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# The Neopragmatic Scene of Theory and Practice in Composition

Several months ago I was asked to respond to an interview between Gayatri Spivak and two composition theorists that appeared in the *Journal of Advanced Composition* (10:2, Fall 1990). I was impressed by Spivak's cogent and provocative ideas on the shifting status of the postmodern female subject, on the oppositional strategies of the marginal, and on other wide-ranging theoretical topics. I had to note, however, that the normally sophisticated level of her discourse slipped a notch when she responded to questions about writing across the curriculum by suggesting that teaching reading and writing in a content course seemed inappropriate. She also made reference to her strong "convictions" about the need for instruction in skills apart from content.

At first I used her remarks to say something obvious about the continuing asymmetrical power/knowledge arrangements in even progressive English departments that encourage a benign obliviousness to issues in composition studies by the left as well as the right, by the open as well as the closed. But later I started to wonder about my response to Spivak. Since even her syntax is an enactment of postmodern theory, I was puzzled by her resolutely practical perspective. Ironically, her responses to issues in composition seemed quite foundational, acontextual, and certainly free from the political, historical, and ideological assumptions and struggles of composition studies over the past twenty years. Standing outside a micro-historiography of the discipline, Spivak's response about skills is jarring to the professional ear. Her answer is pragmatic in the vulgar sense of a practice based on a commonsensical idea: that students will write better by learning how to vary syntax and employ transitions, by using subordination and coordination effectively; that they will improve their style by knowing restrictive from nonrestrictive clauses.

Within composition theory the worth of this approach does not seem so obvious. There is some doubt that it does any good at all. It was an idea without theoretical interest fifteen years ago. In fact, empirical research from the early part of the century by Rollo Lyman demonstrated that direct instruction in "skills" had no effect on writing ability. For the past decade it has been, among composition theorists, a kind of unspoken assumption that grammar, punctuation, and syntax are best learned in the context of real writing on an ad hoc basis, and that establishing a collaborative, literate environment, a workshop of committed readers and writers, was worth more than a dozen handbooks with their endless





entourage of tricolor overheads. But intelligent people outside the discipline of composition and rhetoric, including many deans and most journalists, persist in extolling the conventional wisdom that in writing classes one should eschew controversial ideas in favor of directly teaching syntax, logic, grammar, and style.

Admittedly, the absence of a compelling relationship between direct instruction and writing ability is slightly counterintuitive; consequently, it points to an interesting relationship between theory and practice within disciplines. The perspective from inside composition's interpretative community is illuminated (or blurred) by different variables than those outside its professional discourse. Spivak probably should not have been asked an insider's question since the point of interviewing her was her perspective as a deconstructive/feminist/marxist cultural critic. Any doctoral student in composition could have given a more informed response about teaching writing. I use the term *informed* here, realizing it is thoroughly problematic, especially in the face of the ongoing practice in American schools that still thinks of instruction in writing and math as synonymous—the goal for both being correctness, the preferred pedagogy: direct instruction and drill. Statistically, most writing teachers, K-13, are still doing business at the same stand they always have, regardless of the empirical research and certainly regardless of the scholarship produced by composition theorists. And yet somehow thousands of students subjected to a discredited skills-and-drills pedagogy still learn to write and think. "Informed," then, must necessarily refer to current thinking among perhaps ten percent of the discipline, those who are professionally active, or put another way, an interpretative community of a few thousand teachers willing to engage in the professional conversation, go to conventions, read the same journals and texts, sharing roughly similar philosophical and historical assumptions, privileging some ideas, marginalizing others, constructing, in other words, a common frame of reference, a discipline.

Like other professions, we have a number of influential discourses that prescribe what can be said and in what language. And, except for some cognitive-based approaches, most find the question of skills acquisition to be uninteresting. Much to the frustration and chagrin of our colleagues in other disciplines, the questions that many of us currently do find interesting revolve around the connections among discourse, knowledge, power, cognition, and subjectivity. Forget this irrelevant political activism they argue, do your job: make students write more clearly, more correctly.

