TOWARDS A DEMOCRATIC RHETORIC: SELF AND SOCIETY IN COLLABORATIVE THEORY AND PRACTICE

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Anne Ruggles Gere. *Writing Groups: History, Theory, and Implications*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987, 165 pp.
Karen Burke LeFevre. *Invention as a Social Act*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987, 173 pp.

Despite (or maybe because of) its growing popularity and a wealth of material that has been published on socially-based writing instruction recently, there is a lot of confusion about collaborative learning.[1] A good example is a recent article by Donald Stewart in *Rhetoric Review*. "[I]n our discipline," Stewart writes, "another major ideological shift is underway. . . . [T]he era of the cognitive psychologists is waning; the era of the social constructionists is just beginning" (58). His purpose is not, however, to celebrate this shift, but to question it. In the article, "Collaborative Learning and Composition: Boon or Bane?," Stewart focuses on the problems of collaborative learning and its philosophical justification—social construction. Stewart describes collaborative learning as "a critique of the teacher-centered classroom" (60) which has among its influences John Dewey, Thomas Kuhn, Richard Rorty, Clifford Geertz, Michael Oakeshott, Lev Vygotsky, Paulo Freire, and Erving Goffman. Stewart draws on the work of John Trimbur, Kenneth A. Bruffee, and Karen Burke LeFevre to describe collaborative learning and its assumption that thought, language, selfhood, and authority are socially created. Stewart briefly praises what he sees as the virtues of collaborative learning: its anti-authoritarian urge, its embracing of student participation, its humanitarian assumptions, and its recognition of social roles.

Most of Stewart's article, however, expresses his deep misgivings about collaborative learning and the social constructionist argument in which it is situated. First of all, Stewart argues, proponents of collaborative learning and social constructionist theory are not sufficiently aware of their predecessors, such as Fred Newton Scott in the early part of the century and Robert Zoellner in the late sixties. Stewart maintains, secondly, that implicit in the notion of discourse as community-based is an acceptance of what Stewart sees as the typically turgid, jargon-laden prose of many disciplines and professions. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Stewart says that advocates of collaborative learning neglect the role of the individual and thereby fail to deal adequately with the psychological, ethical, and political implications of their work. In short, Stewart maintains, "neither collaborative learning nor the social constructionist theory that supports it is the educational panacea which its advocates imply" (64).

I share Stewart's admiration for the strengths of collaborative learning. I have taught English with collaborative methods for over ten years, and I find students empowered more often than not by their involvement in genuine writing communities. I believe that the most intellectually consistent way to explain this is through what has been labelled social constructionist theory, so I am happy to see Stewart maintaining a link between social constructionist theory and collaborative practice. I also agree with Stewart that proponents of collaborative practice have been uninformed historically. That is, of course, true of most rhetorical pedagogical practice. Until the relatively recent publications of such historians of our field as James Berlin, Robert J. Connors, and Stewart himself, we have been a discipline with only an ancient history and a recent past. This lack of historical awareness has been particularly acute in regard to collaborative learning, which during most of the twentieth century has been hailed intermittantly as an innovation.

At the same time, however, Stewart fails to grasp the most important issue of social construction—the relationship between the individual and the group. He has several problems with what he perceives as the anti-individualism of social construction. First, Stewart feels that social construction does not adequately explain the phenomenon of "individual genius." "How does one account for the originality of genius? How does the genius transcend the influences that have molded him?" asks Stewart (67). Stewart's concern with individual genius is related to his focus on individual responsibility. He states "the problem of ethics" as a concern he has with social constructionists such as LeFevre, who discusses the political constraints of writing in her book *Invention as a Social Act*. LeFevre cites a situation in which an engineering student protests to a tutor that his thesis advisor has asked him to withhold certain conclusions "because the agency sponsoring the research would discover that the work was essentially completed and would cut off funding" (73). LeFevre contends that a situation like this goes beyond heuristics to the social and political contexts of writing, contexts which we cannot ignore. Stewart finds "the moral relativism of such remarks disquieting" (73). "I understand that in this case a degree is at stake," Stewart says. "In another it will be a job. But the point is that in this example, those exercising the constraints are behaving *illegally and immorally*. They should be exposed" (73). Stewart does not, however, make an appeal for changing the oppressive context within which the individual acts. Instead he puts the responsibility for righting the immoral situation squarely on the shoulders of the least powerful player in this episode—the graduate student. "[T]he student should appeal it all the way to the president of the university," Stewart maintains, "and if he finds no satisfaction there, he should take his major professor to court" (74). Stewart's belief in a world in which a graduate student could win such a battle, given the unlikely condition that he could pay for it, belies a political stance possible only to a man in a relatively powerful position. He takes for granted that individual heroic efforts can and should be the norm.

