Jacques Derrida's fifth of seven theses for what he calls the "new Humanities" reads: "The new Humanities would treat ... the history of profession, the profession of faith, professionalization, and the professoriat" (233). What first struck me when I read this was the "profession of faith" part. Yet, after all, "to profess" originally did mean to take a vow upon entering a religious order. And there is a certain sense of the "novitiate" involved in the training to enter our profession, as if in answer to a kind of a "calling"—or at least there was until the current corporate model of the profession took over, as Don Goellnicht has argued (475). Increased competition, both within and among institutions, has meant that the model of corporate capitalism has become the norm; the pecking order evaluation methods of business have been all too easily translated into the status hierarchy of higher education.
What does this mean for our profession and for how we prepare people to enter it—in other words, for the process of professionalization (which arguably begins on Day One of our graduate—and maybe even undergraduate—education). Perhaps the most significant change in the last thirty years in our field has been a shift to the years of graduate training of certain aspects of professionalization that previously occurred after employment. Job applicants who have not somehow already learned to be “professionals” seem to stand little chance of landing the kind of position they seek. In other words what John Guillory once called “preprofessionalism” has become the normal professionalism expected by hiring departments (93). That this causes extraordinary pressure to be put on graduate students seeking academic positions goes without saying.

The anxiety provoked by this pressure, plus the lack of fit between the “word on the street” among candidates for positions and the realities of what hiring departments actually seek, prompted the setting up an ad hoc committee at the MLA on the “Professionalization of PhDs.” (Our report is posted on the website and published in the latest issue of Profession 2002.) I’m not going to repeat what you can read there, if you are interested, but instead I want to look at another aspect of professionalization that the committee didn’t talk about—given its pragmatic focus on the preparation for employment—but that I think is central to the role of the graduate teacher: exactly what is it that we (as professionals) train students (that is, our future colleagues) to profess? And how do we teach them to undertake this professing?

First the easy answers. We profess language and literature: in literature classes, this is usually seen as a corpus of texts, but, as we know, a corpus that is constantly changing, as are the methodological and ideological approaches to its examination. Now for the harder questions (and answers). How do we profess it? In the most general sense, it is through the deployment of critical thinking and analytic reason, through what
Peter Elbow calls “methodological doubt”: “the systematic, disciplined, and conscious attempt to criticize everything no matter how compelling it might seem—to find flaws or contradictions we might otherwise miss” (257). Yes, there is also a creative and constructive side to our professing, but in our pedagogical discourse (because of our important valuing of dissent—a 1960s legacy) it is this critical dimension that invariably gets emphasized, at least in my experience. But the result of this elision of one whole side of the process has, I believe, been detrimental not only to our scholarship and teaching but to the quality of our public academic life.

Jane Tompkins once recounted a conference scenario that many of us, sadly, will find all too familiar: a woman is giving a paper. It is an attack on another woman’s recent book; the entire paper is devoted to demolishing it, and the speaker is doing a superb job. The audience has begun to catch the spirit of the paper, which is witty, elegant, pellucid, and razor sharp; they appreciate the deftness, the brilliance, the grace, with which the assassination is being conducted; the speaker’s intelligence flatters their intelligence, her taste becomes their taste, her principles their principles. They start to laugh at the jokes. They are inside the paper now, pulling with the speaker, seeing her victim in the same way she does, as the enemy, as someone whose example should be held up to scorn because her work is pernicious and damaging to the cause. (587)

A colleague as an “enemy” to be scorned and condemned? Our profession rightly values both dissent and critical thinking, but increasingly we seem to define these qualities in terms of the belittling and even demolishing of opposing positions. Is this limitation of what constitutes our critical, intellectual mandate as “professionals” a productive restriction? I think not.

Tompkins’ scenario illustrates what Deborah Tannen calls “critique scholarship”—a sign of that deeply competitive, indeed adversarial, culture that has been fostered within the academy, as in our culture at large (248). The Greek term agon
comes to mind here. Connoting contest, debate, and struggle, agon has its roots in the verbal battles of the protagonists of Greek drama; in other words, it does not connote the commenting interventions of the collective (interpreting) chorus, but rather suggests individual contest. Combative oral performances of this kind have a long history in Western culture, as Walter J. Ong has pointed out. Attack has meant survival—and not only in physical terms. Tannen, among others, has shown how today’s “argument culture”, as she calls it, in the political, journalistic, and legal arenas thrives equally well in the verbal joustings of academic discourse. As Elaine Showalter has put it, “invective and personal attack” are the American way (319).

