Professional Self-Reflexivity

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CATHY N. DAVIDSON makes a startlingly frank observation about our profession and some of its behavioral norms in “Them versus Us (and Which One of ‘Them’ Is Me?)”: “Our profession’s particular gift to the world—our critical, intense, trained, sometimes skeptical but always skilled habit of attentive reading—is sometimes our curse to ourselves. The border between close, critical reading (of texts, of people) and simple paranoia is sometimes all too permeable” (5). Rarely do we admit and discuss in such an open and honest fashion the dysfunctions plaguing many of our departments and universities. Davidson’s response to the problems generated by this “skilled habit of attentive reading” is equally and admirably direct, advising that we cultivate an openness to constructive criticism and that we avoid hastiness in responding to the rhetorical excesses and oppositional stances of others (7).

Yet I want to think further here about the particular paradox that she isolates: namely, that our gift to the world can be our curse to ourselves. Why is it that our reading practices too often engender something like paranoia? In much of my current work on the profession, I suggest that to begin to answer that question we first must overcome our general unwillingness to discuss a text that even Davidson fails to mention in her astute commentary, that of ourselves, which are rarely part of our close and (especially) critical reading projects.

This omission is sometimes one of explicit mention only, for many of us do self-reflect often and certainly engage in reflexive activity continuously. Indeed, we read the ADE Bulletin and MLA’s Profession because we think about what we do and how we might do it better. But the lack of explicit stating that we must engage in “close, critical” readings not only of print texts and of other people but also of ourselves is unfortunate and at least abets some of the least defensible professional behaviors with which we are well acquainted: professorial arrogance, hypocrisy, greediness, angry dismissal of others’ arguments and even angrier envy of their accomplishments, and the many other traits that can contribute to the proverbial snake-pit atmosphere of a department or university.

Even when we are very skilled readers of our profession, our focus is almost exclusively on our institutions—their rules, procedures, curricula, et cetera—and only rarely on our professional, professo- rial, or administrative selves. There are notable exceptions, of course: the musings of Jane Tompkins in A Life in School and certain sections of Annette Kolo- ndny’s Failing the Future. What has not emerged from such professional writings, including those published in the Fall 2000 ADE Bulletin in the section “Administration after Poststructuralism” and in Profes- sion 2000, is any clear admonition concerning the necessity of what we might call self-aware, self-reflexive work and our expectations of such work among fellow administrators and faculty colleagues. We may be thoroughly convinced by Stanley Fish’s argument in the Bulletin that “contingency is the rule, [and] it is a rule that cannot be applied, because to apply it (or pretend to) is to make it into a version of the illusion that it rejects, the illusion that there is a perspective (or nonperspective) from the vantage points of which situational confusions are clarified and options are sorted through” (15). But certainly there are better and worse processes by which “confusions are clarified and options are sorted through.” First and foremost, an awareness of the rule of contingency and of what is ad hoc means that we must deal with the incontrovertible fact that our priorities, administrative values, and professional belief systems—our foundational
and professional a priori assumptions—can never be taken for granted or regarded as self-evident, that they are always aspects of a self-identity that is a continuous and potentially very supple project.

Much of the language I’m using here is drawn from the work of the sociologist Anthony Giddens, who in The Consequences of Modernity and Modernity and Self-Identity isolates as the defining characteristic of our contemporary life the unparalleled degree and social pervasiveness of what he terms “the reflexive construction of self-identity” (Modernity 85), which I shorten here to self-reflexivity. For Giddens, the late modern “self is not a passive entity”; instead, “the self, like the broader institutional contexts in which it exists, has to be reflexively made” and is thereby susceptible “to chronic revision in the light of new information or knowledge” (2, 3, 20):

Since the self is a somewhat amorphous phenomenon, self-identity cannot refer merely to its persistence over time in the way philosophers might speak of the “identity” of objects or things. The “identity” of the self, in contrast to the self as a generic phenomenon, presumes reflexive awareness. It is what the individual is conscious “of” in the term “self-consciousness.” Self-identity, in other words, is not something that is just given, as a result of the continuities of the individual’s action-system, but something that has to be routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual. (52)

Perhaps the most compelling question that arises from Giddens’s provocative work is whether or not the aforementioned routine can be anything other than mechanical and un(self)-aware.

One would think that if anyone can imbue such self-reflexive work with critical consciousness, certainly it would be a textual critic. Yet to date that has been too rarely the case. As Bill Readings notes with deadly accuracy, “Anyone who has spent any time at all in a University knows that it is not a model community, that few communities are more petty and vicious than University faculties” (180). Davison confirms that what is true for the university at large is equally true for humanities and English department faculties. But I persist in the question, Is it possible for those of us who read texts so intensely and skillfully to read one another, and allow ourselves to be read, without paranoia and to infuse a critical consciousness into the routine process of creating and sustaining our professorial and administrative self-identities? In my opinion, to say hastily or nervously that we cannot, that self-reflexivity is always unknowable and unconscious, is to avoid in self-serving fashion the most intriguing aspect of our work and identity as intellectuals, to avoid perhaps the most difficult challenge we face in defining and conducting what we now call professional studies.

