

Barnard, Ian. *Upsetting Composition Commonplaces*. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 2014. 181 pages. \$26.95. ISBN 978-0-87421-946-3. Print.

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In light of contemporary enthusiasm for empirical research on writing, Ian Barnard's *Upsetting Composition Commonplaces* might seem anachronistic in its promise to explore the implications of poststructuralist theory for composition studies. Wouldn't such a text fit more neatly in the same era as Lester Faigley's *Fragments of Rationality* (Barnard's acknowledged influence for the book), and not two decades later? What might teachers of writing *do* with the notoriously tricky poststructuralist theories of subjectivity and epistemology? Barnard has already anticipated such questions, and he makes a compelling case that attending to poststructuralist theory in composition might actually benefit our teaching and our students. His book will appeal to teachers and scholars as a resource for troubling and rethinking the terminology and assumptions underpinning how we teach writing and engage students.

Barnard begins by outlining the contributions of poststructuralist theory to composition's articulation of subjectivity, authorship, and the deconstruction of the high/low binary separating literature and student writing. Composition, he argues, has forgotten (or rather never integrated) these "axioms" of poststructuralism, and as a result the field continues to portray writing according to classical and romantic paradigms of authorship, audience, and identity. The primary task of Barnard's book, then, is to explore how applying these axioms might transform composition pedagogy, particularly in how we frame some of the most commonly used terms in our research and teaching. Each of the six main chapters focuses on a key concept or "commonplace" in composition: clarity, intent, voice, ethnography, audience, and objectivity. The chapters are organized similarly but vary in research methods. Each chapter

explores iterations of the commonplace in contemporary composition, poststructuralist challenges to that commonplace, and the pedagogical possibilities of adopting a new understanding of that commonplace. To support his analysis and explain his pedagogical suggestions, Barnard employs multiple forms of evidence, including analysis of textbooks and scholarship, a survey of writing faculty at his institution, his students' writing, and assignments from his classes.

As a reader I connected most strongly to the chapters exploring the commonplaces ingrained in my own teaching: clarity, intent, and audience. I use these terms frequently as a teacher, but Barnard's analysis reminded me how they are often employed in ways that devalue students' writing and ignore the reception of writing in the world. He makes a strong argument that simplistic definitions of these concepts actually limit and fix students' understandings of writing and meaning instead of making writing easier or more accessible for students.

In the chapter on clarity, Barnard evaluates the advice that writers should write clearly, which almost always is framed in terms of style. To demonstrate the complexity of clarity, Barnard analyzes criticisms of the writing of critical theorists, including the "awards" for bad writing and critiques of theory by Richard Lanham, David Orr, and even Gerald Graff. After showing that such critiques often carry political and cultural agendas, he then turns his analysis to teaching, arguing that composition has reinforced this evaluation of writing style using the clear/unclear binary. In doing so, teachers and scholars often ignore the pleasure of reading complex texts, and perhaps unknowingly encourage students to simplify ideas as well as language. In one of the most compelling passages in the book, Barnard suggests that teachers might value students' supposedly "unclear" writing. He writes,

Surely inexpert complexity is preferable to expert simplicity if it is indicative of intellectual wrestling and scholarly ambition rather than the complacency of comfort. Sometimes writing that 'doesn't work' is still interesting

and productive. Why pretend that we aren't sometimes entranced by writing that is mysterious, enigmatic, or illogical—by writing over which the writer/reader does not always have complete control? (36)

This passage epitomizes Barnard's approach in other chapters, all of which ask what might happen for teachers and students if we stopped ignoring the instability of meaning in texts and the constructive role of readers.

The chapters on intent and audience further articulate these ideas, and Barnard argues persuasively that commonplaces in our pedagogy can inhibit students as they attempt to write. After showing how faculty survey responses and composition textbooks privilege the writer's intentions for a text and advise students to address an imaginary, always skeptical audience, each chapter then offers suggestions for engaging students in a discussion of these terms in the classroom. In his chapter on intent, Barnard suggests that teachers might benefit from avoiding framing revision as a realization of the writer's original intentions for a text; instead, he proposes teaching revision as a process of revising intentions as well as writing, while also recognizing that the writer's intent is always up for revision by readers. Similarly, in the chapter on audience Barnard contrasts the common advice that writers should imagine themselves appealing to an audience of rational skeptics. Whether such audiences exist is obviously debatable; however, Barnard further suggests we direct students to the ways some writers flout such advice, presenting themselves as hostile and unconcerned with persuading the audience. Suggesting we might engage students in analyzing the influence and reception of texts that refuse to appeal to an audience, Barnard offers several short assignment prompts in this chapter that ask students to play with this notion. For example, students might compose a research paper to an audience that already agrees with their assumptions about an issue, or students might write an analysis of a text that employs anger or hostile emotional appeals.

