

**Harris, Joseph. *The Work of Teaching Writing: Learning Fiction, Film, and Drama*. Logan, Utah State University Press.**

Reviewed by Elizabeth Geib, Harry Denny, and Isaac Wang

We write in an extraordinary moment where the events of the world threaten to overwhelm us. Since March 2020, each of us has been, mostly, geographically close and distant all at the same time, caring about family, friends, colleagues, and our ongoing teaching and learning. We bear witness to the pain and anger of our BIPOC brothers and sisters as we collectively challenge institutional and systemic racism, even as incidents of domestic terrorism against them open new wounds seemingly every day. We imagine ways of holding true to how we teach in writing centers, classrooms, and communities, when the core practices of mentoring and collaborating one-to-one are both a viral threat and pedagogical challenge. We wonder how the mediated instead of tactile connections will influence how learners, peers, and clients will reach us—something real, intangible is lost when writers can't gather between a paper or a laptop, hashing out an issue together. It's like trying to replicate the live theatre experience of *Hamilton* by streaming the musical on Disney Plus. Close, but no.

Joseph Harris' *The Work of Teaching Writing* gleans lessons from popular, dramatic, and literary representations of teacher-student interactions. Perhaps now more than ever, instructors search for innovative ways for understanding how teaching and writing circulate in popular culture and disseminate back into the classroom. Harris cautions against the well-worn path of critique for critique's sake when it comes to texts and media taking up our ordinary pedagogical practices. Instead, Harris turns to what books, movies, and plays can say about our teaching: "how do others understand what I am trying to accomplish? How do they represent the experience of learning to write? How can I draw on the screens and stories they offer in rethinking my own work with student writers?" (3). Harris sets out to address these questions by taking a

generous-over-skeptical approach, analyzing and comparing popular texts that represent student-teacher exchanges on/about writing, and locating collaborative efforts of writing as unique processes. We appreciate and share investment in Harris' project, but we have concerns about whether its intent and reception play out well. On one level, Harris attempts to discover patterns in how literature, drama, and film represent the teaching of writing, but on another level, the project attempts a critical analysis of these (visual/performed) documents that departs from a core attention to what readers would want to learn about the representation of writing pedagogy. Harris starts out with a clear goal to teach his audience about the pedagogical possibilities of thinking with representations around teaching and the teaching of writing. We expected to learn about creative portrayals of teacher-student dynamics around learning to write; instead, Harris turns more to an aesthetic discussion, not one rooted in ideological or pragmatic interpretations of teaching.

Harris opens with his take on popular films, mostly from the late 1990's and early 2000's, by dedicating special attention to moments of dialogue around writing. He suggests we shift our focal point of "poor" representations of writing and teaching to partial understandings—how might we push *Dead Poets Society* further so that the narrative doesn't just favor enthusiastic motivation as the key to good teaching? How, as teachers, can we recognize a partial representation and push beyond a defensive critique of representation? Perhaps skepticism can be paired with productivity. Harris offers a few forms of "intellectual work" that we might look for instead of solely misrepresentation: when students actually compose texts, when teachers respond and encourage growth in student writing, and when students revise and show evidence of learning.

Following his focus on popular film representation, Harris next focuses on stages of the writing process. These three chapters embody a heftier analytical approach and altered organizational structure. Although the plays and novels are analyzed in vivid detail, the analysis-focused structure may undermine the overarching

objective of locating productive teaching and learning moments to help us better understand popular representations of the work we do as teachers and responders of writing. The overarching point of these three chapters seemingly suggests that conversation and growth is important— teachers should *talk with* instead of *talk at* their students. However, by pin-pointing a few glimpses of productive writing exchanges through a few novels and plays, those singular acts don't tell us much on a grander scale. In Alan Bennett's *The History Boys*, for instance, we learn about failures in the teaching styles of three teachers preparing schoolboys for exams. While Harris goes into detailed analysis of the play's plot and points to the lack of hallmarks of effective pedagogy, he criticizes *The History Boys* for *telling* us about writing instead of *showing* how writing happens, how collaborative writing can be between students and teachers, and how dialogic writing is. Harris also turns to *Up the Down Staircase* as a point of contrast, a film described in a similar level of detail and limited discussion. The book works from the position that analyzing representations of teaching and learning to write in popular texts provides models for instructors about productive pedagogy. Each chapter, however, ends with a short summative wrap-up discussion and slights a deep discussion of implications for teaching and learning around writing. What does an analysis of *The History Boys* really tell us about how we're teaching, what we're teaching, and what we could learn through a comparison of other analyzed texts? Although vivid and detailed, we worry that the textual analysis undermines important connections that circle back to Harris's core attention to pedagogical lessons.

