Reader Response

Politicizing the Composing Process and Women’s Ways of Interacting: A Response to “A Conversation with Mary Belenky”

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As I was reading Evelyn Ashton-Jones and Dene Kay Thomas’ interview with Mary Belenky, I couldn’t help but compare it with Gary Olson’s interview with Richard Rorty published in volume 9 of JAC. That interview was a lesson in miscommunication. Rorty clearly knew very little about the field of composition studies, made no attempt to find out anything about it before the interview, and insulted us all by reducing the enterprise to tinkering with grammar and mechanics. The gap between Olson and Rorty was unbridgeable, hence Olson’s astonishment that Rorty did not consider himself to be a social constructionist, that Rorty thought writing across the curriculum was a terrible idea, and that he was sympathetic to E.D. Hirsch’s views on literacy.

In contrast, Belenky and her interviewers collaborated in the production of a wonderfully illuminating discussion of Women’s Ways of Knowing. The interview itself illustrates the point that women are often connected knowers capable of working cooperatively toward a common goal. Clearly, Belenky had prepared carefully for the interview and was knowledgeable about and appreciative of developments within the field of composition studies. In turn, Ashton-Jones and Thomas asked exactly the right questions, allowing Belenky to provide fascinating information about the collaborative creation of the book and to address important questions such as, Why were men excluded from the research sample? Does the book reinforce essentialist definitions of femininity? Is the model of intellectual growth described in the book developmental or sequential? What is Belenky’s view of grading? In what ways is Belenky’s work informed by social constructionism? The interview will certainly become an important document within feminist studies as it extends Women’s Ways of Knowing in very useful ways.
Two thoughts occurred to me as I was reading the interview. The first was that *Women’s Ways of Knowing* politicizes the process of intellectual development and can be useful in attempts to politicize the composing process. The second was that Belenky’s discussion of the collaborative process that gave rise to *Women’s Ways of Knowing* is a wonderful illustration of how women can cooperate to achieve a goal. There is a dark side to women’s interactions, though, that also needs to be explored. I’ll discuss each of these topics in turn.

**Politicizing the Composing Process**

The composing process is too often discussed by compositionists as an apolitical process. Cognitivists usually speak of it as if writing were solely an activity involving inner mental processes; social constructionists, in exploring the social dimensions of writing, do not always emphasize its political dimensions and sometimes ignore process entirely. As a way of demonstrating the usefulness of *Women’s Ways of Knowing* to an exploration of the composing process, I’ll attempt here a feminist rereading of James Britton’s conception of expressive writing and Linda Flower’s conception of writer-based writing.

Expressive writing and writer-based prose are concepts that are by now quite familiar to compositionists. Both Britton and his coauthors and Flower derive the concepts from the work of cognitive and social psychologists such as Piaget and Vygotsky and see writing as sharing many of the same features as inner and egocentric speech: the absence of logical and causal relations, ellipticality, language that has personal rather than public currency. Both expressive and writer-based writing are described as enabling writers in the initial stages of the writing process because they free them of the constraints of audience-centered writing. Britton gives informal or exploratory writing a much more central role than does Flower. For him, it is the matrix out of which all other forms of writing, including creative writing, emerge. Flower makes clear that writer-based prose is not necessarily a stage through which a writer must develop (22), and her discussion of the concept has a slight negative cast to it in a way that Britton’s does not. Reader-based prose is clearly preferable because it allows for communication with an audience. Writer-based prose, if it becomes a stage in the process at all, is valuable because it leads to reader-based prose.

The authors of *Women’s Ways of Knowing* are not, of course, dealing with stages in the composing process in their discussion of the “ways of knowing” that they identify: silence, received knowledge, subjective knowledge, procedural knowledge, and constructed knowledge. Nor do they claim that the categories are developmental stages. Belenky explains in the interview that the study did not have a longitudinal component and was not designed to
identify developmental stages. She nevertheless feels that the model of female intellectual growth described in the book is developmental, though not necessarily sequential. Belenky might say, then, that intellectual immaturity is characterized by silence and listening to the voices of others, whereas intellectual maturity is characterized by active construction of knowledge, an integration of the voices of the self with the voices of others. I would suggest that the stages identified in *Women's Ways of Knowing* may well approximate the processes many learners, regardless of level of intellectual development, undergo when they learn something new. The stages may be seen, then, as in some ways parallel to the stages of the composing process.

*Women's Ways of Knowing*, though, politicizes the process. Compositionists do not generally recognize that the starting point for the language learning of some may very well be silence rather than inner speech. Opportunities for conversation, clearly an important determinant of intellectual growth, vary according to the political situation of the learner. Women from impoverished backgrounds in which there was little conversation in the home will only mature intellectually if they are able to converse in another context, usually the school. The teacher of writing, then, may well have to do more than simply allow students the freedom to “express” themselves by lifting the constraints of audience and judgment for a time. She may have to coax students out of their habitual silence.

*Women's Ways of Knowing* suggests, too, that egocentrism is not always the starting point of the learning process. The learner's self may be effaced, submerged in the voices of others. The writer/reader/speaker/listener may have no strong sense of self, no ego upon which to build an identity. The process of creating a self may well be complex and difficult and will hardly be accomplished simply by encouraging writers to move from expressive to transactional writing or from writer-based to reader-based writing. I'm speaking here of deeply ingrained habits of mind that result from oppressive conditions that are themselves deeply ingrained historically and culturally.

