

This is a pre-print version of Logan Hudspeth's webtext, "Deconstructing Composition: A Review of Patricia Suzanne Sullivan's *Experimental Writing in Composition: Aesthetics and Pedagogies*," published in *Kairos: A Journal of Rhetoric, Technology, and Pedagogy*, 19(2), available at <http://kairos.technorhetoric.net/19.2/reviews/hudspeth>

Video Transcript

The title of *Experimental Writing in Composition: Aesthetics and Pedagogies* (Sullivan, 2012) might mislead readers into thinking that Patricia Suzanne Sullivan is going to outline experimental writing as used in the classroom. However, this could not be further from the truth. In her introduction, Sullivan (2012) states, "I do not argue for teaching experimental writing in composition classrooms; nor do I [aim to] explain how to teach such texts" (p. 2). If you were looking at this book review for that, you can browse elsewhere. Instead, if you were looking for someone to sort through and evaluate certain high-profile arguments for teaching experimental writing and overview some of the pitfalls one finds when teaching these forms of writing—you're welcome to stay.

For those who have not encountered Patricia Suzanne Sullivan before, she was most recently the Director of First-Year Writing at Northeastern University and has written in conference essays and in print about multimodality in the student classroom. A link to her website can be found at the bottom of this page.

Sullivan starts by looking at more expressivist and compositionist pedagogies that emphasize the individuality of the student and their use of experimental forms to show greater forces at work. She cites such writers as Geoffrey Sirc (2002), Winston Weathers (1980), Wendy Bishop (1994), and others, and contrasts them with more traditional forms of discourse pedagogy. Both expressivist and compositionist arguments she examines via dialectics, such as alienation versus autonomy, and, in the case of the compositionist arguments, critically examines them via "historical and theoretical debates about the politics of the avant-garde" (Sullivan, 2012, p. 46). For Sullivan, experimental writing equates to avant-garde.

The third chapter deals with the question of evaluating experimental writings. Sullivan outlines crises that can easily befall instructors in using these pedagogies. She states:

A teacher's ability to judge student writing can be paralyzed when traditional criteria fail to apply to a new form, or when traditional criteria and new criteria conflict irreconcilably, or when, simply the teacher hasn't yet developed the criteria needed to evaluate what the student has produced (Sullivan, 2012, p. 77).

Sullivan then shows and advocates a reflective view of evaluation like those shown in Min-Zhan Lu's work "Professing Multiculturalism: The Politics of Style in the Contact Zone" (1994) and Jean-François Lyotard and Jean-Loup Thébaud's work *Just Gaming* (1985).

In Chapter 4, Sullivan turns her attention to a specific type of experimental mode, the collage, and uses it to explain more issues that teachers come up with when teaching

experimental writing. In it she highlights the fact that there's no one way to teach collage, briefly summarizing the methods used by Elbow in "A Collage: Your Cheatin' Art" (1997), and in Chris Gallagher's "If This Were Not a Collage: A Collage" (2000). She places collage as distinctly postmodern and discusses her own students' failed attempts at the genre, as well as successful attempts with it.

Finally, in the fifth chapter, she calls "Postscript," Sullivan branches out her analysis. She sees the parallels between experimental writing and new media in the classroom, and sort of anticipates the move in composition studies toward new media.

I hope Dr. Sullivan will remember her acknowledgement and not mind me saying what I really thought of her writing, as she did with her sister's writing. I felt the book could have been more accessible if written in the common vernacular, or, in a humorous take on meta-commentary she wrote the book in a non-academic form. However, this is an academic form, and the form it took lent a voice of objectivity, which was probably what she hoped to establish.

A little bit of background. I'm reading this book in my first semester of teaching a First-Year Composition course, and I obviously still have a lot of fresh-faced idealism to shed. As I read through the book, I found myself swayed by the arguments Sullivan presents of the expressivists and the compositionists, only to have the gumption beaten out of me by the end of the chapters.

In these chapters, Sullivan, like the dutiful teacher of formal composition, sorts through the major arguments for experimental writing by their merits, chastising those seeking to "break the rules" of formal composition studies with dense, Derrida-like deconstruction and grudgingly accepts those that fit into the more practical mode of composition studies. She pokes holes in the works of Peter Elbow (1997), Geoffrey Sirc (2002), and Derek Owens (1994) by questioning their reasoning for including such experimental writing in their pedagogies.

Now the chapter on evaluation really helped me see the danger areas of this particular pedagogy. These new experimental composition genres might be tempting for me to use and freeing to the students, but at the end of the day, I still have to put a well-thought-out and just grade on the student work for the institution.

Now the fourth chapter was a bit difficult for me to deal with because of my own newness to composition studies; however, the chapter is very helpful. The first half shows the necessary background for Sullivan. The last section has her own struggles with teaching collage in the classroom. It highlights her students' successes as well as their failures, and it's very encouraging to see Sullivan also having trouble with her students understanding the nature of the form being taught.

Now in "Postscript," Sullivan applies the criticisms she worked through in the previous chapters to new media, though, as this chapter implies, it seems more of an afterthought—

or perhaps a cliffhanger for another book. It's gratifying to see her consider new media in terms of experimental writing and actually equate them, and by equating them, she's allying the proponents of new media *and* experimental writing.

So, is this book for you? If you're all for bucking the system and teaching avant-garde just to stick it to the institution—no. If you're looking for a ready-made pedagogy or a how-to guide—no. But, if you're looking for a well-reasoned analysis of experimental writing pedagogies, and aren't put off by deconstructionist binary oppositions—yeah, this book is just for you.