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Learning Is [Like] an Act of Writing: The Writerly Turn in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education

> For when the traveler returns from the mountain-slopes into the valley,
> he brings, not a handful of earth, unsayable to others, but instead
> some word he has gained, some pure word . . .
>
> *Rainer Maria Rilke*

ABSTRACT

Scholarly inquiry into teaching and learning in higher education has long been undertaken through a wide array of theoretical and methodological approaches. This article offers a novel theoretical framework for reconceptualizing and analyzing teaching and learning processes as textual acts. Drawing on Roland Barthes's concept of the writerly text, this framework enables us to rethink how students engage with course content through positioning learning as an act of meaning making. It also offers insights into how instructors can prompt more meaningful interaction and engagement. For Barthes, writerly texts are texts where the act of reading is an act of re-writing, where the reader is an active participant in producing the text's meaning. This article applies this writerly conceptual lens to the teaching and learning process in a university STEM course, exploring how positioning the teacher as the author, the course as the text, and the student as the reader might create a space where the student is not just the audience (Barthes 1974, 4) of a course's content, but also a co-creator.

KEYWORDS

writerly teaching and learning, interaction, Roland Barthes, literary theory, textual acts

INTRODUCTION: TEACHING AND LEARNING AS TEXTUAL ACTS

Any discussion of what makes higher education learning experiences good must consider more than students' exposure to excellent teaching performances and course materials or even a construed calculation on whether or how students achieve the intended learning outcomes. Rather, this article argues that the value of a learning experience concerns the extent to which students are invited to participate in the production of meaning around a course's content, as well as the extent to which they can take what is presented to them and convert it into something new. This invitation and exploration may concern an entire term or a single moment in a particular class activity. The article argues that learning is about how students make meaning from their studies, and if this is the case, one possible avenue for fruitfully rethinking the relationship and purpose of teaching and learning is the field of literary theory, since it can equip us with appropriate language, concepts, and methodologies to explore this evasive concept of what "learning" is.

Making such a shift to literary theory for the purpose of educational inquiry is not as radical as it may seem. Theory, in all of its variations, has been a challenge for SoTL at least since Graham Gibbs famously attacked the lack of theory in SoTL almost 20 years ago, sparking quite a debate within the SoTL community (Hutchings 2007). Since then, there have been several calls for improving, defining,

or elevating the role of theory in SoTL (Gordon 2012; Haigh and Withell 2020; Kanuka 2011; Potter and Kustra 2011). One of the things that separates SoTL from education research, in a good way, is its inclusive and interdisciplinary approach (Bass 1999; Chick 2013; Felten 2013; Huber 2006; McKinney 2007), which opens new possibilities for inquiry, theoretically and methodologically, while also allowing for purposeful and productive "messiness" (Bass 2020; Cook-Sather, Abbot, and Felten 2019; Gansemer-Topf et al. 2021; Godbold et al. 2021; Hanstedt 2018; Schrum and Mårtensson 2023). Such messiness is unavoidable when we look into the vagaries of human interactions and learning, but it also offers opportunities for theoretical richness not afforded by other narrowly defined approaches.

Theory and philosophy have a role to play in teaching and learning, as well as any related form of research. Indeed, theory has the potential to enable us to ask better questions, structure what is important, and offer alternative ways of thinking about fostering and researching learning (Tesar et al. 2022). As Hutchings reminds us, "theory is not an end in itself, but a condition for doing better what we most care about as educators" (2007, 3). It is also important, however, that theory in our SoTL work is not simply about itself, meaningful only to an esoteric community, or devoid of application in real classrooms (Sarromaa 2023). Properly employed, however, theory can enable us to embrace a multitude of ways to better understand the dynamics of teaching and learning and the roles and responsibilities of teachers and learners, in order that our teaching and learning practices are more meaningful, and educative. New theoretical approaches can help us reconceptualize what we typically call "learning" as an intentional act of meaning making, as an act of interaction and participation in the production of a lesson's meaning, which implies a freedom to go in new, unintended directions (Dwight and Garrison 2003). This essay makes the case, both in theory and in practice, for the interpretation of learning as text through the lens of literary theory, in particular through Roland Barthes's concept of the "writerly" (Barthes 1974).

