

says instruction in France in his time censored literature. No contributor defines teaching. What it is “goes without saying and is never called into question for the purpose of defining, if not its being, at least its social, symbolic, or anthropological functions” (Barthes 73). As a result, the issue is theoretically impoverished.

Clichés abound, each an emblem of some essentialist or foundational narrative. Barthes equates teaching with “the transmission of knowledge” (74). Melville B. Anderson says teaching is “acquainting” (82). For Frank F. Madden it’s helping students have a meaningful experience (104). Lawrence Buell reflects on “how young minds should be fed” (77). David R. Shumway opines that “good teaching often depends on dramatic performance” (92). As if puzzling over Martin W. Sampson’s question “[J]ust how shall we concern ourselves” with literature? (79), Pamela L. Caughie and Carrie Noland explore what teachers should say to students and to one another. Adopting at a postmodern remove Sampson’s assumption that a teacher “makes his students” approach, love, and understand literature (79), Ross Chambers asks, “Who is doing what to whom . . . in whose interests?” (106).

Throughout this issue of *PMLA*, contributors evade the central question: What should a literary academic do in a classroom? Only Madden’s ingenuous job interviewees articulate what most literary academics tacitly believe they should do there: “My students don’t know about literature, so I have to tell them about it” (102). Illustrations on pages 22, 23, and 78 show literature teachers doing just that, with effects that can be read in the ironically polite faces of the students watching Houston A. Baker, Jr., talk (23).

Only Betsy Keller sketches an alternative (not illustrated). She describes it as “departing from the lecture-and-discussion format with interactive techniques . . . ask[ing] students, working in small groups, to think about” sets of questions (57, 59). Domna C. Stanton and Joseph Oran Aimone cautiously sanction this alternative because, Aimone suggests, small groups “remove the pressure of an audience” (105).

Keller, Stanton, and Aimone do not seem aware of how small-group work affects a classroom. Collaborative learning doesn’t remove the pressure of an audience. It changes the size, composition, and social status of the audience, consequently displacing the locus of intellectual authority and transforming the way students and teacher construct knowledge and authority. Collaborative learning institutionalizes poststructuralist thought in college and university education without, as Biddy Martin puts it, “paralyz[ing] students with compulsive reminders about the absence of ultimate foundations” (13). My *Collaborative Learning: Higher Education, Interdependence,*

*and the Authority of Knowledge* (Johns Hopkins UP, 1993) offers an account of the process.

Shumway describes the social construction of intellectual authority as the “authorization of knowledge by personality” (97), but he does not discuss this phenomenon in the context of the classroom. Thus he does not identify the root cause of “the academic star system” that long preceded cheap air transportation—the classroom authority structure in which literature is normally taught.

We fans of academic stars are academics ourselves. Stars and fans alike have learned to do superlatively what students are doing in the photographs on pages 23 and 78: sitting still and listening with rapt attention. Schooled as fans, we aspire to stardom. Most of us have to content ourselves with local stardom and student fans. But we celebrate the game of fans and stars ritually in the traditional classroom protocol that our professional conventions mirror—both the mores we expect colleagues to conform to and our public bouts of paper reading. The goal of both, indisputably, is cultural reproduction.

Keller alone alludes fleetingly to some of the “social, symbolic, or anthropological functions” of teaching. Its purpose is “not to ‘make students see’ everything that interests the teacher but to invite them to engage the text as a community . . .” (61). Rather than cultural reproduction the goal of teaching understood in this way is reacculturation, which requires collaboration.

The profession at large has already declared obsolete the heavily censored, antique understanding of teaching that informs the January issue of *PMLA*. Academic deans at a dozen independent institutions in Pennsylvania that constitute the Commonwealth Partnership write in “What You Should Know: An Open Letter to New PhDs” that from each crop of aspiring young scholars devoted to “research and creative activity” they intend to select those who can “help build communities . . . in which diversity, responsibility, and cooperation thrive” and who can help students learn “the skills needed to cooperate and collaborate” (*Profession 1996* [MLA, 1996] 80). *PMLA* has done little to help the Pennsylvanians achieve their goal.

