Anyone who teaches persuasive writing has repeatedly read two kinds of ineffective papers: one that takes a well-known slogan (or a series of slogans) and beats the reader over the head with it, and one that evades the argument altogether by presenting some noncontroversial platitude as the thesis. One student may argue that “Guns don’t kill people; people do,” and another that “People should be nice to each other.” Neither paper changes the mind of an informed and intelligent reader, nor does writing either paper teach the student anything significant about the topic or about writing itself.

Interestingly enough, if you point these problems out to students, they will often tell you that they didn’t expect to persuade anyone, that they didn’t expect the paper to have any effect on the reader. This means that the students’ purpose was merely to write the paper to please the teacher. People from Quintillian to Booth have described what results when students simply fulfill a task that they perceive as arbitrary: boring and fairly pointless work for both students and teachers.

Although these two kinds of ineffective papers seem to be diametrically opposed, they both result from the same perception of persuasion, which can be summarized as follows:

1) There is no point in trying to persuade a reader because what the student believes does not matter.
2) What the student believes does not matter because the paper will not change anyone’s mind; thus, the student has nothing to gain from writing the paper.
3) The student has much to lose by writing the paper: trying to persuade an informed, intelligent, but hostile reader seems to mean that he or she will have to attack someone else and withstand someone else’s attack, and neither experience is likely to be very pleasant.

These perceptions result from the “battle” metaphor for discourse: to succeed in discourse is to win an argument; to win an argument you have to be hostile, contentious, and aggressive (Lakoff and Johnson). Some students choose to be contentious, and some choose to avoid the fight altogether. The first kind write slogan-filled papers; the second write papers filled with noncontroversial platitudes. Whenever we have a class in which most
students write either kind of paper, we are back to many of the problems for which current-traditional rhetoric was justifiably criticized: students who have no genuine interest in their papers and who write only to fulfill an assignment which has little connection to real discourse do not learn to enjoy writing. Jürgen Habermas’ theory of universal pragmatics, although itself somewhat problematic, suggests a potentially rich method of describing and teaching persuasion, a method that avoids the problems resulting from the “disagreement is war” attitude.

Cultural Assumptions about Argumentation

Behind the “disagreement is war” attitude rest essentially positivist assumptions about discourse. Since the Enlightenment, we have come to assume that attitudes are either based on facts or are “mere” opinions; they’re either rational or irrational. In either case, there is little point in dialogue. If two people disagree about something that is susceptible to being “proven” rationally, then one person is right (that is, the person’s view is grounded in fact) and the other is wrong (factually incorrect). One doesn’t settle such a disagreement through further discussion (why listen to someone who is factually incorrect?) but through determining further the correct facts. Once one has determined the facts, one simply tells them to the other participant.

If, on the other hand, the issue at hand is one not susceptible to being factually proven, then one is in the realm of “mere” opinion. It is also assumed that there is little point in such a discussion since, without the aid of “facts,” one cannot change the other person’s mind. Since people hold such opinions for irrational motives, one cannot bring any form of reason to bear. All one can do is describe one’s own opinion, but with little hope of it having any effect. People hold opinions on such matters as a result of obscure or arbitrary motives—their upbringing, unconscious desires, sheer bullheadedness—and they change their opinions for equally obscure or arbitrary reasons.

We have on the one hand positivism and on the other relativism. And the hands are clasped. In its assumption that only empirically verifiable statements have any cognitive meaning, a positivistic attitude causes people either to look for ways to “verify” statements which clearly are not susceptible to such proof or to relegate all such statements to a kind of no man’s land in which anyone can believe whatever he or she wishes and there are no standards whatsoever to which one can appeal in cases of dispute. In other words, positivism can lead to relativism.1