Deriving from many of the same theoretical and philosophical traditions that shaped qualitative research methodologies in education and other social science research, literary theory offers powerful opportunities for exploring the complex relationships between writers, readers, and texts, relationships which align tightly with those between instructors, students, and content. Furthermore, a chief advantage of using literary theory in SoTL work is that it prompts us to think about teaching and learning as textual acts (Gray 2019; 2024). This not only allows us to employ more sophisticated methodologies for analyzing teaching and learning experiences; it also enables us to think more deeply about what is happening at the intersection of teaching and learning.

GENERATING AND INTERPRETING MEANING

If we can reconceptualize teaching and learning scenarios as "texts" (Gray 2017), then everything about that scenario—whether in a live classroom or an online learning management system—is a collection of "signs" to be interpreted. These signs, of course, can be words that are written or spoken by the instructor and/or students, but they can also be things that are observed or witnessed in the form of media or other activities. As Derrida famously said, "everything is a text" (Rawlings 1999), and therefore, everything that happens in a course—the full and almost infinite web of signifiers and possible signifieds that is generated in the moment—can be interpreted as "text." This reconceptualization offers new avenues for thinking about learning design as well as what is actually happening in the classroom. It can also present a broad range of new research methods to be employed when analyzing them. This might seem like a radical step for instructors and researchers, but virtually all interviews and observations in education and other social science research are recorded as audio and/or video and then transcribed into text before being analyzed. All types of analysis devise a system for taking an almost infinite number of possibilities and simplifying them,

with varying degrees of artifice, into a manageable enterprise. There is no reason to limit ourselves to how we interpret and analyze such data (Huisman 2024), especially if we follow the advice of Barthes, who places value in the plurality of a text. For Barthes, all analyzers (i.e., readers) of data or texts are already a plurality of other texts and codes, and the act of reading is a risky but generative act in which both objectivity and subjectivity are imaginary (1974). Such openness offers possibility.

This article is an attempt to focus more attention on what happens when a student interacts with (that is, interprets) a piece of content, as well as how instructors might prompt and shape those moments. The purpose is not to align with a constructivist approach, where students build new information into their existing knowledge structures (Bada 2015; Woo and Reeves 2007), or with a sociocultural approach, where students learn in connection and interaction with others (Lave and Wenger 1991; Säljö 2009; Vygotsky 1978). This is not because these approaches are invalid. Quite the opposite. I take both of these as granted. Where I intend to go is somewhere else entirely. In the end, this article explores the possibilities of an alternative approach to the design and research of teaching and learning experiences by introducing conceptualizations from the humanities into the methodologies of the social sciences.

At its point of departure, this article asks the following questions.

- How can Roland Barthes's concept of the writerly be applied to teaching and learning in higher education?
- How can conceptualizing teaching and learning as textual acts lead to new avenues for designing, developing, and evaluating instruction?
- How can a writerly understanding of teaching and learning lead to more purposeful and productive learning activities in the higher education classroom?

LEARNING AS AN ACT OF WRITING

Learning is not an act of recording. Rather, it is an act of interpretation, an act of writing, or, more specifically, rewriting (Gray 2024). Students cannot simply take what a professor or textbook says and store it in their mental hard drives to be retrieved whenever needed in whatever context. To learn from a lecture, video, or text, students have to interpret what is being presented through whatever analytical lenses they have developed before that point in their academic careers, and then they have to make it their own based on what knowledge they already possess. That is, they have to "write" it, in their own words. The writing here is, of course, a function of the mind, not (necessarily) the hand.