The project closes with an analysis of rhetorical limitations. Harris focuses on textual examples from Plato's *Phaedrus* and Peter Dimock's *A Short Rhetoric for Leaving the Family*, two texts which obviously don't depict conventional classroom instruction on student writing. Instead, Harris uses them to highlight a need to listen to students and their work. Overgeneralized theories on writing, Harris cautions, can sideline the unique writing needs of individual students. While Harris critiques sweeping generalizations about the teaching of writing, his closing lessons for

each chapter reinscribe that very rhetorical move, rather than making space for deeper synthesis allowing readers to take up his analysis on their own terms. For example, Plato and Dimock serve for Harris as culminating examples to highlight his takeaway: “That theory gains its value in the act of teaching, or responding to student work” (120). Such aphorisms are hard to argue against, but we wonder what a speculative opening might offer. Teachers have much to learn, Harris notes, about lived experiences represented in fictionalized narratives. As readers, his argument turns our eye towards Harris’s epistemology, the currency of the book’s fodder for critical analysis, and all of its pedagogical relevance to our present moment. We also see Harris’ thinking as an invitation to practice for ourselves a generous critical reading over a purely rhetorical one.

In concept, Harris’ work feels like a callback to older traditions within composition studies. While the field has increasingly valued empirical research as a way of producing knowledge, which would lead one to produce a content analysis or grounded theory, Harris uses textual analysis to understand the work of teaching writing. Undergirding methodology in this book is the metaphor of texts as “*machines to think with*,” a concept borrowed from literary critic and rhetorician I.A. Richards (qtd. in Harris 5). Rather than viewing texts as objects of analysis, Harris wants to think *with* texts and stories in order to produce knowledge. While teachers of writing typically pull from theories of rhetoric or discourse in creating pedagogy, Harris suggests that stories showing “the lived experience of teaching” (6) offer an opportunity to reimagine our practices by bringing in voices from outside of the typical academic conversation.

Although Harris’ approach of thinking with texts and stories has potential, his book lets us down because both diversity and currency seem absent from the book’s sampling of representations of teaching and writing. Harris is right about the value of listening to how “others understand what I’m trying to accomplish.” By looking at texts that show moments of teaching from “outsider” perspectives, there is an opportunity to defamiliarize ourselves with

what is often too close to see and push through the blindness towards established paradigms. However, in thinking with texts to create knowledge and practices that support teachers and writers from diverse backgrounds, care must be taken in the selection of texts. The field of writing studies has been white and continues to be white. In thinking with text in any context, we need to listen to BIPOC, disabled, LGTBQIA+, and other marginalized voices whenever taking up issues in composition. We need to make space for always complicating the insidious and hegemonic nature of critical analysis as unmarked or normalized. When Harris references *The History Boys*, he criticizes Bennet for favoring the banking model of writing, but Harris also misses the opportunity to discuss how sexuality contextualizes the characters' writing situations. The boys' internalized lessons were undoubtedly received within a student-teacher power dynamic, especially considering Hector's sexual pass at them. Other characters explore, confront, and out their sexuality all while teaching, learning, and/or writing. By including *The History Boys*, Harris is partially responding to our call for needing more marginalized voices. But a marginalized presence alone isn't enough. What if instead of pointing out that the teachers in the play can only teach writing effectively as co-instructors, we instead ask why that might be? Maybe, the presence of their sexuality feeds into their reliance on one another. Likely, the characters' writing lessons coincide with their personal experiences which, in turn, can provide insight for real-life writing instructors on how identity is often inseparable from what it means to teach writing.