In practice, such an attitude toward discourse has destructive and disturbing consequences, pedagogically as well as socially. This attitude suggests that in cases of dispute one states the facts which support one’s view. If one doesn’t have the facts, one gets them. If the facts aren’t there to get, one doesn’t discuss the issue. It is easy to see why students who have this view see
little point or possibility of impact to their papers. Since they are not experts in the field, chances are that they cannot mobilize the facts to defend their positions. But there are other equally disturbing consequences. This view of discourse leads to one of two pedagogical practices: dogmatism or formalism. A dogmatic pedagogy is one in which teachers believe that they have the facts on their side and that their role first is to teach students those facts (such as “gun control is bad” or “Conrad’s Heart of Darkness means that all people have the potential for evil”) and then to evaluate student work on the extent to which it indicates that the students have learned the correct facts. A formalist pedagogy is one in which teachers assume that all positions are valid and, therefore, they must grade students not on the “content” of their papers, but on the extent to which they use certain “forms” correctly, such as standard grammar or formulaic paragraph or essay formats.

We seem to be in a double-bind: we’re forced to choose between the kind of pedagogy which Paulo Freire justifiably condemns in Pedagogy of the Oppressed and that which Wayne Booth condemns in “Boring from Within: The Art of Freshman Essay.” There is, however, a third option: we can incorporate certain aspects of Jürgen Habermas’ theories about discourse into our methods of teaching composition. 2

**Habermas and the Frankfurt School**

Initially, the Frankfurt School was founded in order to bring together different disciplines (especially Marxism and psychoanalytic theory), to provide a basis for critique of the dominant political system without simply substituting another, equally dominating system in its place. Adherents of this school, such as Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer and Habermas, have attempted to articulate a “critical theory” which would be an inherently emancipatory system of reflective thought. That is, unlike the kind of thinking done in the natural sciences (in which the observers need not reflect on their own epistemological assumptions in order to arrive at accurate observations), critical theory requires reflection and provides a way for agents to consider their own assumptions. Further, this theory is supposed to enable agents to critique the dominant ideology and perceive the true state of affairs and how they relate to their own best interests. By enabling agents to critique the dominant ideology, critical theory is supposed to provide a bridge between theory and practice.

Habermas’ work has been called “the most sustained attempt by a member of the Frankfurt School to get clear about the underlying assumptions of the critical theory” (Geuss 3). In the course of his trying to get clear about those assumptions, he has drawn on a variety of disciplines, such as hermeneutics, psychoanalysis, and Marxist thought. Recently, he has also drawn on the work of John Searle and J.L. Austin.

Central to this work is a rejection of positivism. Habermas has two quarrels with positivism: it maintains the “objectivist illusion,” and it is an
ideology that protects certain interests. The objectivist illusion is the assumption that the world is made up of facts which a person can perceive and describe "objectively" without prior interpretation. Positivism is an ideology that protects technical interests and, when applied to politics, tends to lead to a technocracy. That is, by insisting that all questions be formulated and answered a certain way (in such a way that they are susceptible to positivist interpretation) positivism gives technicians and technology greater power in politics than others possess. At the same time, however, it claims not to be privileging one group, but simply to be "objective."

For Habermas, the ideal political situation is one in which citizens control their own destiny by taking an active part in the decisions that concern them. Political issues are openly debated and decided through attaining a rational consensus in the community. In contrast, in a technocracy,

No attempt is made to attain a rational consensus on the part of citizens concerning the practical control of their destiny. Its place is taken by the attempt to attain technical control over history by perfecting the administration of society. (Theory 268)

This situation is the reverse of the role technical experts are supposed to have: that of advising or informing the political agent who ultimately makes the decision. Instead, the political agent "becomes a mere agent of a scientific intelligentsia" (Knowledge 63). What are inherently ethical or political decisions become technical questions determined by technical experts. Thus, Habermas wants to reduce the power of technocracy and the philosophical dominance of positivism.

Obviously, language and discussion are crucial to Habermas' theory of politics and political action. It is also obvious that there are certain problems with this vision. How do we go about getting rational consensus on political issues without finding ourselves back in a technocracy or in some kind of propaganda free-for-all?

Habermas' Theory of Communication

Habermas divides communicative action into two kinds: consensual communication and strategic action. Consensual communication is communication oriented toward reaching "intersubjective mutuality of reciprocal understanding, shared knowledge, mutual trust, and accord with one another" (Communication 3). It relies upon what is often called "intersubjective agreement." The notion of intersubjective agreement is an attempt to resolve the objective/subjective dichotomy.

