THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THEORY AND PRACTICE

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Late one afternoon, during a teacher-training seminar focusing on James Kinneavy's *A Theory of Discourse* and two articles in which it is discussed, John D. O'Banion's "*A Theory of Discourse: A Retrospective*" and C. H. Knoblauch's "Intentionality in the Writing Process: A Case Study," one instructor asked how Kinneavy's theory could be presented to beginning students. What ensued was, to some present, a slightly unsettling discussion of the relationship of theory to instruction in which I said that I did not think that theory belonged in the writing classroom. My point was that theory should inform us, the teachers, and should help us develop approaches to instruction so we can take advantage of what the theory offers as we teach. Students in introductory writing courses, I said, do not need to be taught theories about writing in order to write better. Later that same evening, in a meeting of a graduate seminar, Multidisciplinary Studies in Composition, a panel of three graduate students discussed projects they had been doing for a linguistics course—projects in which they attempted to use linguistic theory to develop instructional strategies which would help them address specific diction problems in their students' writing. As part of their discussion, they presented a model describing the relationship between theory and instruction which offers a useful reminder of the limits and uses of theory. What follows here is a consideration of the problem raised by the instructor studying discourse theory and an attempt to suggest a re-examination of our attitude towards the relationship between theory and instructional practice.

I

In his retrospective of *A Theory of Discourse*, John D. O'Banion refers to "the limited success of Kinneavy's theory" (196).

The noun *success* is troublesome: it seems to refer to O'Banion's previous statement, "his theory is unsatisfactory for many who teach composition, largely because he fails to account adequately for rhetorical choices and composing processes" (196). Within these statements are two implications: the first suggests that to be successful, a theory must be satisfactory to teachers; the second implication is that a successful theory of *discourse* must account for rhetorical choices and composing processes. Let us turn to the second of these implications first. O'Banion points out that Kinneavy deliberately chooses to write a theory of discourse, not a theory of composition, and deliberately chooses not to address the process of composing, but instead, in the present text, to limit himself to an analysis of aims. (Discussions of Kinneavy's text often overlook the fact that it is subtitled *The Aims of Discourse* and is intended to present only part of his theory, a point which O'Banion makes, but makes little of.) Undoubtedly then, Kinneavy's theory is product-oriented. He intends to be. Undoubtedly, too, it will be an inadequate model of the writing process, but that point, which is at the heart of much of the criticism the theory has received, is irrelevant since Kinneavy's theory is an effort to describe one aspect of how language functions, not the whole process of how writing is produced or how language makes or elicits meaning. Kinneavy is partly responsible for this confusion since in the preface and first few pages of his text he links his work to the teaching of composition and says that he has chosen the term *discourse* from a group of four "mildly competitive" words (3), the others being *rhetoric, communication, and composition*. He prefers *discourse* to *composition*, he explains, precisely because the latter "embodies almost solely a 'process' connotation which is not desirable in this instance" (4), but despite this attempt to explain that he is not interested in the composing process, his use of the term *composition* and his claim that what he is doing will be useful to teachers of writing leaves him open to criticism which he might have avoided. A central point, one which both Kinneavy and his critics ignore, is that a theory need not encompass an entire discipline to have value, nor should it be considered only of limited success for not doing more than it intends to do.

O'Banion faults *A Theory of Discourse* several times for not "giving any attention to methodologies for teaching composition" (197). Knoblauch, too, points out the limits of Kinneavy's "generic

purposes" for describing the actual motives which govern writers engaged in the full process of composing (154). These criticisms were echoed by students in the teacher-training seminar who claimed that Kinneavy's theory, as well as some of the other theories we had been discussing, did not seem to offer them any immediate help as teachers. They could not, they said, present this theory to their students in freshman composition courses and expect them to follow it, nor were they sure how such a theory, which seemed reasonable when they read it, should be applied.

Such criticisms imply a widespread misunderstanding of the relationship of theory to what we do in the classroom. When we come across a theory which illuminates our thinking about or offers an explanation for a problem which, as teachers, we have observed, our inclinations fall in one of two directions. We may, genuinely enthusiastic, present the theory to our students as the illumination or explanation it was for us and expect them to understand it, apply it, and eliminate the problem which it seems to us so clearly to address. In this situation, we are like the instructor who wondered how to present Kinneavy's theory to students. We want to tell students something which will make sense for them and will help them solve a problem or develop a strategy. The second direction we typically take is to find some way to apply the theory to a problem we face in the classroom, not through a presentation of the theory itself, but through an explanation or example or series of rules, in the last case often followed by exercises which encourage students to use the rules.

