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Successful Blunders: Reflection, Deflection, Teaching

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Cover Page Footnote

Devan Cook teaches first year and nonfiction courses at Boise State University. Her work has recently appeared or is forthcoming in *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*, *California English*, and *The English Record*.

Successful Blunders: Reflection, Deflection, Teaching

Devan Cook

Miraculous and marvelous are clues; both words come from an ancient Indo-European root meaning simply to smile or to laugh. Anything wonderful is something to smile in the presence of, in admiration (which, by the way, comes from the same root, along with, of all telling words, “mirror”). (207)

—Lewis Thomas

One of my students told me that in high school, her favorite class was chemistry. “The teacher didn’t know anything,” she said. “It wasn’t even his subject. We had to learn the material and teach it to him. In every class, he made at least one mistake.” The teacher might simply have been “performing” ignorance, pretending not to know anything about chemistry so the students would take more initiative. However, that seems not to have been the case; he usually taught history and coached the basketball teams and was called upon to cover this chemistry class at the last minute in a small, rural high school. What a successful teacher he must have been, to transform his lack of knowledge into a successful chemistry class.

Yet as teachers we work hard to avoid mistakes; terrified of entering a classroom unprepared, we plan our assignments and keep records carefully. We love control. Surely our efforts are not misguided, but taken in sum they create a firewall against mistakes in teaching, and mistakes, like the chemistry teacher’s above, can be a powerful way to learn. I make a lot of mistakes in my courses, but I tend not to handle them as well as the teacher above, who misrepresented (due to lack of knowledge, the best of reasons) the subject of chemistry. Here I would like to examine my most successful blunder—caused by the ways my course and I represented students, or misrepresented them—and speculate about why it worked. Replication might be difficult because “performance” would be involved; the high school history teacher would have learned at least a little chemistry if he had to teach it twice.

A Rhetoric of Representation

Representation is both difficult and problematic, but it is an essential part of teaching. We cannot act without it. As teachers, we may represent ourselves, given

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our personalities and theoretical bents, as more advanced fellow writers, coaches, cheerleaders, discourse police, parents, watchdogs, laborers in the knowledge factory, cogs in the university's bureaucratic machine, or beckoning, seductive Socratic interrogators.

But, always, we are authorities. We represent classes we teach, and students, too—rhetorically, as texts, audience, and speakers. Jennie Nelson points out that we tend to read classes as texts, and that our teaching would benefit if we could read students as well as they read us (412). Recently, Andrea Lunsford and Lisa Ede have questioned the ways they (as teachers and researchers) constructed students as audience in their early and influential essay, “Audience Addressed, Audience Invoked”:

[T]he students invoked in AA/AI were in important ways the students we had been—eager, compliant, willing to shape ourselves to rhetorical situations. Our desire to invoke such students and to (re)write experience in such a way as to highlight success not failure, consensus not conflict, progress not struggle, is, we have realized, deeply imbedded in our relationship to schooling as well. (171)

We want (or rather, I want) students to become like us, or failing that, like our former students or the representations we have made to ourselves and others about them; we want their progress through our classrooms to mirror our personal narratives or previous successes, no matter how much we may have edited or cleaned them up.

Meanwhile, from the first class day students represent us as text, trying to “read” our mysterious agenda. And of course they represent us as audience—addressed, invoked—for their writing, hoping to appeal to us while shaping or revising us toward a more open-ended, inclusive reading of their products. When they share class notes or repeat assignments, they represent us as speakers. Sophisticated in the rhetorical processes needed to read the classroom, their poetics of representation are shaped by prior teachers and courses.