However, the word agon originally meant just a gathering or assembly—as in the case of public games. It came to have its association with fierce competition, with struggle, through a linkage with the contest held among contenders for prizes at these games. We can see the next step in its etymological history in the extension of the term agonistic from its meaning of “pertaining to athletic feats” to its sense of “polemical, combative, striving to overcome in argument” (Oxford English Dictionary). This, as we may recognize, is all too often the mode of the academic conference, and even of the classroom. But, my question is: is this oppositional mode of thought defined by (or for) our particular discipline, or have the ideals of critical thinking and dissent been translated into a contentious and competitive form of social interaction that is becoming symptomatic of our profession at large?

Of course, others have argued that differences in degree of competition and aggression are actually defined, not by discipline, but by gender, claiming that the radical individualism implied is related to a defense mechanism of male identity-formation within the hierarchy of the profession (Wiltshire 264). This claim has become a commonplace of some feminist positions, often deriving from Julia Kristeva’s description
of the “symbolic” order as hierarchically organized and as revealing an epistemology of opposition (38). But there is another dimension, a more violent one, that also finds its articulation in feminist discourse. As Hélène Cixous asserts: “Opposition, hierarchizing exchange, the struggle for mastery . . . all that comes from a period in time governed by phallocentric values” (893). But more recently, Nellie McKay, following Jane Tompkins, has argued that women in our profession have (unfortunately) come to share those phallocentric values and their attendant modes of exchange (526). The ubiquity of the agonistic struggle makes the academy into “more of a snake pit than an ivory tower”, as Lennard Davis puts it (B8); and if the university is often more of a combat zone than a place of learning together, perhaps this issue is not entirely one of gender.

Whether agon connotes a gathering or a contest, the two connotations share the idea of a performance site of (here, academic) ritual—and ritual has often, it would seem, involved violence (Schechner 633). But rituals can also be ways of sublimating violence, of dispersing violent impulses, though usually at the expense of safe, sacrificial victims (as René Girard suggests) (36). Violence, however, is a real threat to the social existence of any group. As Girard explains: “Inevitably the moment comes when violence can only be countered by more violence. Whether we fail or succeed in our effort to subdue it, the real victor is always violence itself . . . . The more men strive to curb their violent impulses, the more these impulses seem to prosper” (31). Have we reached this point in our profession today? Sometimes violence is not, I think, too strong a word for what we witness. “Critique scholarship,” Tannen argues, actively teaches us to adopt “an attitude of contempt toward scholars who work in a different theoretical framework” (or, frankly, I might add, who hold a different position even within the same framework). This kind of scholarship entails, in her words, “systematically inculcating an at-
titude of contempt toward others and an inclination to see them as not quite human” (Tompkins 248). What she is describing is a form of violence. Contempt can lead, in that context, to misrepresentation, distortion, over-simplification—all for the sake of winning an argument. Given this drive to upstage and discredit others, it is no wonder that any sense of genuine community (intellectual or social) might be rare in our profession today (104).

Despite our ideological protests against the commercialization and corporatization of our universities, we seem to have fallen into, even embraced, a business model of competition in our professional and even intellectual lives. And, we are inevitably teaching this, by example, to our students as part of their professionalization process. In this model—a zero-sum game, if ever there was one—the opposition must be destroyed; our profits (academic—I assure you—not monetary) must be maximized by minimizing the profits of others. I would wager that this model is one whose rhetoric, at least, most of us would actually reject; nevertheless, what I would term its “subtractive” logic is indeed that of our profession’s culture, a culture too often of demolition and dispute.

The idealist in me still can’t help asking: is the production of knowledge not actually more of an “additive” process in which everyone gains? In the research and teaching sweepstakes, if some “win,” does that necessarily mean that others have to lose? Of course, subtractions do occur—through corrections, newly convincing arguments, changes of fashion in methodology—but usually those subtractions involve some degree of synthesis as well.