We found ourselves frustrated with the selection of the project's textual support. While some of the films, plays, and fiction cited in the book are timeless portrayals of the teaching of writing (e.g., *Good Will Hunting* and *Precious*), it's unlikely the author's imagined audience will connect to many of his references. Harris, who powerfully challenges writing instructors to imagine communities for our rhetoric with our students in *A Teaching Subject*, moves toward analysis that doesn't leverage shared experiences or widely read representations of writing instruction. How might looking at

Mark Lamont Hill's *Beats, Rhymes, and Classroom Life* resonate with an audience differently than Harris' use of *The Plural I*? How would Maris de la Luz Reyes' collection *Words Were All We Had* shift the way we think about languaging practices, oppression, and empowerment? Maybe even the mentoring moments captured in *Stranger Things*, *Moonlight*, and *Black Panther*? In the context of Black Lives Matter protests, instructors might see the CW network's *All American* as a narrative to think *with* when addressing ties to everyday racism within the education system: How do the characters' personal identities and the sociopolitical conversations surrounding them connect to what they're learning and writing? We're in a moment where collective action and division are widespread, and virality is literally a cover term for the time. To meet the need for in-the-moment, conversational, and collaborative writing pedagogy, we have to move beyond historically popular texts that feed into orthodox notions of writing and the writing process.

Thinking with stories is hard. Thinking with stories that bring in voices that are not heard in academic conversations around writing is harder. And the challenge of choosing stories to think *with* is—like most things—affected by positionality. Those who write, think, and teach from marginalized identities are more likely to have access to texts that show visions outside of mainstream or normalized positions, but these same people may not recognize those texts as speaking to the work of writing or teaching. Minority people might exile themselves from the landscape of pedagogy because it views them as so exterior and uninviting to their experiences. On the other hand, those with more privilege (i.e., cis white folks) may not know or have access to the stories of those on the margins. In the introduction to their collection *Rhetorics of Whiteness*, Tammie Kennedy, Joyce Middleton, and Krista Ratcliffe argue that white bodies, white rhetorics, white identities haunt words like “writing” and “writer” (5). It is this haunting whiteness that often makes it challenging to select the texts that actually have the potential to fracture the hegemonic lens of writing pedagogy. For these two groups of folks, the work of selecting texts to think

with is different. For those on the margins, the ways that whiteness has haunted the work of composition must be recognized so that we can see our texts as speaking to the work of composition. Those with privilege must learn to listen and ally as grounds for their advocacy.

One last criticism we share as teachers, scholars, and leaders in writing centers: We can't help but find ourselves frustrated that the teaching of writing is restricted in its imagination. Why are discussions and analysis of teaching always so deeply focused on the classroom diad and so infrequently speculating about other instructional methods just as dramatic and fraught, like workshop discussion, the seminar debate, or conferencing? Why must teaching and the teaching of writing be imagined as racial/ethnic/generational power dynamic, inevitably reifying institutional and systemic binaries of white/racial-ethnic minorities, older/younger, and cisgender female/cisgender male (or vice versus)? What's the place for peer mentoring, collaborative learning, and authorship that's shared? What about the mentoring of writing across cultures, disciplines, communities, and media? We recognize that Harris participates in the field's larger sidetracking of how writing happens beyond English, beyond the composition classroom. We want to know more about how those dynamics might grant visibility for writing centers, peer consultants, and writing across communities. Harris thinks of the Stephanie Land memoir *Maid*, where she recounts her life in poverty, domestic work, and love of writing. He thinks of the mentoring occasions that pedagogy in the *X-Men* series, or even the peer consulting around sex education and interracial same-sex romantic relationships in the Netflix series *Sex Education*. The postmodern pastiche of *Riverdale* depicts elements of student-centered learning, whereas the students in *13 Reasons Why* signify the advocacy, angst, and critical reasoning we all recognize in our educational contexts. Each series features teachers who aren't trustworthy figures or allies, let alone exist as people with whom students could imagine collaborating. We think about how *The Hate*

*U Give* challenges viewers to understand the racialized and privileged components of how teaching is experienced.

