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October 2004

Dear Reader,

In this issue, we have two responses to Neal Bruss's "Writing Without Confidence," in *Correspondences Four*. Roz Rosenmeier proceeds by way of problematizing "confidence" in a rather different setting—a theological seminary. As a student of typology and the long-lived effects of such habits of thought on Wallace Stevens and H.D., Roz is alert to what I.A. Richards calls "comparison fields": she knows how settings and purposes can change and how some commonality can remain. She shows how to help students discover the heuristic energy that comes in defining *what* it is they are doing.

Phyllis Lassner offers comment from James Britton and D.W. Winnicott (who are brothers-in-law, by the way) and her own views about the problematics of teaching roles. The kind of analysis we have here is crucially important, I think, if we are to understand the dialectic of personal knowledge and the social construction of knowledge.

"Confidence" is, of course, a notoriously problematic concept and the word reflects that complexity. So far as I can see, Neal, Roz and Phyllis are using it to refer to different ideas. Neal put "lack confidence" in quotation marks to signal that this is the way students put it—and went on to explore what "it" often is, when students come to colleges and universities from environments (situations,

cultures, circumstances) where such ventures are suspect. Roz shows us how unfamiliarity, misconceptions, and rhetorical ignorance aren't properly thought of as matters of confidence; and Phyllis, in talking about teaching roles, is warning us about sanguine hopes and certainty in our expectations. Her recommendations are consonant with what C.S. Peirce sees as a consequence of taking triadically seriously. Peirce notes that since our knowledge is necessarily partial, we must "cultivate a contrite fallibilism." As we think about how the theory and practice of interpretation (hermeneutics) are constrained by the way we think about signification (semiotics), we will be establishing philosophical perspectives in which to consider the way we teach reading and writing (pedagogy).

In future issues this year, *Correspondences* will feature Susan Wells joining the dialogue between Jim Zebroski and Nancy Mack which appeared in our last issue; Donna Kaye on the politics of textbook publishing; essays by John Ramage and Renée Watkins on humanism and liberty. Send me your comments and contributions, especially on the dialogue in *Correspondences Seven*.

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Migrating with Un-confidence

Rosamond Rosenmeier

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The chance to sit across the table from an adult who is writing "something" that is giving some kind of "trouble" offers, I have found, a window on the worlds for writing that apprentice writers inhabit. The one-on-one conversation reveals gaps and continuities, dislocations and contiguities in the writing experiences of adults, in school and out. It helps us to see more of the wholeness of the adult's encounter with writing than the classroom experience allows. Although the "office hour" is not suited to teaching, it is, nevertheless, suited to another kind of activity, which is not, on the other hand, counseling. I would like to try to set down here a view of the issues Neal Bruss raised in "Correspondences Four" about lack of confidence among his older students.

I wholeheartedly agree with Neal's statement that "to be an interpreter, espionage agent, busy-body, prober, counselor, questioner-into-the-personal-life, and especially to be the student's therapist is not appropriate." Furthermore, that role is not one that my students, who range in age from thirty to eighty, want me to play; they do not seek help from the likes of me with issues that lodge at that depth or level of personal experience. To be sure, psychical

continuity, like an underground river, runs beneath the surface somewhere, but my binoculars are trained on the surface features of the landscape the apprentice writer is traveling. My metaphor for the relationship between us, and for the task the writer faces, is the crossing of a foreign terrain. I help the apprentice to map out, predict and make guesses about the *terra incognita* in which he or she has been placed. The adult, quite pragmatically, quite sensibly, requests help with getting, simply, from here to there: over the ground, not under it.

For purposes of illustration, I am going to use my experience tutoring one-on-one at theological school; there, my students face what I consider to be the quintessential writing situation for adult students. The modern minister writes in several worlds. Training for ministry means training for a number of roles: teacher, counselor, preacher, nurse, business-person, scholar, urban planner, hymn-writer, critic/editor, and more. Some of this training takes place in the seminary classroom, some in internships, and some occurs, like so much of an adult's education, simply "around the edges," or "along the way." Each of these potential roles will involve the minister in a

distinctly different kind of writing; texts and the conditions that shape the writing tasks will differ from one role to another.