Perhaps the source of the problem lies in the belief that compositionists concerned with race/gender/class have abandoned traditionally effective strategies for teaching writing, that our unproblematic and clearly delineated task is being recklessly cast off for a subversive, trendy flirtation with ideologies, and that we are *not* teaching writing at all. Looking from the outside-in, this makes some sense, but from the inside, of course, that is not the felt experience. It feels as if writing is at the very heart of what concerns us, that, in fact, we are enriching a previously

thin and anemic definition of what writing is, asking the same kinds of theoretical questions currently pursued in literature, history, philosophy, and anthropology. And, just as many theorists in these fields are not primarily interested in questions of pedagogy, many compositionists in 1991 are engaged with issues that inform but do not fully explain how to teach writing most effectively. There are no theories—in Stanley Fish's strong sense of a governing practice—that we can readily turn to, there are no foundational definitions, no transcultural, transhistorical constructs that can predict for us the consequences of this or that strategy. Within composition theory, effective teaching strategies are more complexly problematic than popularizing journalists would have it.

Instead of certainty, there is a large body of interdisciplinary knowledge about how discourse might work, how it privileges some and dominates others, how it constructs subjectivity, how it both reflects and shapes reality. Critical theory provides us with many of these ideas. Michel Foucault, Antonio Gramsci, Helene Cixous, Louis Althusser, and Kenneth Burke as well as Clifford Geertz, Stanley Fish, Richard Rorty, and Frank Lentricchia have all contributed to the ideological cast of recent musings on theory and practice. But not directly and not as theory in the strong sense, but rather indirectly, as in reinforcing and extending informed beliefs already existing in the minds and hearts of many composition theorists inside the professional beltway.

Let me try to ground my notion of a neopragmatic approach to theory and practice in a specific incident, the recent brouhaha at the University of Texas at Austin over the content of the first-year writing course. After the department voted something like 45-11, and the graduate assistants 52-2, in favor of readings with a thematic focus on gender and race, or more specifically, legal rulings on affirmative action cases, the dean postponed the new curriculum until the fall of 1991. Apparently, he was responding directly to pressure from professors in other disciplines who were upset for the usual reasons: We should teach writing and not something else, certainly not something controversial or political. But mostly he was responding to a well-organized campaign by the conservative National Association of Scholars—the same group Fish recently excoriated at Duke as racist, sexist, and homophobic. Through distortion and hyperbole, the course was labeled as an encroachment on academic freedom, as leftist indoctrination that would unfairly blame white males for many of the injustices in America. Their alternative, of course, was—like the perennial formalists' plea in literary studies—to return to the text, to focus on constructing well-formed sentences, to use logic and rhetoric.

If you wanted a graduate class in composition theory to begin to understand what is going on here, how would you proceed, what would they read, how would you try to frame the relationship between theory and practice? I posed just this problem to my introductory graduate seminar. Some students were impressed with the explanatory power of Fish's essay "Anti-Foundationalism, Theory-Hope and the Teaching of Composition," and with some essays from Richard Rorty's *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*, covering the same ground. They liked the neopragmatic idea that a foundational theory that would be invariant across contexts and that could stand apart from partisan and subjective concerns was implausible. Along with me, these students held that if there were a court case, no theory could be safely advanced by either side in the Texas debate that would provide firm ground on which to say this content or that will improve or retard writing ability; that focusing on difference at Texas, or discrimination at the University of Massachusetts, or sex, drugs, or rock and roll somewhere else will make students write better. Even this perspective, however, is thoroughly situated, since the more prevalent and commonsensical view in the university is that there must be rules or methods that could lead directly to more coherent, intelligible, readable, persuasive prose. Since it is a current assumption within composition studies that, as Robert Scholes claims, a naïve positivist epistemology "is lying in ruins around us," there is not much common ground on which even a benign dean at Texas could stand with compositionists (133). Of course, there is one small bit of collegial territory which they both should be able to occupy, but which will quickly disappear in the ensuing negotiations—and that is—that the writing program is being run by professionals, that this was a professional decision, that appropriate departmental processes were carried out, that detractors in physics and history can never know enough about current thinking in writing instruction to have an informed opinion about the logistics of *any* given writing course. Because of the nature of interpretive communities, however, the latter is unlikely to be the view of a dean situated not within composition studies but within an institutional landscape geared to minimize ideological conflict, promote surface harmony, and privilege administrative prerogative. The eventual decision about the first-year course will always be made on grounds much different than those Linda Brodkey, the former writing director, would have wanted. The contingencies the dean or chancellor must consider probably involve local and state politicians, other administrators, alumni, and national political and educational associations. The struggle between the composition director and the dean will be a struggle between differently situated values and assumptions, and so the tactic of getting back to the text, back to writing, cannot succeed; what constitutes the real text, and what real writing involves, will always be a matter of interpretation.