Misrepresentation

In spring two years ago, I had an English 101 class—first year writing, first semester. But it was spring semester; almost all of the students had failed the class at least once before. How can I best describe (represent) these students? The class met right after lunch, so students appeared not only disillusioned, oppressed, alienated, and wary—fearful of what might happen to them in English 101 this time around—but sleepy, too. (Interestingly, one possible root of “blunder” is the Old Norse *blunda*, “to doze.”) Certainly that was the way I felt after driving thirty miles to school over icy roads and then sitting in my office for half a day, dealing with the petty aggravations junior faculty encounter as a matter of course. But the students seemed even more disengaged than I, in pain and angry about it, while at the same time their resignation suggested they felt powerless to prevent the inevitable occurrence of what I imagined to be the cause of their pain—my class—and the fact that they were required, yet again, to take it.

Make no mistake: I like teaching first year writing. In fact, I prefer it. About

three-fourths of the classes I've taught have been first-year courses, and usually the students' energy and enthusiasm for writing and learning keep me going, counterbalancing the institutional pressures that I often resist. Donald Murray, writing about his decision to teach, said that an acquaintance, in an attempt to discourage him, suggested that teaching at the college level would be like "being bitten to death by ducks" (354). However accurate this description may be, usually the students' "juice" keeps me from feeling like duck mash.

But this class was different. Unfortunately, I had ordered and assigned a book that further angered this already-unhappy class: Elizabeth Stone's *Black Sheep and Kissing Cousins: How Our Family Stories Shape Us*. *Black Sheep* discusses ways we construct self-identities and families construct family identities, from the stories we hear and repeat that become, over time, a canon of family legend, composing lessons in what it means to be one of us—a Torres or a Baker, for example.

To illustrate, Stone offers this story from her own family:

Annunziata was the daughter of a rich landowner in Messina, Sicily, so the story went, and she fell in love with the town postman, a poor but talented man, able to play any musical instrument he laid eyes on. Her father heard about this romance and forbade them to see each other. So in the middle of one night [. . .] she ran off with him in her shift. (3)

A lovely story, certainly. But then Stone realized, as an adult, that "our most idiosyncratic family conviction—that the arts are supremely important and certainly more important than money—was there even in that story, when my great-grandmother chose as her true love that talented but poor postman" (6). The family story, selected and retold, had shaped not only Elizabeth Stone but generations of this couple's descendants, who had collected more advanced degrees and more romantic encounters than cash.

I too come from a family with lots of stories told to, as Stone asserts, "provide the family with esteem," "give messages and instructions," and "issue warnings and prohibitions" (5). "Teach!" my grandmother proclaimed, as she remembered happily supporting herself in a one-room schoolhouse in St. Martinville, Louisiana, around the turn of the century. An orphan, she had insisted that her cousin pay her way through Branham and Hughes Academy, and with degree in hand she left Tennessee and made her way in the world. Pragmatism and self-sufficiency are subtexts of this story; my grandmother was not a romantic.

So I felt the book represented my experience with family stories; I loved it. I thought the students I had taught the previous year in another state had loved it, too. Just as I had, they had come from an Appalachian culture—family-centered, with a strong oral tradition. Several of them used the course's researched assignments to investigate their family histories: one discovered that her grandfather, a Cherokee doctor, had been a respected, important member of the Scotch-Irish town where he lived. Before she began research, she feared that he had lived a frustrated, unhappy life on the community's margins, but instead he was a property owner and the only doctor for miles. From this story, his granddaughter, who planned to go into counseling, felt encouraged and approved as she continued her studies.

Thus, in ordering books and writing class plans, I represented *all* of this year's students as *some* of last year's, in the process misrepresenting both: classes are not unified in their desires and perspectives, and generalizing about groups of students was one of my first mistakes. Yet given academic timetables, such representations are an inevitable and perhaps even necessary part of teaching. Usually I can proceed through the semester with a few minor adjustments; careful listening helps. But this time problems caused by misrepresentation were more central to the class's work and thus derailed its progress.

The Process of Deflection

Although my new students disliked reading, they plowed through *Black Sheep* anyway. They were assigned to write a series of journal-type informal responses to Stone's book, followed by an essay using what they'd learned in reading to explore a family story. Did such stories represent students' lived experiences and the way they thought or spoke about them? Did their lives mirror family stories?

