

## Chapter 9

### Enacting the Active Mind

#### Teaching English, Teaching Teaching

Despite his insistence that we make students aware of the principle *scribo, ego sum*—I produce texts, therefore I am—Professor Scholes and all the rest of us have stopped short of the next step: a recognition that the *classroom* is also a text, produced by teacher and student in collaboration. There is a semiotics of *that* text, too, and it is time we studied it. . . . Why do we talk about what texts we should teach, ignoring the one text we must *all* teach: our own action in the classroom. —Susan R. Horton

This chapter will bring the tradition of active learning up to the current moment in two complementary ways. I will discuss how I have tried to embody its ideas in my own teaching and at the same time relate these ideas to recent thinking in literary, philosophical, and psychological theory. One of the main arguments of this book has been that ideas about education have to be put into practice if they are to be made viable and complete. Only by enacting them can we see their full implications and begin to further clarify them. Otherwise they are only shadows on the walls of our cave, solipsistic soliloquies.

The ideas that have more fully shaped my own discipline of literary studies in the past thirty years are sometimes grouped under the umbrella of poststructuralism, which

takes aim at the very notion of interpreting. To offer an interpretation of a text is to inflict violence upon it, to impose one's own will, to project a coherence that the text could not possibly have. This polysemous quality is due not to the particularly ambiguous and emotive nature of literary language as earlier critics had posited, but to the nature of language itself, more accurately viewed as a field of competing meanings with nodes that tend to untie themselves on closer inspection. As a set of ideas, I felt that these had great potential to open up the classroom in more student-centered, democratic, negotiatory ways.

It was naïve of me to think that a new set of ideas about texts would of itself lead to new ways of teaching. Even before these ideas appeared there was already widespread assent that literature is emotional as well as cognitive, but we rarely allow time and space for the expression of feelings. We acknowledge that literature generates a number of divergent responses, but in the classroom we usually work to get to some kind of convergence or closure before the period ends. We sense the complexities of how reading and writing have individual and creative dimensions, yet insist on ranking students through single numerical grades.

The situation crystallized for me when during a series of job interviews I asked the candidates, most of whom were still in graduate school, if their more theoretically advanced teachers ran their classrooms any differently from their more traditional ones. It seemed that at what are considered the more prestigious graduate schools, the structures of authority in the classroom itself, the ways in which students and teachers interacted—or did not interact—remained untouched. Despite poststructural skepticism about the validity of any single interpretation, despite insights about the transactional and

subjective aspects of the reading process, teachers of graduate students more often than not droned on themselves—often about these very ideas—without enacting any of them. While a rhetoric that was more politically radical entered our professional discourse, it seemed that we were merely trying to outflank each other on the left by articulating the most knowing and anti-authoritarian ideas in print while ignoring the very actualities of our lives as teachers.

If there was one aspect of the new developments that I felt had the most potential for uniting practice and pronouncements, it was reader-response theory. This theory, which shared the poststructuralist sense that there is no univocal meaning embedded in the text, looked to two Americans for its base, Louise Rosenblatt and Stanley Fish. I remember having been encouraged to think along these lines in 1970 by a British critic usually not associated with the approach. I had heard a provocative lecture by Frank Kermode comparing Henry James's "The Turn of the Screw" to an "impossible object," one of those optical illusions that can be "read" in two contradictory ways, as, say a cube with either its rear or its front side protruding, or a fork with either two or three prongs. The illusion works because our eye and mind transform what is on one level a two-dimensional object into a three dimensional construct and there are at least two different ways to do this. Analogously, we do not merely absorb a similarly flat literary text but actively imagine it, creating a construct that is based on our previous experiences, satisfying in some ways, and internally coherent. No side in "The Turn of the Screw" debate, Kermode suggested, neither those who see the ghosts as the governess' hallucination nor those who see them as real within the frame of the story, has been able to defeat the other because James seems to have deliberately constructed the story as a

platform for both possibilities. Although this story may seem a special case—James himself called it “a piece of ingenuity pure and simple. . . an *amulette* to catch those not easily caught” (1984, pp. 1184-85)—I felt similar processes happening with every work I taught. Students were selectively perceiving different parts of the same text. I began to ask myself questions such as: Were all of these responses equally valid? As a teacher should one try to bring them to a sense of closure or let them all stand in their unresolved multiplicity and individuality? How much does the text itself control responses as opposed to how much each reader “pops out” or constructs that text as an imaginative unity?