Obviously for Brodkey and for many others in the discipline, a responsible definition of writing goes beyond the conventions of inscription, beyond rhetorical competencies, to an analysis of argument as it is rhetorically enacted in real social issues, and finally, to the Deweyan belief that the purpose of education is to transform a flawed society. Within the profession this view of rhetoric is acceptable: there have certainly been critics, but no one is surprised by the perspective that as intellectuals working within cultural institutions we have a responsibility at least to analyze the discourse of our society. The idea has been circulating within composition for years, ever since the sixties, in fact, and certainly in scholarly

terms since Richard Ohmann's *English in America* in the late seventies. In the past half-dozen years or so, after Lentricchia's meditation on Burke, *Criticism and Social Change*, James Merod's *The Political Responsibility of the Critic*, dozens of books and essays by compositionists citing Gramsci, Foucault, and Paulo Freire, plus scores of readers with thematic emphases on race, gender, class, sexual orientation and ethnic consciousness, the notion of a curriculum that critically interrogates controversial issues must clearly be seen as within acceptable professional parameters.

Working from Fish's neopragmatic ideas, my graduate students reached just this conclusion. But again, what counts as a plausible pedagogical strategy and rationale within composition studies might not seem so appropriate elsewhere. Therefore, using theory in the weak sense—to suggest principles, assumptions, ideas and attitudes— we find ourselves compelled to judiciously construct our theories and to pragmatically enact our practice within institutions with a limited tolerance for ideological controversy and difference. In retrospect I wonder about how possible the idea of a writing curriculum based on difference within that particular department at Texas, and in that particular state actually was. It must surely be seen as a calculated risk. At the local level, the enactment of theory probably has to take into consideration the personalities of the potential antagonists as well as the long- and short-term goals you have set for yourself and for the department. Can one be more effective, for example, making incremental changes over several years? And how much pressure can the dean take, how much support is the department willing to give, how emotionally necessary is the political point being debated? And finally, will losing forever change one's ability to work comfortably again at the site of conflict?

In a letter to people in the profession by Patricia Bizzell and John Trimbur that supports Brodkey's curriculum, they assert that they share her belief "in the preeminence of the defense of social justice as a goal of liberal education." However, that is just the problem the NAS and the administration at Texas is concerned about. Answers to questions such as "What constitutes social justice?" or "What is the responsibility of intellectuals to confront controversial issues in their own classrooms?" will emanate from differently constructed realities, different interpretive exigencies. Is it fair that 50 percent of high school students in Texas are minorities and only 14 percent go to Austin? Does this reality impinge on your professional responsibilities? Your "yes or no" answer, in Fish's terms as well as in Rorty's, Eagleton's, and other antifoundational postmodernists, will come not from composition theories but from ethical beliefs we have both inherited and constructed for our professional identities. These beliefs are practically impossible to change, especially through rhetorical persuasion and especially if the power alignments are as asymmetrical as those between a professor and a dean.

The question I asked earlier—what would you have to know to understand what is happening at Texas—obviously requires more than a knowledge of com-



position theory or curriculum design: It forces us to confront basic questions about the function of disciplinary knowledge within the university; about the dynamics of power and decision-making when specific disciplines develop an agenda at odds with administrative vision; about how the very nature of a democratic institution becomes possible or problematic. What you would really have to know to grasp all of this is mindboggling, because, as way leads on to way, the interconnectedness of discourse/institution/power/society is, as Jonathan Culler says about context, "boundless." If we take the Texas situation as a representative anecdote, the very idea of a discrete apolitical theory and practice of composition seems absurd, for, as Foucault notes in *Discipline and Punish*, there is no knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations (123). It seems to me that Brodkey's ethical justification for dealing with difference becomes ironically self-evident in the intensity of the attack from her opposition. Her implicit Althussian point about all discourse being implicated in ideological struggle becomes dramatic and explicit when conservative journalists around the country contend that an inquiry into the social implications of difference in a writing course is injurious to the very foundations of the West, the very nature of objective knowledge in the university.