By writing around and into these stories, I hoped students would explore, identify, and/or resist all or part of their stories—just as my grandmother had done when she revised her role of “penniless homeless female relative” to “schoolteacher” by demanding a formal education, in the process creating a new and valuable family tale. My former student's research into her grandfather's history provided similar material for revision. Her grandfather was not marginal or “peculiar” because he practiced traditional herbal medicine; instead, he was his town's doctor and provided an essential service to all its citizens. Neither was her interest in counseling marginal; she, also, would provide a valuable service to her community.

I was fascinated this semester's students complained bitterly about *Black Sheep* but continued to read; as far as this text was concerned, apathy was not a problem. Every day students would come to class, loudly disparaging the previous night's assignment. After they'd finished the book, I asked them to write one more response. “You're an editor at Penguin,” I told them, “and you gave Elizabeth Stone a \$10,000 advance to write *Black Sheep and Kissing Cousins*. Now you have to make sure that the book makes enough money to recover her advance and your printing costs. What will you tell her to do—to rewrite—in order to make the book salesworthy, even attractive? After all, you'd like it to become a best-seller so you can receive a bonus.”

This assignment was the most successful of the semester. Students, it turned out, had plenty of editorial advice. In considering language as active and persuasive, Kenneth Burke writes, “if any given terminology is a *reflection* of reality, by its very nature as a terminology it must also be a *selection* of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a *deflection* of reality” (45). I had chosen the textbook based upon reflections and selective representations of former students and classes; now, through their talk and writing students deflected the text and my expectations of ways they might receive it to better reflect/represent their experiences.

They came to class prepared. “Did she interview anyone besides New York?” James asked disgustedly.

“Yeah, and did she interview anyone under forty?” Heads nodded; students

muttered and consulted their notes. “She wants us to think everybody’s like the people she knows.” The students talked heatedly for a whole class period about what Stone should and should not do, although they weren’t heated with each other. For once, they were in surprising agreement: “Include more young people, more people from the West, more working people. Everyone in the book comes from Europe and lives in New York. They’re all well-educated; they’re all rich; they’re all old.”

“It’s repetitive,” Ron said. “The same thing over and over. Why doesn’t she just say what she’s going to say once and then let people tell their stories?” We had often discussed repetition as a convention of academic writing: making a point, looking at that point from varied angles and perspectives, repeating and rewording, teasing out connections and arguments for and against, and revisiting—one hopes, slightly farther along the road to understanding—the same point in the conclusion. These students thought so much repetition was a bad idea: once was enough.

I listened and did not chime in to take advantage of this “teaching opportunity.” Jenny, a woman seated near the back of the room, spoke quietly. “My sociology professor says it’s not good to pick out passages from interviews like she does. She should talk less herself, and let the people she interviewed talk more.” Once again, students nodded; many of them had liked sociology—something else I didn’t know. They disliked Stone’s habit of interrupting narratives and commenting heavily; they felt she disrespected her informants and their stories, too hastily shutting off their voices.

Brad read his advice to Elizabeth Stone aloud: “Pick 5 people and stick with them. Give them a whole chapter each to tell their story. You get 5 chapters. You get an intro and conclusion. That’s 2. Marriage, Money, and Luck would be good for the others. Everything you say could fit in there. Then, put your 5 people’s stories between them so it’s more interesting.”

The students’ advice about reformatting *Black Sheep* operates from sweeping generalizations about Stone’s research and discussion. But it reveals the sophistication of their reading and critical practices, as well as the faith they felt in the ways they read as opposed to the ways I expected them to read. Clearly, students felt that Stone’s evidence in support of her thesis—family stories shape the ways we “choose” to live our lives—did not reflect their identities, histories, and contexts. They thought Stone was mistaken—as mistaken as an unprepared high school chemistry teacher—and they took this opportunity to tell her so. Nobody in *Black Sheep* had to leave their hometown because the silver mine or lumber mill closed; no one went to taco feeds at the grange hall; no one spoke Basque or came from a family that once supported the Wobblies.

