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Elizabeth Blackburn Brockman

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Professional Book Review

Elizabeth Blackburn Brockman

In Response to Robert Root and Michael Steinberg's *Those Who Do, Can*

As a secondary-level writing teacher from 1983-96, I was sometimes mildly offended, but frequently downright angered, by composition research written by university professors. What yanked my chain was the blatant and unabashed stereotyping of all high school English teachers as either grammar geeks or, to borrow a phrase from Joseph Harris, the "composition equivalent of flat-earththers" (56). In response to all the criticism, I took a long look at myself and at my colleagues but didn't find a Miss Fidditch in our midst. Not a one. No bluish gray-haired "spinster" barricaded behind spectacles. No Warriner's English Grammar tucked away in book bags or briefcases. No red pens run dry. What I saw in the office instead was a group of people, overworked ones at that. Four classes daily with twenty to thirty writers per class (and those numbers, I know, would be celebrated by most public school teachers). Clubs. Conferences. Meetings. Activities. Proficiency Tests. And, of course, the inevitable, ever-present, multiple stacks of drafts to read nearly every night or, as was my ritual, the following morning at 4 a.m., two hours before my three young children would rise and my daily juggling act would officially begin.

No small wonder, then, that after I finished graduate work, after I took a deep breath, crossed my fingers, and left my most recent, my most stable, and (just for the record) my "most favorite" secondary level job to become an assistant professor in the English Department at Central Michigan, I wanted a source book for my composition methods courses based at least in part upon the very real premise that high school writing teachers are woefully overworked primarily

because they teach far too many students during far too many hours of every single work day. It was precisely that premise in Robert Root and Michael Steinberg's *Those Who Do, Can* that initially prompted me to read beyond the Preface and Introduction.

The exigency for *Those Who Do, Can* is The Traverse Bay Writing Project. Traverse Bay, which took place in late June from 1988-92, was distinctive among writing projects. First of all, its location was Northern Michigan, which — all personal prejudice and individual bias whatsoever set completely and utterly aside — is like no other place in this world and maybe even the next. More relevant, of course, to those interested in composition theory and practice is the distinctive feature Steinberg explains in the Preface:

What distinguished [Traverse Bay] from other summer writing projects was that for the majority of the week, we worked on our own writing — not simply for professional development, not only as it had bearing on our teaching, but mainly for the sheer joy we found in being and becoming a community of writers. (x)

Traverse Bay leaders believed English teachers needed to write for themselves during the summer because they simply couldn't during the school year. They attributed this inability not to personality defect or widespread illiteracy, as Emig originally claimed back in her 1971 landmark study. Instead, Root and Steinberg understood what those working at the secondary level have always known; that English teacher are people—real, live, human beings—whose week-to-week, day-to-day,

bell-to-bell obligations are so demanding, so time consuming, so energy sucking, that they seldom have time to think, let alone write. Root admits:

...one of the most discouraging aspects of teaching is the way our responsibilities to our students and our busy work for our administrators drain away our energy and enthusiasm, even for things we love to do ...Somehow in meeting all the other obligations our profession imposes, we surrender our obligations to ourselves...without even realizing we've done it. (viii)

The primary purpose behind The Traverse Bay Writing Project, then, was to give English teachers time — to grant them permission, as the title of Chapter 1 says — to forget about students and other professional obligations for one week in the middle of early summer, so they could BE writers. In doing so, Traverse Bay leaders believed teachers would benefit immeasurably and, in turn, their students automatically would too. As one participant reasonably notes, "It's possible...to teach writing without ever having felt like a writer, but shouldn't we insist that it be otherwise?" (Bishop xi).

Those Who Do, Can isn't organized the way one might expect based upon its exigency. More specifically, readers won't find a chronicle of The Rise and Fall of Traverse Bay or follow a daily account of participants' activities. Instead, the editors have in a rather Thoreau-like way collapsed five years of writing projects into one to represent "the best of Traverse Bay." In addition to an introductory section and multiple appendices, readers will discover three major sections: "And Gladly Would They Learn....," "The Writing Center: Being and Becoming Writers," and "...And Gladly Teach." For most practical purposes, these three sections, as well as the sixteen chapters contained therein, are autonomous, so readers might be tempted to begin somewhere "in the middle," as we're so fond of saying, depending on personal preference or literary leanings. My suggestion, however, is to resist that temptation and take not necessarily a linear approach but at least a more wholistic one.

