DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 358 483 CS 213 898

AUTHOR Powers-Stubbs, M. Karen
TITLE Metaphors of Revolution: Gendered Definitions of Education.
PUB DATE 93
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (44th, San Diego, CA, March 31-April 3, 1993).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Achievement Tests; College Students; *Educational Attitudes; *Essay Tests; Higher Education; Self Evaluation (Individuals); *Sex Differences; Social Values; *Student Attitudes; Student Characteristics; Writing Research; *Writing Tests
IDENTIFIERS Gender (Language); Miami University OH

ABSTRACT

A study examined the responses of 10 students taking Miami University's 1990 College Composition Proficiency Exam which asked students to evaluate their own learning experiences with teaching, learning, and knowledge in and out of school. Scores ranged from 2 to 12; all 10 of the examined essays received a score of 11. Five students were male, and five were female. The 10 students responded in gendered ways--even in the context of a structured writing task which is notorious for eliciting similar responses. One of the clearest patterns discernible in the essays was that women operate predominantly within a morality of care, while men operate within a morality of rights. The 10 essays can be positioned on a continuum, with the 5 essays written by females clustering on the end where the focus is on the human community, connections between people, and social responsibility; and the 5 essays written by males clustering on the end which focuses on individuality, autonomy, and achievement. Findings suggest that the students shaped the exam into their own ideological images, images influenced by social, historical, and political circumstances--including gender. (RS)

M. Karen Powers-Stubbs
Department of English
Miami University
Oxford, Ohio 45056

Metaphors of Revolution: Gendered Definitions of Education

M. Karen Powers-Stubbs
Department of English
Miami University
Oxford, Ohio 45056

Metaphors of Revolution:
Gendered Definitions of Education

Assessment researcher Ed White was surely right when he said that test questions about education "invariably call forth stock responses" (113) or elicit answers which "fail to move beyond the recitation of cliches" (114). 937 students took Miami University's 1990 College Composition Proficiency Exam which asked students to evaluate their own learning experiences with teaching, learning, and knowledge in and out of school. One student said simply, "I'm sorry, I just can't do this," while the other 936 wrote variations of those notorious cliches that White has apparently encountered all too often. In this instance, the recurring cliche was a call for revolutionizing the educational system so that it strikes a better balance between factuality and creativity.

Narrowing my data to ten essays which received nearly perfect scores, I formulated a research question which asked: In the context of a proficiency exam which instructs students to reflect on their own educational experiences and consider the philosophies of others, what do these ten students, especially as gendered subjects, think about issues of teaching, learning, and knowledge? And, how might those students' opinions and strategies for communicating those opinions reflect gendered "ways of knowing," to borrow Belenky et al.'s well-known phrase.

Rather than sort through 937 proficiency exams searching for particular ones which would illustrate characteristic patterns of male and female student writing, I analyzed all of the essays which received an eleven on a scale of two to twelve. I chose those essays because I thought it likely that the students who received high scores would be among the most articulate in discussing their beliefs about teaching and learning. And, simply and fortuitously, five students who scored an 11 are female and five are male.

I make no claim that the ten students whose essays I analyzed constitute a truly representative sampling, in the positivist sense, of men's and women's "ways of knowing." Yet, I argue that it doesn't necessarily follow that these ten students have nothing of value to say about the ways students conceive of education. For the purpose of this study, these ten students' responses to this particular exam offer valuable perspectives on teaching, learning, and knowing--perspectives which I argue are clearly marked by gender. I also argue that these texts suggest that the students' very definitions of education are gender-inflected.