Students did not see Stone’s stories as published “delegates” for their own and felt no agency from them or in them. Many of their editorial suggestions were meant to broaden Stone’s reading of who she might be representing: “Add ranchers, elk hunters, snowboarders, Mormons. Add people who can represent *us*. Then, we’ll consider your ideas more seriously.” As Sara wrote in her response, “My dad had to roll irrigation pipe and drive the spud truck. So did I. He couldn’t play sports, and he missed a lot of school. At least I got to be on the volleyball team because us kids had a car. I don’t know where Elizabeth Stone would put us in her book.”

Finally, I began to understand: instead of an enclosed and conventional academic monologue, students wanted *Black Sheep* to be more open, a conversation between Elizabeth Stone and her respondents and, potentially, between their stories and hers. The students believed they could join in the discussion only if there was room for their stories, too. The large number of interviews and the tightly woven surface of the text—a thread from one person here, a swatch of another history there, bound together by the moving shuttle of Stone’s interpretation—dissuaded them. So why, students asked me, should they be given a personal writing assignment based upon a book that left out who they were, what they believed made them? *Black Sheep*, they felt, told them who they were supposed to be: Eastern, middle class, middle-aged. How could they write a personal essay about the sort of family history they had never experienced?

Reflection, Distortion, and Identity

A reviewer, responding to an earlier version of this essay, wondered why I did not use the critical evaluation assignment to counter the “parochial nature of our students.” But my own parochial nature and the parochial nature of the assumptions I made about the desirability of students’ adopting my perspectives, rather than developing their own, was more of a problem. Sure that this class apprehended and evaluated family history and experience in much the same manner as my former students and I did, wasn’t I being at least as insular as they? The question, it seems, is not what to do about parochial students—and yes, these were, Western and working class down to their DNA—but about admitting that teachers can be just as limited as their students (and maybe more so).

In retrospect, I am not at all certain that I would like to remake Western working class people in my own image and likeness; I prefer them as they are (just possibly, the academic world has more than enough people like me already). In *Writing and Sense of Self*, Robert Brooke defines and describes identity—specifically, students developing an identity as writers—as critically important to successful writing instruction. He states, in explaining “how self and society interact to form identity,” that identity theory “would describe the way selves are formed in the interaction between available roles and individual desire” (11). And he quotes Erving Goffman, a sociologist who has written extensively about identity: “We always find the individual employing methods to keep some distance, some elbow room, between himself and that with which others assume he should be identified” (qtd. in Brooke 24).

Thus students, invited to guest-edit and “save” Stone’s book, found writing space where they could position themselves between roles I as teacher thought they could or should play—among them, the role of eager acolyte cozily positioned in a talkative middle-class family—and the roles they actually inhabited. In a similar vein, Jennie Nelson argues for “the importance of finding ways to make students’ interpretive practices a part of the classroom discussion about writing assignments” (427), for these were roles students wanted to either continue or transform according to their own desires, not mine.

After the class ended, I puzzled over the fact that the editing assignment had been much more successful—if success means more talk, writing, and sophisti-

cated thought—than the essay based upon the book’s premises which followed. Deflection worked better than the reflection I had originally assigned. Surely one reason was that although I amended that assignment to encourage students to write into gaps they’d identified in Stone’s text—tell your whole story, make your contexts and histories part of the picture, extend the critique of Stone’s ideas you began with the “editing” responses, get it all off your chest—students may have still felt excluded by the smooth, tight structure of Stone’s arguments.