Most theories, however, cannot be immediately presented or readily applied to classroom problems because most theories have not been developed for the purpose of solving pedagogical problems. Definitions of the word *theory* remind us that theories are speculative and descriptive. Richard Gebhardt, for example, points out that "A theory, after all, emphasizes underlying and interconnecting relationships so that it helps make sense out of diverse facts and phenomena" (621). In other words, a theory is an effort to describe and to understand a specific phenomenon, and a theoretician's interest in the phenomenon may be purely intellectual, reflecting a desire to seek knowledge for its own sake, without suggesting any uses or applications of the theory. Thus, in *A Theory of Discourse*, Kinneavy identifies *discourse* as the phenomenon he wishes to describe, and the concept of *aims* helps him with

this description. But theories *can* be applied in a number of ways and to a number of fields. Linguist Victor Raskin uses the terms "source" and "target" fields to explain how theories (and/or methods) can be borrowed from one discipline to help explain a phenomenon or solve a problem in another (31-32). Kinneavy, for example, draws on linguistics and communications and classical rhetoric, all of which serve as his source fields, in order to develop a theory about discourse, his target field. And his development of a theory does not obligate him to consider how it might be applied, either by those studying discourse or by those in related fields (like the teaching of writing) for whom discourse might serve as a source field. In *A Theory of Discourse*, Kinneavy is only concerned with developing a theory. He does not intend to address pedagogy, which concerns the instructional goals of those disciplines which see the opportunity to benefit from the theory. Nor is Kinneavy interested in developing instructional activities—the specific teaching techniques—exercises, texts, assignments— through which the results of pedagogical considerations of the theory finally reach the student. Therefore, those who, like O'Banion, criticize Kinneavy for not addressing pedagogical applications of discourse theory misunderstand his purpose.

Thus we are reminded that a theory, even one which seems to have an obvious connection to instruction as Kinneavy's theory of discourse seems to have to composition teaching, must travel a distance before it reaches students. The theoretician and the teacher may have the same goals, they may even be the same person, but on the other hand, they may not. An analogy to science may be helpful: the theoretical physicist interested in describing as best she can a phenomenon for which there is evidence may not be concerned with the influence her theory may have upon the applied physicist who sees within the theory an approach to developing a new energy source, and neither may be concerned with the instructional goals of science educators who decide whether the theory should be part of a curriculum and how it may be presented to students.

There is nothing in this analogy, I trust, which seems the least bit out of the ordinary; it is part of our view of science and a number of other disciplines that theories and classroom instruction need not be immediately related. But in composition, our expectations of the relationship between theory and practice are

different because most of us are teachers as well as scholars and researchers. In an essay entitled "The Domain of Composition," Louise Wetherbee Phelps points out that "Composition as a profession takes responsibility for facilitating the growth of literacy as well as understanding it. This link between knowledge and action, *theoria* and *praxis*, distinguishes composition from other academic fields by making the teaching act itself a primary topic of scholarly inquiries" (187), and later in the same essay explains that "While every discipline has it praxis, its theories, and its metatheory, in composition these are all bound up together and cannot be easily teased apart" (190). Others have made similar points. Lee Odell has written that:

> Our response to any new theory is most likely to be: what does it imply for our teaching? What specific classroom procedures does it suggest? . . . Underlying these questions is at least one major assumption: our primary obligation is to have some influence on the way students compose . . .

Odell goes on to suggest another responsibility—to "help refine and shape the discourse theory that will guide our work with students," thus emphasizing that the development of a theory, though related to teaching, is nevertheless a separate activity (39). And Nancy Sommers explains that one of the two major concerns which has dominated composition research is "a concern with problems of applications (teaching methodologies) rather than with problems of theory" (46). These scholars, recognizing the difficulty of separating theory and practice, nonetheless are conscious of the distinction. Theirs is the kind of work Robert Gorrell praises when he notes the shift in composition studies "from experiments in teaching methods to attempts to find out how students compose" (35). What Gorrell writes about is a paradigm shift from applied to basic research—from practice-centered to theory-centered studies. Faigley's "Competing Theories of Process: A Critique and a Proposal" similarly addresses the theory/practice issue. After presenting "the histories of each of the dominant theoretical views of composing" (expressive, cognitive, and social), each of which, he points out, "has given teachers of writing a pedagogy for resisting a narrow definition of writing based largely on 'correct' grammar and usage" (528), Faigley argues that efforts to understand and synthesize theories "are not mere matters of ivory-

tower debate," but instead enable us to address "the most obvious questions in college writing instruction today" (539).

