THE POLITICS OF SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION AND THE TEACHING OF WRITING

DIANA GEORGE

Social constructionists tell us that knowledge is the product of place, people, moment, ideology, and even (or especially) economic and social circumstance. What composition scholars have most recently been saying about first-year composition is that it is the course which introduces students to "the discourse of the university." Though many hope that an initiation into the language of the university will empower our students, that initiation might just as well be exclusionary, a suggestion that ought to make us somewhat concerned in these days of books like E.D. Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy*, Ravitch and Finn's *What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know?* and in light of the James Madison High curriculum suggested by William Bennett.

Social constructionists have in common with literary theorists like Mikhail Bakhtin, with cultural critics like John Fiske and with Marxist scholars like Terry Eagleton the belief that form cannot be separated from idea. They contend that we cannot, for example, look exclusively at the structural features of a novel, the camera angles of a film or the set design of a television program and expect to understand the whole of it.

Like Cultural Studies, social construction insists upon reuniting the thing with its community. Thus, social constructionists are likely to quote Stanley Fish in his discussion of the role of the interpretive community in determining the features of its particular discourse. They are just as likely to refer to Clifford Geertz's anthropological studies or to make at least a passing reference to Richard Rorty's discussion of the problematic nature of knowledge. That is not to say that Fish, Geertz, and Rorty would call themselves "social constructionists." It is to say that composition scholars, like Ken Bruffee, who write about social construction frequently invoke the names of thinkers whose work ties knowing to circumstance, place, and politics. Social constructionists have a hard time avoiding political questions. They ask who is in control and who is being controlled.

In matters of teaching, social construction focuses, quite often, on the necessity of acquiring a certain "habit of mind," the ability, for example, to appreciate complexity and difference, a tolerance for ambiguity, or an understandiing of conflicting ways of interpretation.

Let me explain with a simple story. When my dissertation advisor Bill Holtz, at the University of Missouri, sent me out of his office again and again with the single statement, "First you have to know what the questions are," he was asking me to learn how literary scholars had been looking at a particular body of work. He was not asking me to look for the one question that had not been answered or to uncover a piece of information that had lain hidden since Lawrence Sterne had completed *Tristram Shandy*. He wanted me to know how people ask questions in a specific discipline and how those questions tend to be answered. Until I could learn that, I would simply read, take notes, and gather information. The information-gathering in and of itself was not enough to lead me to interesting or important questions.

John Berger has given us another way of looking at this problem. When he wrote *Ways of Seeing*, he was suggesting that we take the same material we had been looking at for at least two and a half centuries and look at it again, using a different lens. Thus, we get an *alternate* "way of seeing." We look, for example at art history and see what has been omitted, what might be combined in a different way, and what might be like what we see today. He was not suggesting that, say, influence studies were

wrong, simply that they did not tell the whole of art history. That is an important distinction.

In his discussion of discourse and the novel, Bakhtin tells us that studies of form and ideologial investigations are equally sterile because form cannot be divorced from content: "Once we understand that verbal discourse is a social phenomenon—social throughout its entire range and in each and every of its factors, from the sound image to the furthest reaches of abstract meaning," then we can fully investigate language (259). Some composition scholars have extended Bakhtin's argument into the teaching of writing, suggesting that writing cannot be taught divorced from content or meaning or social construction.

So, the lessons from social constructionists might be stated thusly:

—that scholars ask questions about history, literature, art, even daily events and cultural phenomena (tv, advertising, film, fashion) that students do not normally question.
—that such questions rarely lead to simple answers but do suggest ways of understanding why we act the way we act.
—that answers in themselves are ephemeral things.
—that knowledge, being a product of a particular culture, cannot be examined as an isolated artifact, a pure construct.
—that questions of social, economic, historical, and aesthetic context are political questions.

What, then, might be the consequences for the college composition classroom of seeing language as socially constructed?

One consequence might be our current distrust of teaching writing as acquisition of style, form, and manner solely. Of course, there is the danger of ignoring style, form, and manner. Thus, composition teachers influenced by social constructionist pedagogy attempt to present those lessons within the context of the linguistic or rhetorical situation in order to teach students that particular forms emerge from particular contexts or social or political situations.

A second consequence might be our concern with the decontextualization that too often occurs in college essay anthologies or "readers," as they are appropriately called, in what must be an unconscious evocation of the readers we were taught from as children. This discomfort social constructionists feel with decontextualization is a real one. However, we have not yet come to terms

with the problems of re-contextualization. Classrooms can easily decontextualize. Those who are most successful in the effort to confront decontextualization, like Nicholas Coles and Susan Wall, work hard to set assigned reading material into the context of the students' home or work situation. That, however, is not an easy thing to do. We do not always understand our students' home and work environments. Our efforts to make knowledge meaningful for the home or workplace is not always a desirable thing for some students who wish not to be reminded of either place.