In some fundamental way, students’ editorial advice suggested, her book failed to represent not only people, but also ideas and concepts with which they could identify. Stone positions family stories as universally or globally instructional and inscribing: such stories always help families construct their common identities and goals. But these first-year students in effect replied, “Not so fast! What’s a family? What’s a story? You aren’t talking about stories or families as we know them. Many of us more or less raised ourselves and are managing fine, thank you; we know what we’re doing. We think you should have tested your ideas more broadly if you want to sell books. We think you rushed to publish.”

I didn’t agree with students that Stone rushed to publish; in fact, I continued to believe that a different population of students (the people I taught—and who taught me—in Kentucky, for instance) might have identified with it, marveled at how similar its mirrored images were to their own pictures of themselves and their families, and happily used it in the classroom. If my reflection/representation of their realities serves, they would not think *Black Sheep* was filled with mistakes in content and editing.

Yet I consider this assignment a successful blunder, albeit one I am not sure how to replicate other than assigning *Black Sheep* every semester. Still, the high school chemistry class’s progress suggests an intriguing possibility, for in it students’ roles were very different from those they might have expected to play. In high school chemistry that year, students were either co-learners with the teacher or . . . teachers themselves, people who knew chemistry well enough to instruct another (i.e., the teacher). In fact, because they had to correct continually the teacher’s mistakes, students could be said to hold the final authority about the subject matter.

Blunders as Openings for Critique

Certainly I am not suggesting that we abandon instructional authority and allow students to teach all subjects. This teacher really did know less chemistry than his students, and there was nothing false about his situation. But I am suggesting that we teachers may know less than we think we know, and students may know more. The problem is that much of what students know often doesn’t seem academic, yet it’s crucial to create spaces for their knowledge to dialogue with ours so that critical thinking and understanding can occur.

My blundering assignment, I suspect, helped students adopt a critical perspective. These students were well-positioned to be critical because their lives in school had been so unsuccessful; many of them were right at the point of giving up higher education as a bad choice and the university as a place that did not care about people like them. Stone’s text, as I had assigned it, inadvertently reinforced the notion that, in the academy, *they* were a mistake.

Jane Tompkins critiques “an educational process that infantilizes students, takes away their initiative, and teaches them to be sophisticated rule followers. Of course, as professors, we don’t see the ways in which what we do as teachers narrows and limits our students: for we ourselves have been narrowed and limited by the same process” (209). These students were not the “sophisticated rule followers” I expected them to be, nor were they willing to be in subordinate or acolyte positions. They were a little less conventional, a little more independent, than the academy’s representation of “successful students.” Yet when invited to revise their expected roles to serve as proxy editors, they were articulate, even profound as they suggested revisions that could make the text mirror/represent their experiences, too.

My blunder in assigning this text threatened to leave a huge hole in the class’s progress. Students turned that emptiness into a way to talk back, get involved, and set me—and Elizabeth Stone—straight about how they saw themselves, who they were. Their deflative, resistant readings taught me several lessons: students needn’t think like me to think critically; mistakes can be useful, even if unnerving; being unwillingness to listen or change assignments can be counterproductive; and sometimes simply being open to opposition is the best way to construct difference. There’s a lot of good thinking in first year writing classrooms, even those that seem problematic. And although I know something about teaching the conventions of academic discourse, my representations are no more authoritative than anyone else’s. Critical discourse allows for multiple discourses, dialogue rather than monologue. As Burke points out, language that acts may lead to “*conflict*” and “*victimage*” or to “*solution*” and “*dialectic*” (55). Even if it’s by mistake, we need to leave the window to ongoing conversation tantalizingly open.

Seen from a non-pedagogical perspective, this is obvious. Ernesto Quinonez, the author of *Bodega Dreams*, told Terry Gross on *Fresh Air* that *West Side Story* doesn’t accurately represent Spanish Harlem: “We **hated** *West Side Story*. A comedian named Freddie Prinze used to tell jokes about it. ‘A guy’s singing to a girl named Maria in Spanish Harlem, and only one window opens!’”

Exactly. ☹

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