ED 466 547   CS 511 159

AUTHOR   Sun, Lulu C. H.
TITLE   Presenting and Mispresenting Students: Constructing an Ethic
                of Representation in Composition Studies.
PUB DATE   2002-03-22
NOTE   11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference
                on College Composition and Communication (53rd, Chicago, IL,
                March 20-23, 2002).
PUB TYPE   Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE   EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS   Higher Education; *Research Problems; *Writing (Composition);
                *Writing Instruction; *Writing Research
IDENTIFIERS   Conference on Coll Composition and Communication; Research
                Ethics; Students as Subjects

ABSTRACT
            In the last few years, the focus has evolved from considering
an "ethic of research" in composition studies to an "ethic of representation"
in person-based research. One of the dominant questions that emerged from
this shift is how researchers represent their students and their writings in
composition research. What does the concept of "representation" mean?
Representation is not only the art of construing, but the art of
constructing. Representers do not decode texts--they make them. It is up to
the reader and/or the listener to decode the texts. Ethical concerns specific
to English studies must not only focus on the well-being of the student
participants, but on how student writing is represented by the
scholar/researcher. The CCCC (Conference on College Composition and
Communication) Guidelines register an awareness of a long history of negative
representations of students and their texts in their insistence that
researchers be "accountable to that data," "faithful to the students'
intentions," and represent students' statements "in ways that are fair and
serious...." If researchers speak for their participants, if they appropriate
their voices, they are depriving them of their authority to shape their
identities and their social interactions through their own narratives. The
Guidelines, at present, are concerned with the ethical representation of
students by scholar/researchers in published works or conference
presentations. They do not apply to planned investigations by students that
discuss the scholar/researcher. So, ultimately, when composition researchers
contemplate the Guidelines, they need to consider their epistemological
stance, their choices in epistemology, discourse, and research and make their
decisions about "what" and "who" will be presented and represented, and "how"
they will be presented and represented. (Contains 15 references.) (NKA)

Conference on College Composition and Communication

Presenting and Mispresenting Students:

Constructing an Ethic of Representation in Composition Studies

Lulu C. H. Sun

March 22, 2002

I would like to address a concern specific to the humanities in general and English studies in particular: that is, the issue of the representation of our students in our research. When we read the CCC "Guidelines for the Ethical Treatment of Students and Student Writing in Composition Studies," we notice that the whole issue of representation is not covered in the Guidelines.

In the last few years, our focus has evolved from considering an ethic of research in composition studies to an ethic of representation in person-based research. One of the dominant questions that emerged from this shift is how we represent our students and their writings in composition research.

When we think of representation, we think of the two modes of representation: the first and most obvious one is how we represent the words and texts of our students. The second, more fundamental but frequently neglected, is how we represent the students themselves. But there is a third mode: how the students represent us—the representers themselves.

What does the concept of "representation" mean? Representation is not only the art of construing, but the art of constructing. Representers do not decode texts; they make them. It is up to the reader and/or the listener to decode the texts.

Ethical concerns specific to English studies must not only focus on the well-being of the student-participants, but on how student writing is represented by the scholar-researcher. Our own perspective, background and subjectivity as well as our position of authority, privilege and power in the classroom, all create the possibility for manipulation and misrepresentation. In *Orientalism*, Edward Said's famous description of the West's construction of the East in discourse—managing or producing an image of the Other—easily translates into representation of the "student" that may replace the living, breathing individual in our classrooms who is "a free

subject of thought or action" (3). As a discourse, our treatment of student writers "is produced and exists in an uneven exchange" (12) until they become demeaned as "a sort of surrogate and even underground self" (3) of the composition profession.

Tracing how students have historically been depicted in person-based or student-based research in major journals in the field reveals a pervasive and problematic discourse of Othering. For many researchers, the use of pseudonyms and a respectful portrayal of the student, coupled with "the fact that neither the student nor anyone else who knows the student is likely to read the article," is enough to guarantee that students and their writing are handled fairly (Anderson 78). However, Marguerite Helmers' *Writing Students: Composition Testimonials and Representations of Students* reveals a different story. Staffroom Interchanges in *College Composition and Communication* from 1967 to 1990 disclose an almost universal emphasis on the "stupid, beastlike, and childish aspects of college writers," resulting in a "brutal discourse of ridicule and control" (1-2). That the experience represented is universal, Helmers claims, is reinforced "by the teacher's stance as pedagogical Everyman" (29), who "enters[s] the chaotic world of the freshman composition classroom to set things right with [his] methods" (19).