If learning, then, is a process of interpretation, or metaphorical writing, it follows that such a process requires interaction and dialogue. It is worth noting that, by definition, interaction requires both sides to be changed during the process (Herring 1987, cited in Wagner 1994; Damsa and Jornet 2016), which necessarily leads to new meanings being created through a dialectical process of shared meanings—shared between the instructor, the student, experts, other students, and even different moments in the individual student's evolving understanding—and being constantly rewritten. The idea that a student's interaction with content changes the content can be challenging for some; however, when someone reads a text critically or analytically, what happens to the text? The marks on the page might not change, but the "text" changes in the reader's mind and can never be changed back, which, at least for that reader, is the same thing.

ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLE: STUDENTS DEVELOPING NEW UNDERSTANDINGS

Roland Barthes's concept of the writerly text (1974) provides an opportunity for reconceptualizing higher education teaching and learning in productive and purposeful ways. There are many ways and contexts in which the writerly can be applied in university courses. One example might be an upper-level social psychology course where students analyze the statistical reasoning in recent articles in order to understand the replication crisis. Another might be a first-year course in pedagogy where students create a case around a learning experience and then analyze it by applying a learning theory from the course. Yet another example might be a third-year geology course that eliminates all lectures and exams and replaces them with a series of "ill-structured" problems for students to solve in groups.

For this article, however, we will explore an illustrative example (Gravett and Carless 2023) drawn from an upper-level environmental geochemistry course at a major research university in Scandinavia. This example was drawn from ongoing research on how a writerly approach to teaching and learning might be applied to university pedagogy courses (i.e., educational development workshops) and group learning processes in a STEM classroom. Those projects have been properly registered in the institutional personal data protection system, and the researcher allocated a pseudonym to the participant in this study. The example used here is drawn from a larger study and was selected because the participant's work in the university pedagogy course stood out as a promising example of the writerly.

The experiences in this course show how an intentionally writerly approach to teaching and learning might manifest itself in actual practice. The course had 12 students, with some in their last year of their bachelor program and others in the first year of their master's. Roughly a third of the students were exchange students from other countries in Europe. A more rigorous and analytical empirical study on the course will consider online and classroom discussions, focus groups, and written work with and from students in a separate article. This article, however, is intended as an introduction of the writerly framework and uses some of the professor's reflections to illustrate what a writerly approach to teaching and learning might look like in a university classroom. These reflections, taken from a focus group of participants in the university pedagogy study, were chosen for their expression of "writerly" concepts and are not presented here as empirical findings.

The course's instructor, whom we'll call Michael, wanted his students to initiate a deeper and more meaningful interaction with the content, their peers, and himself, so he developed a series of group-based activities aimed at moving students beyond simply applying rules to reaching a deeper understanding of the work's underlying concepts. He was concerned that students have simply memorized a set of provided rules and learned to follow a set of clearly-defined steps, like a recipe, resulting in them only being somewhat successful on the exam without actually understanding why the rules exist and are important. Ultimately, he wanted to foster what he calls "chemical intuition" and "computational literacy" in his students. He wanted them, by the end of the semester, to "think like math-savvy chemists" and apply these lessons as they move into and through their master's programs.

Michael noted that he wanted students to develop their own understandings and interpretations of the material, not just to record his understanding and interpretation.

> They need to see it work. They need to have their own ah-ha. They can't have my ah-ha, because my ah-ha might be different from theirs, which might be different from all other students', and they all do it on their own timescale and in their own ah-ha way.

He also shared that it took him a while to come to this way of thinking because he, too, tended to think of this in a very fixed way.

> I was like, well, there's a right and a wrong answer with some of this stuff. It's quantitative, it's math-based, it's very black and white. It is, in the strictest sense of what we're studying, but how you sort of structure it in your head and how you interpret it can be completely whatever way works for you.