On one level, these ten essays are so similar that they confirm White's assertion. If the students' essays are broadly categorized as well-written, if predictable, critiques of formal education, the essays support the argument that these women and men read, write, and think very similarly. But precisely because this type of writing prompt is documented as one that most often elicits predictable responses, it is especially valuable for an examination of gender differences. In other words, if

writing prompts focusing on education generally elicit standard answers from most students, and, if there are discernible differences in these ten essays, the case for the influence of gender is stronger. Elizabeth Flynn used student narratives produced in a first-year writing course to claim that, for the males and females in her study, "writing strategies and patterns of representation do differ" (432). My research suggests that the ten students in my study also responded in gendered ways--even in the context of a more structured writing task which is notorious for eliciting similar responses.

Using theories espoused by feminist researchers in psychology (Chodorow, Belenky et al., and Gilligan) and in composition (Flynn) as an interpretive framework, I read the ten essays with a gender question in mind. A close look at them through the lens of gender suggests just how profoundly the differences in the students' responses complicate what seem to be, at first glance, overwhelming similarities. If the similarities are temporarily set aside, perspectives and assumptions which underlie the students' arguments emerge and point to differences that appear related to gendered "moralities," as Carol Gilligan terms them. One of the clearest patterns discernible in the students' essays brings to mind Gilligan's supposition that women operate predominantly within a morality of care, while men operate within a morality of rights.

The feminine style, which parallels the female voice described by Gilligan, focuses on relationships, cooperation, and responsibility. For the most part, the women criticize the educational system because they believe the system fails to adequately consider the human community, connections between people, and social responsibility. On the other hand, the shared stance adopted by the males seems to emerge from a masculine style which focuses on individuality, autonomy, and achievement. Overwhelmingly, the men criticize the American educational system because they feel that the system denies the rights of individuals, strips them of their autonomy, and hampers their achievements.

While the presentation format prevents me from detailing here the many gendered themes embedded in the students' responses, I can delineate one clear pattern. I want to caution at this point, though, that I am positioning these ten essays on a continuum of difference rather than categorizing them as unequivocally male or female. Studies which focus on gender cannot easily avoid binaries; yet, it is important to recognize that constructing a male/female binary camouflages the complexity of symbolic systems. That strategy also fails to recognize that other social differences complicate divisions predicated on gender alone. In other words, pitting what we perceive to be female against what we perceive to be male erases the "in-between" (Poovey). While not one of these essays could be absolutely labeled either autonomous or connected, regardless of the writer's gender, I am convinced that the women in this study responded in female-typical ways, and the men responded in male-typical ways.

I will start with the two essays which are most different, and I will rely on them to position the other eight essays. Katy's and Roger's essays most strikingly illustrate Gilligan's generalization that men tend to be concerned with an ethic of rights while women are more likely to be committed to an ethic of care. The other students fit somewhere between Katy and Roger, with the women clustering toward Katy's end of the continuum and the men joining Roger at the other end.

Let me begin with Katy. That the ethic of care informs Katy's essay is immediately noticeable. Even her opening strategy predicts her focus on the human community and social responsibility. She begins by invoking the Biblical prophecy, "There will be wars and rumors of wars for all time," and moves to her assertion, "This statement represents the grim truth, for it is nearly impossible to indicate a time in history when cruelty and hatred are completely absent from the face of humanity." In contrast, an ethic of rights frames Roger's essay. One of his most salient characteristics is that he centers himself and focuses on rights and individuality. He begins by writing, "When I think about my education I feel somewhat cheated. It is not because I have not been taught. It is because I feel I could have been taught more." Katy also finds the educational system "gravid with inadequacies," as she puts it, but for a markedly different reason. Like Roger, she writes a personal narrative to explain her dissatisfaction with her own educational experience. Yet, from the first sentence, Katy positions herself differently. In contrast to Roger, who stresses the autonomy and rights of individuals, Katy sees herself as one person who is inextricably linked to the larger community and as one person whose primary concern is that larger community.

