JOURNAL OF
CREATIVE WRITING STUDIES

REVIEWS

We Need to Talk: A Review of Thuene and Broad's *New Method for Evaluating Poetry*, as told through fiction

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Review of

Theune, Michael, and Bob Broad. *We Need to Talk: A New Method for Evaluating Poetry.* **Multilingual Matters, 2017.**

It's your first time on the campus of Illinois Wesleyan University. November in Illinois is surprisingly bitter. It's the wind, you think, uncertain how it gathers such velocity when all coasts are hundreds of miles away. You make it through the Eckley Quadrangle and to the English building, where you're meeting Michael Theune and Bob Broad to discuss their latest book, *We Need to Talk: A New Method for Evaluating Poetry.*

You're thankful when you're out of the cold and in Michael's office, the three of you sitting around a table, until Michael stands.

"Coffee?" he asks, grabbing a carafe and filling a cup of his own.

"Please," you say.

Michael takes a cup from a stand on a bookshelf, fills it, and places it in front of you. "Cream or sugar?"

"Black's fine. Thanks," you tell him.

Michael fills a third cup and sets it in front of Bob, smiling as he sits. "We've known each other awhile," he says, "Bob and I. I know how he likes his coffee."

You smile.

"Thanks for agreeing to meet with us," Bob says.

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"Your project sounded promising early on, so I'm eager to hear what you've been up to since. So, let's do it. Tell me, what do We Need to Talk about?

Michael and Bob peer at each other. "Kick it off," Bob says. "I'll jump in if needed."

"Alright," Michael says, looking at you. "In this book, Bob and I create 'a method for coming to understand the relations . . . among diverse, shifting . . . standards . . . for the evaluation of poetry' (5), something we call Poetry Dynamic Criteria Mapping or PDCM."

"We base our methods off of Dynamic Criteria Mapping," Bob interjects, "'an established method for colliding and discovering values in the field of composition' (5), something I've written about in the past" (30).

"So you're applying a method from the field of composition to evaluating poetry?" you ask.

"Exactly," Michael says. "PDCM is 'formed out of a collision of interests and activities' in those two fields" (5). "The result," he continues, "is a method of analysis that helps 'poetry professionals meet their ethical commitments' when assessing poetry (5). And when I say professionals, I mean educators when grading poetry, editors when publishing it, really anyone in a position to assess the success of poetry."

"Great," you say, jotting down some notes.

"Before going into how we employed PDCM in the book, we open chapter one by arguing for the need to do so."

"And we make our argument," Bob adds, "by taking a closer look at similar studies from before."

"Exactly," Mike says. "We look at old exemplars, like 'Alberta Turner's *Poets Teaching: The Creative Process*, Patrick Bizzaro's *Responding to Student Poems: Applications of Critical Theory* and H.L. Hix's *Wild and Whirling Words: A Poetic Conversation*, to develop new methods of investigating more deeply how we value contemporary poetry'" (7).

"And though we acknowledge the contribution of each study," Bob says, "we highlight some of their shortcomings and how we're advancing thought where they left off."

"So have you moved the proverbial needle forward?" you ask.

"In several ways," Michael says, "but I think the most evident way, especially when considering the work that came before, is that we work to establish a blueprint for a localized but communal form of judging poetry, and it is a blueprint the requires recursive practice, reflection, and, most importantly, discussion between those judging work."

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"The live, face-to-face element has never been done," Bob shares.

"Which is an imperative difference," Michael assures you. "Basically," he continues, "there are two ways of looking at values we tend to ascribe to poetry. One is 'objectivist—that somewhere in these criteria are the universally correct standards, or subjectivist—that whatever criteria one chooses simply is a matter of taste and therefore immune to inquiry, discussion, and negotiation'" (13). And because in this study we've integrated a face-to-face discussion about why editors picked the works they did, while also asking their poetic preferences and history, we were perfectly poised to tackle both objectivist and subjectivist issues. They had to lay it all bare."

"That sounds like a paramount addition to the scholarship," you say. After writing a moment, you ask, "Anything else in chapter one?"

Michael and Bob look at each other. "Those are the highlights," Bob says.

"We want there to be some surprises," Michael adds, grinning.

You smile, jot a few more notes, then ask, "What next?"

Michael says, "Well, in chapter two, we employ the methods of PDCM in a case study. First, we created a fictitious literary journal called *The Contemporary American Poetry Editorial Review (CAPER).* Then, we put out a call for submissions, while also placing a call for editors. Ultimately, we narrowed the editors to seven established poets, and they nominated twenty-four poems for publication. Bob and I narrowed those to twelve and told the editors they had to narrow the twelve to five by debating their choices. Beforehand, we recorded what they valued most about poetry they preferred to write, read, or publish" (32-33, 53). Then, we recorded their debates as they narrowed the twelve poems to five. A comparative analysis of the two was informative."

"How so," you ask?

"Let me count the ways," Michael quips. "Really, though, what was most interesting is that we noticed readers valued criteria that were not only text-based, meaning, literally, what the words said and how they moved from one idea to the next, but also the immanence of the ideas and meaning the words conveyed" (35-43).

