunity to question limited conceptions of "literacy."

Asking Questions

Before critics or colleagues find fault with our use of multiple-channel approaches, we should ask them why they're still supporting conventional term papers. Almost twenty years ago in *College English*, Richard Larson argued against using "the research paper" in composition courses, calling it "a non-form of writing" (1982, 811). There is simply no excuse for assigning "research papers" so unoriginally conceived that they can be cycled and recyled, cut and pasted ad nauseum. In contrast, projects that demand a one-time mix of oral, social, spatial, written, and/or performative work would be impossible to download. What's more, by combining such approaches, students would more nearly anticipate the variety of intellectual work they will undoubtedly need to do in their future professions: collaborating with others, negotiating web space, giving presentations, sketching or creating charts or graphs, as well as writing. So why is writing still so exclusively celebrated and protected? Let others explain their choices.

Embracing Research Critically

There is much we do not know about how multiple talents might work to enhance writing pedagogy. We need, therefore, to look beyond Composition for relevant research. As many have pointed out, Composition began in a spirit of inclusiveness, of an openness to research from other disciplines. In some ways it continues that tradition, but for a variety of reasons, sometimes good ones, it has restricted what research it will incorporate and what research it won't. While I'm not advocating that all research be embraced, I think Composition can be more forgiving of research paradigms that might conflict with ours. It's possible to think

about research that might have implications for our students, even if we have qualms about researchers' apparent assumptions.[2]

For example, John Reece and Geoff Cumming cite research by Gould, Conti, and Hovanyecz from the early 1980s that investigated writing done by people using "the listening typewriter."[3] In this ingenious experiment, which took place well before the current explosion of high-quality speech-recognition technology, a typist sat behind a computer screen while a "writer" spoke to the computer. This allowed the text to appear on the screen, simulating contemporary speech-to-screen programs. Researchers compared the resulting texts to those produced through other writing and dictation methods, and found the writing to be "generally superior" to that produced by other writing or dictation methods. Reece and Cumming say little about what constituted a "superior" judgment. However, as Charles Lowe pointed out in his CCCC 2000 presentation, this and similar research is rare in Composition, which should be—but is not—eager to study these results and design updated versions of these experiments.

Familiar But Ignored Calls for Broad-Based Research

In her discussion of the "inner-directed" and "outer-directed" theoretical schools that comprise Composition (referred to in Chapter 1), Patricia Bizzell in *Academic Discourse and Critical Consciousness* calls for broad-based research: "Answers to what we need to know about writing will have to come from both the inner-directed and the outer-directed theoretical schools if we wish to have a complete picture of the composing process. We need to explain the cognitive and the social factors in writing development, and even more important, the relationship between them" (1992, 81–82). Peter Elbow has long recommended "embracing contraries," and Stephen M. North has said that if Composition is to continue as a healthy field, its members should first develop a "heightened methodological consciousness," and second that "All methods and all kinds of knowledge, would have to be assumed to be created equal" (1987, 370–71).

Recent Calls for Changes in Research Design and Purpose

More recently, Davida Charney has argued that empirical research has been essentialized and too readily dismissed: "Our over-reliance on qualitative studies and repeated disparagement of objective methods is creating a serious imbalance in studies of technical and professional writing—and the same may be true in composition as a whole" (589–90). Ellen Barton, too, has pointed out the potential harm done by

too-easy dismissals of other people's research. She criticizes "the field's ethical turn [which] appears to have left other methodologies behind, especially those that do not foreground collaborative research relationships and self-reflexive personae" (402). She views as harmful what she sees as Composition's proclivity for "arguing negatively against other methodologies" (401). Ruth Ray and Ellen Barton call for a comprehensive reconsideration of whose interests research should serve. When doing research on writing in nursing homes and rhetorical analyses on disabilities, Ray and Barton discovered, respectively, that they had to overturn their initial assumptions: "We had to re-define our ethical commitments to these communities not in our terms but in theirs" (214).

In looking for ways to reconceive writing-across-the-curriculum (WAC) theory and practice, Elizabeth A. Flynn, Kathryn Remlinger, and William Bulleit have recommended an "interactivity" theory relevant to discussions of multiple channel use:

> Interactional approaches to WAC, though, emphasize writing as a social and political process as well as an individual one and see writers as able to alter discourse communities rather than merely adjust to them. They become potential agents of political and social transformation. (360)

Similarly, an interactional approach to teaching writing or textual studies would emphasize each student's way of making knowledge at the same time see each student using that now-respected knowledge to make changes in the status quo.

Finally, James Thomas Zebroski describes a comprehensive "theory of theory," that would avoid dichotomies and hierarchies and focus instead on an "ecology of practices" that "integrates an understanding of a large number of practices, and the communities which attend to them, into a tolerant, but not eclectic, theory" (1998, 43–44). Interestingly, he uses sketches and diagrams to explain his theory.

Universal Design

Perhaps the most intriguing model with which to frame a commitment to multiple, alternate strategies comes from outside our field. "Universal design" is an architecture-related concept also employed in other areas of design. The idea behind universal design, as Roberta Null explains, is "to redesign the built world—its interiors, exteriors, products, and furnishings—so that it will be usable for all people" (Null and Cherry 1998, ix). This concept provides an apt parallel, and a kairotic moment, for the argument in this book: what is important is not so much the products themselves but the ideology behind the design, just

as the few strategies described here are important not for the activities themselves but for the change in perspective their description might inspire. Here is Null on the importance of changing worldview:

> The universal design process is not just the methodological design of building a house or tinkering with a few specifications to make a slightly different version of an existing environment. Universal design asks for the design of an entirely new creature. Designers are being asked to embrace the chaos of discovery, to put imagination before skill—and in the process to re-create the world. (1998, 47)

Using multiple-channel strategies requires that all of us likewise "embrace the chaos of discovery": teacher/theorists and their students as they design and complete multi-modal projects, and colleagues, administrators, and critics as they learn to understand theoretically, and then embrace, the "new creature" that emerges.

Using the productive chaos of multiple-channel literacies will help us rethink our purposes, broaden our epistemological assumptions, and refresh the methodologies supporting them. It will force us to have greater expectations for ourselves and for all our students.

Notes

1. According to Rose, in the 1930s, "having three or more years of schooling" was equated with "functional literacy." These three years were increased to five, then six, then eight, and then to the finishing of the twelfth grade (6).

2. See especially pages 188–94 in *Learning Re-Abled* for a discussion of such research.

3. I am grateful to Charles Lowe for his reference to this research in his CCCC 2000 presentation.