Let's begin with theory. If readers define themselves as "expressivists" and so believe that writing is art and that writers are artists whose passions and ideas should be privileged over just about everything else, they'll be right at home because *Those Who Do, Can* has a decidedly expressivistic slant. Not surprisingly, then, the text is characterized by many of the hallmarks typ-

ically associated with expressivism. Freewrites and journal entries abound. Validation of "creative" and/or personal discourse forms only. Transforming experiences at every corner. Shared laughter and tears. Emotional hugs and promises. It's all there. This aspect of the text naturally means, of course, that readers defining themselves as "social constructionists"—that is, those who believe writing is communication and that writers' success depends on a willingness and an ability to negotiate discourse community members' shared values, norms, and conventions—might be skeptical. These readers, however, should take solace in two features of the book. First, writing at Traverse Bay is not at all a solitary activity reminiscent of Brodkey's now-famous description of isolated writers working alone in garrets, studies, and libraries. Instead, writing is defined and illustrated over and over again as a noisy people pursuit. Moreover, Traverse Bay leaders are fully cognizant of organizational or community norms. Time and again, they note, for example, that a small band of English teachers writing together in a bucolic atmosphere is unlikely to behave like a classroom full of adolescents writing in a school setting. If these features don't persuade the most ardent social constructionist to take a peek at *Those Who Do, Can*, I have one last comment. Lighten up. Even if its theoretical underpinnings are grounded in expressivism, the book's primary message is that writing teachers should be writers, and who can truly find fault with that claim?

Theory aside, here is my recommendation for reading *Those Who Do, Can*;

1. Start with Steinberg's Preface and Root's Introduction because they are worth the time it takes to read them. Steinberg introduces Traverse Bay, explains its rationale, and sets the book's agenda. Root begins with a discussion of Chaucer's Clerk of Oxenford (who would gladly learn and gladly teach), continues with a brief history of the early process movement, and then highlights the writing of a Traverse Bay participant named Catherine Short. The connections between Short's narrative and her writer's log are fascinating.

2. After finishing the Preface and Introduction, jump right into Part I and peruse the first two or three chapters to get a sense of Traverse Bay. Each chapter is a workshop leader's attempt to capture the "give and take" of his/her workshop, so they all have a strong, multi-voiced quality because each includes many anecdotes about writing participants, as well as ample quoting from log entries, writing samples, and workshop evaluations. After

finishing two or three chapters, readers may well be inspired to browse through two or three more chapters.

3. After Part 1, skip briefly to the multiple appendices to learn even more about Traverse Bay. Thumb through sections devoted entirely to participants/ writing samples (Linda Dinan's "Folding Clothes" and Jeanie Mortensen's "Gentle Insubordination" are good), and glance over the long list of contributors (Who says English teachers don't write?). Also, in the appendices are two short essays (Tamara Lantz's "Writers, Teachers, and Learners: The Many Sides of Self" and John Kelly's "Putting on a Show: The Workshopper's Guide") worth reading because they provide a "behind the scenes look" at a writing project.

4. After the appendices, flip back to the two chapters in Part II and read both. Like those in Part I, these chapters are designed to capture a certain aspect of Traverse Bay, and they do: The Writing Center. In doing so, they also provide useful approaches for responding to written documents as an authentic reader. Chapter Ten, for example, outlines specific procedures for constructing and maintaining response groups. Though prescriptive, these procedures proved far more effective than any other peer response activity I have ever tried with students. Chapter Nine doesn't detail explicit procedures but shows instead how to respond to another writer's emerging text in one-on-one conferences over several days.

5. As a final step, return to the Table of Contents and fill in reading gaps with personal preferences. As the saying goes, "the picks are good."