There is, of course, tension here, because, especially in STEM subjects, there often are clear, right answers. At the same time, once a fact is taken into consideration and situated in a particular context or assigned a particular meaning, it ceases to be simply a fact. Putting his students into an interactive environment and giving them time to work through the problems and find their own understandings enabled him to realize "there's a bit of creativity there that I don't think I would have realized was possible before." He also pointed out that giving students time to do this kind of work takes away from other things, like covering more content, but he found this more important than covering a lot of material that they would probably just be "tuning out on anyway." For Michael, then, his job as a teacher is not simply to give his students content, but rather to get his students to interpret the content, to think creatively, and to make their own new meanings and understandings.

ROLAND BARTHES AND THE WRITERLY

Barthes's concept of the "writerly" text (1974) enables us to explore how the intersections of reading and writing can enlighten our understanding, development, and evaluation of teaching and learning. Barthes argued that there are essentially two kinds of texts: readerly texts and writerly texts. Readerly texts offer a limited number of possible interpretations, while writerly texts require the reader to actively participate in the production of the text's meaning, making the act of reading into an act of writing. Barthes also argues that the writerliness of a text is the only criteria we can responsibly use to determine its quality. For Barthes, evaluation must concern itself with a practice, a production, that is, something alive and in action, not something fixed or static, and "this practice is that of writing" (Barthes 1974, 4). Barthes's writerly framework also works, by extension, for teaching and learning scenarios. He states that "on the one hand, there is what it is possible to write, and on the other, what it is no longer possible to write: what is within the practice of the writer and what has left it" (1974, 4), which is essentially a claim that what has already been written can no longer be rewritten. If a course's content is "already written" or reified, then it is what he calls the "readerly."

More importantly for Barthes, what "can be written" is what he calls "the *writerly*" (1974, 4, emphasis in the original), and this is the "value" upon which we must base our evaluation, "because the goal of the literary work (of literature as work) is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text" (4). This idea of reading as production rather than consumption is essential to what makes Barthes' concept of the writerly so analogous to teaching and learning (Gray 2017; Gray 2024). For all the talk about learning outcomes in the twenty-first-century academy, and especially in research intensive universities, is not the goal of higher education to make students no longer consumers of old knowledge but rather producers of new knowledge (Neary and Winn 2009)?

Indeed, higher education is about creating something new in people, about creating new people, and the writerly promises to play a key role in that transformation. Higher education should be more than a commodity, something to be exchanged for a job. Therefore, we need to move away from the notion of students as consumers and, as Neary and Winn argue, help them to become producers, "the subjects rather than the objects" of not only their education, but also of new

knowledge (2009, 134). The centrality of research to the purpose of higher education would seem to support this contention. Barthes argues that the literary texts we should hope for, the texts that give us the most pleasure or joy, are those which necessarily shift the agency from the text (or author) to the reader. Higher education should do the same.

ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLE: SIGNIFICANT LEARNING THROUGH INTERACTION AND REFLECTION

One of Michael's primary teaching goals is to demonstrate what it means to think like a chemist. He wants to show his students where chemistry intersects with mathematics so that they can have some predictive power and "be a little bit quantitative about what's going to happen in some water when you start doing things to it, or nature starts doing things to it." For several years now, most of his "lecturing" has been to work problems out with pen and paper on a document camera, carefully narrating his work and thought processes in a think-aloud style (Banning 2008). Even after trying to make his course more writerly, Michael still spent a considerable amount of class time talking in the front of the classroom. What made his approach novel was in how he did this, not only narrating and explaining, but also constantly asking questions to the students to create a dialogic space for students to understand in new ways. He would not simply present the content: he would interact with it in front of the students. He also consciously removed a lot of the original course content to make space for the students to interact more meaningfully with the conceptual aspects of the course (Gray 2019).