Seminarians not only prepare for a variety of professional applications of their callings, they come from a variety of backgrounds. The call to ministry can come in the midst of any life at any adult age or stage. Seminarians arrive during or after a divorce, a health crisis, a bereavement. They come at retirement time, or after. Sometimes they enter immediately after graduation from college, but their college preparation can have taken place in another country, or in an equally "other" part of this country. A business success may enable one student to afford the "luxury" of following, in effect, a second career. For others, studying for the ministry can mean a considerable burden of debt and the necessity of a part-time job. Students come to the systematic study of religion from every academic preparation and from every denominational background. They arrive with the sounds of very diverse church experiences ringing in their ears.

Some students seek my help on their own; some are referred, primarily from the writing class or writing workshop. I think I can say that, without exception, students do not come for an office hour from "lack of confidence." The hour is requested for help with a usually self-diagnosed writing problem, not for a personal problem. One student discovered she could not "outline"; she did not know what outlining was, and, although she had done quite a bit of writing, she had, to her knowledge, never outlined. Another complained that he could not seem "to give the professor what he wants." Another wondered why her papers were returned frequently with the comment, "unclear writing." Another did not know what "sentence fragments" were. Another had doubts about his ability to write idiomatic English. My students do feel some sense of crisis; that is what has driven them to my door. But it is a writing crisis, and is expressed as such.

The request is usually specific. The text and the task have dimensions: the student in pastoral counseling is logging his visits with a mental patient; a student intern in the central office of the denomination is sending a newsletter, which he helps write, to a readership of clerical and lay members. Important letters of condolence, congratulation, refusal or advice have to be written. And the same week includes seminary or "school writing" tasks: a critical reflection, an interpretation, perhaps an exegesis, or the first chapter of the Dissertation. Any one of these tasks can prove to be a "problem" for the apprentice minister. Even the experienced writer, who in a day's work must move from one to another of these writing tasks, is faced with the problem of writing for a diversity of audiences and purposes.

The office hour allows us a chance to talk together about just these points: purposes for writing, audiences of readers, and how diverse, how different from each other these can be. The conversation can quite profitably turn to personal experience: not to symptoms, defenses, avowals, splits,

dreams and other Freudian matters, but to a review of the worlds of discourse this adult has inhabited prior to the present world. This kind of assessment or review can be accomplished quickly, or it can be allowed to take some time, but adults do like to talk about their schooling (how "long ago" it was), about jobs they have held, about attitudes toward language and learning in their families of origin, about speaking and reading. My students easily respond to the idea that language habits are habits, and that assumptions about purpose and audience are imbedded in all our communications. They accept the idea that these, at one time and place, have served the writer well, but may not serve as well in the present situation. The seminarian who comes from a career in business faces the year-end business report for his parish with equanimity; the Ordination paper is another matter. When I remind the former nurse that she wrote nursing notes in her former life, she is suddenly aware that theological reflection is a very different breed of discourse.

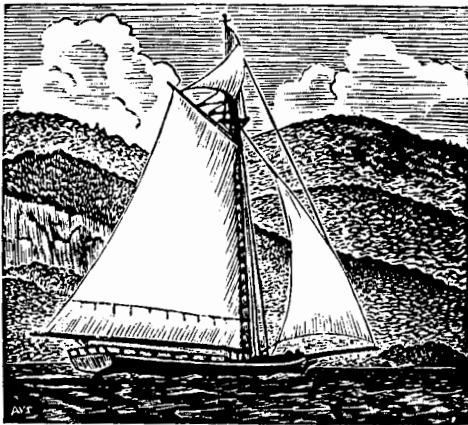
The more experienced the writer, the more automatic will be the manner of expression. The idea that serviceable habits now have to be, if not unlearned, at least set aside or modified, is disconcerting. Writers whose grammar was at least adequate for other kinds of writing sometimes find that spelling and punctuation can founder in a new and previously untried application. The encounter with a new kind of writing feels like migration to a new found land. It is this quality of the experience, in my view, that makes for unconfidence in adult writers, even when the adult has written apparently without trouble on other, often earlier, occasions.

The office hour is no place to introduce (in effect, to teach) all forms of the exegesis, or even all structures of the English sentence, but it is a place to help the writer achieve a sense of perspective on the fact that different structures serve different purposes. That sense serves to introduce a picture of what the adult student faces: the need to migrate from one world to another. Becoming a native of the new context will take getting used to. New habits will have to form. One needs to be patient with that process. I have come to the conclusion that "lack of confidence" (not quite the right phrase) is not a pathological symptom in adult apprentice writers, but is the inevitable, natural effect of adjusting to a new environment, a new way of thinking and acting with words.