Stewart continues criticizing those who support collaborative learning for not being fully aware of "the political implications of what they propose" (74). Stewart faces conformity. The rhetoric of social construction, he says, "is well suited to a society that needs managing—China, for example" (74). But American society, says Stewart, is based on a social dynamic diametrically opposed to collaboration—one rooted in individualism. "In our history," says Stewart, "we have championed the trail blazer, the pioneer, the self-sufficient person" (74). Furthermore, such individualism is at the heart of creativity: "The history of social, scientific, musical, and literary innovation is a history of people who were light years ahead of their times and who decided that their contemporaries could go to hell; they would do their thing and let the rest catch up" (79). Stewart's contentions demonstrate a significant misunderstanding of collaborative learning and social constructionist thought. Bruffee-style collaborative learning depends not on conformity, as Stewart implies, but on conflict. Bruffee's text *A Short Course in Writing* is based on a series of oral and written tasks that ask students to argue with each other. Collaborative learning is virtually unworkable, in fact, in those cases in which all students agree, because it requires a strong sense of individual responsibility.[2] Stewart's analysis supposes a rigid dichotomy between the individual and the group that makes him distrustful of collaborative learning and social construction. He misunderstands the dialectic interplay of self and society which is central to social constructionist thought.

Two recent books in the Southern Illinois University Press *Studies in Writing and Rhetoric* series have attempted to elaborate the implications of collaborative learning and social construction, and in doing so they have dealt with the relationship of self to society: Anne Ruggles Gere's *Writing Groups: History, Theory, and Implications* and the already mentioned *Invention as a Social Act* by Karen Burke LeFevre. Both books contribute to a fuller understanding of the social nature of writing—historically, theoretically, and practically.

Gere's *Writing Groups* is a welcome antidote to the tendency of collaborative practices to be chronically innovative. Her book provides a sense of historical continuity which has been conspicuously absent in most treatments of collaborative learning. She chronicles the history of men's and women's writing groups both inside and outside the academy, beginning with the creation of literary societies and self-improvement groups in the 18th and 19th centuries, which originated as extracurricular college activities, and therefore were limited largely to men. Writing groups for women started with Bible studies, but became an important alternative to formal education and an audience for nineteenth-century women writers, for whom writing was important for intellectual, financial, and political reasons.

Gere provides us with useful analytic frames for discussing writing groups. Her distinction between autonomous (or self-sponsored) and non- or semi-autonomous (classroom) writing groups guides us towards thinking about groups in terms of the crucial issue of authority. Although I would argue with some of her distinctions between authority in self-sponsored and classroom groups, her division of classroom groups into the categories of non- and semi-autonomous enables us to examine and evaluate our own classroom practices. Another interesting typology which Gere offers is based on the work of educational historian Herbert Kliebard. Gere proposes four philosophical stances which have historically supported writing groups: humanism, which emphasizes intellectual growth; social meliorism, which is interested in "fostering social progress for all;" developmentalism, which is based on Piaget's concept of egocentrism; and social efficiency, which combines Taylorism with a "back to basics" focus. Gere argues that these disparate philosophical bases have marginalized writing groups by causing supporters to focus more on the differences among them than on their similarities. As a result, collaborative practices have been unable to develop a solid theoretical foundation. More specifically, they have tried to exist in a world ignorant of social constructionist assumptions, a world that has privatized the individual.