In a superb little book entitled Foucault and Social Dialogue, Christopher Falzon teases out a related line of thought running through much of Michel Foucault’s work, one that has made Foucault by far the most important influence on my professional life, even when I disagree with his generalizations and conclusions. Falzon writes that “the problematization of our prevailing forms of life in order to promote resistance and new forms of thinking and acting is, for Foucault, central to the life of the philosopher, the thinker, the intellectual.” For the intellectual, “thinking itself [is] a process of reflective problematization” in which one must “step back from a way of acting and reacting” and reflect on “what one does […] as a problem.” Indeed, it is “this idea of self-detachment that is at the heart of Foucault’s conception of the ‘ethics of the intellectual’” (70). Giddens’s comments also pertain here, especially when he states that one of the most striking characteristics of our age is a “wholesale reflexivity—which of course includes reflection upon the nature of reflection itself” (Consequences 39). That idea is the basis of my continuing optimism that we skilled textual critics, we professional intellectuals, are particularly capable of reflecting on the nature of reflection and of acting thereby and thereafter with critical awareness, assuming that we are ethically committed to such action.

Even if we are so committed, what is clearly missing from the commentary above is a way out of solipsism, a recognition, following Fish, that there is no secure, self-generated vantage point. Of course we can never detach ourselves wholly from ourselves or achieve anything like clarity in our perspective on ourselves. Thus as part of our ethical commitment we must energetically solicit the perspectives of others, who can add immeasurably to our partial views, even if the result will never be complete. Following Foucault’s lead, we must seek to foster a “form of reflection which opposes deadening, unthinking closure and domination, opens thought up to the other, assists those who resist, promotes the revitalizing creation of new forms of thought and action, and ultimately fosters continuing dialogue” (Falzon 71). We can use our skills of textual reading, response, and analysis to read the texts of our professional norms and behaviors, if we allow—better yet, if we communally demand—sustained expressions of those
texts, and if we encourage and value divergent readings of them, critical readings of our critical readings of ourselves. What Davidson isolates as paranoia is largely born of the too common professorial need for something like mastery and autonomy, for unquestioned, unchallenged scholarly and administrative authority. What Barry Sarchett calls the covert “will to power/knowledge” among administrators, which he discusses with some embarrassment as “administrative desire” (12), is actually part of a larger topic that has received far too little attention: the question of what draws people to this profession and to specific sectors of it (such as administration) and what behaviors, attitudes, and underlying desires are so routine that we simply never discuss them. Far too much remains unrevealed, unchallenged, and uncritically assumed. Dialogue may not reveal everything, but certainly it is far less static than closed-ended monologues or, worse yet, silence.

At the conclusion of my essay in Profession 1999, writing about the silence that reigns on life at nonresearch institutions, I said that “[o]ur professional life stories can replace a deadening and deadly silence” (203). I was not suggesting that self-expression is ever anything other than tendentious, partial, contingent. In a professional context in which we can acknowledge that professorial roles are assumed and that administrative performances are just that, performances, I want to have more rather than fewer scripts to look over, to talk over, and to choose from. More scripts would be particularly useful when we find ourselves, as faculty members or administrators, in the situation that Fish points out: “Say you're [...] faced with a dilemma or a crisis or a garden variety decision, [even as] a good poststructuralist [...] you will still have to decide by running through the options that occur to you and tagging each of them with its probability (that's the best you can do) of success, failure, triumph, or embarrassment” (15). Yes, but options never occur to us from some metaphysical source. They (and their probabilities of success) occur to us because they are part of our knowledge base, including our knowledge of the failures and triumphs and critiques and professional life stories of others in similar or dissimilar situations.

So, since I am calling for something like a culture of professional exhibitionism, let me at least reveal a few key aspects of my own professional and administrative self-identity here. I value openness and overt self-reflexive work—an ability to talk about professional roles as such and our potential agency in choosing our professorial performances—among all colleagues, but I certainly look for it among possible new hires. Frankly, I was hired into something like a snake pit in 1991, but through a variety of means (including early retirements and also some very careful hiring) the place has become, for the moment anyway, a fairly snake-free zone. I am not casting myself as Saint Patrick here. What my very hardworking colleagues and I are seeking, like many Bulletin readers, is a way of making functional rather than dysfunctional our current state of dissensus, as described accurately by Readings and discussed by J. Hillis Miller and Manuel Asensi in Black Holes. At the very least, this making functional requires a communal emphasis (certainly on the micro if not macro level) on reading and responding to the textuality of diverse professional norms, behaviors, beliefs, values, and activities in ways that do not involve the paranoia that Davidson mentions. Administrators committed to self-aware self-reflexivity should hold up that emphasis as one of their highest values, participate in it, and work openly and energetically toward institutionalizing it.