Michael also faces the challenge that, while the course has a textbook, it is not written in a way that is comprehensible for the students. As he explains,

> There's a certain set of rules when you set up these problems, and the rules come from the textbook. The textbook is beautifully, elegantly written with as few words as possible, and it's fantastic if you're a somewhat functioning career scientist and can understand what those rules mean. They make total sense, and they're very elegantly written. But as a student, you read it and you're like, "okay, that just sounds like poetry, and I have no understanding of what that is."

Here, we have the writerly at its purest in a scenario as far away from the literary world as we could imagine. In this context, the idea of poetry, perhaps the most writerly form of all writing, and perhaps the most obvious course discipline for a writerly analysis, is unfathomable. It would be perceived as a foreign language by science students, something impossible for them to understand, and Michael's primary goal was for them to understand. Previously he had, like so many science courses around the world, merely shown students the rules and they would work without consideration of what any of the rules mean. This, in his mind, led to little thinking and even less learning (just as in a poetry course where the professor tells the student what the poem "means" and that's the end of it). This also didn't help them develop the quantitative or chemical intuition skills he was looking for. He didn't want them to just use the formula. He wanted them to think about it, to understand it. Therefore, he designed an interactive group activity where they had to stop and think about why the rules are what and how they are, and then apply the rules and think about "the why." After, they had to reflect on when and how they had their "ah-ha" moment in understanding it. Finally, they had to share all of this in an online discussion and respond to other students' posts.

Taking the time to let the students immerse themselves in the material, to find their own way through it and draw their own conclusions, led the students to a completely new way of learning and

thinking about what and how they are learning. This is what the writerly is all about. Their learning moved from a largely passive process of consumption to a more active process of production. In what Barthes would consider an intertextual move, they were also able to connect what they were learning in this course to other courses they were taking or took previously. For example, one student who had recently taken a course in matrix algebra was able to share those insights on the discussion board and help students understand in new ways that even Michael could have never anticipated.

RECOGNIZING THE READERLY AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE WRITERLY

Some course content is decidedly readerly, while other parts are at least potentially writerly. It is important for instructors to consider the differences there. For Barthes, the readerly parts are those parts that have already been written, that have already been fixed and finalized. With these parts, there is nothing more to say than what has already been said, and sometimes these parts are necessary. Even the most writerly texts are mostly readerly, with rich moments interspersed among what is mostly mundane. The writerly is those parts where students are able to construct their own meanings out of what is being presented. The key is to learn to recognize what is writerly, what is readerly, and most importantly, what might be made more writerly, and then to explicitly prompt those processes by getting students to explore and rewrite the curriculum in the aftermath of our teaching. The writerly offers both instructors and students a kind of intentionality that fits perfectly in the current state of higher education that calls for active learning, student-centeredness, and co-creative partnerships.

In many ways, the difference between readerly teaching and writerly teaching is the difference between telling and asking. Therefore, a charismatic lecturer who fills a lesson with questions and provides space for reflecting on those questions is teaching in a writerly way, whereas a lecturer who is delivering information by giving answers but not making clear what the question is, is teaching in a readerly way. Writerly teaching is building in moments where students are given opportunities to reflect and build on, or to write, their understanding. Sometimes it is right for the instructor to answer those questions, and sometimes there needs to be some telling in order to set up questions. It is the thoughtful selection of when to use what and how to evoke what that matters. Yet how much of the teaching (and learning) at our institutions is still conducted in a largely traditional, student-passive manner?

Barthes's initial explanation of writerly texts characterizes the relationship between authors and readers as a "pitiless divorce" where the reader is "plunged into a kind of idleness" and can only choose to "accept or reject the text." He concludes that the publishing industry has created a situation in which the reader is denied "the magic of the signifier" and "the pleasure of writing," and where "reading is nothing more than a *referendum*" (Barthes 1974, 4, emphasis in original). For Bathes, the problem in this scenario is that the reader is denied the agency to enjoy this magic and pleasure. In other words, the infinite play of signifieds depends on the degree to which the reader can make them (or recognize their) play, while, clearly in the context Barthes is referring to here, the pleasure of writing is an act of what we would normally think of as reading, an act of meaning production not textual production. But meaning production is not what is happening in this scenario. The reader is passive, being acted upon rather than acting herself. There is no play or pleasure here. This is the readerly, the opposite of the writerly. With readerly texts, there is no interpretation, no negotiation, and no writing, only the choice of whether or not to accept the text as it is. A curious thing about this scenario is that it tracks directly with the twenty-first-century higher education industry. The average traditional lecture hall puts learners in a passive posture and reserves all the agency for the teacher (Biggs, Tang, and Kennedy 2022; Fink 2013). In this situation, learning is merely an act of reception. It

