DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 411 518 CS 215 964

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TITLE Borders, Zones, Transgression and Dissent: Negotiating Difference in the Freshman Composition Class.
PUB DATE 1997-03-00
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (48th, Phoenix, AZ, March 12-15, 1997).
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Classroom Communication; Classroom Techniques; College Freshmen; *Freshman Composition; Higher Education; Instructional Effectiveness; Learning Strategies; Student Development; *Teacher Student Relationship; Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS *Discourse Communities

ABSTRACT

The city is described as a place where strangers meet, and that is also what happens in the public space of the composition classroom. If students share anything, it is an awareness of the need to negotiate the institutional demands of the freshman writing class and an invitation to enter the public forum where the issues can be divisive, unsettling, and even painful. The range of possible approaches to composition is quite large: (1) cognitivist, emphasizing goal-oriented process and student-centered pedagogic devices; (2) expressivist, with its ideologic critique of dominant culture and de-authorizing of the teacher in favor of the student; (3) social constructivist, claiming apolitical, communal discourse communities and collaborative learning methods; and (4) radical, insisting on liberation and relying on dialogic interaction. In the classroom, the teacher needs first to establish the normal discourse as the central text and then use intentional abnormal discourse to arouse wonder and skepticism. By modeling abnormal discourse, teachers entice students not so much to follow as to experiment, and by listening, students refuse to preserve the power and the authority of the podium. (Contains 15 references.) (CR)

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4C's Roundtable Session
"Intimate Publics: Reflections on Responsible Communities"
March 12-15

Borders, Zones, Transgression and Dissent:
Negotiating Difference in the Freshman Composition Class

Richard Sennett describes the city as a place where strangers meet. Perhaps we should remember that that is what happens also in the public space of the composition classroom. Strangers come together within our carefully constructed magic circles for a brief, firmly delineated period of time to contemplate the mysteries and frustrations of the required writing course before separating and slipping courteously away to various other closed rooms on campus or even beyond. On day one, they face us, expectantly, guardedly, carefully. They observe, listen, evaluate, and judge, deciding if this course and this teacher will fit their needs, make only acceptable demands. We look back, wondering how to get beyond those masks, to meet the individuals, and begin the conversation. And that is what we must do because, ultimately, that conversation is all that matters.

When we met on day one of our seminar, we experienced those same concerns, but over the course of the term we sought to respectfully get beyond our masks. We learned to trust warily. The results are inconclusive. We may never know how much we didn't see but we did build a public space that seemed safe enough for us to challenge each other, in our own way, on the ethics of teaching. You will hear the result in the echoes and refractions that seep across the borders of our presentations.

And that safe-enough public space can work for that composition class too. There, we are not dealing with twenty-odd equal voices working together to resolve some common concern of the *res publica*. If they share anything, it is an awareness of the need to negotiate the institutional demands of the writing class and an invitation to enter the public forum where the issues can be

divisive, unsettling, and even painful. And we take advantage of that tension to suspend our classrooms somewhere between those two poles — the reproductive, homogenizing machinery of the school and the liberating, individuating process of validated intellectual inquiry with all its attendant risks.

The range of possible approaches seems quite large, but a few labels might help sketch the territory: cognitivist, with its emphasis on goal-oriented process and student-centered pedagogic devices; expressivist, with its ideologic critique of dominant culture and de-authorizing of the teacher in favor of the student; social constructivist, with its claims of apolitical, communal discourse communities and collaborative learning methods; and radical, with its insistence on liberation and reliance on dialogic interaction. Each of these approaches invests the teacher with authority as an exemplar, or as Harvey Kail points out, as a hero. He analyzes the master narratives of four common textbooks to show the recurring heroic quest motif: the "world redeemer" in *Rhetoric: Discovery and Change* by Richard Young, Alton Becker, and Kenneth Pike (cognitivist); the "questing knight" in *Forming/Thinking/Writing* by Ann Berthoff (radical); the "spellbound hero" in *Teaching Composing* by William Coles (expressivist); and "an exemplary modern figure" in *A Short Course in Writing* by Kenneth Bruffee (social constructivist) (179). I have to agree with Xin Liu Gale when she describes this conception as one that infantalizes the student and makes the gap between knowing teacher and ignorant student "unbridgeable" unless the student reproduces the struggle already overcome by the teacher (126-127). That is the comfortable structure the students demand accompanied by the assurance of success in the presence of the instructor but it is hardly liberating or even empowering. And I wonder how inviting this image can be to a student who does not see himself or herself reflected in the face or culture of the instructor. I have to believe that a more successful strategy would involve bringing

that teacher down from the mythic stage to actually meet and converse with the new minds flowing through the classroom, no matter how dangerous that may seem to the teacher.

But what role then should the teacher take? Two common approaches demonstrate the range adopted by composition teachers: the emancipator and the nurturing mother[1]. The emancipator seeks to make the student aware of his or her downtrodden position as the naive recipient of hegemonic manipulation. For instance, Peter McLaren calls for a border pedagogy that relates the local to the global as a "difficult whole" through the use of metadiscourses in conversation with counter-narratives which enables his students to critically evaluate hegemony and signifying practices, develop a facility with semiotics, a willingness to confront contradictions and to construct strategies of containment and distancing (217-219). Apart from the difficulty of the sheer ambition of this program, it also assumes the teacher holds higher moral values than the student. That texture of radical pedagogy prompted Elizabeth Unsworth to ask "Why doesn't this feel Empowering?" (297). In fact, she argues, "Strategies such as student empowerment and dialogue give the illusion of equality while in fact leaving the authoritarian nature of teacher/student relationships intact" (306). She points out the partiality and uniqueness of both student's and teacher's moral positions, and consequently the plurality of moral positions generally. What if the student simply does not believe what the teacher believes, has experienced repression and dominance differently? Rather than being empowered by such a pedagogy, that student might well be silenced by the institutional authority of the teacher. Rather than searching for and evading the interstices of hegemonic forces, the student may well ask "What do you want" and choose to strategically reflect back what s/he sees as the teacher's beliefs.