When reader response criticism broke most noticeably on the scene with the appearance in 1980 of two well-conceived anthologies, *Reader Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, edited by Jane Tompkins and *The Reader in the Text: Essays in Audience and Interpretation*, edited by Susan Suleiman and Inge Crosman, I read them avidly for answers. There was considerable intellectual excitement in the way theorists like Wolfgang Iser, Stanley Fish, and Norman Holland were able to reconceptualize the reading process, but I still felt a lack of concrete texture, of specific analyses. What these writers gave with one hand, the idea that meaning is created in the interaction of reader and text, they took away with the other, as it remained only an idea. Instead of actual readers, we encountered “the implied reader,” “the ideal reader,” “the narratee,”—arguably as much constructs of the isolated critic as any single interpretation of the text itself. At this point I began to wonder if the best laboratory, the most dependable source of data, might not be the classroom itself.

With these questions in mind, and the hope of bringing into graduate education a course that would relate theory to classroom practice, I began teaching “Theory and the Teaching of Literature.” This course was built around a beginning undergraduate course that we all taught together. We met for the hour immediately after each undergraduate class to share our perceptions and analyses of it, to relate it to theories we had read or formulated ourselves, to plan the next class in the light of all this, and to form new hypotheses that would be confirmed, denied or qualified by what we were to see in that next class. We also read carefully and often as a group the undergraduates’ papers and other written responses, so in effect the undergraduate class, both in its oral and written dimensions, became the main “text” for the graduate course. I hoped to get both the graduate students and myself to read that text with the same kinds of passionate attention and theoretical conceptualizing that we expect for the best readings of literary texts.

The first time I taught the course I made the mistake of running the undergraduate course myself for the first couple of weeks, to try to do some modeling and initiate the graduate students gradually. But I soon realized that with teaching as with most things, the only way to really learn is to do it oneself, and that the graduate students should jump in the water the very first day. One ability I hoped to teach the graduate students was to learn from mistakes. What I learned from this false start was the huge gap between my perceptions of my own lecturing and what was really going on, an immediate example of how important it is to have classroom observers not confined to the roles of teacher or student. As I lectured, I consistently saw upturned, interested faces. But I did not realize how much my looking affected the very behavior I was trying to see, how I was enacting the kind of distorted perception that John Holt described. It was primarily the graduate

students who were really absorbed in the lectures, not the undergraduates who were often more interested in doodling and writing letters.

It was not simply this perceptual difficulty that created the gap between my sense of the classes and the graduate students' collective account of them. The difference also has to do with the inherent distance between talking and listening, between being able to move about and being confined to a seat, between being a lecturer and being a lecturee. I blush to say it, but I was never tired or bored by my own lectures. And yet I know I cannot keep my mind from wandering after about a half hour of someone else's lecture, no matter how good it is. As Bouton and Garth have pointed out, "The active role of the teacher in the traditional classroom contrasts sharply with the passive role of the students. It is not surprising that teaching is the best learning. The teacher's activity makes the traditional method a very effective method of learning—for the teacher" (1983, p. 78). This realization helped explain why often what I thought were the most brilliantly original parts of my lectures often lagged the most for the students. I was thinking things out for the first time, discovering what I had not fully seen before, but these ideas by their very nature were not yet in a form that was particularly clear or incisive to my listeners. These were also my most enthusiastic moments of lecturing, but clearly they were not the ones that created the most enthusiasm in the students. I mention this for those who think enthusiasm works like a virus: if the teacher is enthusiastic those in proximity will catch the bug. Although I feel that short, well-prepared lectures can be useful, it is also important to be aware that we are always embodying our values in the classroom by what we choose to do, and that to lecture is to value having thought over thinking, the transmission of knowledge over its making. Another recovering lecturer, Stephen Monk,