The very process of dividing knowledge into objective and subjective has long been criticized for various reasons. One of the more obvious is that there really cannot be any such thing as "objective" knowledge because the knowledge I have is always within me. In that sense, it is always "subjective." To say that knowledge is always subjective, however, would seem to suggest
that there is no communal nature to knowledge, that it is completely individualistic. And while it is true that people do seem to understand things in somewhat different ways, it is also true that people often understand or perceive things in strikingly similar ways. There are some things which are shared by subjects and are, therefore, "intersubjective." Intersubjective agreement indicates those things upon which different subjects can agree.

There are certain advantages to talking in terms of intersubjective agreement rather than objectivity, Truth, or facts. Intersubjective agreement is necessarily contingent; it depends upon what different subjects agree to. It suggests a kind of bridge between that which may be unique to an individual and that which is shared with other individuals. And, it avoids the typical pitfalls of dichotomies like objective versus subjective. Since participants in consensual communication are trying to achieve intersubjective agreement, they do not try to "win" an argument at any cost, to manipulate the other parties, or to lie, equivocate, or conceal. They listen to the other participants. They may change their minds during the discourse.

Strategic action, in contrast, is a kind of force; participants in such communication use language as another form of domination and violence. It is the result of the assumption that discussion is a battle, that all disagreements are debates. Participants will lie, equivocate, or conceal evidence that works against them. They will not change their minds during the discussion; or, if they do, they will not let it be known.

Clearly, both attitudes toward discourse exist: some people genuinely listen to participants; others are only interested in winning. If Habermas were only pointing out these attitudes, his theories would be no better than those of the student who says people should be nice to each other. But Habermas' theory goes further. In the first place, he describes clear criteria for consensual communication. Second, he argues that consensual communication has certain obligations. Third, he argues that these obligations are inherent in language use.

Habermas suggests the following criteria for determining a successful speech act: it is comprehensible and acceptable, and accepted by the hearer. The acceptability depends upon the speaker's using language in certain ways (which will be described in the section on Habermas' use of Searle and Austin) and assuming "in a cognitively acceptable way" what Habermas calls "validity claims" (Communication 65). When we engage in consensual communication, in addition to whatever claims we explicitly make (that gun control is a bad idea or a great idea), we make certain claims implicitly. Habermas identifies four. They are that the speaker is:

1) Uttering something understandably;
2) Giving [the hearer] something to understand;
3) Making himself thereby understandable; and
4) Coming to an understanding with another person. (Communication 2)
At first glance, these are almost painfully obvious. Before any speaker and hearer can possibly reach agreement, the speaker has to say something in a way that the hearer can understand. The speaker must be saying something; there must be something under discussion. The speaker must be trying to make him or herself understandable, and there must be someone else involved in the discussion.

Habermas makes the situation somewhat more complicated by defining these criteria in particular ways. The first claim (that the speaker is "uttering something understandably") means that the speaker is making a comprehensible expression. The second, that the speaker must be giving the hearer something to understand, means that the speaker must "have the intention of communicating a true proposition (or a propositional content, the existential presuppositions of which are satisfied)." The third, that the speaker must be making himself understandable, is defined as "the speaker must want to express his desires truthfully." The fourth, that the speaker must be coming to an understanding with someone else, is redefined as "the speaker must choose an utterance that is right so that the hearer can accept the utterance, and speaker and hearer can agree with one another in the utterance with respect to a recognized normative background." This "recognized normative background" is also called a "shared value orientation" (Communication 2-3). The first is still fairly clear. The others are more difficult because it is not easy to specify what Habermas means by "true." It is modified by Habermas' use of Searle and Austin and by the third validity claim: that the speaker is making him or herself understandable.