Helmers goes on to write, "representations rely on the categorizational article <u>the</u>, as in 'the student.' Such labels mark differences between 'we' and 'they' . . . The students 'are' specimens, their writings 'are' artifacts, their purpose to provide useful knowledge for a community of practitioners. The colonial discourse of 'Inventing' demonstrates the imperial position of the educated narrator, who beckons to the student to learn the language of the hierarchy" (100).

The discourse of the colonizer and the colonized, the missionary and the heathen, the narrating Subject and the object, finds its expression in Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the*

Oppressed: "This relationship involves a narrating Subject (the teacher) and patient, listening objects (the students)." The teacher's "task is to 'fill' the students with the contents of his narration—contents which are detached from reality," which are "static" and "predictable" (57).

Hence, as we have seen, a number of analogies have been used over the years to describe or represent the teacher-student relationship: Said's Oriental, the image of the Other; Helmers' teacher as pedagogical Everyman and the student as stupid, beastlike, and childish; and Freire's teacher as colonizer, missionary or narrating subject and the student as colonized, heathen or object.

In the early 1990s, however, as composition shifted from writing-as-process to writing that is socially constructed and economically situated, representations of students and their writing changed. Feminist compositionists, seeking to relinquish their traditional position of power in order to give students some agency or voice, transformed the "lazy, doltish" generic student depicted in Staffroom Interchanges into a resistant, "savvy" student, one "highly literate about how classrooms work" (Jennie Nelson), one who gives the teacher what she wants (Andrea Loewenstein). But even these depictions of resistant, savvy students putting one over on the system can be read as another face of the Orientalized Other—the Other as devious (Said 39). More recent representations of students and their texts (Russell Durst and Robert Yagelski, for instance) demonstrate collaboration between researcher and research participants in the interpretation and dissemination of the results.

The CCC Guidelines register an awareness of a long history of negative representations of students and their texts in their insistence that researchers be "accountable to the data" (489), "faithful to the students' intentions" (488), and always represent students' statements "in ways that are fair and serious, cause no harm" (489). The assumption, unfortunately, seems to be that

care and awareness will automatically ensure that such representations will be fair, that is, faithfully convey the student writer's intent. But, as Min-Zhan Lu points out, "fair" and "objective" are socially- and historically-constructed concepts, and as such may be manipulated (or reconstructed) to suit the unspoken political motives behind our research (Lu 101). In Said's words: "In any instance of at least written language, there is no such thing as a delivered presence, but a re-presence, or a representation" (21) that is "embedded first in the language and then in the culture, institutions, and political ambience of the representer" (272).

As qualitative researchers, our ideologies, our backgrounds, our personal, subjective, and cultural discourses, our epistemology, our experiences of coming to know, our experiences with theory, practice, and methodology, the institutions we work in, all coalesce to construct or represent our research, all form the base or foundation of our research. As Rita C. Manning asserts, "an ethic grows out of one's lived experience, attachments, and sense of personal integrity" (xiv). Over the last decade, we have started to recognize more and more the qualitative researcher's role in constructing knowledge (for a more detailed description, see "Special Focus: Personal Writing" in the September 2001 issue of *College English*). "For many, ethical qualitative research practices demand that the researcher reflect on and explain to readers how her own definitive characteristics—such as race, gender, socio-economic background, and so on—as well as those of her subjects influence her findings and the construction of her text" (Hindman 35).

In many instances, the difference between the instructor and the student is the key to the representation. James Clifford, writing in 1988, ten years after Said, states the following in *The Predicament of Culture*, "Difference is encountered in the adjoining neighborhood, the familiar turns up at the ends of the earth. . . . 'Cultural' difference is no longer a stable, exotic otherness;

self-other relations are matters of power and rhetoric rather than of essence" (14). Clearly, the representation is a matter of power and rhetoric.

If we speak for our participants, if we appropriate their voices, we are depriving them of their authority to shape their identities and their social interactions through their own narratives. Such appropriation can occur at any point in the research process itself: gaining voluntary consent only at the outset, not throughout the project; misrepresenting the full meaning of the student's writing by neglecting its context; and effacing the personal imprint of the student through pseudonyms or genderless or agencyless identifiers. We can also misrepresent our student writers by reducing their texts to analyses of skills or surface features rather than appreciating "the complex ways in which [their] writing and reading relate to [their] identity and the experiences that have somehow shaped that identity" (Yagelski 15). These effacements depersonalize the students and thereby make appropriation of their texts and misrepresentation of them and their writing that much easier.