Clearly what is at stake here is not simply the quality of our communal life; it is a matter of what we see ourselves doing as professionals. We regard ourselves, rightly, as critical thinkers. We value, as we must, dissent. But cannot rigorous critical thinking be rescued from its present reduction to attack and opposition? Cannot the ideal of a community of
learning replace individual success (success at all costs) as the goal of the profession? Some would argue that such a change is not likely to be possible while the present institutional ideology prevails: the current reward system values the work of the solo scholar in ways that bear the marks of both capitalism (the idea of ownership of ideas) and Romanticism (the concept of the individual genius). Will new models of collaborative teams doing interdisciplinary scholarship together change this ideology? It might—but only with time, lots of time. The current system deploys a powerful ideological weapon (that is, the individual), one that will have to be eased out by action, not only by time. As Gerald Graff has claimed, we handle conflict badly because we stress divisions when, in reality, we share a lot (823). Instead of destructive disputation—which (as we know from political life) does not necessarily require serious and careful listening, reading, or thinking—perhaps we could put more effort into finding more constructive ways of detecting and using strengths as well as weaknesses in the work of others. Could we look for what we share as well as how we differ from one another? Could we make fewer assertions and ask more questions?

In short, to ask yet another question, could the creative and the integrative ideally become a part of the “critical” in critical thinking, replacing demolition and enmity as key elements? Andrea Lunsford suggests that a look at our citational practices in our scholarly writing is enough to reveal “some patterns of sharing, borrowing, and building upon the good work of others. Even those citations that register strong disagreement, after all, mark a dialogic relationship to the work criticized . . . . The scholarly work we do is social, dialogic, highly collaborative—even when we appear to be flying completely solo” (535). Maybe we need to learn how to feel more comfortable entertaining other than our own position on any given topic, to learn to accept (even promote) a climate of positive thinking with rather than against others. For me, the
larger (positive) lesson of postmodernism has always been the inclusive and additive logic of "both/and" (in contrast to the subtractive diminution of "either/or"). "Either/or" logic repeats what Catharine Stimpson evocatively calls "the dance of polarization in slow-brained motion" (409). A greater tolerance for variety and diversity (of opinion and position) has arguably NOT accompanied all our profession's theorizing of difference and otherness over the last decade. Some would say: on the contrary.

In the interests of full disclosure, I must confess to being congenitally non-confrontational. That's why it seems natural to me that critical thinking CAN involve other than confrontation. Dissent need not be made manifest as opposition alone. It also seems natural to me to suspect that intellectual (or social) attack has never been as pedagogically productive as encouragement and cooperation. As Jeffrey Perl and Alick Isaacs once put it, "knocking our heads together seems an unobvious route to enlightenment" (4). Critique—conceived anew without contentiousness—need not, however, lose its valuable role as provocation or dissent. William Blake may have said (as he did) that "Without contraries is no progression." But surely there are different ways of conceiving of the possible relationships between contraries. Need those ways always be freighted with issues of emotional response and personal worth? True intellectual debate in our profession need not be a matter of protecting individual vested interests; it can involve more than search-and-destroy missions. The classroom or the academic conference need not be the site of one-upmanship, where the clever and articulate win in the battle of words. Is this an adequate definition of education, or, for that matter, is it an adequate example to offer to our young colleagues who are in the process of being professionalized?

What are the options, then, if one rejects this professional self-image? Peter Elbow, theorizing pedagogy from the position of a teacher of English composition and rhetoric, argues
that critique or “methodological doubt”, to use his term once again, is only half of what we need to become complete professionals (or to teach someone else how to be); we also need “methodological belief”—the “systematic, disciplined, and conscious attempt to believe everything no matter how unlikely or repellent it might seem—to find virtues or strengths we might otherwise miss” (257). He’s right that we tend to assume the ability to criticize a claim “counts as more serious intellectual work than the ability to enter into it and temporarily assent”. But both are part of what we do—or should do—as teachers and as scholars. We need to hear and understand the positions we may disagree with, not reject them out of hand. Individualism and skepticism need tempering with collective and imaginative engagement.

Yes, doubting implies resisting authority—the kind of dissent that we think of as our right and indeed our responsibility as academic professionals; and, yes, believing may connote acquiescence. But belief also suggests action born of passion rather than critical disengagement, as Elbow suggests (264). The idea that only critique can lead to legitimate dissent and therefore action, then, needs to be challenged, as indeed feminist theorists have argued for some time now. There are other models possible. Just because the first usage cited in the Oxford English Dictionary for the word “professionalization” (in 1899) is about the professionalization of warfare doesn’t mean that that has be the last word on the subject.

WORKS CITED