Habermas suggests there are three more or less different realities: internal reality, external reality ("the totality of the existing state of affairs"), and social reality ("the totality of his intentional experiences") (Communication 67). Ideally, there would be little or no variance among them, but ideologies distort social and especially inner realities. One of the purposes of communication is to bring the various realities into correspondence. For example, at the beginning of this century, there was the belief that child labor was beneficial to the child and a fair practice. This employer-employee relationship was accepted as legitimate by so many that it could be categorized a "social reality." Yet, it did not fit the inner reality of the children who did not feel that it was a benefit or that it represented a contractual agreement into which they had freely entered. Nor did the social reality correspond to the existing state of affairs: illness, injury, and starvation. Proponents of the benefits and fairness of child labor, in attempting to justify their claims, would have to provide a rational defense that took into account the illness and injuries, and they would have to show how children were freely choosing to work under such conditions. They would probably have great difficulty bringing the inner reality of the children, the external reality of injury and illness, and the social reality of supposed benefit into rational correspondence.
This is not to suggest that Habermas is a positivist; he does not think that bringing these realities into rational correspondence will require that we use scientific methods or strive for "objectivity." An "objective" method would attempt to get to the truth while ignoring inner realities as totally unreliable. For Habermas, the inner reality of the speaker should not be ignored or discounted.

It is easy to imagine instances in which one or more of the validity claims is not assumed by the speaker and hearer. We do not think that an actor on the stage actually believes what he or she is saying. We do not even assume that the playwright believes the things he or she has characters say. We do not assume that words spoken in an unknown language will be understandable. But those instances are not consensual communication. After all, we do not go to a play expecting to engage in consensual communication with the actor. In general, when we are trying to reach consensus with someone else, and given no evidence to the contrary, we are likely to assume that the speaker is saying something we can understand, that it is true, that the speaker thinks it is true, and that he or she is saying it to us. If one of the claims is unfulfilled, we ask for assurances.

To understand what Habermas means by "the speaker must be saying something true," it is necessary to review Searle and Austin's philosophy of language. Briefly, Searle (himself building on theories developed by Austin) shows that any utterance has two parts: the illocutionary force and the propositional content. There are five kinds of illocutionary acts: promises, assertions, commands, questions, and requests (22-71). The propositional content may be something like "you have an apple." I can promise you will have an apple, assert that you have it, ask if you have one, command that you have one, or request that you have it.

To take another example, imagine the various kinds of utterances possible with the propositional content "the meeting is adjourned." I can promise to adjourn the meeting at a particular hour, order that the meeting be adjourned, request that it be adjourned. Each of these speech acts presents a different kind of truth claim. That is, you determine the truth accuracy of a command differently from how you do an assertion. Each kind of illocutionary act presupposes a different relationship to reality. For the command, "This meeting is adjourned" to be "true," I must be in the appropriate position to adjourn the meeting (the chair, for example); whereas for the assertion "The meeting is adjourned," it does not make any difference who I am. I may be the chair, a participant, or simply someone sitting outside the meeting room who noticed people leaving.

There are a variety of existential presuppositions for an assertion. Habermas categorizes them into three kinds: existence, identifiability, predication. For the sentence "The meeting of the subcommittee on rules has adjourned" to be true, there must have existed a subcommittee on rules and a meeting of that group (existence); the speaker and hearer must be able to
identify that particular meeting and subcommittee (identifiability); one must be able to say that it is adjourned (predication). One of the more interesting consequences of the Searle/Austin view of language is that it highlights the ways in which language use has norms. Not only are there certain ways that people can use language and still remain comprehensible, but language use itself has certain obligations. People who make promises, for example, are expected to try to fulfill them. People who make assertions are assumed to be saying something about the world. And so on.