However, to complicate matters, there is a unique twist to this whole issue of representation. While we represent our students, our students, in turn, represent us. The following excerpt is from a paper I commented on and graded two weeks ago:

> This Doctor of some English (I really could care less about his "specialty") felt it was important for each student in his classes to meet with him one-on-one, for a "getting to know you" type of deal. I was there no longer than five minutes before realizing that this man seemed caught up in himself. A victim to narrow-mindedness, a disease that targets the brain and usually stay embedded there. Or should I say "sticks" there?

Let's refer to the professor as Professor X. The paper the student submitted does not fulfill the

requirements of the assignment; it is simply a critique of Professor X. This student has openly criticized this particular professor in class, although I have repeatedly told her that her remarks are inappropriate. There is an interesting reversal here, the student has represented Professor X in a certain way, and I have represented the student to you. I have chosen a passage that I feel is the most innocuous one from the paper and which identifies or represents the student as little as possible. If I were to quote other excerpts from her paper, not only would I represent her more, but I would divulge her identity, and you would have more information to construct and reconstruct her.

What is fascinating about this case is that there are at least three representations here. The student has represented Professor X in my class and in her writing. By doing so, she has in fact inadvertently represented herself. And I, in describing this scenario to you, have also represented her. The multiple representations operating here are from different perspectives and from different lenses. Representation is a two-way street.

The Guidelines, at present, are concerned with the ethical representation of students by scholar-researchers in published works or conference presentations. An intriguing question would be what if the student described above were to publish or conduct research on Professor X or to publish her paper on the World Wide Web? The Guidelines do not apply to her in this case. They do not apply to planned investigations by students that discuss the scholar-teacher.

What do we do once we are aware of our biases? We can, for one, be more careful when we represent and construct our students. We can attempt to be more cognizant of our own prejudices, preferences, perspectives, backgrounds, ideologies, and our social, historical, cultural and political milieu. However, simply because we are human, there will inevitably be biases with representation—whether it is intentional or unintentional.

So, ultimately, when we contemplate the Guidelines, we need to consider our epistemological stance, our choices in epistemology, discourse, and research and our decisions about <u>what</u> and <u>who</u> will be presented and represented, and <u>how</u> they will be presented and represented.

To end with a paraphrase of Clifford, representation is a matter of power and rhetoric. We can only approximate fair and accurate representation. There is a beautiful sentence in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* where the author is describing the difference between Katharine Clifton and the English Patient himself, "Words gave her clarity, brought reason, shape. Whereas I thought words bent emotions like sticks in water" (238). Representation can give us clarity, reason, shape, or it can bend the represented like sticks are bent in water.

Works Cited

Anderson, Paul V. "Simple Gifts: Ethical Issues in the Conduct of Person-Based Composition

Research." *College Composition and Communication* 49 (1998): 63-89.

Clifford, James. *The Predicament of Culture.* Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1988.

Durst, Russell K. *Collision Course: Conflict, Negotiation, and Learning in College

Composition.* Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1999.

Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.* Trans. Myra Bergman Ramos. New York: The

Continuum Publishing Corporation, 1983.

"Guidelines for the Ethical Treatment of Students and Student Writing in Composition Studies."

College Composition and Communication 52 (2001): 285-90.

Helmers, Marguerite. *Writing Students: Composition Testimonials and Representations of

Students.* Albany: State U of New York P, 1994.

Hindman, Jane. "Special Focus: Personal Writing." *College English* 64 (2001): 34-40.

Loewenstein, Andrea Freud. "Confronting Stereotypes: *Maus* in Crown Heights." *College

English* 60 (1998): 396-420.

Lu, Min-Zhan. "Importing 'Science': Neutralizing Basic Writing." *Representing the "Other":

Basic Writers and the Teaching of Basic Writing.* Ed. Bruce Horner and Min-Zhan Lu.

Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1999. 56-104.

Manning, Rita C. *Speaking from the Heart: A Feminist Perspective on Ethics.* Lanham:

Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1992.

Nelson, Jennie. "Reading Classrooms as Text: Exploring Student Writers' Interpretive

Practices." *College Composition and Communication* 46 (1995): 411-29.

Ondaatje, Michael. *The English Patient*. New York: Vintage, 1992.

Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. New York: Random House, 1979.