To help us institutionalize such self-aware self-reflexivity, statements of professional self-identity should be regularly expected, should be as much a part of our professional introductions and processes—including the hiring process—as curricula vitae are. Cover letters, of course, already serve as indirect statements of self-identity. But I am talking about something much more forthright, in which we work communally to demystify and denaturalize the choices we make in the process of constructing a professional self-identity. I would even go so far as to say that professional statements should be made the central texts of symposia, workshops, and conference panels. It is interesting that we require statements along these lines as a particularly important component of applications for graduate school but do not require them of one another in job applications and professional introductions. Why not? It cannot be lack of time and energy alone. A succinct (five hundred words or so) professional statement might lead to cover letters that speak much more directly to issues at hand than they often do now.

Of course, such statements of professional self-identity, especially those submitted as part of an application, should be one component only of a two-way or multidirectional communication process. If applicants self-disclose values, beliefs, goals, and priorities, so should institutions. Applying for jobs and appointments, I have asked an institution explicitly for a sense of its self-identity, its goals, values, and belief systems.
At times I have been given highly useful and detailed information. At other times I have been met with blank stares or incredulity. Even the incredulity was revealing: I knew immediately that the department or institutional entity did not value anything approaching self-aware self-reflexivity. Too much was assumed to be self-evident or natural. As John Stuart Mill might have reminded us, vipers and all sorts of viperish activity exist in that realm of the natural.

Which brings me to a related point, that we must continue to discuss and formulate ways of linking diverse methodologies, professional interests, self-identities, and even dissensual presuppositions into articulable departmental and institutional self-identities. Despite the pluralism skirmishes of the 1980s, we still have not adequately addressed the need to live with the practical fact of dissensus or arrived at ways of representing it as something other than a cacophony to new and potential colleagues, provosts, the public, and outside evaluators. It should be taken as an intellectual, administrative, and professorial challenge to discover how we converge in priorities and collegial values even as we may diverge significantly in methodologies and lifestyles. However cynically we are now treating processes of self-study, strategic planning, and mission-and-goals generation, we can infuse these often mechanical and even wasteful processes with urgency and a critical utility. I have seen these processes work well and have also participated in very effective departmental retreats on such topics, but they are effective only if they begin with a discussion of individual professional behaviors, expectations, hopes, fears, and responsibilities. In sessions I have facilitated, I even asked that before professors read (i.e., complain about) the text of a department or university, they preface that reading with a statement of responsibility for helping solve the problem identified, a technique drawn from Richard Carlson's Don't Sweat the Small Stuff at Work. In fact, his chapter entitled “Light a Candle instead of Cursing the Darkness” contains some injunctions that every administrator and academic needs to hear and reflect on.

This article is my candle. The text of our profession and the texts of our individual and institutional self-identities are as multilayered, dense, and complex as those of any novel by Joyce or Faulkner (and even have some of the same plot lines). I am hardly calling for wholesale self-absorption—I do not predict that professional texts will replace our interest in literary ones—but I do hope that we can more regularly read and respond to such professional texts as ongoing, creative works. I certainly believe that we can all become more supple and skilled administrators by foregrounding our statements of self-identity in forums such as the ADE Bulletin and Profession. To return to Giddens, “each of us not only has,’ but lives a biography reflexively organized in terms of flows of social and psychological information about possible ways of life” (Modernity 14). We should find ways of organizing our professional biographies with even more information at hand about possible ways of life. Circumspection will be necessary at times for all sorts of reasons. We are highly skilled writers as well as readers and can certainly arrive at ways of self-protecting as well as more openly self-reflecting (and accurately reading slick, mechanical, and overly evasive professional statements as such). At the same time, we must admit that closed, spuriously autonomous, and in Davidson's extreme, paranoid professional selfhood is too common for reasons beyond anything strategically necessary or even intellectually defensible.

Works Cited


This paper emphasizes the importance of researcher position and reflexivity for professionals in the ecological and development sciences. We draw on critical discourse analysis (CDA) to analyze a selection of scientific papers written by more. This paper emphasizes the importance of researcher position and reflexivity for professionals in the ecological and development sciences. Self-reflexivity is being critically reflective in the moment. It is having an ongoing conversation with one’s whole self about what one is experiencing as one is experiencing it. To be self-reflexive is to engage in feeling and thought while being in the moment, it is an advanced form of self-knowledge. Self-reflexivity is frequently referred to as ‘internal conversation,’ and language is assumed to be the main channel through which individuals can relate to themselves. Studies of the self have focused on conversations, confessions, and diaries—all discursive tools that serve as anchors for self-reflexivity. Yet this focus on words has neglected other, more hidden forms of reflection, which are more difficult to track.