We think of the lessons that Michele Eodice, Anne Geller, Neal Lerner, share with us in *The Meaningful Writing Project*: Students hunger for personal connection, intense engagement with teaching faculty, and writing exercises that are relevant. Harris' analysis might be more evocative were it to imagine how texts of various media index hip-hop music to enable the meshing of learning from one's community and education. We agree with Harris's main premise—that popular texts have much to say about the work of teaching writing. Harris reminds us of a very important lesson: We need to better locate how films, novels, and theatre can influence and challenge our pedagogies, how we talk with students, and encourage their growth as writers. As Harris notes, literary analysis on popular texts too often serves as a defense of poor representations of teachers teaching writing. Just as we often teach our students to rhetorically think with and respond to texts, we should do the same. We do worry, however, that Harris's insights circulate within a time capsule, making his analysis and focus on student-teacher feedback not in tune with today's pedagogical practices. Students often turn to friends, parents/guardians, tutors, and mentors for writing help. If the primary focus is to truly understand what popular texts have to say about writing, then student-teacher exchanges are only partial, imperfect pieces to that quest. If popular texts are to have an impact on instructors and students, they need to resonate so that writing connects to their internal and external worlds.

We wonder what the next iteration of popular culture representation will have for teaching and learning around writing, when today's intense experiences with video conferences, asynchronous interactions, and conferencing across face masks and plexiglass dividers become common referents for instructors and students. Will the moments of writing consultants side by side with peers or the shuffle of papers and laptops between writers become themselves antiquated signifiers? Will future new teachers and tutors look at us as quizzically, wondering, "What's all that physical



proximity and exchanging about?” We hope that cherished aspects of writing pedagogy will continue post-COVID, but that depends on a return to the delivery of education that seems deeply in doubt today.

### Works Cited

- Bennett, Alan. *History Boys*. Directed by Nicholas Hytner. Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2006.
- Blair, April, creator. *All American*. Berlanti Productions, 2018.
- Black Panther*. Directed by Ryan Coogler. Marvel Studios, 2018.
- Cole, William E., Jr. *The Plural I: The Teaching of Writing*. New York, Holt, 1978.
- Dimock, Peter. *A Short Rhetoric for Leaving the Family*. Mclean, IL, Dalkey Archive Press, 1990.
- Duffer, Matt and Ross Duffer, creators. *Stranger Things*. Netflix, 2016.
- Eodice, Michele, Anne Geller, and Neal Lerner. *The Meaningful Writing Project: Learning, Teaching, and Writing in Higher Education*. Utah State University Press, 2017.
- Good Will Hunting*. Directed by Gus Van Sant. Miramax, 1997.
- Harris, Joseph. *The Work of Teaching Writing: Learning from Fiction, Film, and Drama*. Utah State University Press, 2020.
- Harris, Joseph. *A Teaching Subject: Composition Since 1966*. New ed. Utah State University Press, 2012.
- Harris, Joseph. *Rewriting: How to do Things with Texts*. University Press of Colorado, 2006.
- The Hate U Give*. Directed by George Tillman, Jr. Fox 2000 Pictures, 2018.
- Hill, Mark Lamont. *Beats, Rhymes, and Classroom Life: Hip-Hop Pedagogy and the Politics of Identity*. New York, Teachers College Press, 2009.
- Kennedy, Tammie M., Joyce Irene Middleton, and Krista Ratcliffe. “Introduction: Oxymoronic Whiteness—From the White House to Ferguson.” In *Rhetorics of Whiteness: Postracial Hauntings in Popular Culture, Social Media, and Education*. Edited by Tammie M. Kennedy, Joyce Irene Middleton, and Krista Ratcliffe, Southern Illinois University Press, 2017, pp. 1-16.
- Kirkland, David. “The Skin We Ink: Tattoos, Literacy, and a New English Education.” *English Education*, vol. 41, no. 4, 2009, pp. 375-95.
- Land, Stephanie. *Maid: Hard Work, Low Pay, and a Mother’s Will to Survive*. Hachette Books, 2018.
- Moonlight*. Directed by Barry Jenkins. A24, 2016

Nunn, Laurie, creator. *Sex Education*. Eleven Film, 2019.

Plato. *Phaedrus*. Translated by Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff. Indianapolis, Hackett, 1995.

*Precious*. Directed by Lee Daniels. Lionsgate, 2009.

Reyes, Marie de la, editor. *Words Were All We Had: Becoming Biliterate Against the Odds*. Teachers College Press, 2011.

Richards, I. A. *Principles of Literary Criticism*. New York, Routledge, 1924/2001.

Yorkey, Brian, creator. *13 Reasons Why*. Netflix, 2017.