writes: “My TAs and I spent all the time telling students how we did mathematics. Their job was to imitate us when they did the homework. The message was that learning was to take place not on course time, but on their own time, away from teachers and away from one another” (1983, p. 8). The implication of all this—particularly as the graduate students began to do their own teaching—became evident. Why should we hoard all the wealth and shoulder all the responsibility? Why have just one person prepare to run a class when every student could benefit from such preparation.

When we turned to discussions with the entire group of forty undergraduates with one or two of the graduate students moderating, however, the results were often disappointing. We ran into the common problems of only a few students dominating the discussion, of lack of focus and analysis, of participants more concerned with their own points than listening to each other. We had more success when we split the class of forty into groups of six to eight; the fifteen graduate students paired off, one running the discussion, the other taking notes on the process, with the pair switching roles next class. Still, something was missing in terms of undergraduate involvement and initiative. We eventually came to what we called the structured and prepared discussion. The crucial move here is to have the undergraduates themselves prepare in writing for each class session. That informal writing, then, became the ticket of admission to the class discussion. If a student showed up without having done it, we would sit him or her down in a corner of the classroom to complete it right there and then. While this might sound punitive, we did find that the rock on which so many discussions wrecked was lack of student preparation. Not only is one working at less than full strength, but even the prepared students start to sign off in resentment at having all the work put on them alone.

All the discussion techniques and interpersonal skills we worked on were futile if the students had not read the text.

But the writing was much more than a check on the reading. It deepened, clarified, even created the students' response. For writing is not merely the setting down of what we already know, but itself a method of discovery, a cognitive tool. As we push our vague, fuzzy thoughts to precision, we find the very act of writing makes us articulate things we didn't know we knew. Before it is written out, our knowledge remains locked in our own subjectivity, shadowy and inert. As we shape it into words and sentences, it becomes more objective, something external that we ourselves can scrutinize, analyze, reshape. As W. H. Auden (1948) has said, "How can I know what I think till I see what I say?" (p. 172).

In an even deeper sense, my own experiences as a teacher and my reading in the tradition of the active mind have convinced me that knowledge is not truly one's own unless it is articulated. It has been said that you really don't know something unless you can articulate it; I would go further to say you really don't know it *until* you articulate it. In the past few years those who have wanted to reunite reading and writing in English studies have made the point often and convincingly that the act of reading and the act of writing are essentially both acts of interpretation; to construe is to construct, to understand is to invent. Writing about what one has read moves the whole process into a fuller dimension and make the act of reading more active, deliberate, intense, and more closely related to one's immediate experience.

As a forum and format for both the undergraduates' and our daily writings we adopted the notion of a dialectical journal from Ann Berthoff (1987), in which students

leave substantial room, either three inch margins or on the back of each page, to reread and write back to what they had written previously, keeping a kind of reflective, running dialogue with themselves. To this structure we also offered them a list of questions, usually asking them to focus on specifics in the text itself. The care and imagination with which we structured the journal questions was crucial. As the semester went on, we increasingly tried to become the first Montessori teachers at the university level. We brought to bear on constructing the questions all the insight and learning that we might otherwise have tried to dispense during the class hour itself, our greatest challenge being to make them structured and specific as well as open-ended. The problem with some “discovery” approaches is that what the students are supposed to discover is predetermined and carefully controlled; the fix is already in. To get around this problem, we as teachers tried to focus on the processes by which we as readers came to an understanding of the text--e.g., what words and images are repeated, what more becomes revealed in the first paragraph after one has read through the entire text, what effects are created by the syntax and rhythms of sentences—rather than on final interpretations. We asked each other what came to be known as the epistemological question: not what we know, but how we came to know it.