A more detailed examination of Roger's essay illustrates just how strongly he commits himself to an ethic of rights. Summing up his entire high school experience, Roger remarks, "All through high school I had three feelings: boredom, fear, and a hunger." As Roger explains it, his dissatisfaction arises from the failure of both his parents and his teachers to understand and respond to his individual rights. He uses the revolution in Tiananmen Square to explain his contention that the educational system alienates and subjugates individuals. Rather than regarding the revolt as an example of a social problem in need of creative solution, Roger sees it, in a rather distanced, clinical sort of way, as "one of the most interesting educational incidents of the decade." In fact, his interest in the revolt pivots entirely on his right to know "what was happening in the world." And since Roger's teachers "only teach what is on their curriculum," Roger fails to achieve at his anticipated level. Thus, he concludes, "I could've been taught more."

But Roger is not as solipsistic as he first appears. On the contrary, he argues for the rights of all individuals. The "boredom, fear, and hunger" Roger mentions are his own feelings, but they are also "feelings that should not be felt by a student." Roger's wording suggests that his assertions apply to students in general. And he goes on to argue that the practice of requiring all students to take a core curriculum is coercive and potentially harmful. Using "intimidation," as he terms it, such as threatening students that they will fail to be accepted at a good college or get a good job if they make poor grades, teachers "force kids to learn all the useless facts. Make artists do chemistry experiments. Make future historians do calculas [sic] problems." Roger argues just as passionately for the prerogative of others to pursue their individual agendas as he argues for his own. While artists, chemists, historians, and mathematicians coexist in a communal society, in Roger's view, each person is a unique, autonomous individual whose primary right entails noninterference by others.

Katy is as passionately committed to educational reform as Roger, but Katy's concern is quite different. She does not care so much about individuals; rather, she feels that the educational system has failed to respond to the social problems of the "global community," a recurring phrase in Katy's essay. Katy holds the present system

responsible for the "many global and social problems, such as war, racism, and the shocking apathy toward the condition of the environment." In marked contrast to Roger, Katy is concerned that "children are required to memorize facts and ignore emotions, " not because that method is particularly injurious to individuals, but because it is detrimental to that "global community." Katy's different consciousness is exemplified in her statement that "by stifling the creativity and individuality of a child, advancement of any type, either technological, social, or otherwise, comes to a screeching halt, leaving the globe to wallow in its current state of disaster."

Coincidentally, Katy also refers to a sociopolitical revolution. Yet, Katy invokes her classroom discussion of the French Revolution to support her contention that the educational system perpetuates "a shocking lack of acceptance of differences among people and understanding of others' plights and struggles." Rather than concentrating on "a discussion of how the paysans felt ... during the French Revolution as duty compelled them to murder their compatriots," Katy's teachers focused on "memorizing a time line of events following the storming of the Bastille." Like Roger, Katy uses a revolution as an example to illustrate the educational system's inadequacies. Remember, though, that Roger saw Tiananmen Square as "an interesting educational incident." Katy sees the French Revolution as an event worth studying because it provides some insight into conflicts which threaten human connections. Roger claims that the system fails individuals, and Katy claims that the system fails the human community--two very different perspectives.

Gilligan maintains that many women operate under "an injunction to care, a responsibility to discern and alleviate the 'real and recognizable trouble' of this world" (100). That Katy is operating under this injunction to care is evident. Roger more clearly fits Gilligan's observation that "For men, the moral imperative ... appears as an injunction to respect the rights of others and thus to protect from interference the rights to life and self-fulfillment" (100). These different moralities prompt Katy and Roger to define the mission of education differently. Roger rails against a system which denies individuals the right to learn according to individual proclivity. From his position, he sees education as the means to improve oneself. Katy, on the other hand, argues for a system which promotes connectedness. She sees education as the means through which social problems can be redressed.

Certainly, it isn't remarkable that two students such as Katy and Roger have different ideas about the mission of education. What is more interesting is that the differences between Roger and Katy extend to describe the other eight students, for the women have much in common with Katy and the men closely resemble Roger. Time allows for only a only a glimpse of that gender split.