"Special Focus: Personal Writing." *College English* 64 (2001): 34-108.

Yagelski, Robert P. *Literacy Matters: Writing and Reading the Social Self.* New York:

Teachers College Press, 2000.

CS 511 159

U.S. Department of Education
Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI)
National Library of Education (NLE)
Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC)

Reproduction Release (Specific Document)

I. DOCUMENT IDENTIFICATION:

Title: Presenting and Mispresenting Students: Constructing an Ethic of Representation in	
Author(s): Lulu C. H. Sun	Composition Studies
Corporate Source:	Publication Date: 2002

II. REPRODUCTION RELEASE:

In order to disseminate as widely as possible timely and significant materials of interest to the educational community, documents announced in the monthly abstract journal of the ERIC system, Resources in Education (RIE), are usually made available to users in microfiche, reproduced paper copy, and electronic media, and sold through the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). Credit is given to the source of each document, and, if reproduction release is granted, one of the following notices is affixed to the document.

If permission is granted to reproduce and disseminate the identified document, please CHECK ONE of the following three options and sign in the indicated space following.

The sample sticker shown below will be affixed to all Level 1 documents	The sample sticker shown below will be affixed to all Level 2A documents	The sample sticker shown below will be affixed to all Level 2B documents
PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY *SAMPLE* TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)	PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE, AND IN ELECTRONIC MEDIA FOR ERIC COLLECTION SUBSCRIBERS ONLY, HAS BEEN GRANTED BY *SAMPLE* TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)	PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE ONLY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY *SAMPLE* TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
Level 1	Level 2A	Level 2B
↑ X	↑	↑
Check here for Level 1 release, permitting reproduction and dissemination in microfiche or other ERIC archival media (e.g. electronic) *and* paper copy.	Check here for Level 2A release, permitting reproduction and dissemination in microfiche and in electronic media for ERIC archival collection subscribers only	Check here for Level 2B release, permitting reproduction and dissemination in microfiche only

Documents will be processed as indicated provided reproduction quality permits.
If permission to reproduce is granted, but no box is checked, documents will be processed at Level 1.

I hereby grant to the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) nonexclusive permission to reproduce and disseminate this document as indicated above. Reproduction from the ERIC microfiche, or electronic media by persons other than ERIC employees and its system contractors requires permission from the copyright holder. Exception is made for non-profit reproduction by libraries and other service agencies to satisfy information needs of educators in response to discrete inquiries.

Signature: *Lulu C. H. Sun*	Printed Name/Position/Title: Lulu C. H. Sun, Associate Professor	
Organization/Address: University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth North Dartmouth, MA 02747-2300	Telephone: (508) 999-8284	Fax: (508) 999-9125
	E-mail Address: LSun@umassd.edu	Date: June 4, 2002

III. DOCUMENT AVAILABILITY INFORMATION (FROM NON-ERIC SOURCE):

If permission to reproduce is not granted to ERIC, or, if you wish ERIC to cite the availability of the document from another source, please provide the following information regarding the availability of the document. (ERIC will not announce a document unless it is publicly available, and a dependable source can be specified. Contributors should also be aware that ERIC selection criteria are significantly more stringent for documents that cannot be made available through EDRS.)

III. DOCUMENT AVAILABILITY INFORMATION (FROM NON-ERIC SOURCE):

If permission to reproduce is not granted to ERIC, or, if you wish ERIC to cite the availability of the document from another source, please provide the following information regarding the availability of the document. (ERIC will not announce a document unless it is publicly available, and a dependable source can be specified. Contributors should also be aware that ERIC selection criteria are significantly more stringent for documents that cannot be made available through EDRS.)

Publisher/Distributor:
Address:
Price:

IV. REFERRAL OF ERIC TO COPYRIGHT/REPRODUCTION RIGHTS HOLDER:

If the right to grant this reproduction release is held by someone other than the addressee, please provide the appropriate name and address:

Name:
Address:

V. WHERE TO SEND THIS FORM:

Send this form to the following ERIC Clearinghouse:

However, if solicited by the ERIC Facility, or if making an unsolicited contribution to ERIC, return this form (and the document being contributed) to:

ERIC Processing and Reference Facility
4483-A Forbes Boulevard
Lanham, Maryland 20706

Telephone: 301-552-4200
Toll Free: 800-799-3742
FAX: 301-552-4700
e-mail: ericfac@inet.ed.gov
WWW: http://ericfacility.org