A third consequence might be the emphasis in writing in the disciplines programs on teaching writing only within disciplines, focusing (as do Elaine Maimon and Linda Peterson, for example) on the genre of a discipline in an attempt to teach writing as a social consequence of the work of any particular discipline. Studies in writing in the disciplines which attempt to place writing into its generic context are helpful, but they can also serve (again) to decontextualize. Once we have identified the genre, we might easily turn to teaching form devoid of content/context once again.

A fourth consequence might be to see the writing class as an appropriate place for teaching abstract thinking and interpretation of ideas through discussion of the literature (nonfictional as well as fictional) of a culture. Exercises in problem-solving are eschewed in favor of discussions of particular studies or philosophies.

Treating writing as interpretation is an important consequence of social constructionist thought. However, we must guard against the temptation to think of the writing class as a place for higher order reasoning while "problem" students (or basic writers) then get shuttled off to the Writing Center. We thus have another version of "I teach something more sophisticated than basic writing, but my students do need to know the basics." In fact, at the University of Chicago's Spring, 1987 Interpretive Communities Seminar, the Writing Center was exactly the solution posed any time participants asked how social construction might help their basic writers.

Even with their corresponding problems, these consequences work to open up the composition classroom, and in skillful hands can lead to a liberating pedagogy, the sort about which Paolo Freire and Ira Shor often write.

Why, then, should a theory of knowledge that has opened up intriguing possibilities in composition classes give me pause? It certainly is not the theory itself, for I find the theory convincing and politically astute. For example, social construction could easily

lead us to an understanding of why some students succeed in the university and others do not and then suggest what we might learn about how to teach those who do not. A few scholars (Patricia Bizzell, Nicholas Coles, and Richard Ohmann are among them) do just that.

What concerns me is, of course, not the theory *per se* but the application of that theory. One or two readers of this essay have reminded me that, in many ways that count, E.D. Hirsch is a social constructionist. After all, Hirsch says that we cannot read our culture's literature if we are ignorant of its past. The problem with Hirsch's solution, however, is that he has only one past in mind. Our culture is made up of many pasts and many versions of those pasts. A past is not as easily recoverable as Hirsch's new *Dictionary of Cultural Literacy* makes it seem.

Or, to give another example, if we take seriously the suggestion Joe Williams made (at that same Interpretive Communities Seminar mentioned above) that we abolish first-year composition in favor of courses that teach students to use the language and thinking strategies of their chosen disciplines, we fail to serve those students who are the least likely to make it at the university. Most of our students do not actually get to their chosen disciplines until their third year in college. By that time, those students who do not traditionally make it in the institution have dropped out. Thus, a suggested reform that was certainly offered in the spirit of strengthening writing instruction would serve instead to help only those who make it far enough through the institution to get to a "chosen discipline." Nontraditional students, economically deprived students, learning disabled students, students who are alienated by the institution from the outset, often do not get as far as a chosen discipline. They need help from the very beginning to learn just what this "discourse community" expects of them.

My concern increases, as well, when I consider the political environment in which social construction has taken root. I hate to sound too suspicious, but it gives me pause (again) when I realize that we are living in an era of competency testing for both students and teachers. That two of the three best-selling books on "literacy," including *What do Our 17-Year-Olds Know?*, are books of lists. That the former Education Secretary has unveiled his James Madison Curriculum, which looks as if it came straight out of these books of lists. That, in the last eight years, civil rights legislation aimed at equalizing educational opportunities has been

seriously eroded. That, in our border states, legislative bodies are arguing for the necessity of a nation of one language. And, that, the language these legislative bodies are arguing for more closely resembles William Saffire's language than it does the language of most of our students.

David Bartholomae's insight that the student is "not so much trapped in a private language as he is shut out from one of the privileged languages of public life, a language that he is aware of but cannot control" (139) can easily lead us to attempt to teach a certain jargon, not so much a way of thinking, but rather a way of talking—certain kinds of words lead us to certain kinds of power. I would not say that Bartholomae means to do that. I believe he means to do just the opposite. The possibility is there, though, if we are not careful about how we apply the language of social construction.