Donna, for instance, is a nontraditional student who relies on her experience as a registered nurse to support her argument for educational reform. Like Roger, she recounts her struggle against institutional hierarchies. But Donna's strong sense of social responsibility fuels her anger at the system. She does not mention personal injustice at all. Instead, her anger emerges from her dedication to her patients. She is an advocate for their rights, not her own.

Rebecca and Sarah both construct classroom communities as microcosms of the larger social order. Rebecca is actively engaged in nurturing connections between people in her depiction of a utopian classroom. She describes the network of students

who are so involved in discussion that they ignore the bell which signals an unwelcome dissolution of the community bond. Rebecca also praises the exemplary teacher of this class for his ability to promote discussion and affiliation and lead the students in the formation of community.

Sarah depicts a classroom antithetic to Rebecca's. And she criticizes her teacher, her classmates, and herself for her classroom community's failure to build a network in which the teacher and all students--especially the German-speaking girl they shun--connect and collaborate to construct knowledge. She talks of ruptured relationships which diminish learning and even result in violence.

Marsha structures her essay around her belief that learning requires interaction with other people. She sees as the educational system's primary responsibility the bringing together of people from diverse backgrounds so that social problems can be resolved. Michael stands in direct contrast to Marsha. Like Roger, he argues for an individual agenda and claims that "Everybody must learn on their [sic] own." Also like Roger, both Michael and Charles focus on separating and differentiating themselves from others. Individualistic metaphors abound in Charles' profile of himself as he confronts personal flaws and educational challenges entirely alone. He ultimately triumphs through his own resourcefulness and determination.

Sam experiences an epiphany which convinces him that he can define knowledge for himself. He learns to navigate through a system which he finds inhospitable to individuals and proclaims, "I can find answers for myself." Scott resembles the other men in his concern with a system which promotes the same definition of success for every individual, as if students are somehow homogeneous.

As the women see it, knowledge is negotiated and jointly constructed. The student's role is to collaborate with the teacher and other students for the benefit of the community. They state their need for interaction with others in order to learn. The men hold firmly to the notion that the role of the individual is to respect the rights of other individuals by not interfering with one another's learning processes. The men assume that knowledge is constructed or discovered by the individual.

Like a growing number of composition researchers, I am convinced that we need to consider gender differences in every facet of student education, including writing assessment. It strikes me as curious that we seem reluctant to consider gender differences in the context of assessment. As Linda Brodkey points out:

> Just as literary critics have sought to decontextualize literature from the social, historical, and political circumstances of production, most composition research on testing and evaluation decontextualizes writing by presuming there to be no significant effect on writing performance that could not, say, be traced to the "prompt" or the circumstances of testing--on the assumption that all students are asked to write in response to the same question under essentially the same testing conditions. (96).

The ten students in this study did indeed take the same exam in the sense that they responded to the same writing prompt under the same testing conditions. In another sense, these five women took a different exam than these five men. What I mean is that these students shaped the exam into their own ideological images, images

influenced by social, historical, and political circumstances--including gender. These are circumstances we generally do not consider when we formulate proficiency exam questions and score those exams. Perhaps we need to ask ourselves what it means when we so blithely and so carefully code exams in order to obliterate a student's race, class, gender, and nationality, as well as other markers of social difference. What does it mean when we assume that we can score "objectively" only if we disregard the student's intextricable connections to social realms beyond the classroom?

Works Cited

Belenky, Mary Field, et al. Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind. New York: Basic Books, 1986.

Brodkey, Linda. Academic Writing as Social Practice. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1987.

Chodorow, Nancy. The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender. Berkeley: U of California P, 1978.

Flynn, Elizabeth. "Composing as a Woman." College Composition and Communication. 39 (1988): 423-435.

Gilligan, Carol. In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1982.

Poovey, Mary. "Feminism and Deconstruction." Feminist Studies. 14 (1988): 51-65.

White, Edward. Teaching and Assessing Writing. San Francisco: Jossey, 1985.