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ABSTRACT

James Berlin has identified three common ideological approaches in rhetoric in composition courses crucial to an understanding of how collaborative learning works in writing courses: the expressivist, cognitivist, and social-epistemic. One of the primary distinctions among these rhetorics is how the subject is perceived. In an expressionist or cognitive rhetoric, the subject is always autonomous, but in a social-epistemic rhetoric, the constructedness of the subject by social, political, and economic elements is acknowledged. The role of collaboration in a composition classroom too often may work to enforce a dominant ideology rather than question it. Even in a course driven by social-epistemic rhetoric, in which every activity that takes place is theoretically collaborative in nature, conformity and consensus to master social forces can keep recognition of diversity and multiplicity from taking place. However, this is not to say that traditional collaborative activities should not be allowed. The nature of these activities allows for the de-centering of the classroom, a first and primary step in empowering students to be aware of their own conflicting subjectivity. The very act of collaboration in expressionist and cognitivist classrooms gives the students the opportunity to resist the ideology of those rhetorics. (TB)

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### The Role of Dissent in Current Composition Theories: Implications for Collaboration

Diversity and pluralism have become catchwords in composition studies; the study of diversity, that is, the study of multiculturalism, has been forwarded as the new, better way to develop critical thinking and analytical abilities, as well as better writing skills, for our students. The theme for this year's CCCC, "Common Concerns, Uncommon Realities: Teaching, Research, and Scholarship in a Complex World," revolves around this issue.

How the teaching of this acknowledgment of difference proceeds deserves attention. Quite often, collaborative activities are instituted in a classroom, because it is assumed that such direct exposure to other students of different backgrounds, races, and culture will in and of itself cause the students to come to some sort of understanding (whether appreciation or disdain) of difference. But does collaboration actually enable this exploration of difference? How is it really being used? Are dissenting voices allowed to have a voice? The answer is complex, because the implications for collaboration depend on the approach taken to ideology in the classroom.

Berlin has identified three common ideological approaches in rhetoric in composition courses: the expressivist, cognitivist, and social-epistemic (see "Rhetoric and Ideology"). One of the primary distinctions between these rhetorics is how the subject is perceived. In an expressionist or cognitive rhetoric, the subject is always autonomous, but in a social-epistemic rhetoric, the constructedness of the subject by social, political, and economic elements is acknowledged.

In a recent article, "Poststructuralism, Cultural Studies, and the Composition Classroom: Postmodern Theory in Practice," Berlin reviews these conceptions of subjectivity. From the perspective of liberal humanism, "the subject is a transcendent consciousness that functions unencumbered by social and material conditions of experience, acting as a free and rational agent who adjudicates competing claims for action;" in postmodern terms, however, the subject is a

ED 371 349

CS214342



product of social and material conditions (18). The positioning of the subject therefore has implications for the success of or perspective on collaboration; how the subject is defined and whether or not the individual has a sense of agency affects how the instructor sets up collaboration and what then happens or is expected to happen.

Before I begin to explore the effectiveness of collaboration in developing awareness of difference in these different types of rhetorics, I would like to discuss what I mean by the terms dissent and difference. On purpose I use the terms very broadly, because as I will discuss in the following sections, dissent/difference will have different characterizations according to the rhetoric in question. Dissent could concern either the writing, exemplified as a comment from a peer editor that remarks on a different way to organize a paper, or more drastically, a voice that says a paper is no good; these kind of remarks on the writing at hand are based on one person disagreeing that the writer has met standards for the writing, though where these criteria come from and whose criteria are being used may differ. Dissent could also be about the group process, taking the form of dissent among the ranks, that is, interference with decision-making, either within student groups or against the instructor. Both of these types of dissent are differences of opinion; however, what is not usually questioned is how the opinions are formed or in what specific social factors they have a basis.

Contrasting with this is a form of dissent or difference which is the acknowledgment of social/economic/political/cultural differences and the recognition that the voices that come along with those different personal contexts will not harmonize into a single given reality or truth. This type of difference may be recognized on a student-to-student basis, or, given a more postmodern view of subjectivity, difference within a student may be a topic of analysis, as the student becomes aware of the many social factors influencing her and the various discourse communities of which she is a part. The analysis of how collaboration manifests within different rhetorics can aid in demonstrating these distinctions of dissent and difference.

### Collaboration and Conformity in Expressionist Rhetoric

Expressionist rhetoric has been described as holding a view of the subject that, while it acknowledges that the social exists, confirms the individual's power over everything social. As Berlin notes, "For this rhetoric, the existent is located within the individual. While the reality of the material, the social, and the linguistic are never denied, they are considered only insofar as they serve the needs of the individual" ("Rhetoric and Ideology" 484). Writing, according to this perspective, is an act of creativity of genius, in which an individual is able to express the truth she finds inside; the most important aspect of any writing that is "genuine" is "the presence of originality in expression" (485).