Gere offers social constructionist theory as a rationale for all writing groups. According to Gere, writing groups work because they offer an alternative to the isolation of the individual writer by reducing alienation. She supports her social constructionist stance with a variety of potentially divergent theorists including Dewey, Marx, Einstein, Kinneavy, and Bahktin. Gere brings her argument into the current debate on literacy by maintaining that writing groups both contribute to and are sustained by an "ideological" conception of literacy—one which defines literacy as socially constructed and culturally situated, growing "directly out of the immediate social environment" (117). Because of its individually empowering and egalitarian nature, Gere maintains that "ideological" literacy is more desirable than its alternative—a technological concept of literacy (popularly known as the "great divide" theory) which focuses on reading and writing as skills which affect mental functioning. Technological literacy, says Gere, separates the abstract from the concrete and the language user from her language (114-116).

A problem with Gere's analysis is that in focusing exclusively on social construction as a rationale for writing groups, she underestimates the variety of theoretical and ideological stances that writing groups can promote. Although I agree with Gere that writing groups should be governed by the tenets of participatory democracy, there are many writing groups that function in other ways. In Charlton Laird's "Oregon Plan" in the late 1950s, for instance, group members competed for the teacher's approval by finding surface errors in each other's papers. A related problem is that in making a case that draws on a host of different perspectives, Gere ends up without a clear-cut theoretical position that might explain precisely how collaborative practice reduces individual alienation rather than squashing individual creativity, as Donald Stewart claims. Gere writes that her book "assumes that the authority of individual creation can coexist with the authority of consensus" (6) without explaining how those two kinds of authority can function fruitfully together.

LeFevre's *Invention as a Social Act* also provides us with a useful analytic scheme that enables us to discuss more fruitfully the relationships of a social model of writing to other models. LeFevre presents a spectrum of approaches to invention—Platonic, dialogic, collaborative, and collective—claiming that the latter three are varieties of social invention. Situating her argument politically, LeFevre presents a brief history of the social construction of authorship, linking individual authorship with capitalism. She draws on Foucault to make a connection between the creation of private property and that of individually authored and copyrighted texts. In terms of practice, LeFevre demonstrates the use of collaboration in business and engineering. Her practical suggestions range from training students for collaboration in the professions to teaching people skills for negotiating international conflicts.

LeFevre presents a revisionist notion of invention that takes it beyond the role it has had in classical, cognitive, or expressionist rhetoric, and necessitates a redefinition of the self. In presenting models of invention on a continuum from Platonic to collective, LeFevre invites us to look at the relationships among the several models, making it possible to see strengths of a model that one might have otherwise missed. For instance, LeFevre presents the Flower/Hayes cognitive model of invention as an attempt to formalize, and thus make accessible, the previously popular expressionist model which had mystified the role of invention. The spectrum also provides a way to discuss pedagogies which overlap models, and theories which give way to different practices: "[A] broad inventional scheme need not be considered inherently Platonic or social," LeFevre states. "[W]hat matters is the way the scheme is interpreted and used" (51). She interprets Plato in two ways: one supports the expressionist model of invention; the second supports the social constructionist stance. LeFevre's approach in *Invention as a Social Act* is in keeping with her underlying theme—that the social redefinition of the act of writing implies an ethical commitment to cooperation.

A variety of social theorists help explain the collaborative and collective approaches to invention, among them Clifford Geertz, Gregory Bateson, Wayne Booth, and John Dewey. LeFevre's three varieties of social invention—dialogic, collaborative, and collective—are linked theoretically to Freud, Mead, and Durkheim, respectively. Unfortunately, the scope of her project precludes a full explanation of the theoretical apparatus that supports each of the models, and it is difficult to be persuaded to their value in the very brief space they are allowed. For instance, she presents only one aspect of Mead's pragmatist theory and its relationship to a collaborative model of invention. LeFevre's argument could be strengthened by a fuller development of Mead's work on the construction of the social self.

