Reader Response

Response to the JAC Interview with Richard Rorty

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Reading the JAC interview with Richard Rorty makes me realize once again why I adopted him as one of my heroes ten years ago. By "him" (to make a foundational distinction) I don't mean of course the whole warty man, with whom I am barely acquainted. I mean the language of a lot of what he has written and said. Rorty seems humane and sensible. He's menschlich. His attitude toward America—that it is, with all its flaws, "the best thing on offer"—is one I am sympathetic to. Most of all, his language, more than that of anyone else I know, has given me ways of saying things that I have been unsuccessful trying to say myself.

Reading the JAC interview also makes me feel grateful to the editors for providing an occasion on which Rorty was compelled to think for forty-five seconds or so about something I had written—far more attention from that direction than I have any right to hope or expect.

But reading the JAC interview also makes me feel that the interviewers did me, their readers, and perhaps Rorty, too, something of a disservice in the way they framed their questions and summarized the interview.

Rorty is not a "theorist." Neither am I. Social construction is not a "theory." It is a way of talking, a language, a vernacular. Least of all is social construction a "theoretical rationale for collaborative learning." It is a way of describing collaborative learning. The theory-practice dichotomy is one of the notions endemic to foundational thought that make it so constraining and so thoroughly obsolete.

Furthermore, Rorty is right, in my opinion, that talking about something and doing it "play back and forth," but that the first thing to do is to "find out whether it actually works." That description, in any case, more or less sums up my own almost twenty-year experience (good lord!) with collaborative learning. For a decade I fiddled with it and with solutions to its practical problems contributed by the expertise I found in social group work, before I lost my epistemological virginity over it. That happened because I became increasingly and uncomfortably aware that the language of cognition could not describe in any coherent way what was going on. The language used by Rorty, Kuhn, Geertz, and that bunch could. And that was that.
In short, with all due respect to those involved, I would suggest that the foundational terms in which the JAC interviewers addressed Rorty, if they're representative, reveal, dismayingly, more about the stage that the conversation in composition studies is currently at than his replies reveal about either him or me.

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On Personally Constructing “Social Construction”:
A Response to Richard Rorty

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Gary Olson’s interview with Richard Rorty in volume nine of JAC suggests the problems in our field’s new obsession with “social construction.” When Kenneth Bruffee first promoted the term, he usefully foregrounded the contextual nature of discourse. Furthermore, by invoking Rorty and other theorists, he helped composition sense its relation to other rhetorical inquiry. Yet, the boom now enjoyed by “social constructionism” threatens to obscure how notions of “the social” have historically differed. As Cy Knoblauch observed in volume eight of JAC, “When roving, and morally warring, bands of cognitive psychologists, text linguists, philosophers of composition, historians of rhetoric, Marxist critics, post-structuralists, and reader-response theorists all wax equally enthusiastic about ‘the social construction of reality,’ there is a good chance that the expression has long since lost its capacity to name anything important or even very interesting” (54). We should find “important” and “interesting,” though, the ideological differences revealed when theorists of “the social” elaborate what the word personally means to them. Rorty’s JAC remarks offer a good test case.

The interview contains two major surprises. First, Rorty proves unfamiliar with Bruffee’s “social constructionism” and, in fact, declares his notion of writing across the curriculum “a terrible idea” (6). Bruffee can thus be accused of misleading us when he intimates Rorty and he think alike. In fact, Bruffee has often propounded a dubious Whig version of history by suggesting that all noteworthy intellectual trends converge in his doctrine. Yet, we should never have assumed that he and his favorite theorists precisely correspond. As Edward Said points out in The World, The Text, and The Critic, “Theory often gets modified as it ‘travels’ through the academy.”