Dueling with Dualism: A Response to Interviews with Mary Field Belenky and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

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In reading Evelyn Ashton-Jones and Dene Kay Thomas' interview with Mary Field Belenky, I found myself experiencing the same mood swings I experienced in reading *Women's Ways of Knowing*: alternately I was pleased with ideas that accorded with my own way of thinking, and I was irate at ideas that neglected my perspective. This is not to say that I have mixed feelings about the interview or the book. In fact, these perhaps unsettling shifts are what make the work Belenky and her colleagues have done and are doing so stimulating to me as I try to think about the problems of teaching writing at the post-secondary level. What helped me understand this was the fortunate juxtaposition of this interview with the interview Phillip Sipiora and Janet Atwill held with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. What I want to do here is to use some ideas that came up in the Spivak interview to help explain my response to the interview with Belenky.

The work done by Mary Field Belenky, Blythe McVicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger, and Jill Mattuck Tarule is situated in a field beset by two recalcitrant dualisms: the man/woman dualism and the cognitive/social dualism. Two commonplace reactions to such dualisms are to refuse the either/or view of the world they promote, and to suggest that they can be resolved, that the different perspectives they refer to can be balanced and the tensions between them dissolved. Spivak's suspicion of balance and mediation can be instructive as we duel with these dualisms—dualisms that are also central in the study of teaching writing. I do not believe that the most productive way to handle the differences that often separate us is to pretend that they don't exist or to negotiate them out of existence.

**Competition/Collaboration and Critical Discourse**

The man/woman dualism constructs itself through many related dualisms, both in the work of Belenky and her coauthors and in society at large. The particular expression of gender dualism that caught my attention in this interview was the opposition between competition and collaboration. In the
context of Belenky's discussion, it is a moot point whether competition is associated with men and collaboration with women because of innate differences or because of socially constructed ones; the current pattern that she and her colleagues disclose is that women by and large prefer to work collaboratively and that because collaborative work is devalued and dismissed in institutions structured on the basis of competitive strategies (such as institutions of higher education) women's work is often devalued and dismissed. Belenky goes on to argue that competition is not only bad for women but is bad for everyone and that collaboration is to be preferred: "In my mind the world should not—cannot—be construed as a zero sum game. That's no way to live."

In many discussions of gender differences in scholarship, the differences between men's competitive ways of proceeding and women's collaborative methods are reduced to an opposition between conflict and accord, or disagreement and agreement. Women scholars protest "attacks" on their positions; men scholars protest that such protests are themselves based on the method of disagreeing that underlies the investigation of complex ideas. In such arguments, women tacitly take the position that conflict is incompatible with collaboration, and men tacitly take the position that all disagreement implies competition. Both groups, of course, also imply that good scholarship necessitates either collaboration or competition depending on their allegiances. What I'd like to argue is that none of these positions is plausible.

In their book, Belenky and her coauthors come close to this reductionist view of competition/collaboration when they equate women's collaborative methods with Elbow's "believing game" and men's competitive methods with Elbow's "doubting game." They observe that women are in general uncomfortable with the doubting game: "Few of the women we interviewed . . . found argument—reasoned critical discourse—a congenial form of conversation among friends" (105). And they observe that "many women find it easier to believe than to doubt. . . . While women frequently do experience doubting as a game, believing feels real to them" (113). The equation of doubting with competition and conflict and believing with collaboration and accord is evident when they quote Elbow, who "says that while the doubting game requires a 'combative kind of energy that feels like clenching a muscle. . . . the shape of the believing game is waiting, patience, not being in a hurry'" (117). The problem with these equations is that not only are women excluded in educational settings that depend on competitive practices, they are also excluded from reasoned critical discourse, which depends on the doubting game. While there are reasons to be suspicious of seeing "reasoned critical discourse" as the sole mode of knowledge, it is also difficult to see this kind of discourse as the sole province of competitive men and women.

Belenky offers a more complex view of the contrast between competition and collaboration in her interview, where she sees them as separable from,
and interacting with, the contrast between doubting and believing games. Here she points out that “both games are of enormous importance for anybody who’s going to do serious intellectual work,” and she refers to some “informal research” she’s done that indicates that women dislike the doubting game only within competitive situations. She explains:

In the other environment, people are in a win-win situation, where they play the doubting game not to win or lose but to clarify arguments, to develop ideas, and to do better thinking. Women have no problem with the doubting game in such a collaborative setting. You can be a marvelous doubter, and doubting can be life-enhancing if it takes place in the service of the clearest possible understanding of truth rather than in one-upping another. We associate competitiveness—winning—with the doubting game, but competitiveness destroys the doubting game; competitiveness makes it a poor game for getting at the truth. Winning an argument and achieving a more comprehensive view of what’s true are not the same. (284)

Belenky here shows clearly how doubting can be seen as more than simply competitive and how, by implication, disagreement can be included in collaborative working situations. (Her descriptions of the collaborative work on the book are further evidence of the compatibility of doubting, critical discourse, and collaboration.) But she also tacitly argues that competition is incompatible with what she calls “serious intellectual work”: “competitiveness destroys the doubting game.”