is not an act of writing. It is not a production. Rather, it is a passive and largely pointless exercise of accepting uncritically whatever is given.

Barthes characterizes readerly texts as that which is "no longer possible to write." Such texts "can be read, but not written" and "are products (and not productions)" (1974, 4–5). These are also apt descriptors for what might be called readerly teaching. Readerly teaching presumes an instructor has all the answers and holds full authority. The student's role in this context is to receive the message passively and uncritically, exactly in the form in which it was (en)coded. Like readerly texts, readerly teaching has "nothing more to say than what it says" (1974, 216). It closes down all writing, thinking, and any attempts to build or carry things further. Many instructors present their teaching as declarative statements or explanations, as truth or even Law, and university students are enculturated to accept it as such. While these efforts are universally well-intended, they only produce "what can be read," not what can be written or rewritten in the form of meaningful learning (Gray 2019).

Writerly teaching and learning is about helping students more purposefully engage with course content. As previously stated, some parts of a course's content are going to be unavoidably readerly; however, other parts are, at least potentially, writerly. The latter possibly makes up a much larger portion than one might think. It is important, therefore, that instructors consider and investigate the differences and opportunities there. The readerly parts are the parts that require rote learning, memorization, or basic comprehension. The writerly parts, on the other hand, are those parts where students are able to construct their own meanings out of what they are taught. Our tendency in the academy is to assume that some courses or disciplines tend toward one pole or the other, but all courses, regardless of discipline, have elements of both. The key is in how to explicitly prompt those processes and get students to explore and rewrite the curriculum during and in the aftermath of our teaching.

ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLE: TAKING TIME FOR INSPIRATION

While Michael recognizes that there is value in the instructor covering material, he has also found that some of his students' explanations on the discussion board were "even better than some of my ways of explaining it," and "I'm totally stealing all that. And they should as well!" In addition, he wants to find ways to present the more readerly "reference" or background material in a more selective and interactive way, so that

> They can have their own intuition and their own way of creating things, they can explore that stuff if they're motivated or if they need to, and they should be able to explore it on their own without me just blah-blahing in front of some PowerPoint slides.

He wants to use his time for telling (Schwartz and Bransford 1998) in order to make them look through his slides on their own, to find things to question or even mistakes to point out, making it clear that "It's their journey. It's not my journey anymore."

His main takeaway in trying to make his teaching more interactive and writerly is to figure out what is most important for students to learn, and then to devote time to giving them the opportunity and guidance to do "the deeper thinking stuff" and "just allowing that time for the interaction to happen instead of skipping past it and moving on." He also notes that a major advantage of this approach is that, if he hadn't given them adequate time to do these things in class, only the strongest groups would have been able to "stumble through this organically themselves." He could have easily given in to the tyranny of the clock, "but then I would've left some of the groups hanging, and they

probably would never have gone back to it." In other words, there is a valuable opportunity to create space and give students enough time to reflect, interpret, and make meaning.

While this professor is now devoted to taking the time in his courses to give students time to work and explore, he still sees some value in lecturing, but he also believes that lectures need to be interactive and "promote thinking rather than just passive recording" if they are going to capture students' attention and understanding.