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To the Editor:

Atypical of *PMLA* in focusing on the teaching of literature, the January 1997 issue is stimulating and replete with engaging and interesting observations. It is also unrepresentative of literature teachers, many of whom do not share the view of Joseph T. Skerrett, Jr., that “what

lies behind the desire to put senior faculty members into freshmen classrooms” is the goal of “inhibiting our theoretical work, questioning the value of speculation and research . . .” (112). The authors, compiler, panelists, and translator represented in the issue are, with one exception, all from research universities (Cornell, Loyola, California [two], Rutgers [two], SUNY, Harvard, Carnegie Mellon, Michigan [two], Princeton, Stanford, and Massachusetts). A lone panelist is from Westchester Community College. Absent from the roster are teachers of literature from liberal arts colleges or regional comprehensive universities. This is not unusual for lists of contributors to *PMLA*, but in this particular issue, the omission seems embarrassing, revealing, even silly. Surely it is in the liberal arts colleges and regional universities that the teaching of literature is the primary focus of members of departments of modern languages, including English. Those of us who share that calling are certainly not the most prestigious members of the profession and are rarely regarded as cutting-edge practitioners of contemporary literary studies. When we write letters like this one, we often appear curmudgeonly, out of fashion, irrelevant. But what we undoubtedly do is teach literature—quietly, enthusiastically, effectively, and often creatively. It would have been wise, and maybe even instructive, for the organizers of the roundtable and the *PMLA* special topic to have included us in this discussion.

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To the Editor:

Joseph Skerrett, Jr., and George Levine rightly raise the problem of university administrators’ regarding their institution as a “technical institute” or as a corporation that deals with “customers instead of students” (“Teaching Literature in the Academy Today: A Roundtable,” 112 [1997]: 101–12). The matter requires much more discussion and analysis than is allowed by Skerrett’s obvious disdain or Domna Stanton’s laconic response, “That means the triumph of the McDonald’s mentality” (112).

MLA members first need to recognize the extent to which colleges and universities are already adopting the McDonald’s mentality. Many schools, for instance, distribute ID cards that function as credit cards, long-distance calling cards, ATM cards, and the like. The education supplement of the *New York Times* points out in excruciating detail how corporations regularly make advertising the price for donations of course materials and computers (4 Dec. 1996). Teaching is starting to be conceived of as an almost purely economic transaction. During winter

and summer sessions at my institute, teachers are paid not by the course but by the head. Thus, if a student decides to drop a class for whatever reason, the professor’s salary is reduced accordingly. Eli M. Noam, director of the Columbia University Institute for Tele-information, predicts that in ten years education will be predominantly commercial (universities will compete with publishers like McGraw-Hill for “customers”) and electronic. All these trends are epitomized in Florida Gulf Coast University, Florida’s newest state university, which is dedicated to electronic distance learning, has only temporary positions (its ad reads, “The State University System Board of Regents authorizes multi-year appointments”), and determines the value of research “by state and regional needs.” It is hard to see how research on the construction of gender in the Renaissance fits into such a place.

Dismissing these developments is the wrong response, as is pleading our case by advocating the study of timeless literature’s eternal truths. The former only increases the communication gap between faculty and administration; the latter renders us quaint and harmless. Neither approach will draw support for our work from those who control the purse strings and who subscribe to what Skerrett and Stanton (rightfully) deplore. Such administrators are more likely to regard our complaints as fossils of a better-funded age. Turning away in disdain will only hurt us. If we are to survive in an academy increasingly subsidized, as J. Hillis Miller notes (“Literary Study in the Transnational University,” *Profession 1996* [New York: MLA, 1996] 6–14), by “transnational” corporations with little or no sympathy for what we do, we need to learn how to justify ourselves in the language of the McDonald’s mentality.

There is perhaps more common ground between us and “them” than Stanton and Skerrett allow. For example, in a recent issue of the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, the chairman of the California Information Technology Commission, John M. Eger, calls for increasing use of distance learning and computer-based education, but he also wants a transformation of the curriculum that sounds like a move to cultural studies: “Schools and universities . . . everywhere must find ways of creating new programs that cross the lines between disciplines, cultures and institutions. The world has changed and students and their future employers demand broad-based, interdisciplinary, international curricula that produce a different and more relevant learning experience” (18 Dec. 1996: B13). Could we not combine the argument that cultural studies provides the education that students and their future employers apparently want with a defense of face-to-face classrooms as the best method for delivering this education? Along the same lines, Christopher Newfield has