DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 392 042 CS 215 188

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TITLE Teaching Composition as Cultural Studies: Pedagogy in the Aporia between Modern Harmony and Postmodern Discord.
PUB DATE 29 Dec 95
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Modern Language Association (Chicago, IL, December 27-30, 1995).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Critical Reading; Cultural Awareness; Higher Education; Modernism; *Popular Culture; *Self Concept; *Writing Assignments; *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS *Cultural Studies; Discourse Communities; *Identity (Psychological); Postmodernism; Rap Music; Social Constructivism

ABSTRACT

Recent discussions of teaching composition in the context of cultural studies have begun to consider the condition of the writing subject in society, yet these discussions construct student-writer S(s)ubject(ivitie)s at the poles of modernist-identity and postmodern-difference binary opposition that is politically problematic. The identity of the modernist Subject is defined in terms of its objective relationship to reality and its opposition to "Other" (different) subjects, and the construction of the modernist Subject is an effect of ethnocentric formulations of identity in opposition to difference. But modernist objective identity and postmodern undecidable difference are both theoretical illusions. Through cultural studies, however, scholars can realize the dialectical relationship between identity and difference in the practice of lived culture, and a cultural studies approach to teaching writing encourages student writers to construct subject positions in the aporia between this modernist-identity and postmodern-difference opposition. For instance, in a composition class students examine the banning of 2 Live Crew's album "As Nasty as They Wanna Be" in a federal district court in Florida. Students are asked to write a position statement on two essays that represent competing views of the 2 Live Crew controversy, one by Jon Pareles and one by George Will. Excerpts from student essays demonstrate the spirit of negotiation and the construction of subject positions. (Contains 4 notes and 11 references.) (TB)

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MLA Convention
Hyatt Regency Chicago
29 December 1995

Teaching Composition as Cultural Studies: Pedagogy in the Aporia Between Modern Harmony and Postmodern Discord

Recent discussions of teaching composition in the context of cultural studies have begun to consider the condition of the writing subject in society, yet these discussions construct student-writer S(s)ubject(ivitie)s at the poles of a **modernist-identity** and **postmodern-difference** binary opposition that is politically problematic. The identity of the modernist Subject is defined in terms of its objective relationship to reality and its opposition to "Other" (different) subjects, and the construction of the modernist Subject is an effect of ethno-centric formulations of identity in opposition to difference.[1] In Donald Lazere's pedagogy for "Teaching the Political Conflicts," for example, we find a desire to create objective student-Subjects with pure minds (uncontaminated by debilitating cultural biases) passing judgment over arguments advanced by "Other," different author-subjects. Postmodern subjectivities, on the other hand, are the free-flowing products of language, of random intersections in the infinite play of signification, and they are indefinable in their relationship to the semiotics of difference. In Lester Faigley's computerized composition classroom, for example, we see postmodern fluid subjectivities so engulfed by linguistic différance that they form what he calls an "achieved utopia" in which cultural difference disappears. I argue, however, that modernist objective identity and postmodern undecidable difference are both theoretical illusions, and I agree with Stuart Hall that through cultural studies we can realize the dialectical relationship between identity and difference in the practice of lived culture. In this too brief talk, I will work toward a cultural studies approach to teaching writing that encourages student writers to construct subject positions in the aporia between this modernist-identity and postmodern-difference opposition.

A few recent cultural theorists (Michel Foucault, Stuart Hall, Jacques Derrida) do not view "identity" and "difference" as oppositional terms; instead, they construct "identity and difference" as a complimentary pair, as an alliance rather than an opposition. In his most recent writings, Derrida