> Now we are tasked, in a way, with inspiring curiosity in a very passive audience that is just glutted with information from all sides. If you're going to keep using the traditional lecture format, you have to find ways to promote the interaction. You need to push on it, because otherwise just getting up and blasting—and I've done it—I get up and I blast through PowerPoint slides and then I think afterwards, crap, if I had just paused there and tried to break that up a little bit and forced them to think about this in a certain way, they don't need much of a push to kind of engage on the fly. But you have to be constantly thinking of ways to trigger, I would say, inspiration.

If only he had said ways to trigger the writerly. . .

THE VALUE OF THE WRITERLY

But why, then, should the writerly be "our value" for recognizing and enacting what is good in teaching and learning? That is, why should the writerly be the goal we strive for when designing or delivering learning activities? Even Barthes admits that writerliness is extremely rare, going so far as to state that "the writerly text is not a thing, we would have a hard time finding it in a bookstore" (1974, 5). This elusiveness, however, is not pointless. As has been shown above, the writerly is about production. For Barthes, the writerly text is "*ourselves writing*" (1974, 5, emphasis in original) and "a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds" (1974, 5). Such a text is about the active generation of meaning, not the destination. In most lecture situations, an instructor takes a large body of possible meanings (i.e., signifieds) and reduces them to a single signifier expressed as a fixed and finite form. However, the student, as much as the instructor might wish or intend, cannot simply record that reduction. Instead, she must take the meaning in the opposite direction, working "back from signifiers to signified" (1974, 174). Therefore, the student's task is to take that reductive fixity and, ideally, expand it into something more resembling its original fullness. Yet, as Barthes points out, the instructor's expression is often expressed as something "replete" (1974, 200), something whole and complete, that "can no longer be written" (1974, 201) and has "nothing more to say than what it says" (1974, 216). This kind of teaching also casts itself as denotative, presenting a literal meaning of the content or curriculum (which is often expressed as a learning outcome) and, arguably, antidemocratic, employing language to stand as official or "Law." However, the "content" has an infinity that no [re]presentation can capture nor deny.

From an educational research perspective, the above passage could be taken as a critique of theoretical frameworks, that such defined ideologies shut down rather than open up possibilities of meaning. I would contend, however, that we should be mindful of how absolutely we take poststructuralism's rejection of absolutes. Like most poststructuralist theory, Barthes is challenging us to open up possibilities and pluralities instead of homing in on one ultimate, correct meaning. In educational research, like traditional literary analysis, we tend to look for patterns, for sameness, but Barthes contends that it is difference that matters. Difference occurs with each reading of a text or each encounter with a piece of content. Indeed, interpretation, for Barthes, is not about determining

or fixing the meaning of something, but rather about appreciating "what *plural* constitutes it" (1974, 5, emphasis in original).

Often when I talk to university instructors in disciplines that profess to have right answers, I stress that their teaching of the discipline might have right answers, but their research in it rarely does. In addition, when they teach those right answers, they spend considerable time beforehand deciding how to present them, and then, even in the moment of presenting, they have to make countless more decisions on how to say or show or explain those answers. Futhermore, each time they teach that material will be different from every other time, and from every other time anyone else has taught that same material. In the end, no matter how perfectly presented or formulated those answers may be, each student will hear, understand, and [re]write those answers differently (Hall 1980). This is the case whether or not we get into how right or wrong their (or their instructor's) appropriation of those answers may be.

All of this creation and representation of meaning happens dynamically in the *pure durée* (Schutz 1967), in the moment of engagement, not in an immutable and ideal Platonic state of "truth." This brings us back again to the idea of production, which, for Barthes, situates all this activity in a perpetual present. Learning is always happening anew. Imposing a fixed meaning, or even fixed language, "would inevitably make it past" (1974, 5). As mentioned, a key aspect of the writerly, and I would contend for all learning, is that it is "experienced only in an activity of production" (Barthes 1977, 157). A writerly text requires that one try to abolish (or at the very least to diminish) the distance between writing and reading, in no way by intensifying the projection of the reader into the work but by joining them in a single signifying practice (1977, 162).