As an example of the kinds of questions we asked, here is the sequence on Wallace Stevens’ poem “Gubbinal” (1954, p. 16)

That strange flower, the sun,  
Is just what you say.  
Have it your way.

The world is ugly  
And the people are sad.

That tuft of jungle feathers,  
The animal eye,  
Is just what you say.

That savage of fire,  
The seed,  
Have it your way.

The world is ugly,  
And the people are sad.

*Please consider the following questions, but don't just answer them in order; try to relate your answers to each other. When you're finished, read what you've written and see what other insights and connections you can make.*

*In what ways can the sun be said to be a "strange flower"? How does this metaphor work for you? Similarly, what about the other images for the sun—"that tuft of jungle feathers," "that animal eye," "that savage of fire," "that seed"? Are the images related? Is there a progression through the poem? Why does the speaker say, "the world is ugly and the people are sad"? Why is it repeated? Is there more than one speaker? In what ways is the sun "just what you say"? What questions do you have here that you'd like to raise with the class?*

Earlier in my career I might have asked the class first what Stevens is suggesting here about the relation of language to perception. And I would have gotten the skimpy, vague generalities the question deserved. To say that this poem is about the power of articulation would not be wrong; it would just be banal and superficial. The questions ask the students not simply to find out what the poem means, to get to some bottom line, but to immerse themselves in it imaginatively. Questions about individual words and images are deliberately meant to make the reading more deliberate, to slow it down enough to allow the poem to resonate through the imagination. While there are no right answers to questions like “Are the images related? Is there a progression through the poem?” they are important in having the student see *how* one does or does not make meaning out of a poem. To ask, for example, how the sun is a strange flower, is to at once draw the students into the texture of the poem and to generate a series of disparate responses. Some students seize upon the visual qualities of an orb that appears to radiate lines, as in a child’s drawing of the sun. Others are more emotive, talking about feelings of natural freshness they associate with both, others more conceptual and scientific as they talk about both participating in cycles or growing from small beginnings. Even students who see no resemblances can help to underscore how the sun can be described as a *strange* flower. The very act of producing and sharing responses gives the students an intrinsic, ambulatory knowledge of what it means to say the “sun/Is just what you say,” a knowledge that they can then be asked to articulate.

As we have seen throughout this book, generalizations about how metaphor works or how language can alter our sense of the world are intelligible to the student only to the extent that these ideas emerge from and relate back to their own experiences of metaphor

and language. Stevens's writing, like that of other participants in the tradition of active learning, is particularly helpful in easing students into the journaling situation for several reasons. As the discussion above suggests, his poetry tends towards self-reflection; in a playful way it examines its own workings. Although most poetry does this to some extent, Stevens' work is particularly aggressive in challenging and involving the reader as a participant in the making of meaning. As David Walker (1984) has noted, a Stevens poem often is "a poem whose rhetoric establishes its own incompleteness; it is presented not as completed discourse but as a structure that invites the reader to project himself or herself into its world, and thus to verify it as contiguous with reality" (p. 18). Further, Stevens writes at a level of difficulty that is just beyond the grasp of most students when they first read the poems, yet comes just within their reach as they begin writing about them; Stevens once wrote: "Poetry must resist the intelligence almost successfully" (1957/1989, p.197). In response to questions about Stevens' poems, many students begin with a statement to the effect that they have no idea what is going on and then proceed to write a couple of pages that contain some powerful insights. Indeed, it was exciting for us as teachers to see a student's mind unfold through the course of a journal entry and the course of a semester. One frequent movement is the students' increasing use of them to work out things for themselves—mnemonics such as diagrams, charts, drawings appear more often. A related trend is that the individual entries get longer, far beyond what a student would have to write just to fulfill the assignment.