critiques the autonomous identity of the modernist Subject **and** the wandering in-difference of postmodern subjectivities, positing in their place a space in the aporia between identity and difference. Derrida objects to the closure of the modernist metaphysical Subject that does not account for trace and différance, and he argues that we should discover our own subjective identities in the very difference that once constituted the modernist "Other," thus destroying in the process the oppositional character of identity and difference and opening an aporia between them for cultural and rhetorical practices. In The Other Heading, his recent attempt to account for the collapse of Eastern European Communism, Derrida critiques the modernist-identity and postmodern-difference opposition which, he argues, leads inevitably to physical and metaphysical violence. Here Derrida presents a paradox which he believes points toward an answer to the problems facing Europe in the final decade of the twentieth century: "on the one hand," Derrida argues, "European cultural identity . . . cannot and must not be dispersed into a myriad of provinces, into a multiplicity of self-enclosed idioms or petty little nationalisms, each one jealous and untranslatable." But "on the other hand, it cannot and must not accept the capital of a centralizing authority that, by means of trans-European cultural mechanisms, by means of publishing, journalistic, and academic concentrations--be they state-run or not--would control and standardize, subjecting artistic discourses and practices to a grid of intelligibility, to philosophical or aesthetic norms, to channels of immediate and efficient communication, to the pursuit of ratings and commercial profitability" (38-39).

Modernist and postmodern thought frame this paradox as an unresolvable contradiction; however, I believe with Derrida (and with Foucault and Hall) that the paradox has an aporia that can be articulated and negotiated rhetorically. As Derrida points out, "Responsibility seems to consist today in renouncing neither of these two contradictory imperatives. One must therefore try to invent gestures, discourses, politico-institutional practices that inscribe the alliance of these two imperatives" (44). Derrida's critique of the modernist-identity and postmodern-difference opposition problematizes much of the social theory drawn upon in cultural studies composition pedagogies. The rhetorical US/them violence that has led to real violence in Eastern Europe should not be encouraged in courses directed toward developing critical social consciousness in our composition

students. But the difficult question is a pedagogical one: How can we **teach** students to avoid the binary logic of the identity/difference opposition in their critical writing about culture?

When we teach students to read cultural texts through binary terministic screens, we limit their abilities to negotiate these texts. Composition pedagogies instead should encourage in students a certain cultural initiative in their understanding and use of texts, a cultural initiative that is diminished by binary politics. During the first few weeks of each composition course I teach, my students write what I call "position statements." These brief assignments introduce students to the critical reading and writing strategies they will need in the rest of the course, a cultural studies composition class focusing on school, work, and advertising as critical contexts for reading and writing.[2] It is my goal to help students move beyond the identity/difference opposition that only encourages accommodation or resistance; it is my goal to help them **negotiate** cultural artifacts and social institutions. Negotiation, however, requires that students learn critical reading strategies that most are simply unfamiliar with when they enter college.

During the first week of classes, I describe the position statement assignment to students using the following guide (which I have also reproduced on the handout):

> Throughout this course, you will write several "position statements"--short writing experiences designed to help you develop critical reading strategies--in response to assigned texts that argue competing sides of a cultural issue. Each position statement requires you to critique the assigned articles from your own perspective, accommodating and acknowledging good ideas (and explaining why they are good), resisting and rejecting bad ideas (and explaining why they are bad), and--most importantly--negotiating and revising ideas (and explaining how they might best be revised), referring always to your own cultural experiences.
>
> Accommodation and resistance in position statements only require us to state our agreement or disagreement with the ideas that are already present in the assigned texts. But negotiation, a far more valuable critical reading strategy, requires us to establish our own position in the middle ground among competing texts. In other words, when we negotiate assigned texts, we articulate the points of intersection among both the texts themselves and our own cultural experiences. In order to discover these points of intersection, though, we must do more than simply read to ascertain the content of the assigned essays; we must read instead to understand their lives as texts--their spirit, their politics, their history, their investments--and how their lives as texts intersect with our own lives as readers.

The instructions are theoretical and intentionally so, until we move into our first concrete context for critical reading and writing.

