

Mentor's Introduction

Sydney Walker

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Recommended Citation

Walker, Sydney. "Mentor's Introduction." *Marilyn Zurmuehlin Working Papers in Art Education* 14 (1997): 66-67.

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mentor's introduction

Sydney Walker

The Ohio State University

In August 1993 I received a letter from Sydney, Australia introducing me to Jane Gooding-Brown, who was arriving as a doctoral student in The Ohio State University Art Education Department. My first name is Sydney and I considered it an ironical coincidence that I had been assigned as Jane's contact advisor. Later I realized this was a most fortuitous assignment, as Jane and I had much in common, both from an intellectual and personal perspective. Because I regard Jane as much a friend and colleague as a doctoral advisee, I would like to write this introduction as a letter to Jane.

September 21, 1995

Dear Jane,

You have been absent from the art education department a OSU for almost a year and I certainly have missed your presence. I look forward to your return in January when we can resume some of our extended talks about postmodernism and its often convoluted theory. Although you and I have been on different continents for most of our lives, I believe we have much in common when it comes to education. I know from our conversations that we both are primarily interested in teaching students to think.

I remember in your first quarter you selected the philosophy course, "The Theory of Knowledge", as an elective, and I thought, here is someone whom I would like to know better. I believe we both pursue the question, "How do we know what we know?" with great seriousness. I recall you greatly admired and respected the professor in that course, although you eventually found his theories too conservative for you. During that quarter, your discussions and struggles with the philosophical foundations of knowledge stimulated my own thinking.

This investigation into the foundations of knowledge is still highly relevant for your present work with Derrida and Foucault. As I interpret your research, I view you asking the question, "What are the structures of knowledge, and moreover are there such structures at all?" This question represents your difficulties in aligning Foucault and Derrida. You began with Foucauldian discourses which represent structures and hierarchies; and after discovering French poststructuralism, you asked, along with these theorists, "How do we avoid the trap of structuralism?" The answers you are finding have to do with

difference, disparity and contradiction. I understand the difficulty of this inquiry since the obvious answer, extreme relativism, is not an option for you.

As you found in your research, even Derrida says we cannot forego the center. I well remember your search to locate that particular citation from Derrida. "First of all I didn't say that there was no center, that we could get along without a center".¹ Derrida, as you know, is about systems and rigor and not at all like the popular reading of him.

Jane, you have brought a personal imprint to your study. Your interest in how individual discourse positions affect meaning making is strongly felt as I read your work. This, I believe, reflects your own generous social nature and desire to always be involved in the thick of things. I can never imagine you squirreled away in some ivory tower for too long.

Finally, I am so pleased that you view scholarly research from a classroom perspective. Your teaching and research are reciprocally related and you are genuinely interested in reforming art education classroom practice. Practice always challenges theory. I'm certain your teaching this year has shaped your thinking. When you return in January to finish your research, I selfishly hope you'll require a lot of talking time to work it out.

Best Regards,

Sydney

Jane will return to OSU in January 1996 to complete her dissertation research. I believe the interim year of teaching between her course work and proposal will be invaluable to her understanding of postmodern theory and classroom practice.

¹ J. Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play". In R. Macksey and E. Donato (Eds.), **The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man**, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1970), p. 171.