To say more about the relation of the journals to other kinds of course writing, I must recount one of our perennial surprises in the graduate class, the dullness of the students' first formal papers compared to their earlier journals. If we had only the formal

papers to go on, as most teachers do, we would come to the same harsh judgment—that students cannot read, write, think critically, or whatever students are currently not supposed to be able to do. As in the classroom itself, to measure something is to change it. And whatever pleas and disclaimers we make before the papers are due, the situation itself activates the mindset with which students have approached the task in previous courses. Students who are lively and original in their journals—and most of them become so quickly—suddenly revert to a style that is stilted, tentative, wordy, and vacuous. We get introductions that begin with the nature of the universe and funnel down to some nearly tautological thesis statement, conclusions that merely reprint the topic sentence of each previous paragraph. The act of writing often becomes again for students an adversarial situation, where the goal is to get as quickly as possible through the minefield with the minimum of red ink exploding in your face.

After our initial shock we have found ways to ease our students into the formal writing situation more naturally, having them read their drafts out loud to each other and revise them in small groups. But the disparities between the journals and the essays are instructive, and the reasons for them go beyond the procrustean forms of organization which many students are taught and the error-centered approach by which they are graded. More fundamental are the premature demands placed on student writing for something called “clarity.” When I go over papers and point out to students some elements in the text that run counter to their thesis, a frequent response is: “Well, I saw that, but it would have wrecked my whole paper to put it in.” In our demands that students be immediately intelligible at breakneck speed, we often encourage their own impatience with complexities and contradictions, with the hard work of thinking. The

situation is exacerbated when writing becomes a separate course isolated from genuine academic inquiry and is narrowly focused on issues of form and rhetorical strategy. If the student is not actively engaged in learning something new but forced to write, say, a description of a dorm room or a comparison-contrast paper on “anything,” the prose, however neat and correct, is going to be deadly. The views of David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky (1986) are a welcome alternative:

It’s this lesson that we want to teach students: that reading and writing begin in confusion, anxiety and uncertainty; that they are driven by chance and intuition as much as they are by deliberate strategy or conscious intent; and that certainty and authority are postures, features of performance that are achieved through an act of speaking or writing; they are not qualities of vision that precede such performance. (p. 105)

In helping students learn to write, then, we do not want them to excise their most problematical writing but instead to push even harder on those cruxes where the deepest kinds of insights are likely to emerge.

Even when we began using student writing to structure the classes we underestimated or overlooked some of the ways it intensified the classroom experience. At an early stage, for example, we wrote an assignment on Denise Levertov’s “Stepping Westward” asking detailed questions only of the first half of the poem. We hypothesized that once the discussion pump was primed, it would keep flowing, and we could do the rest of the analysis right in class. The results were disastrously instructive. All the air hissed out of the discussion as soon as we came to the end of the questions; the second half of the class turned into one of those awkward tooth-pulling sessions we all dread. It

seemed that the actual writing created a depth of response in the undergraduates that was difficult to replicate with a section of the text on which they had not written, no matter how well the discussion started. How, then, did the journals shape class discussions? We found that not only did the number of students participating increase, but that the conversation was particularly deepened by the additional voices. Normally, the students who talk in class are not necessarily the best thinkers, just the quickest or glibbest. Preparing the journal assignments gave the more deliberate thinkers a chance to articulate and rehearse their ideas, making them far more ready to speak on their own. Further, the act of writing gave them more of a stake in the discussion, increased their commitment to positions they had formed. And if, as often happens, some of the brightest students are also the shyest or least self-assured, the worksheets made it easier to call on them or draw them out in other ways with a minimum of embarrassment. We frequently began classes by going around the group having each student say in a couple of sentences—or read from their writing if they preferred—what they felt their most significant discovery was. In terms of process, this broke the ice—everyone had already spoken—and in terms of content it put a number of fruitful, provoking, conflicting positions on the table.

A question that came up frequently in the graduate class was whether it should be a primary goal to have every student speak. If the discussion among a portion of the students is animated and productive, why push to include everyone? Our eventual answer was analogous to the reasons for having everyone write: one learns more by articulating than just absorbing. Even students who spoke only once or twice a class seemed to be more engaged than those who try to be just bystanders. Further, there are times in the rhythms of learning when one wants to generate as many and as widely

divergent responses as possible, and what one gets from a handful of talkers cannot compare in richness to a symphony from the entire class.