Those Who Do, Can was a solid component in the required reading list for my composition methods course at CMU because it reinforced what is perhaps the most important concept in the class: writing teachers should be writers. Using Michael Bacon's strategies from Chapter Ten in Part II, my students formed response groups and used many class sessions for talking about their fiction, poetry, or other kinds of primarily personal writing — and linked discussions to the relevant chapters in the book. Like Traverse Bay participants, some students brought works-in-progress while others shared completely new material. The choice was theirs. Then, in lieu of a midterm exam, students compiled writer's portfolios comprised of at least fifteen different written documents generated during their K-college years (including our response group materials) combined with an annotated table of contents and a reflective cover letter about themselves as writers. Keeping with the Traverse Bay tradition, we also

celebrated ourselves as writers by holding a writing fair in which students read one or two pieces for the entire group. Most students read narratives, some fiendishly funny and others incredibly sad. So I must admit that we laughed and we cried. Overall, student reaction was overwhelmingly positive to the Traverse Bay segment of my composition methods course. In short, students valued both *Those Who Do, Can* and the writing it prompted.

In addition to granting my students permission to write, *Those Who Do, Can*, also serves as an historical work when placed in the larger context of Composition Studies. As I have previously mentioned, the book is a good example of expressivism, which Berlin claimed to be the first "new" theory of composition when The Winds began to change. And now when The Winds seem to be shifting again — when Atwell excitedly proclaims that she has changed her pedagogical approach in order "to teach with a Capital T" (47) and when Tchudi calls for a "critical examination of our pedagogies [because] millions [of adolescent writers] are paradigm busters" (11) — the field needs a reminder of early process movement contributions, like the concept that writing is a process, the belief that writing was meant To Be Read and not just graded, and the importance of writing projects in teacher development programs. *Those Who Do, Can* could serve that function because it illustrates those concepts in actions — nearly three decades after they were first introduced in the field. One might argue, then, that *Those Who Do, Can* has a place alongside landmark texts, such as Elbow's *Writing Without Teachers* or Macrorie's *Telling Writing*, in a canon of composition textbooks.

Unlike so many early process compositionists, however, Root and Steinberg don't appear to be distancing themselves from public school colleagues. As a result, a hierarchy — like the one North advocates automatically relegating high school English teachers to an underclass status — doesn't seem to exist at Traverse Bay. That's not to say that readers won't find a few "what-those-damn-teachers-do-to-kids narratives" (Harris 62) in *Those Who Do, Can*. After all, the "propensity of human nature to tell the very worst of itself, when embodied in the person of another" (Hawthorne 181) is true for English educators too. Perhaps not surprisingly, then, readers will learn early about a literature teacher, for example, who only tolerated books, and they'll also hear about a kindergarten teacher who criticized a child for choosing the wrong crayon color. That genre of negative teacher story, however, is far outweighed by what will strike most readers as Root and

Steinberg's strong respect for and positive portraits of English teachers.

Having required Root and Steinberg's *Those Who Do, Can* in a composition methods course at Central Michigan, I would argue (and my students would agree) that the text is an excellent choice for pre-service teachers. Having spent ten years of my life teaching middle and high school English, though, I would just as quickly claim the same for new teachers and veterans, alike. Root explains why:

The love of reading and written expression, of learning through books, of sharing learning with others, is frequently the force that channels the learner into English Language Arts education. But when undergraduate college ends and the English educator begins to teach..., often the arc of a career is a trajectory away from the learner's experience.... The balance between the two parts of Chaucer's concluding sentence about the Clerk of Oxenford — "gladly would he learn and gladly teach" — indicates a necessary balance in the lives of teachers, the importance of simultaneity of learning and teaching, not its sequentiality. (xvi)

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About the Author

Elizabeth Blackburn Brockman, who taught in Ohio and Michigan public schools from 1984-96, has recently completed a Ph.D. in English from Ohio State University. She is currently an assistant professor at Central Michigan University where she teaches composition and composition methods courses.