Mead's exegesis of the social self and Dewey's extrapolation of this concept to society can help explain the relationship between the individual and the group in collaborative practice, a relationship that continues to puzzle critics of social construction such as Donald Stewart. Most of Stewart's misgivings about collaborative learning and social constructionist theory center on what he perceives as a neglect of the individual in favor of the group.[3] The problem is not simply that Stewart disagrees with the social constructionist, or pragmatist, treatment of the relationship between an individual and society.[4] Rather, Stewart (and other critics of collaborative learning) misperceives this stance. In positing the individual and society as polarities, Stewart and others have fallen into the trap of posing dualities where they do not exist. A fuller explication of Mead's and Dewey's social theory can illuminate Stewart's misconception, and perhaps clarify the most frequently misunderstood aspect of social constructionist thought.

In her use of Mead as a theoretical foundation for invention as collaboration, LeFevre briefly discusses Mead's model of the human communicative act, which involves a *gesture* (physical and/or verbal), another's *interpretation* of the gesture, and finally a *response*. "New meanings," says LeFevre, "are thus brought into existence by means of social interaction involving a symbolic gesture and a response" (62). Knowledge is continually being created, then, through soical interaction. It is not so much, as Gere would have it, a "coexistence" of separate realms of authority, but rather an interpenetration of the individual and her "others," and society. The relationship is reciprocal, not parallel.

This dialectic is even more clearly understandable in Mead's conception of the "social self."[5] Mead understood the self as a dialectical interplay of two components: the "I" and the "me." The "I" is the impulsive, highly subjective component, and the "me" is the component of the self which provides a social perspective. The "me" is formed not only from current interaction with others, but from past interaction as well, from experiences with others over time. David Miller, a student of Mead, writes:

> Without unity and stability and a consciousness of how to apply one's past experiences and acquired habits, there would be no self. The self is not a substance, and to speak of 'the same self,' or of the identity of the self, is to refer to attitudes, habits, ways of speaking and acting, that have endured over a relatively long period of time. ("Meaning of Freedom" 57)

According to Mead, human action is formed out of past and present social interactions, based on the interplay of the "I" and the "me." The "I" provides the impulse for action, while the "me" provides the structure for its expression. They more than coexist; they are dependent on each other to function.

Without this interplay between the "I" and the "me," the "self" as we know it could not exist. "Self-awareness" comes from interacting with other people, gradually learning to see oneself as an object, then gaining the ability to distinguish one's self from other selves. For Mead, the child first becomes conscious of itself only by noticing the effect of its behavior upon others. Interaction with another poses a set of problems which must be resolved by reflective thinking which involves role-taking (Miller, *G.H. Mead* 51). Role-taking enables the child to develop a sense of self in conjunction with a contrasting sense of the "other." Stewart's rugged individualists who "decided their contemporaries could go to hell" (79) could do so only in the context of those contemporaries.

Stewart asks how social constructionist theory can possibly explain the notion of individual creativity. In linking collaborative learning to conformity, Stewart implies a model of society that consistently reproduces a fixed set of notions that an individual cannot free herself from, short of escape. In this model society is a mechanism that reproduces itself perfectly, that leaves no gaps. Society, in other words, equals total domination. Stewart confuses the social constructionist conception of the relationship between the individual and society by positing this totalitarian model. For Dewey and Mead, no meaningful concept of "individual" could even exist in such a society. Furthermore, creativity would be impossible within such a context since "it is impossible for a . . . new idea to be had by the entire community at its inception" (Miller, *G.H. Mead* 167).