I am concerned as well because, exciting as social construction is, its application seems more and more to support the notion that the University is that place where students must abandon their cultural and social heritage and adopt the standards, the language, and the values of the institution. Social constructionists remind us that what happens in any university classroom is the formation of an Interpretive Community. We ought to ask ourselves what it is we are creating when we create an interpretive community in the classroom. What do we mean when we say we are introducing students to college-level discourse? Are we teaching them to sound like us? Are such specialized language communities working to support the dominant/power culture and to weed out those students who do not adapt easily to the "discourse of the university," students who, very likely, are from low-income groups and who very likely would not score well on Ravitch and Finn's test?

The interpretive communities we set up in composition classes are supposed to be communities that will empower our students. Too often, however, these communities become closed worlds. We tell our students what we like and what we do not like, and we move them toward a common language that may not extend outside the classroom.

Lucille Parkinson McCarthy's study of a student moving from one class to another may serve to illustrate my point. In order to do the work of the university, students continually discard the language of one class and try to adapt to the language and expectations of the next class. The student McCarthy followed through

two years of college coursework never did, without prompting, see a connection in the instruction between courses.

Bartholomae tells us something very similar. Students struggle again and again to reinvent the university every time they move into a new class. Their learning is fragmentary. Their language is not likely to be the same from one class to another.

What, then, is university-level discourse? Well, it seems to be many things.

I have said that questions of social, economic, historical, and aesthetic context are, in the end, political questions. And yet, I do know how uncomfortable we in academe are with political questions. We would rather not deal with messy problems that come from questioning the status quo, and that is what we are going to have to do if we are really going to take this business about social construction seriously.

Too often we teach our students to avoid the questions—copy the masters—pay attention to form, to propriety. Too often, we seem afraid to let them loose with ideas. There are good reasons for this. Peter Elbow reminds us that they trample all over the things we love (*Embracing Contraries* 146). That is true. They do trample all over the things we love. Further, they are forever asking us to defend ourselves. They stare at us with eyes that challenge, or they look blankly into their notebooks and copy our words. It is very hard to continually defend yourself in the classroom. It gets very hard to ask them to subject their very world to scrutiny.

When, for example, I ask a group of first-year students to look critically at television using Neil Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death* as the primary text in that discussion, they will go along with Postman as he talks about news and even the junk of television, but when he gets to *Sesame Street*, they balk. "I, for one, learned how to read and count from *Sesame Street!*" they proclaim with not a small bit of outrage. I have come too close. They would rather have the old "Take this Fish and Look at It" essay. It, they believe, is not about them.

I do believe, though, that if we keep a clear head about all of this, we can work toward an understanding of what it might really mean to learn the language of the university. Part of learning the language of the university is learning where to go for help. Students are notorious for wanting to be the only one to say a thing—wanting to say it best, get extra credit for it. Teachers are

notorious for being suspicious of collaboration, for wondering "where that idea came from," for denying students even the freedom to quote themselves. Learning the language of the university ought to involve learning how to collaborate, learning what it means when everyone is talking about the same topic using the same jargon.

Part of learning the language of the university ought to mean learning to connect the strategies of one course with the strategies of another. What that would mean is designing a "connected curriculum," if you will, and making our students and each other conscious of the connections. It is not enough to think that our lessons will be good for our students somewhere along the line. We, as faculty, must talk to one another about teaching and scholarship and research questions and methods. We cannot expect our students to make the connections when we rarely make them ourselves.

Tom Fox has argued that what we are learning is that universities are healthier when they invite and encourage cultural diversity. That means more than encouraging minorities to attend college. It means rethinking a pedagogy that asks a student to become bicultural, reject home, family, and friends and embrace the institution. It means understanding how different cultures construct meaning and working with those constructions in the classroom.

The problem I outline here cannot be addressed by one course. It must be taken up by the entire university system which as yet continues to function piecemeal. Students do not know that a lesson in one class might build on a lesson in another. That is because we as a faculty do not know how they build on one another. That is not the fault of a course but of a curriculum.

If we followed Bennett's James Madison Curriculum, we wouldn't have all this trouble, would we? All students would study essentially the same things in much the same ways. What Bennett offers, in the end, is control. It is the kind of control Michel Foucault outlined in *Discipline and Punish* when he connected the structure of educational institutions with the make-up of the prison system.

Education ought to open minds, not close them, and to do that we might not always have the control that we would like, but we are surely to have something better—something, say, like a conversation with our students.

Diana George directs the First-year English program at Michigan Technological

University. Her work has appeared in *College Composition and Communication,
English Journal, College Teaching,* and most recently, *Writing Center Journal.*

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