"Right!" Bob exclaims. "'A significant dynamic we observed within the realm of textual criteria was the connection and tension between values such as invention, moments and images and the counter-posed criteria of *development, discovery,* and *consequence*' (original emphasis 35). We also learned the editors preferred poems that had '*surprise*' and took '*risks*' (original emphasis 38), which often lead to developments in the poems that revealed '*turns*' or a kind of '*building*' in the poems that were often associated with those works deemed best" (original emphasis 39).

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"And you know what's really wild?" Michael asks. "Form played a much smaller role in deciding strong poems than one might think. 'With only a few exceptions, *form* was not discussed as a significant value in and of itself' (original emphasis 39). With that said, these observations are ours only and in no way should be considered universal (54). Each instance of PDCM should be its own localized process"

"Then, in chapter three, we—"

"One second, please," you interrupt, writing notes rapidly to catch up.

"Pump the breaks," Michael jokes, grinning at Bob over his cup of coffee.

A few moments later, you take a deep breath and exhale. "Okay, chapter four," you say. "Go."

Bob begins again, smiling. "In chapter three, we outline what we did in the months and years after the study. In 2007, once the poems were selected and data was in, we spent 'many months poring over transcripts of the *Contemporary American Poetry Editorial Review (CAPER)* conversation, sifting through the data to find the patterns and themes in how and why those 7 poets valued and evaluate the 12 nominated poems'" (56).

"Then, three years later, in 2010," Michael adds, "we turned that data into an article in *College English* and then pursued the required steps to do a follow up with our editorial board and selected poets. We sent different but very similar letters to the editors and poets and received a range of responses (58-59)."

"Really?" you inquire. "Like what?"

"Well," Bob says, "'From the CAPER editorial board, we received at least brief responses from all seven participants' (59), and from 'the 12 poets, we received a wide range of responses and non-responses'" (59).

Michael says, "Though there were a number of interesting findings post participants' reflection, we summarized them into three categories: critiques and dissents; real-time change in participants; and change in participants over a long period of time. In the critiques and dissents section, the most unfavorable concern was brought forth by a female editor who was upset by being the only female participant in the project" (61).

"That was through no lack of trying," Bob adds. "We '*invited*' a more diverse group, but it didn't pan out" (original emphasis 61).

"Right," says Michael. "Hopefully, this model will be used by more diverse groups in the future. Alright, continuing, another interesting discovery came in the portion on real-time, where some

participants shared 'their enhanced understanding of how and why people (poets, critics, readers, etc.) *change* over time in their ways of judging verse'" (original emphasis 62).

"In line with that," Bob adds, "is what some participants discussed they learned about themselves over time. For example, with years to reflect on the project, and to grow as a writer, one participant discussed how much current context affects a person's evaluation of what good poetry is. Likewise, one of the poets noted context can equally affect the content of a poet's work, even to the point that that person might look back at old work, while in a much different context than they were then, and feel very differently about it."

"Another thing we learned," Michael adds, "is that 'nine years later, we would proceed differently too'" (68).

"Right," Bob says.

"For example," Michael continues, "if we performed the same study but found ourselves as 'homogenous' as we were for the prior study, we'd 'put the project on hold.' Even though we tried to assemble a more diverse group, 'pragmatic considerations' stopped us from waiting until we had that group before continuing (68). However, almost a decade later 'pragmatic considerations like limits on our time and energy . . . no longer seem to us to be acceptable reasons for assembling a board with only one woman member and only one person of color'" (68).

"'A better CAPER study would have required of us . . . a stronger commitment to diversity than we demonstrated in 2007,'" Bob adds (68).

"Exactly," Michael says, nodding. "And I think discoveries like this one are what makes PDCM so important. Pursuing PDCM is an 'adventure in vulnerability' (69) that can lead to surprise, and that's a good thing because 'surprise is often the sign of good research, but surprise is not always easy or enjoyable'" (69).

"Well said," you say, writing.

After a moment, Michael says, "Ready to hear how we finished it all up?"

"Ready,"

Michael begins. "In chapters four and five we discuss applications of PDCM. For example, in chapter four, we discuss how it might be used in an undergraduate classroom (71); how it might be used by students to learn more about what they publish in their own student-run literary journals (75); by faculty building rubrics to assess learning objectives for a creative writing course (77); and by editors in charge of journals all over the world (82-95). Then, in the final chapter, we discuss some other works that have yielded creative, axiological insights and talk about how our project

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enhances those. Finally, we end by talking about what PDCM can add to the field of creative writing studies, especially in helping it bridge its 'stark schism' with creative writing (112)."

"Anything else?" you ask, finalizing your notes.

"We provide a helpful appendix with appendices from the CAPER study to help make our findings more concrete for readers," Bob adds.

"Good," you say. You finish your notes, close your notebook, and look at Michael and Bob. "It's been a pleasure learning more about your project," you say, shaking their hands and standing. They walk you out, where you step back into the cold yet feeling satisfied. The trip was well worth it. You're certain their project, *We Need to Talk: a New Method for Evaluating Poetry* will be a great contribution to creative writing studies and to all those evaluating works of poetry all over the world.

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