

# CONSTRUCTING IDEAS OF THE SOCIAL SELF

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Let me begin with a story. Early in this century, my grandmother and her sisters came to this country from Ireland and took jobs as maids for some of the wealthiest families in Pittsburgh. They became understudies of successful American lives. As soon as they had saved enough, they sent for younger members of the family. When the clumsy and raw boys who grew up on Irish farms arrived at my grandmother's home, they were taught to do things "the way the rich people does it." The lessons were more in what the rich people did not. The rich people did not: eat without table linens, wear underwear to dinner, put elbows, ankles, heels, or heads on the table, serve food in commercial containers, read in the bathroom, walk barefooted, or speak any language but English.

The ways of the rich became ritual. As a child I ironed table linens and forced decanted ketchup back into Heinz bottles. The answer to my "but whys" was always "because that's the way the rich people does it." When I asked how my name sounded in Gaelic, they pretended to have never known the language and told me to go wash my hands. Before the last of the three sisters died, she called me into her bedroom and, with embarrassed diffidence, offered me a mothbally roll of goods, covered in brittle shelfpaper, and tied with strings. They were Irish table linens, edged with handmade lace and richly sculpted with embroidery. While I admired them, Aunt Nan turned away, sniffed, adjusted her glasses and reminded me that the rich people bought their linens at Kaufmanns.

These Irish sisters were proud of their quick assimilation into American life. Success in America had meant letting go of Irish country ways, but the faster they learned to speak, to dress, to eat, to act like successful Americans, the faster they found good jobs and advanced in them. They learned to love the look of the fine fabrics and expertly tailored clothing that their employers handed down to them. They began to live a little beyond their means, but they never questioned it. The fine fabrics, the cloth napkins, the lace curtains were important not because of their loveliness but because of what they said to others about the self. The sisters became proud enough to scorn the waves of immigrants who came after them, especially those who held tightly to their languages, foods, and customs. Unknowingly, the oppressed became the oppressors.

I think much of American higher education, like American immigration, has taken place by assimilation. Universities have functioned like the rich people who took in the three Irish sisters, put them to work, and sent them out looking somewhat like themselves. The most successful students and the most successful immigrants were those who were most easily assimilated.

Lately, however, the process of assimilating students into the culture of the academy has become much more challenging. Our customs of speaking in abstractions, of questioning ideas, of making points and scrutinizing evidence are foreign to many of our students. Our knowledge base is different from theirs. If demographic predictions hold true, the next twenty years will bring an increasingly diverse group of students to our doors.

First-year English has traditionally been a place to assimilate, to introduce college-level expectations of reading, thinking, and writing. For many of us, the course was more of an orientation than a challenge. Now the job of the course is more challenging. What happens to our students when the social identities they bring with them meet the social forces and expectations within our classroom?

Patricia Bizzell asks a similar question in her essay "What Happens to Basic Writers When They Come to College?" She hypothesizes that the students most alien to the college community will define their difficulties differently depending upon the teacher's approach to composition. Bizzell suspects that in order to be successful in college a basic writer may have to become bicultural. Whether or not this is possible, and just how difficult it is, is open

to debate. I think social construction can sensitize us to just how difficult it is to create courses where diversity is celebrated and where students *and* teachers can stretch their repertoires to include a variety of conceptual and cultural perspectives.

Instead of using social construction theory to support teaching our students to think, act, and talk more like us, let me explore the problematic social constraints facing teachers who value diversity and who wish to develop their students' ability to think critically and to question dominant cultural values. I'd like to classify these constraints into three areas: social pressures, social rules, and the social value operating in the typical classroom.

## **SOCIAL PRESSURES**

I can illustrate these pressures best by reference to an August nightmare that many teachers experience. In my version of this nightmare, I arrive at my first class of the year to find my students with their backs turned to me, talking and laughing with one another. I open my mouth to speak, but can't seem to hold a thought or gain their attention. A few glance over their shoulders and laugh at me. I turn to my handouts and texts to find instead a pile of confusion, words printed upside down, pages stapled backwards, the 410 texts substituted for the 230 texts.

The dream is the opposite of what occurs every September. I arrive well-prepared for my first class, armed with a carefully chosen text and neatly prepared handouts. My students sit in silence, staring straight ahead, waiting with impassive faces for me to break the ice and tell them exactly what they have to do to get an A. In reality, my prepared syllabus and their silence are more frightening than the nightmare.