This idea of joining the reader and the "work" (the student and the content) into a single process of meaning making can get at the heart of what learning should be about. Further, these writerly moments can only take place in moments. It would be impossible to determine if an entire course is writerly. Barthes's literary analysis happened at the level of what he called "lexias," the "units of reading" (1974, 13), which sometimes consist of a few words and sometimes several sentences. When we think about the writerly in our teaching, we too should focus at this level of granularity.

ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLE: MAKING LEARNING MORE LIKE TEACHING

For Barthes, a writerly text reduces the distance between reading and writing (1977), making the act of reading more like the act of writing. This, in turn, means that the writerly classroom reduces the distance between the teacher and student, making the role of the student become more like the role of the teacher. This is, of course, a process. One cannot simply flip a switch and achieve writerliness with a group of first-year bachelor students, but that switch can also not be flipped with first-year master or PhD students. Most college professors were told at some point in their graduate studies that they have to learn to teach themselves, but the implications of making this a process of becoming much earlier in a student's academic journey would be profound. This is because, ultimately, any student's journey needs to proceed to a place where she can teach herself content, in concert with the instructor. Such learning as teaching is also critical to enabling future self-teaching and critical thinking in the discipline. As Michael states,

> I equate the readerly stuff to like, okay, we all have to learn to speak the same language, otherwise we're going nowhere. But once we can actually speak enough of the language to communicate, it's the communication that's important. And that's what I feel like I'm trying to do, just giving them the skills to teach themselves.

This process of them teaching themselves will necessarily include their own new re-readings and rewritings with their own new correctnesses. What they create cannot be not a facsimile of the Law, of the real or proper content. It has to be something novel, original. Or, as Barthes would say, this teaching and learning process is about obtaining "not the *real* text, but a plural text: the same and new" (1974, 16, emphasis in original).

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH AND APPLICATION

The literary theory of Roland Barthes can deeply enrich our thinking about teaching and learning in higher education. Work is currently underway that further explores the implications of Barthes's work and the writerly framework in teaching and learning in higher education, as well as more empirical applications of the framework. More work is needed in all of these areas. Regardless of whether one adheres to a North American model that offers more conspicuous scaffolding of student learning or to a European model that focuses on a Humboldtian vision of the freedom to find one's own learning path or *bildung*, higher education should be about joining teaching and learning into a single signifying practice, into a deliberative process of meaning making. It doesn't matter if we are trying to create workers, citizens, or colleagues, higher education should be about making students more like teachers, and this can only happen in the moment where students are meaningfully interacting with course content. The value of the writerly is that it intentionally reorients the notion of instruction away from the readerly posture our teaching practice has so persistently embraced.

Even if the writerly is some impossible ideal that is difficult for most instructors to achieve, or even grasp, it is something we should, nonetheless, strive for. And while Barthes clearly identifies that there are these two kinds of texts, he also admits that the writerly text is more of an idea than a reality (remember, "we would have a hard time finding it in a bookstore"). If authors like Shakespeare, Woolf, Balzac, Keats, Morrison, or Joyce have been unable to produce a purely writerly text, it would be impossible for any instructor to make his or her teaching perfectly writerly. However, any effort to spark moments of the writerly would be a step in the right direction. Therefore, even if the writerly might be an elusive (illusive?) aim or aspiration, the readerly is something to be avoided, which circumventing it is, in itself, a step in the right direction. How different might university teaching and learning practices be if professors simply tried to be less readerly in their teaching and students learned to be more writerly in their learning?

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Laura Cruz, Paul Hanstedt, Matthew Russell, and the TeLEd Research Group at the University of Bergen for their support and feedback in shaping this article. I also want to thank A. S. Morton for the blackbird image (CC 2.0 attribution, 2011).

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ETHICS

This research project has been registered and approved in the University of Bergen's research ethics and data protection system.

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