Is it true that under competitive situations the doubting game amounts only to one-upmanship? We may agree with the final statement in the quote above but still argue that winning an argument contributes to knowledge just as much as does achieving a more comprehensive view of what’s true. Our belief in the value of pluralism and in the social constructedness of all knowledge (which are not the same thing) does not prevent us from saying that in particular situations ideas can be adjudged not only false but also pernicious; nor does it prevent us from wanting to discredit those ideas in the pursuit of knowledge. That race is not a predictor of intelligence, that individualism is not necessarily a good basis on which to build a society, that women are not inherently more nurturing than men—these are arguments we want to win in our current situation, and ones we have good social reasons for wanting to win.

Now, I am not arguing that competition and collaboration are equally important to good scholarship. I’d have to think a lot more about the subject and analyze the current academic situation in a great deal more detail before I could make any such claim. Nor am I arguing that we should try to achieve a balance between collaboration and competition in our work, or that we should all try to be equally good at both strategies. What I am arguing is that the two sides of this dualism offer a productive check on one another; that they remind us that there is always something left out of our calculations; that a perspective conceals at the same time that it reveals.
Asked whether Aristotle’s concept of techne could be seen to function as a middle term deconstructing the theory/practice dualism, Spivak points out that “the deconstruction of something is, of course, not a deconstruction of the binary.” She refuses to conceive of the middle term either as privileging one or the other side of the dualism or as achieving a balance between the two. Instead, she argues for a productive unease:

If the middle term is something that cannot be sure of itself as either theory or practice, but finds itself inhabiting a kind of productive “unease,” and every time it settles into either the theory of rhetoric or the practice of rhetoric, something on the other side beckons and says, “Look here you, you know you are dependent upon me and you’re ignoring it,” then I feel that the discipline of rhetoric can be an extraordinary ally in, let’s say, exposing the artificial distinction between literary theory at one end and creative writing at the other end of our divided terrain. (296)

What Spivak is arguing here is that treatments of problems involving dualisms (or binaries) are often insufficiently dialectical (in the Hegelian sense), that they assume a resolution of the tension rather than a use of that tension.

Applying Spivak’s suggestion to the discussions of competition/collaboration and critical discourse, I think we can see that the possibility of an exclusive association of critical discourse with competition calls forth Belenky’s consideration of how critical discourse can be collaborative and, vice versa, that her exclusive association of critical discourse with collaboration calls forth my consideration of how critical discourse can also be competitive. The binary nature of this relationship does not allow the possibility of a merging of collaborative and competitive ways of working. Competition and collaboration are fundamental opposites. You cannot, for example, collaborate with someone whom you’re trying to win an argument with; at least, you can’t do those things at the same time. Furthermore, anyone who comes at critical discourse with a collaborative way of working will always be liable to misunderstand what someone who comes to critical discourse with a competitive way of working is up to, and vice versa. (I described such misunderstandings earlier when I mentioned the oversimplified discussions of the competitive/collaborative dualism.)

With regard to other manifestations of the man/woman dualism, Belenky understands the value of this dialectical method too, a method that allows us a more complex view of phenomena such as critical discourse or voice: “We have a rigid, dualistic way of structuring the world that makes it hard for people to understand that a voice can be associated with gender without being encased in gender” (285). Similarly, I would say that critical discourse can be associated with collaboration without it being the case that collaboration explains everything about critical discourse that’s valuable. I would also argue, and I think Belenky would agree, that though women can be
associated with collaboration, collaboration cannot simply be explained as women's way of knowing—all of which makes any discussion of gender differences and critical discourse very complex indeed.

The Cognitive/Social Binary

I'd like now to turn to a very much briefer consideration of the other dualism I noticed in reading the Belenky and Spivak interviews together—the cognitive/social dualism—and I'd like to suggest that we deal with it in the same dialectical way. I was especially struck by the difference in perspective between Belenky's argument for the value of the developmental sequence she and her colleagues have described and Spivak's refusal to extend her analysis of the functioning of rumor within a system of colonial aggression to a general theory of rumor.