In several respects class assignments present adult writers with a special circumstance, one that they do not face elsewhere in their lives when they write. That circumstance and its dislocating effects on adult writers deserve comment. The nurse/now seminarian, when she wrote notes to her peers and to the doctors, knew why she was writing and to whom. She understood the uses to which her information, recorded on the patient's chart, would be put. She is used to thinking of her purpose as writing to *tell someone something they need to know*. In other areas of her life, she writes to share family news, to protest her gas bill, to

persuade her neighbors to vote to leash dogs. Not only is there a gap between these written texts and, say, the text of the exegesis, but the idea that she is writing information in school to teachers who already have that information, that they, in fact, know "the facts" better than she does—that is disconcerting! The student who complains that he cannot "give the professor what he wants" wants help with that task, but does not express a lack of confidence (he seems, in fact, annoyed). He is open to the suggestion that it is indeed profoundly disorienting to write what he feels like saying, only to have that utterance returned for further "work." He was helped by my suggesting that he look on school writing as one world of discourse, with its own rather peculiar (in both senses) purposes, and of the teacher/reader as a special kind of audience.

That basic metaphor (worlds and their inhabitants) enabled both these writers to create bridges between familiar writing tasks and the writing which their seminary training was calling for. Although we do not do a true textual analysis in the one-on-one hour, we do look at a text and ask what *it does*, and what the *reader* is expected to *do* with it. A letter to the parole officer about an inmate one of my students has been counseling has to have in it a clear recommendation and solid evidence for that recommendation. The emigré to this kind of writing begins to notice (models of other letters of the same kind are useful) what works, and to apply what he or she has noticed. Adults out of school normally learn this way; they notice, apply and then consult. My office hours are often used by students who simply want me to look something over. They ask, "How am I doing?" And that question usually means, "Am I sounding credible? Do I sound like a native?" These questions suggest the kind of measurements adults use to mark their own progress into the new territory.



Most adult students do not take map in hand and head at once across the new terrain. They are more cautious; they make forays first. They need a few trial runs, some testing time. Furthermore, since I have not written some of the kinds of texts they bring in to review, I have to ask questions about the circumstances for writing. The minister of an inner-city parish who is working in the area of low-income housing has to write proposals, rally the parish, and perhaps the neighborhood, and go before the Planning Board. There is writing at every stage, and each text belongs to a world—a social, political world, as well as a world for writing. The minister cannot stop to take a course in building specifications and how to write and read them. Nor does he or she have time to study the proposal writer's manual, or the chapter on persuasive writing. The minister has to have some ready sense of how to gauge these tasks. The kind of advice Cy Knoblauch of the SUNY, Albany, English Department, gave to teachers of writing across the curriculum at the recent MLA meeting in New York is useful as we try to help this busy seminarian face the writing tasks imbedded in the urban-planning project. Cy, following Foucault, said "Discourse is a practice, . . . not a structure; an activity, not a container or enclosure; it *has* form but it is not *a* form; it is momentarily regular, but not a system of precise or timeless rules; it exists within history; it is a site, shaped by phenomenal, shifting conditions, not a model or code. . . ." It is unnerving to try to adjust one's footing, keep one's balance, and learn to assess the shifting conditions for writing, especially when one is in the habit of traveling a familiar landscape where one does not have to watch out for the unforeseen.

A sense of dislocation, disorientation, unconfidence, at times outright panic in the writer/wayfarer is to be expected. What cannot be anticipated, predicted is the time the trip will take. How many trial runs? How much testing, consulting, rehearsing will be involved as the apprentice writer assesses and practices and finally masters the new writing tasks? There are countless factors in the seminarian's life that interrupt the process of learning to write. Neal's list of "motives" shared by students who "lack confidence" helps us to see what some of these are. But, in my view, such matters as a family's lack of support, or a lack of personal confidence, or clarity of direction, are not to be confused with the underlying condition which I have described as traveling across untried ground. There are personal dilemmas which my students have to attend to, one way or another—some do seek counseling or therapy for these. Health and finances keep the student writer preoccupied, at the very least. Sometimes attention to these matters can necessitate a semester off. There are countless pressures on adults in school, not visible to those who teach, and not our responsibility to try to help with, either. But these affect length and duration of time spent at the task. These prove distracting. But they do not have the same effect as the experience of confronting a new kind of writing.