The individual is unique in the sense that his mind forms the intersection of a set of social experiences which only he has experienced in that particular configuration—and because he continues to have experiences, that configuration is constantly changing, whether subtly or radically. His particular voice is necessary to that society because that voice is the source of creativity, of innovation, of social reform. Yet, as Mead argues, creativity can emerge only with the development of mind and the social self:

> Human society, we have insisted, does not merely stamp the pattern of its organized social behavior upon any one of its individual members, so that this pattern becomes likewise the pattern of the individual's self; it also at the same time gives him a mind, as the means or ability of consciously conversing with himself in terms of the social attitudes which constitute the structure of his self and which embody the pattern of human society's organized behavior as reflected in the structure. And his mind enables him in turn to stamp the pattern of his future developing self (further developing through his mental activity) upon the structure or organization of human society, and thus in a degree to reconstruct and modify in terms of his self the general pattern of social or group behavior in terms of which his self was originally constituted. (*Mind, Self, and Society* 263n.)

Social construction does not squeeze out individual creativity, but rather emphasizes its importance as a social act. This is so because the individual self and society are dialectically engaged. Stewart simply fails to recognize this premise of social constructionist theory and its implications.

Pragmatism posits a society in which ideological maintenance of the kind Stewart is concerned about is neither possible nor desirable. The ideal society for social constructionists is one based on participatory democracy, in which individual input to the society is necessary to its continual revitalization. Mead's friend and colleague John Dewey drew out the implications of Mead's concept of the dialetical self for social change in a democracy. As the role of the "I" is to challenge the "me" when it proves unworkable, so the role of the individual in society is to challenge outworn social convention. Cultural transmission of social custom even at its most conservative is never exact, Dewey noted, but is always reconfigured by the contributions of individual impulse and historical situation.[6] Dewey's goal was to use the dialectical process of transmission to further social progress. Given the crucial importance of the individual to society. Dewey argued that society must promote social arrangements that maximize the opportunity for the individual to engage in public discourse.[7]

When Stewart speaks of the American tradition of individualism as if it were in opposition to social constructionist beliefs, he fails to acknowledge the equally historical American tradition of democracy. The problem of Stewart's "trailblazer," "pioneer," or "self-sufficient person" is that she has no political power unless she joins her voice with others who have similar concerns. Stewart's is a privatized individualism that is powerless in the face of social and political reality. It is the interconnection of the individual and society that characterizes the American ideal, as exemplified in Jeffersonian political thought and in Whitman's quintessentially American *Leaves of Grass*: "One's-self I sing, a simple separate person/Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse ("One's-self I Sing" 1-2).

The ethical dilemma from this perspective is not the issue of morality as a matter of individual responsibility, as Stewart asserts. Rather, the ethics of education must focus on developing a social context in which individuals have real responsibility (the ability to respond) and the political opportunity to do so. The central question which Dewey and Mead pose for education is the same one that John Trimbur has recently stated in a discussion of cultural studies:

> The question cultural studies leads us to ask is not just how writers write but how literacy has been, and can be, produced and used to increase democratic participation in public life, to give voice to the needs and experience of those who have been silenced and marginalized, to articulate political desires. (13)

Implicated in social constructionist theory is an active sense of pluralism, in which the first agenda is to recognize differences and work towards equalizing power relations among the participants so that every individual's voice may be heard.

Our students, largely consumers of mass culture, have little knowledge of successful democratic movements that have helped to make up the history of their society. As Henry Giroux has pointed out, there is little in their daily lives that invites them to imagine alternatives to the current concept of citizenship which celebrates a competitive, isolated individualism that brings with it conformity to a narrow standard of excellence (111-12). They have been taught to think of democracy as supporting the *status quo*. This popular version of patriotism assumes that democracy serves a reproductive function in our society. A pragmatist stance, however, assumes that democracy must be continually remade. "Social reconstruction must be an ongoing concern rather than an all-out, one-time effort to set up a perfect society," Mead urged (cited in Shalin 935). Rarely do our students witness, much less are they personally involved in, the fruitful debate that characterizes democratic action.