Indeed, this exact confrontation has always been at the heart of all our struggles in English departments over the nature of reading and writing, albeit in more subtle, less obtrusive ways. For decades oppositional reading and writing strategies have been marginalized to the very borders of respectability. The history of reading and writing within English departments, in fact, can easily be read as one long ideological struggle with a dominant discourse that is in harmony with the institutional and societal goals of producing cooperative and productive workers. Of course, the proposed writing course at Texas would probably still do just that, but even the possibility of some institutional support for a counterhegemonic gesture is enough for the Right to warn America that the attempt to develop critical consciousness in first-year writers is proof that the barbarians are within the gates, undermining structures, gnawing at foundations.

For an understanding of theory and practice from a neopragmatic perspective, we might turn to what Steven Mailloux calls rhetorical hermeneutics, an antifoundationalist argument that wants explanations of texts or events to be embedded in theories of power and subject positions, plus relevant critical debates and traditions within the discipline, as well as all the local ingredients I mentioned. In the case of Texas, these might also include the interconnected professional debates about difference, multicultural diversity, discrimination and the canon, and the long-standing debate about the function of reading and content in writing courses. Also to be considered, according to Mailloux's hermeneutic pragmatism, is a critique of the specific argument within "current cultural conversation, relevant social practices, and constraining material circumstances of its historical moment" (134).

Additionally, we might want to place this moment within an evolving social, economic, and political dynamic. All these are relevant concerns.

Finally, this contextual theory must exist in a dialectical relationship with the various evolving subject positions we inhabit in time and space. For example, I wonder if I would have been enthusiastic about difference as a curriculum focus fifteen years ago. Before composition's social turn, there were linguistic, cognitive, and process turns. As a novice member of the profession in 1976, I was eager to learn the current talk, and that did not, except in quiet closets, include difference. By being attuned to and part of the professional conversation, one's views will also dialectically evolve. Students, deans, and journalists at *Newsweek* often mistake this symbiotic relationship as mere fashion, as if there are, in fact, other kinds of disciplinary knowledge that are forever young. I doubt if journalists would write about current thinking in physics or biology as *fashionable*. From the subject position of the graduate student concerned about usable theories, the evolving or dynamically fragmentary nature of theory in composition must seem frustrating. What's the point of learning, say, cognitive psychology, classical rhetoric, or structural marxism if they're here today and gone tomorrow, if the disciplinary conversation can be counted on to take yet another turn? Stanley Fish cleverly suggests that every eighteen months professors in theory have to retool, looking again at familiar texts from unfamiliar perspectives, shifting from an anthropological cultural critique to a materialist new historicism, or in the context of composition from grammar to voice to modes to linguistics to sentence combining to cognitive rhetoric to process to social construction to ideology critique.

Instead of building a comfortable fort out of the theoretical tools of reading and writing that one acquired in graduate school and then tenaciously defending that territory against waves of sinister assistant professors until retirement, I am suggesting that an ongoing commitment to engage in theory talk will have more intellectually exciting consequences. What Fish calls the "ceaseless transformation of theory" will force your practice to be constantly challenged, constantly put in a dialectic with the profession's thinking. The life of the mind, as Mikhail Bakhtin suggests, exists only in relation to the other, in our continuous struggle to both confront and increase the surplus of meaning.

In the kind of neopragmatism I am urging for composition theory, I also want ethical principles other than those currently prescribed by dominant institutions to prevail. I think that Fish is wrong not to build a *telos* into his apolitical antifoundationalism. Beyond the proper institutional goal of having students write better, I want to echo Cornell West's neopragmatic emphasis on the materiality of language—such as the ways rhetoric can construct forms of rationality and subjectivity—*as* a potentially liberating project, not only because it evades transhistorical epistemologies, accentuates human powers, and tries to transform unjust social hierarchies, but also for its unashamedly ethical emphasis and its "unequivocally ameliorative impulse" (4). In *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, West writes that "in this world-weary period of pervasive cynicisms, nihilisms, terrorisms, and possible extermination," there is a yearning for principled resistance and struggle that can change our desperate plight" (4).

I take Brodkey's stance at Texas over writing about difference as an instance of principled resistance, one that should remind all of us of Kenneth Burke's belief that discourse is social action, that the shape of our theory and practice matters, and that our profession should prepare for more counterresistance from those hegemonists who would deny us our professional and ethical responsibilities.



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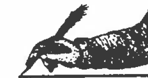

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