Given this stance, what are the purposes of collaboration in the classroom? Elbow was one of the first to widely use groups, even though at first it would seem that they are antithetical to his purposes. It would be expected that differences of opinion among writers would be the norm, because each writer would be unique and have her own sense of personal truth to be expressed in the writing. If "The community's right to exist, however, stands only insofar as it serves all of its members as individuals" (486), then collaborative activities are used only to validate individual efforts, not to inform them. So when small groups are organized in a class, what happens when students holding different ideological perspectives and positions get together? They are placed in a position in which they hold a common purpose, that is, to establish what the class, the instructor, and university hold to be good writing. They must establish some type of common view, a consensus, of what is good given the specific setting and time that they are writing in. Myers gives the example that Elbow's own power and voice are determined not so much by what he says in his writing, but by its positioning within the body of composition discourse, within the social arena (165).

According to Myers, the sort of rhetoric that Elbow, as well as Bruffee and Leonard, use to teach in the classroom has two basic appeals, to "the authority of consensus" and to "the authority of reality" (155), both of which serve as elements of a dominant ideology. Berlin details this further in "Composition Studies and Cultural Studies: Collapsing Boundaries," analyzing

expressionism within its historical context: because expressionistic rhetoric developed in resistance to "the horrors of capitalism" (104), it is "radically democratic, opposing dominant class, race, and gender divisions in the interests of equality" (105). While it was intended as a reaction against a dominant form, it has instead developed one of its own, one of "quietism and the acceptance of defeat, self-help therapeutic ministrations in response to a world gone wrong" (106). Even though, as Berlin writes, both social constructionist and expressionist rhetorics claim an ability to critique and resist imposed ideologies, neither of them in their current incarnations are able to do so (103).

### Cognitivist Rhetoric and Rational Dissent

Cognitivist rhetorics also hold to an ideology of the individual, although in an opposite manner than that of the expressionists. While the expressionists privilege poetic discourse, cognitivists privilege the rational; the writing process centers on problem-solving and goal-setting. "Obstacles to achieving these goals are labeled 'problems,' disruptions in the natural order, impediments that must be removed" (Berlin, "Rhetoric" 482). Given this approach in a classroom, collaboration may be used as a check for one's logic and objective writing abilities. A peer group would serve to point out errors that lie in the path of meeting the criteria; these comments would not be seen as dissent but as a method of attaining identification, consensus, with the goals. Dissent could also occur either in the writing itself, when it is deviant from the standards, or when a student's critique deviates. Dissent of this type would create more problems, rather than lead to a problem's smooth solution. If a voice of dissent is not rational, it is ignored.

While it would seem that collaboration's role in a cognitive rhetoric would best fit in at the end, again in the form of peer group members checking the rationality of each other's final products, such groups may also be used throughout the writing process, in order to both inspect progress and to stimulate an individual's thought. The role of collaboration in the planning process has been questioned and researched by Higgins, et al., in order to see if it enhanced critical reflection, which they define as "a particular act of metacognition in which individuals

engage in evaluative thinking," on the part of individuals (49). They found that collaboration did not necessarily cause reflection (80), which calls into question the use of collaboration within a cognitivist framework altogether. If collaboration cannot be shown to be an efficient use of an individual's time, if it does not aid the individual in coming to cognition in less time and with less difficulty, then it is an impediment and should not be used.

It can be argued that while the focus in cognitive rhetoric is on the individual's mental processes, these processes function based on a standard. That standard is established by the dominant social ideology. According to Berlin, cognitive rhetoric "encourages discursive practices that are compatible with dominant economic, social, and political formations" ("Rhetoric" 478), not in conflict with them. Differences of class or culture among students would as a matter of course be silenced, because any type of difference that did not conform to the dominant standard would create problems. These differences are not seen as an influence on reality, because there is one objective reality. Stewart calls into question the use of collaboration because of this. He feels that collaborative learning "didn't change what students learned; it changed the social context in which they learned it" (60). Here he assumes that context has no effect on knowledge; what is learned is separate from the social conditions in which it is learned.