Also, *Women's Ways of Knowing* suggests that the movement toward mature writing or mature intellectual development is not simply a matter of moving from self toward other, from writer toward reader, but of integrating the self with the other, integrating writer and reader. Britton says of transactional writing that the writer is concerned to “enmesh” with the reader's relevant knowledge, experience, and interests (94). Flower speaks of writing “for” the reader (34). Surely, though, the goal of the writer cannot simply be to please the audience, to eliminate unnecessary barriers between writer and reader. The writer cannot give herself over to the reader and cannot give up her right to express herself. Writer and reader need to become “enmeshed” in dialogue; the writer needs to write “to” the reader. Transactional writing, then, needs to remain expressive in some ways, and reader-based writing needs to remain writer-based to an extent.
Women’s Ways of Interacting

Women’s Ways of Knowing is especially valuable to compositionists because it focuses exclusively on women’s ways of learning, an area that has been neglected in composition theory and research. As I have suggested, thinking about women’s ways of writing changes the way we think about writing in general. I couldn’t help but think as I read the interview and reflected back upon the book, though, that the very positive portrayal of women’s connectedness to other women did not quite coincide with my own experience or with some recent feminist research and theory. Belenky’s description of the collaborative process that produced the book, for instance, illustrates a predominant theme in Women’s Ways of Knowing: the wonderfully cooperative way in which women can work together. It would seem that women are, in general, more cooperative than men, more connected to each other and hence more capable than men of collaborating successfully. At the conclusion of their book, Belenky and her coauthors claim, “We believe that connected knowing comes more easily to many women than does separate knowing” (229).

The work of Nancy Chodorow has most often been used in the way Belenky and her colleagues use it: to emphasize the connectedness of mother and daughter and, by implication, the connectedness of woman to woman. Surely, though, women do not always work together cooperatively and are not always good collaborators. Implicit in Chodorow’s depiction of mother/daughter interactions is the suggestion that women’s interactions with other women may also be problematic in patriarchal society. In “Guaranteed to Please: Twentieth-Century American Women’s Bestsellers,” Madonna Miner uses Chodorow’s work to construct a twentieth-century white middle-class American “woman’s story,” one that emphasizes the enormous psychic tension that characterizes relationships between mothers and daughters. Her position is based on Chodorow’s finding that “girls cannot and do not ‘reject’ their mother and women in favor of their fathers and men, but remain in a bisexual triangle throughout childhood and puberty” (140). Miner sees bestsellers as portraying women who are bound to their mothers by intense physical and emotional appetites and as appealing to readers bound by the same appetites. She sees Gone with the Wind, Valley of the Dolls, and Forever Amber as portraying aspects of a daughter’s relationship to her mother: desire, denial, fear, anger, compensation (192).

Anita Clair Fellman in “Laura Ingalls Wilder and Rose Wilder Lane: The Politics of a Mother-Daughter Relationship” discusses the “uncomfortable proximity” of Wilder and Lane. According to Fellman, “Each woman needed but could not satisfy the other. Their desires and offerings failed to coincide” (536). Fellman speaks of daughters who come to repudiate attachment as a form of dangerous dependence and who are emotionally distant from their mothers (540). Such women, according to Fellman, may
be drawn to an ethic of rights rather than an ethic of responsibility, to use Carol Gilligan's terms. Their sense of morality may be one of "noninterference" (540, 541).

Literary critics and theorists are also beginning to explore the complexity of mother/daughter relationships. For example, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in volume 1 of *No Man's Land* speak of the ambivalence felt by twentieth-century women writers toward the "maternal" tradition they were beginning to recover. They speak of Virginia Woolf's "paradigmatic ambivalence toward female literary inheritance," and claim, "The love women writers send forward into the past is, in patriarchal culture, inexorably contaminated by mingled feelings of rivalry and anxiety" (194, 195). According to Gilbert and Gubar, for the literary daughter the powerful literary mother becomes the subject of both "matrophilial utopian and matrophobic dystopian meditations" (196). The literary mother becomes "a figure to whose primal relation with tradition the daughter obsessively directs her consistently ambivalent attention, at just the moment when it would seem that maternal potency ought to have healed daughterly dis-ease" (196).

If mothers and daughters are sometimes caught in webs of tension and misunderstanding, it is likely that women in other situations may be as well, especially when relationships involve power imbalances. Deanna Womack makes this point in "Conflicts Between Women at Work." After reviewing several studies, she concludes, "Women in positions of power equality may be less likely to engage other women in conflict than women in superior-subordinate relationships" (48). Evelyn Fox Keller and Helene Moglen, in their essay, "Competition and Feminism: Conflict for Academic Women," analyze and interpret stories told by colleagues in the academy and conclude, "The fact is that women seem to experience different, deeper, and more painful forms of competition with one another than they do with their male peers," and they find that competition increases with the magnitude of the stakes (494, 507). Keller and Moglen claim that the morality of the women's movement, with its emphasis on mutuality, concern, and support, is difficult to implement in the real world situations of the current academic marketplace" (502). They conclude that conflict and competition are inescapable facts of both the inner and outer realities of women's lives, and they see value in acknowledging the fact rather than denying it (510).

The authors of *Women's Ways of Knowing* suggest that our educational structures have served to separate women from each other and from knowledge and that new structures must be found that allow for connected knowing. They say in their conclusion, "Education conducted on the connected model would help women toward community, power, and integrity" (228). They tend to implicate men and exonerate women in their analysis of barriers to women's intellectual development. In the section on subjective knowledge, for instance, they speak of incest and sexual harassment as problems women often face in the home that are damaging to them.
intellectually. At the same time, they speak of the positive value for such women of turning to people close to their own experience (such as female peers, mothers, sisters, grandmothers) for validation of their own experience. Men become the villains, women the saviors. If we consider, though, that women's relationships with each other are often highly troubled, then the problem of women's silence becomes very complex and the solutions to the problem equally complex.

Works Cited