When I teach writing at U. Mass.-Boston, I measure time by semesters. I want my students to finish the school year well. It is disappointing when students prove to be too distracted to write a paper as well as I think them capable of writing it. But, as I know from the office hour visit, this does not mean that the student is not learning how to write for his or her ministry and for the demands that the particular ministerial duty entails. These demands may indeed be, for the seminarian, more compelling than the syllabus for my class. A looseness in the schedule of one-on-one meetings with students can encourage progress at a speed and pace that suits the student's life, as a whole. The seminarian, equipped with a heightened sense of the *practice* of writing, heads off across the hall and down the stairs. The rate of accomplishment, the number of interruptions, the necessary pauses to unknot a life problem, all will affect progress. These do not necessarily drain confidence. A state of unconfidence is already an inevitable condition of the journey. Tugs and tensions, feelings of obligations to family, personal doubts, are part and parcel of adult experience, in school and out. These affect every adult enterprise. I do not attempt to address these issues; however, the disruptions of confidence which learning new ways of writing entail I do try to address and I do not necessarily expect results by semester's end.

In this, and in several other respects, the tutor can borrow from the therapist's practice. The teacher usually feels, assumes, more responsibility for the student's rate of progress than the consultant or tutor. A window on the world of the apprentice adult writer provided by one-on-one conferences helps us to accept rates of accomplishment as set by the writer's life. When the seminarian has a homily to give on Sunday, that task will distract from the school writing assignment. But it will also afford a kind of writing lesson. When we confer about the homily afterwards, the seminarian may say that someone in the congregation came up after the service and said how much the homily helped on that day with a particularly pressing problem. This writer can be helped, in turn, to understand that comment as a measure of success. That perspective on what he or she is trying to achieve in the homily enables the apprentice writer to feel a little more at home with the task. Does this mean living up to the student writer's "potential," in the teacher's sense of that phrase? Perhaps not. But it does mean that the apprentice minister/wayfarer is a little less disoriented in the pulpit, that student's "new world." And that seems to me what I, given my professional training and obligations, can and should work towards.

Teaching Without Confidence

Phyllis Lassner

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Neal Bruss, in *Correspondences Four*, addresses a problem faced by many writing teachers: the "bright, sincere students who say that their basic problem is that they 'lack confidence'" and who never fulfill their promise. Bruss approaches this problem from a psychodynamic perspective many teachers would shy away from. Despite "the ubiquity of psychoanalytic clichés" in our attempts to understand human behavior, composition theory generally finds more compatible those methods which separate the cognitive behaviors of writing students from the psychodynamic. Bruss approaches students' resistant behavior as a symptom recurring within the context of "the continuity of psychical life." That is, he attributes this behavior to a defensive strategy which both protects the student from the idea of failure and defends against taking risks. Importantly, he warns us that our grasp of such problems does not license us to be therapists; indeed, we must be on our constant guard not to impose, either through verbal interpretation or behavior, an analysis of the student's psychological life.

Neal's emphasis on the student's needs leads my attention to the teacher, who, as part of this "dynamic duo," has needs and hesitations every bit as significant as the student's. In the teaching of writing especially, teachers work so close to the student's ego defenses that we are in constant danger of exposing our own. Each time we comment on a paper or meet with a student, we are engaged in interaction that flows two ways. As we work to facilitate students' writing, we respond to their response to our paradoxical combination of encouragement and criticism. This interrelationship draws upon teachers' own doubts and anxieties about fulfilling the promise of *our* work. Like the student, we bring to the writing classroom and conference motives which do "not originate in the student's relation to us or our class, [but] . . . in some current or prior experience outside of class." A student may resist our efforts to give, perhaps mirroring their earlier resistances to family, as well as reflecting their teachers' resistances to taking intellectual and social risks. In both cases—the student's psychological life and our own—we invest unconscious needs and defenses in this particularly intense teaching and learning experience.