At this first encounter of the year, my students and I are engaged in what Ervin Goffman calls a "veneer of consensus." Social pressures force each participant in the situation to suppress his or her heartfelt feelings and instead convey a view of the situation which they feel others will find acceptable. We are playing out a tacit social script. The teacher's role is to express interest in the students. The students' role is to respond with a show of respect for the teacher's competence. My nightmares, I suppose, are caused by fear that this veneer of consensus may crack.

According to social scientists, such cracks are unlikely. Festinger's Social Comparison theory, for example, explains that

our need for certainty and balance, especially in unfamiliar situations, creates pressure to conform to social expectations. Over thirty years ago, Solomon Asch's study revealed that approximately 40% of his college-aged subjects submitted to the collective judgment of others, even when the collective judgment contradicted the evidence of the subject's own senses.

Another social psychologist, Irving Janis, studied concurrence-seeking behavior in four major political fiascos: FDR's failure to be prepared for the attack on Pearl Harbor, Truman's invasion of North Korea, Kennedy's Bay of Pigs invasion, and Johnson's escalation of the Vietnam War. He discovered that in order to retain the approval of fellow group members, individuals made wrong decisions in face of evidence to the contrary. He called this phenomenon groupthink, the tendency of groups to maintain homeostasis and seek concurrence at the expense of critical thinking. According to Janis, groupthink is more likely to occur in situations a) where members were isolated from outside opinion, b) when the leader is strongly committed to an idea or solution, and c) when group members are forced to make a choice in areas beyond their level of competence.

Think about it. Every September, in classrooms across the nation, students and teachers are responding to social pressures. To maintain a veneer of consensus, they tacitly agree not to disagree. Students and teachers are rewarded for buying into this pact. They maintain homeostasis and preserve status quo by agreeing not to examine structures that cannot withstand examination. Why, for example, do you think Stanley Fish can so easily replicate his experiment of turning a reading list into a religious poem?

## **SOCIAL RULES**

A second social constraint is the tacit and unexamined nature of the rules by which we operate within the classroom. Mehan's ethnographic study revealed that the primary lesson of early education is learning that the teacher controls the floor. As early as first and second grade, students need to figure out for themselves how to gain access to the floor and what to do with it once they have it. Mehan found that students must uncover and interpret these interactional strategies from paralinguistic, kinetic and contextual cues. Because these rules are never brought up for examination or confirmation, some students never master them. The rules bely

an uncomfortable power structure that exists even outside the classroom. Bizzell reminds us of the professor's social power and "how difficult it is to make education truly reciprocal, and not something done to one person by another" (151).

## **SOCIAL VALUES**

A third constraint is the values underlying the educational system. Stanley Fish reminds us that "the mental operations we can perform are limited by the institutions in which we are already embedded" (229). We college faculty members are products of a Cartesian education. We may say we value individual differences, but we work within degree-granting and grade-giving institutions that value uniformity. Students value these grades and degrees. They work hard to figure out what the teacher wants for those grades. In a report entitled "A Good Girl Writes Like a Good Girl," Sperling and Freedman demonstrate that even the most promising students and the most enlightened teachers labor under tacit constraints posed by these dominant social values. Their research demonstrated that Lisa, a ninth-grade high-visibility "good student," persisted in misunderstanding many of her teacher's comments not because of a mismatch in information and skill, but a mismatch in value. Lisa's closely held assumptions were "The teacher knows best, so do whatever he tells you" and "You write to make the teacher happy." On the other hand, her teacher, Mr. Peterson, did not value simple compliance. His ideal was to have students develop a personal voice and personal judgment about writing. Lisa's unspoken reluctance to assume authority created a hidden constraint and caused her to misconstrue the purpose of revision in spite of response-rich instruction.

For some students, the process of figuring out what the teacher wants and of doing what is necessary to get a good grade requires little in the way of personal transformation and the payoff is worth it, as it was for my Irish ancestors. For others, the process is not so easy; it demands radical transformation. Richard Rodriguez is an example of this. For him, success as a student came at the price of losing intimacy with his family. It was necessary to give up even the words for naming his parents. Family members began calling him "pochos," a child who has lost his color. Meanwhile, he idolized his grammar school teachers. "I began imitating their accents, using their diction, trusting their every direction. The very

first facts they dispensed, I grasped with awe. Any book they told me to read, I read—then waited for them to tell me which books I enjoyed” (434). For him it was necessary to be stripped to silence, to lose intimacy, to sacrifice the private self to become a public person. To Rodriguez, education was not possible without “radical self-reformation.” He acknowledges being an embarrassment to his fellow academics because he proves that education for some is a demeaning process. Not many students are as determined as Rodriguez. Holzman suspects that those who are already outcasts in their own cultures.