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[1]Xin Liu Gale develops this framework more fully in her book *Teachers, Discourses, and Authority in the Postmodern Composition Classroom.*

The proponents of the nurturing mother paradigm see the emancipatory classroom as too violent and too complex for the developing minds of students. Maxine Hairston calls for a "low-risk environment that encourages students to take chances" (190). In such a setting, controversial subjects that might raise conflict have no place. Instead, the students write on only those topics which have the potential to promote peaceful collaboration and demonstrate the presence of different world views created by each student's unique and personal experiences. The collaboration and growth comes through student interaction which specifically excludes the teacher. The teacher acts only as a "guardian angel" filtering the pain and struggle and encouraging intellectual growth. This is certainly a seductive approach, but perhaps not totally honest. Clearly such a nurturing mother/teacher must resort to institutional power to maintain some semblance of order in the classroom, to enact that filtering process, or the students must be so separated and isolated that no interaction takes place. Here I think of Jürgen Habermas' remark that keeping order is not necessarily coercive or repressive and that solving problems of social interaction requires stepping into the public and acting in concert. He rejects the idea that if we disagree, we can just "go off in peace" as not a meaningful alternative (467). Carolyn Hill wanted to grant her students "individual authority over their mental space," but ended up concluding that such a position does not encourage students to develop "give-and-take negotiation of their own perceptions and sentiments of class events" (77-78). The choice is to allow so much freedom that the class fragments mentally and physically, avoiding the pain and struggle of learning in encountering the unexpected or inexplicable, or to exert so much control, so much filtering, that the students never begin to negotiate but rather respond to the teacher's cues. If they do not, they learn through the grading system that they have the wrong answer.

A third approach answers some of these complaints. Many like Patricia Bizzell (What Happens When Basic Writers Come to College"), David Bartholomae ("Inventing the

University") and Kenneth Bruffee ("Collaborative Learning and 'Conversation of Mankind'") argue the composition teacher should mediate the transition from the student's home culture to the mainstream, university culture by minimizing the pain of transformation, lowering the barriers and explaining the benefits of repositioning. Others like Terry Dean ("Multicultural Classrooms, Monocultural Teachers"), and Min-Zahn Lu ("Conflict and Struggle: The Enemies of Basic Writing?") question the implicit positioning of the student as outsider and the claim of discrete discourse communities immune from distorting effects of "interactive cultural forces" (Lu 895).

All these approaches share the same pitfall: they assume an inside and an outside and then refuse to admit it. When gazing back at those beginning students on day one, we should remember their expectations and their hesitant probings. They are looking for the hero who will simplify and explain and initiate. That is our institutional responsibility and the way we gain these students' trust. But we have more to offer and more to learn if only we can make our classrooms a site of edification to borrow Richard Rorty's term or a contact zone to appropriate Mary Louise Pratt's. And we can do that through the use of our favorite device: discourse.

When confronted with unsolicited oppositional discourse or by strategic silence, we have the opportunity to demonstrate a way through the conflict, to accept the discursive resistance on its own terms and contain the violence within words. And the composition classroom offers an unusual opportunity for exactly that because it is a place where strangers meet. As Kurt Spellmeyer notes, drawing on Michel Foucault "it is not membership, but marginality that enables [the writer] to challenge the prevailing configuration of knowledge, and so to refashion self and knowledge together" (78). Gale suggests a mechanism for making this happen in her manipulation of Rorty's edifying philosopher and his concepts of normal and abnormal discourse. She argues that the traditional binary oppositions of teacher and student discourse as literate/illiterate, academic/non-academic, or canonical/non-canonical can be replaced with a

continuum with normal discourse situated as an arbitrary center. In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Rorty differentiates normal discourse and abnormal discourse: "Normal discourse (a generalization of Kuhn's notion of 'normal science') is any discourse (scientific, political, theological, or whatever) which embodies agreed-upon criteria for reaching agreement; abnormal discourse is any which lacks such criteria." But, as Gale points out, abnormal discourse is more than that. It could better be described as a humanizing reaction to normal discourse. It seeks to prevent the "freezing over of culture" by averting the danger that "some given vocabulary, some way in which people may come to think of themselves, will deceive them into thinking that from now on all discourse could be, or should be, normal discourse" (Rorty 377). But Gale insists the relationship between normal and abnormal discourse is "parasitic" rather than confrontational. There is no contending for power, only the Deweyan "breaking the crust of convention." The interaction comes when someone joins in the discourse who is innocently ignorant of these conventions or who intentionally sets them aside (Gale 67-72).

In the classroom, the teacher needs first to establish the normal discourse as the central text and then use intentional abnormal discourse to arouse wonder and skepticism. With the encouragement of the teacher as model, the student will also begin to break the rules and test the results in the classroom group, gaining confidence and independence with each experiment as long as the teacher listens and responds courteously.

For the teacher must listen to what the student has to say, to the innocent, abnormal language as that student attempts to first appropriate and then challenge normal discourse. By modeling abnormal discourse, the teacher entices the student not so much to follow as to experiment and by listening, s/he refuses to preserve the power and the authority of the podium.

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Corporate Source:	**Publication Date:** March 12-15, 1997

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