Barnard's chapter on voice traces the problematic connection between voice and notions of authenticity, arguing that, "demands for 'authenticity' can also be used to police identity" (69). By acknowledging and analyzing the identity politics inherent in notions of voice and authenticity, students might get a better sense of the strategies involved in choosing to construct a particular voice rather than falling back on limited notions of finding an authentic voice. At the end of this chapter, Barnard describes an activity he gives to students asking them to reflect on a recent debate they entered on social media, to characterize the features that constitute their voice, and to contrast that voice with other voices they adopt in other texts. As this activity shows, Barnard never advocates a total rejection of the commonplaces he discusses; rather, he proposes that the term can become a critical lens through which students and writers might look at writing as less stable and more open to play than is often presented to them.

Barnard's discussions of ethnography and objectivity may be the most controversial of his six commonplaces. The chapter on ethnography brings awareness to the prevalent critiques of ethnography in anthropology, and Barnard argues that given such critiques composition should advocate critical ethnographic methods in teaching and research. His students' multimodal ethnographic projects sounded fascinating, but his final injunction implores instructors to teach ethnography as "its own critique" (107). That advice may leave teachers wondering why they should bother teaching ethnography in the first place if it serves no other purpose than to critique its own methodology. Although I do not conduct ethnographic research, I do know that what counts as "ethnography," especially in disciplines outside of anthropology, varies widely, and that the term itself has been debated and redefined. Barnard does not define ethnography in the chapter, and so I imagine that composition scholars and teachers who do employ ethnographic methods may find some points of contention with this chapter. However, the description of Barnard's pedagogy and his students' projects is worth reading for teachers using ethnography assignments in their writing classrooms who

seek to help students learn to engage critical questions about the role of the ethnographer and the politics of observing and writing about others.

The chapter on objectivity raises important concerns about the methods composition is often forced to use to assess writing classes and programs. Quantitative assessment, testing, and timed essay writing are pervasive in higher education, but most composition scholars and teachers will likely already agree with Barnard's critique, making this chapter unique in that it describes a commonplace outside of composition. Barnard's discussion of objectivity, however, also touches upon advice given to students to take a neutral or objective stance when evaluating and analyzing texts they read. He also points to the distinction drawn between summary and analysis or argument in writing, noting that textbooks often frame summary as an accurate (and by implication, objective) representation of the author's beliefs. I frequently ask students to "withhold judgment" or set aside their personal opinions when they analyze texts, both of which imply that students should seek objectivity as an ideal goal. After pointing out the impossibility of this stance for any reader, Barnard advocates integrating personal narrative and story into composition assignments through hybrid genres that challenge the dominance of supposedly objective research-based argumentative assignments that exclude the personal.

Although Barnard's six chapters cover a range of contemporary pedagogical issues in composition, his introduction also describes other commonplaces he might have explored using his analytical framework. Three short sections discuss how upsetting commonplaces might help us rethink plagiarism, the continued preference for print alphabetic texts, and the dominance of standard US English in composition classrooms. I actually wish he had explored these three commonplaces in full-length chapters, because his short discussion of each made me curious about his own pedagogical approach to these important and current discussions in composition. I hope that Barnard returns to these topics in future work.

The focus of *Upsetting Composition Commonplaces* remains on major ideas in composition theory and pedagogy. As a result, Barnard pays little attention to current institutional and political constraints on the classroom space. I found the absence of any sustained institutional critique odd given the field's widespread concern with labor issues and Barnard's reliance on the scholarship of Susan Miller, Bruce Horner, and Sharon Crowley, all of whom attend to how institutional spaces constrain the work of composition. The question remains, then, about how we might transform commonplaces in the teaching of writing when state and federal governments place many demands on public education to prove its value in quantitative terms and academic labor continues to be devalued and undercompensated. Composition has always had difficulty applying theory because so few of those who teach writing have had previous or continuous exposure to composition scholarship. No doubt Barnard is aware of these issues, but he probably also knows that many of his final conclusions, including the argument that grades should perhaps be dispensed with, will obviously not be realized in the current higher education "market." As he states in his conclusion, contradictions in his argument and pedagogy necessarily exist.

As a teacher I found Barnard's analysis timely and valuable. Before I read Barnard's book, I probably would have said I do a good job teaching students to complicate ideas about clarity, audience, and purpose. But in reading his analysis, I realized that I do not always have a clear idea about the purpose or value of complicating those ideas. *Upsetting Composition Commonplaces* offers a way to convey abstract notions about authorship and subjectivity so that students can learn to play with language and the roles available to them as readers and writers. Barnard does not complicate composition simply to follow some theoretical paradigm. Rather, he does so because he wants students to see how writers, readers, and texts are mediated and interpreted in the world. This perspective is valuable particularly for new teachers and graduate instructors in training, but the analytical framework may also help more experienced teachers and scholars

see ways to connect theory and practice in their work. Barnard is right, I think, that purpose, author, and audience play a large role in contemporary pedagogy, and those terms are often superficial constructs for students, especially when they view writing primarily as a classroom activity. While it may be impossible or even undesirable to abandon the structure of the rhetorical triangle completely, we can all find some value in teaching students, as Barnard puts it, “that writing (noun and verb) contains and creates many different meanings” and offers opportunities for exploring “the promotion of play and the possibilities of language in all its indeterminacy” (154).