Composition theorists have long been aware of connections between good writing and personal risk. James Britton tells us that "writing best succeeds when it becomes part of the writer's own feeling for the work." (*Development*, 28) Britton's studies of the development of writing as a learning process reveal the necessity of supportive intervention by a trusted teacher. In his model, the development of expressive to transactional writing depends on an environment shaped by the empathy of the teacher.

Transactional writing develops only as students can move confidently away from their dependence on the teacher's empathic support. As writers become competent, they become independent by internalizing support and making it their own. They learn to write to an unknown audience as they come to recognize the safe distance between their egos and that of their teacher.

Embedded in Britton's model are psychoanalytic assumptions formulated by D.W. Winnicott, the British child psychoanalyst. Winnicott concluded from clinical observations that "maturation processes" require a facilitating environment where young children develop a sense of their capacities for learning from symbiosis with a "good enough mother" or caregiver who supports the child's need for dependence while encouraging the need for separation and individuation. (*PR* 11, 55) Painfully ambivalent about leaving the one on whom competence seems to depend, children create images of the caregiver each step that they move away. In this "transitional space," children substitute artifacts for the caregiver until the "transitional object" becomes a sign leading to independent work.

Just as Britton observed children internalizing rules of language, Winnicott saw how they master rules of social interaction. The good teacher, like the "good enough mother," creates a facilitating environment in which competent writing can develop. As Britton observes: "Whether we write or speak, expressive language is associated with a relationship of mutual confidence and trust and is therefore a form of discourse that encourages us to take risks, to try out ideas we are not sure of, in a way we would not dare to do, in say, making a public speech." I am not suggesting that teachers assume the role of mother or therapist, but that elements of nurture and support are necessary to make an active adaptation to the writer's needs. Then, as the student gains mastery and is able, in Winnicott's terms, to account for failure of adaptation and to tolerate the results of frustration, they may lessen. In short, according to Britton, the teacher represents a stage in differentiation between self and other, between expressive and transactional language, "as a sympathetic and interested

adult, rather than specifically as a teacher." This stage is enacted out of "shared interest and expertise" and in "an accumulating shared context." (*Development*, 118)

This stage and space are parallel in meaning to Winnicott's "potential space," where a need to separate from the caregiver is replaced by the need for independence. In the writing classroom or conference the instructor facilitates separation and independence by not rejecting the student's need for help, support, and criticism. In turn, the student cannot become autonomous unless the instructor is prepared to let go. As this happens, the teacher, according to Britton, becomes an "internalized other"—as the reminder that this first draft will be rewritten and that rewriting means discovering problems and implications that are now recognizable. (*Development*, 119) Recognition takes place in the potential space where, Winnicott tells us, "there develops a use of symbols that stand at one and the same time for external world phenomena and for phenomena of the individual person" and, I add, person writing. (*PR*, 121)

Teaching writing involves both teacher and learner in affective interaction where both are vulnerable. If we are to be good-enough teachers, we must understand how we feel and behave in relation to our students. In her pioneering studies of teacher-student relationships, Elizabeth Richardson, the British educator, observed this vulnerability in the form of mutually shared unconscious need, a dynamic which can be compared to the processes of transference and countertransference in psychoanalysis. Effective teaching would then require a recognition of the transfer of unconscious feeling flowing back and forth between teacher and student. Through her training at London's Tavistock Psychoanalytic Clinic and Institute for Human Development, Richardson saw that that can both facilitate and hinder teaching and learning:

The teacher's role as leader of a dependent group carr[ies] with it all the pains and anxieties as well as the pleasant characteristics of the dependent group culture. We must ask ourselves whether the teaching and learning situation, too, depends on the ability of teacher and class to use this dependent culture in a sophisticated manner, or whether another kind of relationship must be sought. (*EL*, 52)

Richardson's work is especially important to our understanding of teaching writing as she identifies "the elusive unconscious mechanisms that we all use in face of difficulty." (*Teacher*, 25)

Richardson felt that teacher evaluation has to be a process parallel to the goals of teaching. That is, if we are to teach competence and independence, we must be models of the same, and this can only take place as we empower ourselves to be as self-critical and self-supportive as we wish our students to be. This can only come about as we



recognize that, like students, we teachers struggle in our desire for and fear of dependence and autonomy in every relationship following our own infancy. In this way, "echoes from the family situation will be at work, if only at the subconscious levels in every teacher-pupil relationship." (EL, 16) Thus transference and countertransference occur as exposure and vulnerability in the teaching setting invite responses which replicate feelings and conflicts from parental relationships. Richardson identifies such a conflict between a student's "wish to be treated as an adult by the teacher" and "a subconscious need to keep him in a visibly recognizable position of authority. . . that will be found to have roots going right back to infancy." (EL, 6, 16) Students operate on two levels: that of "primitive emotions," where they look for easy, unambiguous solutions to learning through "fantasy," and their efforts to test reality through solutions found only in work. (*Group Study*, 7)