Beyond written work there were other techniques and strategies we found helpful for discussions. More often than not, it was a matter of giving up bad habits than of learning a new set of complex skills. One of these widespread habits is the hidden agenda, where the teacher really has his or her own points to make, but tries to pull them out of student discussion instead of saying them directly. Although the agenda itself may be hidden, the fact that there is one soon becomes apparent as student comments are either reinforced or rejected in accordance with their proximity to the teacher's line of thought and not examined in the open marketplace of class reaction. Even when teachers renounce their own agendas, they often retain some vestigial habits that inhibit open discussion. The most common is the feeling that they must make some kind of response to every student comment, to pass judgment or acknowledge in some other way—even with just an uh-huh—what every student says. This blocks the normal flow of discussion by making the teacher a kind of central switchboard to which all comments are addressed and only then sent back out to the rest of the class. We called this the ping-pong effect, where the ball bounces monotonously back and forth from teacher to class to teacher again. What we were striving for was something more like volleyball. Having the students move their chairs into a circle does help somewhat, but will not entirely solve the problem. Just as we are used to speaking in response to each comment, students are used to speaking directly only to us as teachers. Sometimes we found it helpful to explicitly direct students during the first few discussions to speak to the entire class. If this seemed too awkward or blunt, we used the technique of not looking directly at the

student speaking but instead at the other members of the class. While the undergraduates at first found this disconcerting, they soon got the message and began to search the room for eye contact with other students.

The habit of speaking after each student is a special case of our general tendency to talk too much, to not allow enough silence in the classroom and to not make the students themselves feel any responsibility for breaking the silence. One thing that helps is realizing that the silences are never as long to the students as they seem to the teacher, who usually feels too much responsibility for them. Further, we should remember that silence is not a mental vacuum. The mind does not switch off during them, and indeed sometimes they are necessary for genuine thinking to occur. Classes are rarely experienced as slow or boring because of too much silence, but more often because of too little depth, of discussants not really building on each others' comments.

Once we learned to let an open discussion happen, though, certain anxieties remained. What happens if it gets too open, if student comments become too diffuse, too anecdotal, too digressive? At one point we handled our feelings about this by agreeing to mentally allot each class what we called a ten-minute "bullshit quota" in the interests of keeping the discussions lively and unimpeded. But as we analyzed the classes it became clear that one person's bullshit is another's insight. A more formal way of conceptualizing this is to use Lev Vygotsky's (1962) notion of a "Zone of Proximal Development," the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by individual problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving and guidance. A more advanced student may actually be able to teach a less advanced one more effectively than a professor or even a graduate student because

the students speak the same language and are at a closer developmental level. What may seem banal or intuitively obvious for the professor who may have passed this way decades ago and forgotten his or her own learning processes may need to be stated, clarified, reiterated, explicated by undergraduates for each other. What we found to be increasingly important for good teaching—more so than eloquence or brilliance—is a kind of steady patience and confidence in the ability of the mind to construct its own orders and create its own patterns.

It is a patience, though, that should not be taken just on faith. Especially since this was an academic course and not merely a teacher “training” program—horrible phrase—I was careful not to let us get completely absorbed in the practical details of the classroom, but rather to have us continually conceptualize what we saw and did. As noted, I felt postmodern thinking, especially reader response theory, potentially relevant to creating and analyzing a more open classroom. Fortunately, the first year I taught the course there appeared a special issue of *College Literature* on “The Newest Criticisms,” containing a full bibliography and articles that clearly explored the relevance of theory for pedagogy. The most powerful of these articles for our own work was Robert Crosman’s “How Readers Make Meaning” (1982). In it he showed how his own reading of Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily” was expanded and reevaluated in the light of a student response that at first reading seemed “off the wall” or just plain “wrong,” in which a student compares Emily to her own grandmother in a nostalgic reverie. This article confirmed our own growing realization that what students said should not so much be weighed in the scales of evaluation as carefully listened to for what was revealed about the interaction between text and the student. In other words, anything a student says is