II

It is important that we remember to distinguish between theory and instruction when we write or choose texts. Though *A Theory of Discourse* contains examples and exercises, no one would mistake it for a freshman composition text, but even Kinneavy, in the preface, calls the book a text and suggests such diverse audiences as "courses in advanced composition and rhetoric at the upperclass and graduate level," in-service courses for teaching assistants in freshman composition, and summer institutes for teachers (ix). This, it seems to me, is at least a partial misunderstanding of the appropriate audience for the book, which has less to offer the student writer or new composition teacher than it does the student of rhetoric and composition theory. His view of his audience may be, in fact, Kinneavy's best argument for his product-based theory since it seems to demonstrate his claim that the author is not necessarily aware of the purpose his discourse will serve (13). Another example is Young, Becker, and Pike's *Rhetoric: Discovery and Change* (N.Y.: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1970), an important work for the scholar and teacher, frequently used as a text in graduate courses in rhetorical theory, but inappropriate as a text for the introductory composition students who were its intended audience. This is not to say that composition texts cannot be based on theory and be successful texts, for examples exist. Kinneavy's description of the relationship of aims and modes has been successfully adopted in several recent texts, most notably Sue Lorch's *Basic Writing: A Practical Approach* and Lauer, Montague, Lunsford, and Emig's *Four Worlds of Writing*. The latter text also presents an invention heuristic based upon tagmemics, but students who use the text and the methods are not presented theory; instead, the theory has been adopted to meet pedagogical goals. A similar relationship between theory and instruction can be seen in Frank D'Angelo's *A Conceptual Theory of Rhetoric* and his text *Process and Thought in Composition*. And sentence-combining exercises and texts (instructional activities which help meet pedagogical goals of writing instructors) are, of course, derived from a linguistic theory, transformational-generative grammar, and the rules and schema developed from it.

These examples suggest not only that theories can be sources of instructional activities, but demonstrate that when we examine a theory in light of its pedagogical value, we may find uses for the theory which go beyond the theorist's original intention. For example, in *The Four Worlds of Writing*, Lauer et. al. use modes to suggest an organizational frame for discourse, as does Kinneavy, but in addition explain that the modes can suggest the material or content of the discourse. An expressive discourse may, for example, be organized as a narrative but may use classification within the frame of the narration as a means of presenting information. Or again, the theorist's intention may bear no relevance upon the pedagogical use which develops from it, as is the case with Hunt's development of sentence-combining techniques, which have only tangential and insignificant ties with the theory underlying transformational grammar and even less relationship with the intentions of the theorists for whom transformational grammar is a way of describing language, not an approach to teaching writing.

For years, our profession was a-theoretical. We look back upon the articles which dominated the pages of our journals as being method without rationale and criticize the "Here's-what-I-did-in- class-why-not-try-it" eassay if it has no theoretical foundation or empirical support. Our increasing concern with theory is a sign of professional development and intellectual vigor. But we must learn to understand the appropriate position of theory in a profession where scholarship, research, and teaching are so closely intertwined, learn to resist the desire to take theories into the classroom and criticize them if they cannot be readily applied to instructional goals, learn not to expect theories to do more than they set out to do, and learn to see theories as sources for further exploration.

Coda

When Sir Gawain was tested by the Green Knight, he was representing chivalry, a complex code designed to describe ideal behavior. Gawain received a nick on the neck from the Green Knight for his efforts to deceive him, and blamed himself for not being flawless. Gawain then had to be assured that he had upheld the ideal as well as was possible, and neither Gawain nor the code

had been diminished in anyone's eyes but his own. Our theories are our efforts to develop an ideal representation of a phenomenon, and like Gawain's code, they can be useful guides to us. But we have to be cautious not to expect them to operate beyond their limits or, like Gawain, we run the risk of erroneously diminishing their value.

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