Collaborative learning can provide one concrete experience of democracy in action for people who have few such experiences. It deliberately transforms social relations in the classroom, replacing the traditional hierarchical model of power with a model of power which is not decentralized, but "poly-centralized" (Bruffee, "The Way Out" 461-2). The individual student both acts upon the group and is acted upon by the group, playing out the dialectical relationship between the self and society proposed by Mead and Dewey. Structured in terms of social constructionist principles, this classroom experience can provide students with a model of democratic action, possibly creating a desire in them to approximate such relations in other contexts. As Trimbur has explained in "Consensus and Difference," collaborative learning can provide a utopian critique of social relations.

The impetus toward social and political egalitarianism was the initiating force behind the revival of rhetoric and composition studies over twenty years ago with the advent of open admissions at the City University of New York. This is also the spirit that guides the contemporary "ideological shift" (in Stewart's words) towards social construction. Anne Gere chooses to frame writing groups within these social constructionist assumptions, implicating writing groups in a democratic vision of literacy. Similarly, LeFevre's rewriting of invention as fundamentally social and often collaborative clearly implies, as she states, an ethical commitment to cooperation. Finally, Bruffee's collaborative learning and Trimbur's analyses of its political impact can stimulate us to experiment with our pedagogy towards democratic ends. In short, a wide range of collaborative practices can offer students some necessary participatory skills and a vocabulary of democratic possibility.

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NOTES

[1] I would like to thank John Trimbur and E. Leon Anderson for reading and commenting on drafts of this article.

[2] The role of consensus in Bruffee's collaborative learning tasks has been criticized by Greg Myers ("Reality, Consensus, and Reform in the Rhetoric of Composition Teaching") and others. The best discussion of this issue can be found in John Trimbur's "Consensus and Difference in Collaborative Learning." Trimbur defines the role of consensus in Bruffee's collaborative learning as a disrupter of stability in that its purpose is to elicit conflict, rather than to mask difference. Trimbur's discussion does not fundamentally change Bruffee's practice, but rather politicizes consensus/dissensus in a way that Bruffee has not.

[3] Collaborative pedagogy has often been subject to accusations that the individual's interests are ignored in the interest of the group, or vice versa. This has been, perhaps, the central debate in the history of collaborative pedagogy. In the 1920s, for instance, two versions of collaborative practice co-existed. The first, which was called "The Project Method," was criticized for neglecting the individual; its counterpart, "The Dalton Plan," eventually lost favor because it focused too much on the individual.

[4] I use the words "social construction" and "pragmatism" interchangeably. I maintain that social construction, with its post-structuralist epistemological assumptions, owes much to the pre-structuralist work of American pragmatist philosophers George Herbert Mead and John Dewey. However, some variants of social construction (specifically the New Pragmatism of Richard Rorty) are concerned more with the epistemological issues of "non-foundationalism" than with its political implications. I choose to focus on Mead and Dewey because

they argued that political action is the inevitable responsibility of a belief that knowledge and power are socially constructed.

[5] Mead's work is most fully explicated in *Mind, Self, and Society* and in the more recently published notes from his 1914 and 1927 class lectures in social psychology, *The Individual and the Social Self*. For a recent discussion of differing interpretations of Mead's work, see the Spring, 1989 issue of *Symbolic Interaction* pages 1-111. Mead's conception of the social self shares some strong similarities to the theory of "mind" developed by Russian social psychologist L. S. Vygotsky, whose ideas have also contributed to recent social constructionist thought.

[6] Social construction shares similarities with a wide range of social theories which in recent years have moved from a deterministic view of social actors toward a recognition of the transformative power which social actors exert on their societies. This shift is exemplified in Henry Giroux's writings on marxist educational theory and in Anthony Giddens and Alain Tourraine's sociological theory. It has been a major factor in the convergence of strands of continental and pragmatist philosophy (as discussed in Richard Bernstein's *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*), and it has been at the center of the development of the "new" interpretive approach to ethnographic writing in anthropology advocated by Clifford Geertz, Victor Turner, and Edward Bruner, among others. Common to all of these shifts in social theory in various disciplines has been movement toward a recognition of the interplay of social actors and the culture in which they are embedded.

[7] For two of Dewey's most important statements on the philosophy of education, see *Experience and Education* and *Democracy and Education*.

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