data, subject matter for our own analyses and interpretations. But, the question was soon raised, should we be completely accepting of all responses? Should we take them as they are or try to widen and deepen them? Our answers were similar to the ones David Bleich came to in *Subjective Criticism* (1978): that the very act of having students discuss, argue about, negotiate their readings enriched their minds and their reading abilities. If they were just “popping out” the text from one perspective, or feeling just one part of the elephant, it was crucial to get them to see how others did it differently, to put their own hands on the parts of the elephant that their peers were feeling.

Once this process was begun, it was important for us to have the undergraduates become reflective about it. In other words, we found it valuable to have the undergraduates engage in the same kinds of observing and conceptualizing that we as a graduate class had been doing from the start—not to arrive at the single best reading but to catch red-handed the ways readings are made. We noticed, for example, that the primary way the students were making sense out of Hawthorne’s “Rappaccini’s Daughter” was through the convention of “character.” That is, they constructed a unified psychological reality for each of the four main figures and then tried to work towards any larger meaning through their feelings and judgments about those psychological units. But in the actual give and take of the classroom, the undergraduates soon discovered that their psychological character readings conflicted with each other. Instead of trying to mediate these disagreements, we tried to point out, as does Kenneth Dauber in his *Rediscovering Hawthorne* (1977), that the author may have been providing fodder for all sides something like what James did with “The Turn of the Screw,” that the story’s “meaning” may have less to do with the characters’ personalities than with the stances it

takes towards what Hawthorne foregrounds in his preface as “an inveterate love of allegory” (975). That is, readers, like Giovanni in the story itself, may be too quick to allegorize other people, to extract from confusing and complex experience some kind of simplified, polarized meaning. Indeed, although both students and teachers complain about the difficulties of making meaning of difficult works, we found that equal difficulties lay in the students’ making meanings too rapidly and easily. In Norman Juster’s children’s book *The Phantom Toll Booth* (1961) there is an overcrowded Island of Conclusions, to which the inhabitants travel very quickly by jumping, but from which it is far less easy to escape (pp. 164-70).

As the semester went on, we began to notice and create all kinds of analogies and parallel processes between the undergraduates’ readings of the texts and our readings of these readings. What became increasingly pressing in both classes was the constructed nature of all knowledge. This led neither the undergraduates nor us to an impairing skepticism or nihilism about everything being relative or fictive, but a realization that our constructions were useful and powerful to the extent that we knew where they came from and how they were made. We discovered further that what we found out through scrutinizing the responses of readers to texts and measuring this against literary theories can be extended to a general critique of traditional education by linking it to concepts in cognitive science and philosophy. In some aspects, the students’ reading of a text can serve as a synecdoche for their reading of the world. Particularly suggestive is a line of thought called “constructivism,” which, as Jerome Bruner explains in *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (pp. 93-105) has powerful potential for reuniting philosophy and psychology. Indeed constructivism in philosophy can be seen as a late development in

the tradition of the active mind, with prominent constructors of this tradition such as Nelson Goodman clearly working in the line of American pragmatism.

The two most important tenets of constructivism for this work are that what we know depends on how we come to know it, and that the knowledge we construct does not so much match external reality as fit it. I will use an example first given by Paul Watzlawick (1984) to illustrate both of these related ideas. It was a dark and stormy night. A sea captain without charts has managed to steer his ship through a long, narrow, dangerous channel. The very fact that he has survived proves his course does not directly conflict with the actual shape of the strait, but the course also does not give us the best route or the exact topography; in other words, in a functional sense his course worked or fit an existing reality but did not necessarily map or match it. Most of our formulations have a similar status. We make them not in a vacuum of abstraction but with certain goals in specific contexts. And only by making them ourselves can we be fully aware of their provisional nature, of the amount of hunch, serendipity, blind luck, false starts involved. To return to Bruner's title, there is a range of possible "worlds" that "fit." Two common errors of traditional education are to make students think the world(s) we present them in our courses really "match,"—i.e., correlate directly with the structure of reality—and to simply give them our final formulations, saving them the effort of making their own knowledge. For to know has to be a set of active processes—perceiving, creating, inventing, formulating, articulating, and not necessarily in this or any other linear order. Truman Capote once harshly said of Jack Kerouac's work that it's not writing, it's typing. Capote, I feel was wrong, but I have to say just as harshly of most of our pedagogy at the university level that it's not teaching, it's talking.