In the intensive setting of teaching writing we can see how "teachers. . . are peculiarly vulnerable to the unconscious re-awakening of their most primitive" feelings as they empathize with students' anxieties about exposing one's limitations in writing that threatens to become a humiliating monument to ignorance. (EL, 179) How often, after all, do we see ourselves in our students, either as we once were or as we would like to forget we sometimes still are. Recognition of the value of empathy, however, must not invite a fusion of student and teacher identities. To lose sight of where our needs and the student's begin and end, would be to lose the critical distance necessary for teaching and learning. Richardson notes that affection must be accompanied by detachment so that we do not incite the kind of dependency that perpetuates students' and teachers' unconscious ambivalence about risk-taking. For while we take for granted students' anxieties about evaluation, we tend to forget or ignore that teachers feel their own successes and failures reflected in their assessment of students' work.

This dual anxiety demands dual responsibility: to our sense of our own professionalism and to the student's maturational processes. We therefore want to encourage "a healthily aggressive relationship between teacher and class that promotes learning through a dialectic of discussion and argument." (EL, 54) Without being assaulting, the interplay of differences between teacher and student fosters individuation which not only prevents the replay of psychical patterns destructive to our autonomy, but produces mutual recognition of individual styles of being, leading to mutual respect. Richardson argues that assessment should be "continuous" so that like the child's ongoing separation from parents in which rules are tested and reestablished in forms consistent with growing self-sufficiency, students accept evaluation as an "integral part of learning and teaching." (*Group Study*, 42) Thus, in the writing classroom or conference, we must tolerate the tentative, sometimes inchoate expressions of thought on the

part of our students in order to support the creation of mature, coherent thinking and writing. At the same time, however, we must not support patterns of thinking which reflect infantile desires to remain close to the object of nurturance. Out of a need to be loved or feared, to be in control, teachers may feel it necessary to affirm naive, ignorant, or even foolish ideas in the guise of validating the student's fragile ego. In fact, such uncritical behavior is multiply damaging. It only affirms dependence on a teacher who is actually no more autonomous than the student, and it reinforces the teacher's need to find validation through shared passivity and compliance.

In order to become self-sustaining while risking our vulnerabilities, we must protect ourselves from collusion with students' projections onto us of their anxieties. We cannot feel and behave as though we are ultimately responsible for students' successes and failures. If we resist the inclination to fuse our own needs with those of the student, we will be in a position to perceive our own behavior and that of the student more objectively. Richardson argues that this dialectic of being close while negotiating distance between ourselves and students is a "drama [which] becomes a mirror in which to see oneself as others see you." (*Teacher*, 43) This mutual imaging enables us to recognize those features in our personalities which encourage others to react to us as they do, to identify ourselves with another's personality and to work with an awareness of those differences.

To take care of ourselves, however, does not mean to protect ourselves from evaluation with the rationalization that professional autonomy is threatened by recognition of weaknesses. Real professional autonomy requires knowing more about the unconscious coping strategies that allow us to defend against and avoid changes. As intellectuals, we may be only too ready to ignore the power of feeling in our thinking. As Richardson warns:

Too much of our thinking is ineffective because it is divorced from feeling. Conversely, too much of our feeling works destructively because, being unacknowledged, it lies beyond the control of our thinking. (*Environment*, 12-13)

Bibliographical Note

The quotations from James Britton are from *The Development of Writing Abilities, 11-18* (London: Macmillan, 1975). References to D.W. Winnicott are from *Playing and Reality* (Harmondsworth, 1974). For the work of Elizabeth Richardson, see: *The Active Teacher* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1955); *The Environment of Learning: Conflict and Understanding in the Secondary School* (NY: Weybright and Talley, 1967); *Group Study for Teachers* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967); *The Teacher, the School and the Task of Management* (London: Heinemann, 1973).

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