Chapter 16
Performing Dissident Thinking through Writing:
Using the Proprioceptive Question to Break out of the Classroom

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ABSTRACT
Theoretically informed by Julia Kristeva’s linkage of political dissidence with thinking, this chapter explores a deconstructive tool used to develop dissident thinking through writing in the post-secondary classroom: the “Proprioceptive Question,” a central feature of Metcalf and Simon’s Proprioceptive Writing™ (2002). After this method’s fundamentals are addressed, the devaluing of subjectivity throughout schooling, as played out through literacy learning, is surveyed. Analysis of the Proprioceptive Question in terms of its discursive components and examples of its academic uses follow in order to understand what makes this question such a powerful method for developing subjective engagement in the university setting. Just as dissidents separate from existing regimes to organize their opposition, this chapter concludes that student writers via the Proprioceptive Question create space between themselves and their thought content to challenge their own ideas. Thus the question serves as a form of political intervention, a disruptive pedagogical practice.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-61350-495-6.ch016

PRELUDE
The notion of the dissident was formulated in the post-World War II era behind the Iron Curtain, where Soviet bloc intellectuals, critics, and particularly writers - the most famous being Solzhenitsyn - often disappeared, some placed under house arrest, others forced into psychiatric facilities and labor camps or permanently exiled, stripped of citizenship. These dissidents wrote in opposition to regime writers whose work supported the “ideological state apparatus” (Althusser, 1971). In the 1960s, as they took to the streets, American
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and European university students adopted the “dis-

sident function” - a term later used by Bulgarian

theorist and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva (1986a,
p. 294). Against these cross-cultural backdrops,
Kristeva published her 1977 essay “A New Type of
Intellectual: The Dissident” in which she remarks
that: “true dissidence today is perhaps simply what
it has always been: thought” (p. 299).

In the post Berlin Wall era, as the age of infor-
mation technology has taken root with a rapidity
and pervasiveness few could foresee, Western
student dissidence has progressively dissipated,
along with the Soviet dissident writer/regime
writer binary and the harsh realities it produced.
Yet Kristeva’s coupling of dissidence and thinking
has relevance particularly for educational settings
in our new century’s second decade. It is thinking
- dissident thinking versus regime thinking - that
must now provide opposition, engage cultural
criticism, and structure a path to new social and
political formations. Deleuze and Guattari (1987),
for example, in their critique of Western, “arbo-
rescent” thought (p. 15) articulate an alternative
reality based on “nomad thought” (Massumi,
1987, p. xii) with its rhizomatic outcroppings
and “lines of flight” arriving and departing (De-
elleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 3). An elaboration of
Foucault’s “outside thought” (Massumi, 1987, p.
xiii), uncultivated nomadic thought travels
without restriction in and around existing trees
of thought, accepted knowledge, and dominant
cultural values.

Teachers as cultural workers (Friere, 1998) are
charged with developing engaged, participatory,
democratic citizens who can ask questions and
think nomadically but who must also be prepared
to master appropriate skills in order to enter the
free market, global economy where out-of-the-
box thinking may be highly valued. However,
teaching critical, nomadic thinking is easier said
than done. Educators may ask: what does criti-
cal, nomadic, outsider, or dissident thinking look
like in practice? And can it even be taught in
school, a place where students learn skills but
also a place defined by norms and the need to
conform? Teachers as cultural workers, teaching
for transformative learning (O’Sullivan, Morrell,
& O’Connor, 2002), may value dissident thinking,
but it remains nonetheless elusive, an abstraction,
perhaps an impossibility to teach and to enact.

This chapter explores critical, in-class language
practice as a way to crack through that impossi-

bility, in particular an adaptation of Metcalf and
Simon’s (2002) process writing method, Proprio-
ceptive Writing™, for the post-secondary class-
room. This writing method centers on the use of a
deconstructive tool, the Proprioceptive Question,
as a way for writers to explore and contest meaning
and to activate dissident thinking - in writing. In
her essay, Kristeva describes three types of dissi-
dents (1986, p. 295). The first reflects those Soviet
bloc dissident writers who constitute opposition
within a system, but who, Kristeva explains, are
insiders nonetheless and thus caught in Hegel’s
master/slave binary because of that positioning.
The psychoanalyst who counters religious practice
forms the second type of dissident. But Kristeva’s
third type of dissident best speaks to conceptual-
izing a disruptive pedagogical writing practice:
the experimental writer, who undermines “the
law of symbolic language” (Moi, 1986, p. 292)
to create new syntheses, however temporary or
enduring, through which “the master discourses
begin to drift and the simple rational coherence
of cultural and institutional codes breaks down”
(Kristeva, 1986a, p. 294).

Placing a word, not under Derridian erasure,
but under and into question, the Proprioceptive
Question (the PQ) serves to undermine language
- one’s own. By asking the PQ, writers align
themselves with the interrogative form, rather
than predominantly making declarative statements
one after the other and accepting them as fact.
Moreover, this realignment via the PQ positions
writers to interrogate jargon as well as ideological
and dogmatic traces in their own thinking and to
challenge their most ingrained assumptions.
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