Our first context centers on rap music, in particular the banning of 2 Live Crew's album As Nasty as They Wanna Be by Judge Jose Gonzalez in a federal district court in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida. Students are asked to write a position statement on two essays that represent competing views of the 2 Live Crew controversy: "Rap: Slick, Violent, Nasty, and, Maybe, Hopeful" by Jon Pareles and "America's Slide into the Sewer" by George Will.[3] Briefly, Pareles admits that 2 Live Crew's rap lyrics represent violence, but he vindicates slick and nasty rappers for their political integrity and their subcultural battle against dominant culture's racist stereotypes. Will, on the other hand, condemns rap lyrics, particularly those in 2 Live Crew's banned album, for directly inciting African-American youth to sexually violent behavior.

The following excerpts from two students' position statements demonstrate the spirit of negotiation and the construction of subject positions in the aporia between identity-with and difference-from the arguments advanced by both Pareles and Will. (These excerpts are also reproduced on the handout.) Sheri North has little personal experience listening to rap music, so she negotiates a subject position by referring to the Christian music she likes and what it means to her; and in making this comparison, Sheri constructs rap music as an important cultural symbol which should be protected:

> Rap has become a cultural symbol concerned with the experiences and lives of African-American communities. Likewise, Christian music serves as a cultural symbol for my family because it deals with the experiences of everyday Christians and how we should live our lives and put all our trust in God. . . . Vulnerable individuals who listen to rap may think that the violent lyrics describe the right way of doing things. However, sometimes rap does serve as a creative channel for expressing alienation and oppression.

Sheri's reading of Pareles and Will is conflicted: she believes that rap music is vulgar and violent, and she disapproves of it on that basis; yet she also sees rap as a cultural symbol of African-American social history, much like gospel music and hymns are cultural symbols of her own Christian social history. In terms of censorship, rap's character as a cultural symbol overpowers its character as a representation of violence and degradation, but the symbolic character of rap music in no way

excuses the crude content of its lyrics. From Sheri's Christian subject position, rap music is a social bane; however, she is able to recognize and accept the differences between her own community's values and the values of urban African-American communities that generate rap music, and Sheri embraces these differences, gathering them together in an alliance based on cultural symbolism.

Like Sheri, Jodi Warden does not listen to rap music; however, she does work in a daycare center, and she sees first-hand the influences media have on children's actions. Jodi formulates a subject position based on her own experience with groups of children, and she criticizes rap on that basis:

> 2 Live Crew may not be out doing what they sing about, but their music seems to make people, especially kids, want to. Rap is not a productive outlet. It is obvious to me that the things kids listen to and watch on TV have a profound effect on their actions. For example, the new cartoon show Power Rangers deals with a group of kids who fight and kill bad people. A number of daycare centers, including the one I work at, have banned children from watching this show because the children act out the fighting on the playground. Children act out what they see, and it is logical to assume they would do the same with what they hear.

Jodi condemns rap music for its complicity in a larger social problem--the negative effects media have on children's behavior. Jodi's experience as a daycare worker allows her to understand in concrete ways the social problems to which violent media (one of which is rap) contribute. However, Jodi's forceful rejection of Pareles' liberal arguments regarding the rap music controversy does not cause her to accept impulsively Will's conservative arguments. Instead, Jodi draws on her own extensive experience with children and negotiates in the process her own subject position.

In their position statements Sheri and Jodi critique the competing ideas presented in the articles by Pareles and Will, but their critiques are rooted solidly in their own cultural experience. These students do not passively accommodate or defensively resist the arguments advanced by Pareles or Will, and they avoid, consequently, falling easily into prefabricated liberal and conservative subject positions. Instead, Sheri and Jodi negotiate the texts through the filters of their own terministic screens, constructing alternative subject positions in the aporia between modernist identity and postmodern difference.