Another attempt to enact the ideas delineated in this book was a course I was able to offer in our undergraduate Honors Program, which I co-taught with Dr. Mary Ann Shea, director of the Faculty Teaching Excellence Program, titled “The Experience of Education.” In thinking about the first course, I realized that the experience was probably richer for the graduate students than for the undergraduates we taught, because the former could relate all their readings and writings to their ongoing teaching. We designed the Honors course to provide an analogous experience for undergraduates, and we took their own current involvement in education, their lives as students, as the focus. We did not intend to produce future teachers as much as to help the students become more reflective about the learning they are immediately undergoing in the interest of enriching that learning. The primary text for this course was to be the students’ own journals in which they monitor and articulate this learning in the light of readings and discussions. We wanted these students also to experience writing as a way of thinking, of fixing their experience for a while so that it can be scrutinized. To this end, we used the dialectical notebook described earlier, which was reinforced by our reading of books such as those by Holt and Dennison, which also can be viewed as examples of this form. In the course the students are asked to view the activities in their other courses through reflective lenses, to observe the structures and processes of their own education as well as the content. One assignment is to compare the syllabi from their various courses. Despite the varied subject matter, from music appreciation to organic chemistry, it was remarkable how similar they all looked, with requisite midterms and finals in the same places.

In addition to asking students to reflect on their experiences in other classes, we created shared learning situations within our own classroom and analyzed them. In one such case, we adopted an idea from Eleanor Duckworth (1987) and asked students to figure out why and how the moon has phases. But the equipment we brought in as manipulatives—flashlights, balls of various sizes—was not up to the task. With just a minute of class time left, we were all still puzzled and frustrated. Then one of the students suddenly exclaimed “Just look at everybody’s face!” We were sitting around a circular table with windows on only one wall, and according to our positions, the shadows on our faces corresponded to the different appearances of the moon, with the student directly facing the window as the full moon, the one facing away as the new moon, and the rest of us as all the gradations between. The student had created a wonderful analogy between faces and phases, and the analogy was enriched by the circumstance that as we looked at the physical light on one another we could also see the figurative light of understanding break out as the idea dawned on each of us.

One conclusion that emerged from both these courses is the power for educational change of that vast, underused resource, the students’ own minds. Students come to us generally unobservant and inarticulate about their own education but they can soon easily be helped to learn how to be perceptive and reflective about their school experiences. This kind of metacognition can only help their own learning, even when it does not result in structural change. What if the students in a high school or college were given the time and assistance to take on the project of improving their own education—observing their own and other classrooms, making hypotheses, collecting data, interviewing themselves

and their teachers, reading in cognitive psychology and in the history and philosophy of education, experimenting with different structures?

I can understand John Holt's heartbreak in the Maine woods, for not only has the history of American education been so dismal, but the opportunities for it being otherwise have been so rich, plentiful, and philosophically fresh. Yet as I work with these young people I realize that these opportunities have not been permanently foreclosed. We have an indigenous tradition of active learning that has already been enacted sporadically. The rigor mortis of our current school system can be reversed through listening to these voices from the past and opening ourselves to those of the future. We need only trust more the mind's abilities and desires to make sense of the world by interacting with it, to not only master the old formulations but to go beyond them in the creation of new ones. The materials for a new American *padeia* lie before us all the time in the immediacies of our own lives seen fully in the light of the active mind,