Social-epistemic rhetorics, on the other hand, attempt to remain aware of their own ideology and analyze the social elements that are continually in flux. Berlin defines these rhetorics as sharing "a notion of rhetoric as a political act involving a dialectical interaction engaging the material, the social, and the individual writer, with language as the agency of mediation. Their positions, furthermore, include an historicist orientation, . . . and this feature in turn makes possible reflexivity and revision as the inherently ideological nature of rhetoric is continually acknowledged" (Berlin, "Rhetoric and Ideology" 488). The subject is always viewed as a construction, in contrast to the autonomous subjects forwarded in expressionistic and cognitive rhetoric.

### Social Rhetorics: Collaboration and the Danger of Conformity

This awareness of the conflicted individual marks an especial difference between social-epistemic rhetoric and social constructionist rhetoric. Social construction admits the influences of the social on the individual but does not offer any points on which to critique that influence. According to both Myers and Trimbur, the collaborative learning model that Bruffee develops as the heart of social construction is based on a conversation with the social that internalizes only the dominant social order, taking consensus as its only purpose. Myers' critique of Bruffee is based on the fact that once Bruffee acknowledged that consensus is the primary object of social construction, he left it at that, accepting that consensus is the only path.

Consensus would then be the primary mode of operation within collaborative groups in a social constructionist classroom, as well as within the classroom as a whole. Both Trimbur and Myers argue strongly for action against the passive conformity that consensus brings. Trimbur agrees with Myers in saying "we need to see consensus in terms of differences and not just of agreements" (608), offering a theory of dissensus in its place.

Berlin summarizes the differences between social construction and social epistemic rhetorics in "Composition Studies and Cultural Studies," developing further distinctions than were present in "Rhetoric and Ideology." Here he notes that social construction does not let go of the autonomous individual, even though it attempts to give emphasis to social influences. Other distinguishing factors include that social construction has no interest in critiquing the economic; in fronting consensus with no means to critique it, it maintains an "innocence about power;" and it attempts to maintain a rational, objective view of discourse, a universal discourse that is somehow better than others (107).

The danger in the classroom that tries to discuss social influence, especially in the collaborative groups of students that may be formed, is that the discussion not lapse into the social constructionist perspective that Berlin outlines. When the dominant ideology is continually reaffirmed, students will never feel the sense of empowerment that a awareness and critique of social, political, and economic factors can bring; instead, they "begin to see the economic and

social system that renders them powerless as an innate and unchangeable feature of the natural order. They become convinced that change is impossible, and they support the very practices that victimize them—complying in their alienation from their work, their peers, and their very selves" (Berlin, "Rhetoric and Ideology" 490).

Collaborative activities can aid in the acknowledgement of the dominant ideological system and the time and context of the system if the students are encouraged to analyze all angles. This is difficult because students do not want to see themselves as fragmented, as members of many discourse communities and ideological systems. If the encouragement to question is missing, then rather than critique the system, the students will reinforce it among themselves. They would rather feel a sense of comfort and security than chaos. In collaborative situations, students must work to avoid the easier option of not questioning, and they should be careful to not only analyze the greater system but their group's own method of operation as well.

Because it appears that the priority of cultural studies is to critique and gain awareness of communities rather than seek entrance into them, pedagogy must work to enable this. Critical democratic pedagogy, a liberatory pedagogy with a goal of enabling change, can aid in the cultural studies project. For example, the pedagogy that Shor describes in *Empowering Education* holds participation as its basis. Its strategy of problem-posing begins with the student's point of view and puts knowledge into critical life contexts. By virtue of starting with the individual and the critical, there is potential for starting with dissent rather than beginning by working towards common goals of understanding, of consensus. There is still, however, a potential danger in this empowering pedagogy's activist agenda negatively impacting collaboration, should vocal majorities silence some group members.

#### **Ensuring Collaboration's Potential**

The role of collaboration in a composition classroom too often may work to enforce a dominant ideology rather than question it. Even in a course driven by social-epistemic rhetoric, in which every activity that takes place is theoretically collaborative in nature, conformity and consensus to master social forces can keep recognition of diversity and multiplicity from taking



place. However, this is not to say that traditional collaborative activities should not be allowed. The nature of these activities allows for the de-centering of the classroom, a first and primary step in empowering students to be aware of their own conflicting subjectivity. The very act of collaboration in expressionist and cognitivist classrooms gives the student the opportunity to resist the ideology of those rhetorics.

The composition classroom cannot escape from ideology, as it is a part of an ideological system itself. Berlin advocates that "the student/ teacher relation will be marked by a democratic dialogue that is by moments both collaborative and disputatious" ("Literacy, Pedagogy" 13). I would add that this "collaborative and disputatious" interaction should not be relegated to the student/ teacher relationship but should be encouraged between students as well, in all collaborative forms, in peer groups, in writing collaborative documents, and in whole class discussion.

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