As Lee-Ann Kastman Breuch indicates in one of her footnotes, she kindly allowed me to read and to comment on her manuscript before it appeared in these pages ("Post-Process 'Pedagogy': A Philosophical Exercise," JAC 22 [2002]: 119–50). I admired her work then, and I like it even more now after having read the article in its final form. In this piece, Breuch grapples with large issues, and here I want to comment primarily on a few more or less mundane issues located at the circumference of her argument, and on one important issue located at the center of it.

As I understand her central position, Breuch argues that post-process theory is "at its very core, concerned with pedagogical practice," and most of her discussion constitutes a warrant for this assertion (145). I want to pick a bit at this claim, for I don't believe that post-process theory or any theory for that matter can help us very much with our pedagogical practices. Breuch does not define explicitly what she means by "pedagogy," but she seems to suggest that it concerns primarily "what we do with content" in our courses (145). This reasonable observation means, at least to me, that we possess a wide range of pedagogical alternatives that help us relate to students the content of our courses, and some of these alternatives, depending on our students' learning situations, will prove more efficacious than others. These pedagogical alternatives almost
always reflect some sort of learning theory, a generally coherent system of presuppositions that describes how people learn—perhaps a Deweyean social theory, a Freirean dialogic theory, a Piagetian cognitive theory, or some other coherent set of presuppositions. In principle, however, nothing makes one of these learning theories better than another. No principled pedagogy exists in the sense that we can stand outside our practices to discover a set of uncontested principles that will allow us to reject definitively one learning theory and to declare another the undisputed path to enlightenment. Of course, in practice, we always definitively reject theories, for, in practice, some theories always will seem silly or inappropriate to us.

So, we confirmed anti-foundationalists must insist that theory informs practice only when we need a theory to explain our practices. I should emphasize too that we should not confuse the holding of a theory with the holding of a belief. Theories are not beliefs. Theories are coherent systems of presuppositions that explain and that bring coherence to the practices that derive from our beliefs. A theory cannot justify our beliefs, for nothing justifies a belief except another belief. Consequently, post-process theory indeed may be “concerned with pedagogical practice” in the sense that post-process theory helps us to explain coherently our pedagogical practices, but these pedagogical practices, as motivated and intentional actions, derive from our beliefs, not our theories. To be fair to Breuch, she does not reject this position, and she may actually endorse it; however, she sometimes seems to hold the view that theory precedes or guides practice. She tells us, for example, that if we “uncover the assumptions that guide post-process theory, we may find helpful and even profound contributions that inform our pedagogical practice—if not in specific pedagogical agendas, then in philosophical principles that guide our practice” (121). This view that theory guides practice invites us, I believe, to see pedagogy as principled—or, stated another way, as a practice determined by principles that reside outside of the give and take of human communicative interaction.

That being said, I’m not sure that I agree with Breuch when she concludes her article by holding that post-process theory enhances our sensitivity as teachers, our knowledge and expertise, and the way we communicate with students to help them learn. In short, post-process theory asks us to take a close look at ourselves as teachers. Thinking through the principles of rejection of mastery and engagement in dialogue provides all teachers with a valuable philosophical exercise.

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No theory, post-process or otherwise, can enhance our sensitivity as teachers or force us to take a better look at ourselves as teachers. Only our belief that sensitivity and introspection matter can result in this type of right behavior, and we may hold this belief for all sorts of different reasons. In fact, we might become more sensitive and introspective teachers by holding unpopular and controversial beliefs, beliefs that most people do not hold, but the bottom line here is that no theory—only a belief—will ever help us heighten our sensitivity or become more introspective. So, if we believe that our beliefs inform our practices and that nothing justifies a belief except another belief, then we really don’t require theory at all except to bring together our practices in some sort of coherent and, in turn, teachable way. As I indicated, Breuch may actually endorse this position, although I don’t believe that she does so overtly.

I would like to mention here as well a couple of issues raised peripherally by Breuch. The first issue concerns the articulation of pedagogy and composition studies within what I shall call an institutional economy, and the second concerns the sometimes misunderstood claim that writing cannot be taught. In her article, Breuch identifies a seeming contradiction inherent within the very possibility of a post-process pedagogy: “To articulate any kind of pedagogy based on anti-foundationalism would be to support the claim that knowledge can be rooted in a particular approach or system and, therefore, would no longer be anti-foundational” (140). The contradiction identified by Breuch embodies the fallacy of self-refutation: anti-foundationalists refute themselves when they hold that pedagogy may be grounded or founded on a “particular approach or system.” However, I believe that this contradiction is only “apparent” because, as with most examples of self-refutation, the contradiction disappears when terms are defined adequately.

Anti-foundationalists understand clearly that systems of belief exist and that some systems work better than others within particular social conditions; however, we anti-foundationalists simply don’t see any advantage in inflating this empirical observation into a philosophical one. And, of course, we anti-foundationalists may endorse and defend one of these belief systems over another, for anti-foundationalists may defend and have every right to defend their beliefs just as strongly and vociferously as any foundationalist. Consequently, when we consider pedagogy or almost any other human activity or intellectual endeavor, anti-foundationalists may be just as foundational in practice as any foundationalist. We may ground a pedagogy on any system or approach that we feel works best, and we can argue or lobby for that system or
approach when we serve on curriculum committees or when we attend
department meetings or national conferences. Finally, then, the contra-
diction that Breuch identifies really does not constitute a contradiction in
practice. Nonetheless, what I take to be her more general concern remains
an important issue, a concern that looms large behind this seeming
contradiction. In broaching the problems inherent in the very possibility
of a post-process pedagogy, Breuch also broaches the more general
problem associated with our ability to create a pedagogy that actually
works. In more specific terms, she raises a question about the possibility
of finding a pedagogy that will actually help our students become better
writers, and this question should concern us all.