So what about the students with less determination? In First-Year English we want our students to learn to read and write from multiple perspectives. Must we disenfranchise them of their own culture to do that? Will the social forces allow it? What happens to them if we are successful? What happens if we aren’t?

I ask that we be cautious. In a recent essay in *College English*, Nicholas Coles and Susan Wall describe their work with adult basic writers. For their course, Coles and Wall selected readings that they hoped would challenge their student’s motivating ideology. Coles and Wall then wrestle with what they euphemistically call “disturbances in students’ motivation.” Their students had enrolled in college because they were motivated by the belief that a college degree would enable them to break through existing barriers and get ahead in life. The course readings forced them to see this world view as problematic. Coles and Wall argue that this conflict is a necessary risk in “an approach that aims to empower students,” but the despair in the student writing bothered me. I don’t know about you, but I took B’s instead of A’s when I was required to do more than assimilate ideas into my motivating ideology. I can recall no instances of having undergone the painful reconstruction of self in a classroom. In real life yes, but not in school, not for a grade. Richard Rodriguez realized that it was necessary to lie to his teachers about his experiences in order to succeed in school. I suspect that Coles and Wall’s students will figure this out also.

Majorie Roemer’s recent essay in *College English* reminds us of the obviously privileged ways of confronting and valuing experience at work in the university classroom. She reminds us that “Any classroom discussion of literature is carefully limited by what students think the teacher thinks is appropriate.” Reader response is a step in the right direction, but there are powerful forces operating against it. Roemer’s essay is filled with vocabulary warning

us of cultural aggression: “marginalizing,” “repressed responses,” “ethnocentricity,” “strangled and sullen silences,” “false unity,” “estrangement.”

Education should lead students to examine and question cultural values, but I am looking for ways to do this without forcing them to self-destruct or to deceive us. I think that role-playing is one way to achieve this. Let me illustrate. Last fall, three or four of my 101 students were discussing Gloria Steinem’s essay “Ruth’s Song” while the rest of the class watched. To encourage more participation, I invited the class to role-play someone who might respond to the essay differently from the way they did. This time the hands flew up. Beth said that her mother, already an ardent feminist, would have been deeply angered and recharged in her activism. Jim explained that his cousins, who had lived with their father’s mental illness, would have felt their experience validated. Wendy said that her mom, a traditional homemaker, would have used the essay to explain to her daughters the rigid role expectations that limited her choices as a young woman. Mike said that his father would have refused to read beyond the first two paragraphs.

What, I asked, would Steinem have had to do to get Mike’s father to read further? Change her name. Start with facts, not personal stories. Walter Ong reminds us that “the fictionalizing of readers is what makes writing so difficult.” In this role-playing exercise, we project readers beyond the self, which allows us to examine the essay from multiple perspectives and consider its rhetorical effectiveness in terms of particular audiences. The trick was to free students from the social constraints of the classroom, allowing them to get beyond the veneer of consensus, freeing them to disagree and to respond to questions the teacher didn’t already have answers for. We were able to think about how a feminist could talk to a chauvinist. We could not have done this if the feminists and chauvinists in the class had been forced to defend their readings.

I agree with Coles and Wall that education should be a transforming experience. But I also believe it must be mutually transforming. It must expand my cultural awareness, give me ways of achieving greater rhetorical effectiveness. In discussions like the one described above, we share authority. Students and teachers expand their notion of possible responses. Stasis is upset, dissonance created, but because student integrity and self-esteem are not at stake, they are free to explore and free to be naive. Because students are

engaged in speculating on responses they do not “own,” they are free to deviate from the opinions they feel are privileged in the university classroom. Stepping out of their social roles to raise issues protects their integrity and at the same time helps them develop the flexibility of mind needed to revise their own writing for particular audiences.

In her most recent essay in *College English*, Bizzell argues for a rhetorical view of literacy. She agrees with E. D. Hirsh’s argument that a knowledge base is necessary for participation in discourse. Hirsh, however, offers to remedy the problem by having students learn *his* knowledge base, and he conveniently provides them with a five thousand word list. Bizzell reminds us that “knowledge is what ensues when rhetoric is successful” (149). Successful rhetoric requires investigating an audience’s values, interests, and social condition. Successful teachers are successful rhetoricians. In order to “persuade our students to participate in intellectual life with us,” we need to study their social context, their knowledge base. Bizzell follows the like of Piaget and Shaughnessy who suggest that students’ points of view should not be dismissed or destroyed but studied.

Maybe it is time to stop complaining that our students don’t know anything and admit that they don’t know what we know. Education, especially first-year English, may no longer work by a process of assimilation. In order for it to work at all, it may be necessary for teachers and students alike to engage in a process of mutual transformation.

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