Belenky points out that their study was not designed in such a way that would allow them to claim validly that the positions they describe are developmental stages, and she notes that they also are uncomfortable with the assumption that any particular developmental sequence is universal. She then adds,

Some of my colleagues found it hard even to argue that one of these positions is inherently better than another. Now, that boggles my mind, because each position seems so much more adequate and adaptive than the previous positions, at least in the context of this culture. (288)

I think most would agree that Belenky's perspective, like that of most psychologists today (I'm simply ignoring behaviorists), is cognitive; that is, she investigates problems by asking questions about the way people (or women, or types of women, but not individuals) think. And though she often, as here, makes a nod to the idea that thinking takes place within a social context that may have a lot to do with how individuals think and with our evaluation of those ways of thinking, such considerations have little effect on what she feels she can validly claim. This, of course, infuriates me, because from my perspective the only thing that's valuable to explain about thinking is how individuals think in particular social situations. But though I am infuriated by the relegation of social context to an addendum, I realize that it is just because the cognitive perspective rules out the analysis of social context that it can analyze those aspects of thinking that are adaptive across a variety of situations, if not universally.

Of course, I still find Spivak's position much more comfortable. When asked to comment on the relationship of rumor to Western humanism and democracy, she replies (in part),
Rumor could in fact be operative in insurgent efforts against the organized *logos*. But this requires situation-specific study. Just as people like Derrida say that they cannot speak of anything outside of Western metaphysics, I do not feel authorized to establish my critique of the imperialist field as a general theory... [Still] it is quite possible to see the lineaments of what might gel into what we are calling the technical use of the word *rumor* in my commentary on the operation of rumor in a very specific case. (299)

Spivak’s perspective, like that of other Marxists, is social; that is, she investigates problems by asking about what forces are operating in the specific social situation. And though she acknowledges the usefulness of generalizing across situations, she does not see the possibility of making such claims as establishing the value of her work. (Perhaps this is what some people find infuriating about deconstructionists.) In fact, it is just by ignoring what holds true in all situations that scholars working from a social perspective can explain why a phenomenon occurs in one specific situation and not in another.

Finally, I would like to argue that the cognitive/social dualism cannot be resolved, that these two perspectives cannot be held at once or combined, despite the claims of “social cognitivists” and others. As Spivak says,

> I don’t think that reconciliation is ever going to happen, frankly, because mediations are always interested. There is always a residue of either this or that side in the way in which mediations are performed. (297)

Cognitivists may qualify their conclusions with remarks such as, “at least in this context,” and social theorists may speculate on the implications of their conclusions for a general theory, but these remarks are best read, I think, as expressions of the “bad conscience” that dualisms produce, the voice Spivak hears saying, “Look here you, you know you are dependent upon me and you’re ignoring it.” Each perspective reveals something only by concealing what the other reveals; to pretend that master and slave are one, that social and cognitive perspectives are really after the same truth, is not enlightening but mystifying.

It is precisely this tension arising from the cognitive/social dualism that is productive in the field of composition research. Just as the tension arising from the competitive/collaborative dualism helps us explain the complex nature of critical discourse (among other phenomena), so the tension between cognitivists and social theorists keeps us from reducing the complexity of writing activities to a unitary, and therefore false, model. Just as cognitivists would acknowledge that their analyses of the structures of thought have little value in predicting an individual’s thought process in a specific social situation, so scholars working from the social perspective acknowledge that their analyses of specific situations have little value as the basis of general theories. The relationship is not, of course, one of ecumenical bliss. Misunderstandings occur as scholars read research from the
opposite perspective from which it was produced; and there is a fair amount of wrangling over which are the most productive, most valid, most correct methods of scholarship. But it is important that we see these misunderstandings, these conflicts, as positive, that we use them to define and understand our own perspective better, if we want to advance knowledge in the field of writing research.

Talking Differently: A Response to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

THOMAS KENT

Michel Foucault taught us to talk about history in terms of shifting discourses rather than in terms of transcendental master-narratives. Instead of talking about history as an epic story of one kind or another—for example, as a story about our climb up the ladder of knowledge, or about our emancipation from old bad ways of thinking—Foucault asks us to think about history as changes in the way we employ vocabularies: once we talked like that; now we talk like this. In his writings, Foucault continually reminds us of the common sense observation that the world does not tell us how to talk. As Richard Rorty puts it, “The fact that Newton’s vocabulary lets us predict the world more easily than Aristotle’s does not mean that the world speaks Newtonian. The world does not speak. Only we do” (6). When we begin to talk about history—and knowledge, too—in terms of shifts in vocabularies, we no longer need to worry about the Cartesian or what is now called the internalist problem of matching up our vocabularies to something that exists outside of our own subjectivity. Consequently, we can get rid of the notion that language mediates between us and the world, for human being (human being-in-the-world) does not consist in striving for eternal truth or for ahistorical facts that exist “out there” beyond the vocabularies we employ to get things done in our everyday lives. In other words, when we stop talking about a split world—a world possessing an intrinsic nature set apart from an internal realm of mental states—and, instead, start talking about how we employ our vocabularies, we can get beyond essentialism and stop imagining