I would like to suggest that any successful pedagogy that helps our
students become better writers will be viewed as successful only within
an institutional economy. By economy, I don’t mean exchange value
only. Following Thoreau, I mean by economy the way we choose to
organize our material conditions. By institution, I simply mean a social
organization of some sort that is structured to engage in a relatively
specific activity. So, by institutional economy, I mean the way that we
choose to arrange the material conditions that constitute our social
organizations. Now, I admit that I’m playing fast and loose with my terms.
For example, we need to know much more about what constitutes a
“material condition” or the act of “choosing” to arrange our material
conditions. And we certainly need to discuss at greater length the nagging
question concerning determinism: don’t our organizations, in a sense,
“arrange” us instead of our arranging them? However, for the sake of
brevity here, I need to postpone a discussion of these important questions
in order to make the following, albeit underdeveloped, claim: any
pedagogy that we deem successful—by whatever measure that we choose
to employ (a measure that in itself will constitute another material
condition)—will be deemed successful primarily through that particular
pedagogy’s ability to articulate with the material conditions that structure
our institutions. Through this process of articulation or positioning, a
specific pedagogy will appear as more or less successful. For example,
the material conditions at Utopia University may be so arranged and
perhaps so bountiful that a pedagogy for writing instruction there would
be impossible to duplicate at Real World University. The Utopian
pedagogy simply would not articulate with the material conditions at Real
World. What works at one university obviously may not work at another.

This common sense observation, however, also means that to be
successful at Utopian U a specific composition pedagogy would need to
articulate with the material conditions there, conditions such as the available technology (physical capital) or the expertise of its faculty (intellectual capital). I should emphasize here that a specific arrangement of material conditions does not cause the success of a specific pedagogy. A specific pedagogy will be deemed more or less successful according to its bearing and position within the arrangement of material conditions that structure or organize an institution. At Real World University, a specific pedagogical approach to composition instruction might be regarded as successful primarily because the approach allows hundreds of students to be taught through distance education technology. Or, stated a bit differently, the Real World pedagogy articulates with an arrangement of material conditions (distance education, the generation of student credit hours, perhaps the use of adjunct instructors, and so forth) that in a sense defines success at Real World. A successful or efficacious pedagogy, then, depends neither on a general principle nor on a general pedagogical theory, unless of course this principle or theory happens to articulate with the arrangement of material conditions that structures a particular institution. Rather, a successful pedagogy will be recognized as successful only within the articulated “space” that it finds for itself within its institutional economy.

Finally, I would like to comment on another question raised somewhat peripherally by Breuch: if writing cannot be taught, what do we writing teachers teach? In our professional careers as academics, many of us make claims that we wish we had formulated or articulated differently. For me, the claim that haunts me and often hounds me is my admittedly underdeveloped and underexamined contention that writing cannot be taught, a claim that Breuch rightfully foregrounds in her article. I need to point out here, as I have indicated on other occasions and in other forums, that I have never claimed that composition cannot be taught, for we certainly may teach systematically and rigorously subjects dealing with how texts operate, how texts shape understanding, and how texts function within different social contexts. My claim that writing cannot be taught means simply that we need to know a bunch of stuff before we can effectively communicate (write, speak, employ appropriate gestures in public situations, select the right attire, and so forth). Certainly, we need to know some sort of language (a system of signs or sounds) before we can communicate, but we don’t need to share a common language in order to communicate. Knowing a language and knowing how to knock about by employing it are necessary but not sufficient for communication.
Writing as a kind of communication requires that we know a language and how to manipulate it, but knowing a language and how to manipulate it, although necessary, cannot ensure that our written communications will be understood. Nothing can ensure that. If something could ensure that our written communications will be understood, then we would all know that something sooner or later, and we writing teachers would be out of jobs. Actually, communication itself depends on this interpretive slippage or this discontinuity, for without the uncertainty inherent in interpretation, no communication could occur at all. So, my contention that writing cannot be taught doesn’t mean that we writing teachers are defunct. Our current and future students will always need to know how texts operate, how texts shape understanding, and how texts function within different social contexts. And, of course, we require pedagogies in order to teach these subjects, but no guiding principle will help us very much in our search for the most efficacious pedagogy for a particular course—except perhaps for the finally anemic principle, or cliché actually, that one size does not fit all. When Breuch writes that “post-process theory does not mean an avoidance of the teaching of writing; it does not mean becoming irresponsible teachers” (146), I certainly concur, and giving up the search for a principled pedagogy will help us all become more responsible teachers.

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Fucking in the Wreckage: After Postmodernism

Johndan Johnson-Eilola

Near the end of David Cronenberg’s adaptation of J.G. Ballard’s Crash, James Ballard stalks his wife Catherine down a busy freeway. The barely controllable, battered behemoth of a 1963 Lincoln weaves in and out of traffic, cutting off cars and a garbage truck, literally pushing other vehicles off the road in pursuit. The car was previously driven by Ballard’s friend Vaughan, whose earlier pursuit of both Ballard and