Position statements teach students the active reading strategies necessary for writing effective cultural studies essays on the semiotic significance of their own and other's experiences in cultural contexts.[4] Every cultural studies writing assignment that I design has two parts: a critical essay in which students describe and critique competing discourses in an institutional context, and a practical document (usually a letter) in which students attempt to gather the differences among the competing discourses into an alliance and propose resolutions to one of the problems described in their critical essays. For example, one essay my students write examines "work" as a critical context. In these essays, students locate competing discourses in a place of employment and compose critical essays that formulate subject positions in the aporia between or among them. Students then write practical documents that attempt to reconcile the competing discourses and resolve a problem associated with them. In these practical documents, students draw forcefully on the critical reading strategies they have learned in their earlier position statements: practical documents must not represent one ideological pole of the competing discourses in the work context under examination; they must instead reconcile these discourses, gathering their differences together into an alliance directed at a common goal--the improvement of the work environment for all employees.

Kim Yates, for example, wrote her work critical essay on Champagne Dye Works, a factory in her hometown. The competing discourses Kim locates in her critical essay center around social and economic class distinctions. Material working conditions at Champagne Dye Works were difficult to endure for uneducated factory workers--no air conditioning in the summer and no heating in the winter caused health problems for many employees--but management offices were equipped with the necessary environmental control technologies. Kim writes, "the uneducated employees at Champagne Dye Works were in no position to complain about the poor working conditions we endured each day, since management could easily find another body to replace us." Kim also represents the discourse of management at the Dye Works, though only indirectly, acknowledging that the expense of heating and air conditioning the entire factory would result in bankruptcy.

The practical letter Kim wrote to the owner of Champagne Dye Works reconciles the competing discourses into an alliance of differences, and she harnesses these differences in the

service of a common goal: to improve worker morale without excessive cost. Kim suggests that the owner of Champagne Dye Works set specific "control temperatures" above and below which workers would take frequent alternating breaks in limited and environmentally controlled spaces to rest and recover from adverse conditions. Through these critical and practical essays, Kim recognized that considering only one discourse within the context of Champagne Dye Works (i.e., uneducated worker vs. privileged management) would be rhetorically ineffective; in order potentially to enact change in the material conditions of uneducated workers, Kim had to gather into alliance the differences among competing discourses. While Kim does not directly confront management for their unethical treatment of its working class, the rhetorical tone of her letter to the owner of Champagne Dye Works implicitly proposes a more inclusive ethic. Kim demonstrates, through her writings in the context of work, the kind of complicated critical thought that is characteristic of effective cultural studies and that can potentially lead to social change.

Students in composition courses that focus on cultural categories, popular artifacts, and social institutions benefit from rhetorical and cultural strategies that teach them to avoid the paralyzing either/or logic of the modernist-identity and postmodern-difference opposition. Students who construct subject positions in the aporia among competing discourses are equipped to offer viable cultural alternatives to the processes that marginalize certain people. These students work to negotiate cultural identities and differences, and this socio-rhetorical strategy of negotiation is learned initially through writing position statements and developed through composing critical and practical essays in a variety of cultural contexts.

Notes

[1] In Orientalism, for example, Edward Said describes how modernist European societies construct cultural differences not only as "other" but also as "opposite" (the identity of the West is constructed in opposition to the difference of the East). According to Said, "When one uses categories like Oriental and Western as both the starting and the end points of analysis, research, public policy, . . . the result is usually to polarize the distinction--the Oriental becomes more Oriental, the Westerner more Western--and limit the human encounter between different cultures, traditions, and societies." The tendency, then, is "to channel thought into a West or an East compartment" (46), eliminating the possibility for common ground, agreement, understanding, or in more extreme cases, destroying the human capacity for tolerance of difference.

[2] I use the term "contexts" to dispel any belief that cultural studies is the "content" of my composition courses. I teach students to write using a combination of rhetorical heuristics and cultural studies methodologies, and students apply these heuristics and methodologies in a variety of institutional contexts.

[3] These two articles are anthologized in the textbook I require for the class: Diana George and John Trimbur's Reading Culture: Contexts for Critical Reading and Writing. Both Pareles and Will have been discontinued in the second edition.

[4] Other contexts for position statements in the first three weeks of my composition classes include generations, style, and television. Since several chapters in George and Trimbur's Reading Culture do not contain competing discourses, I frequently supply counter-voices from popular magazines and television.

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