Habermas uses Austin and Searle because their view of language supports his contention that "all communicative actions satisfy or violate normative expectations or conventions" (Communication 35). This should help clarify what Habermas means in his second validity claim: that what the speaker says must be true. Searle and Austin's view of language shows how what we say should be "true": when engaging in a speech act, we should be fulfilling the obligations inherent in the specific illocutionary act we are enacting. This is the sense in which language implies shared value orientations; by our very conventions, we have shared expectations. Habermas describes them as follows:

The bond into which the speaker is willing to enter with the performance of an illocutionary act means a guarantee that, in consequence of his utterance, he will fulfill certain conditions—for example, regard a question as settled when a satisfactory answer is given; drop an assertion when it proves to be false; follow his own advice when he finds himself in the same situation as the hearer; stress a request when it is not complied with; act in accordance with an intention disclosed by avowal, and so on. (Communication 62)

If participants in a discussion use language too unconventionally, or appeal to experiences too different from ours, we do not communicate at all, let alone reach any kind of consensus. And although we are aware that people lie and equivocate, communication relies upon our suspending that disbelief to some extent. We may be somewhat skeptical, but complete skepticism makes communication impossible. If we cannot suspend skepticism, we ask for assurances. In the ideal speech situation, people give those assurances.

This point is important. It does not mean that people in consensual communication always believe each other, nor that they always speak truth. In consensual communication, participants feel obligated to represent reality accurately. Just as someone, however hard she tries, might have difficulty making herself understandable, she may have trouble being sure she is representing reality accurately. But she feels the obligation. And, if her interlocutor points out some way that something she has said does not represent reality, she will feel that it is a problem that needs to be rectified. She may try to show that it does actually represent reality; she may reconsider her statement; she may try to separate those parts of her statement that are acceptable to the audience from those that are problematic; she'll try to determine why the interlocutor doesn't feel her statement represents reality.
Implications for Teaching

If we do adopt Habermas' view, there are several important consequences which would involve changing how we teach writing. We would emphasize persuasive writing and writing to a specific opposition audience; we would orient classes heavily toward class discussion in order to enable students to identify that audience; we would not use a predetermined formulaic essay; and we would include in our grading standards consideration of the extent to which students try to be truthful.

If, as Habermas says, the goal of communication is to reach agreement, there must be some kind of disagreement or lack of agreement of which the student is clearly aware. Thus, a course reliant on Habermas would emphasize "persuasive" rather than "expressive" writing. This does not mean such writing would have no place, but it would tend to be part of the process of coming to an opinion, determining the other participants in the decision, understanding their points of view, and discovering methods of reaching consensus. It would tend to be secondary to the goal of persuading an intelligent audience with whom one has disagreed.

In addition, students would write papers not off into the void, but to someone with whom they have disagreed or someone who has withheld agreement. Such a requirement is reinforced by Habermas' third validity claim. If the author is going to write so as to be "in accord with shared value orientations," there must be someone whose values he or she can share. Voids have no values. It is important to understand that this requirement is not fulfilled by the instructor telling students to think of how "a reader might react." A randomly picked reader might react any way at all because different readers will have different values. For example, a student might write a paper arguing against gun control. Many of those in favor of gun control cannot agree what it is. Some students mean banning all handguns; some mean registering all weapons; others mean instituting a mandatory waiting period. Some might support gun control because they are concerned about gangs using semiautomatics; others might want to reduce the number of domestic murders. A student could not possibly write a focused paper addressing handguns, semiautomatics, waiting periods, gun registration, handgun banning, as well as the potential consequences of all of these on domestic violence and on gang violence. Attempting to predict every possible response a reader might have will force the student to write a sentence or two on every point. Or, more likely, it will precipitate a writing block.

Even narrowing the topic, as many composition textbooks suggest, will not solve the problem. A student who has chosen an opposition of people who wish to ban handguns in order to reduce domestic violence but who has chosen to "narrow" the topic of gun control to the issue of semiautomatic weapons will write a paper which will seem pointless to the opposition. The student must narrow the topic in a way appropriate to the audience.
Habermas' theories would also lead us to talk of audiences not in categories (such as "teachers" or "middle class readers") but in terms of arguments. One can only begin to predict what values one might share with a particular kind of reader, ideally a reader one has met, such as students in this class who want to ban semiautomatic weapons in order to reduce gang violence. This need for a clear sense of value orientation means that, if we are going to incorporate Habermas' theory, we will have composition classrooms heavily reliant on class discussion, group work, and shared drafts. The purpose of group work is not merely to get "reader reaction" but to identify points of agreement and disagreement with a specific audience.

Certain pedagogical practices break down in this kind of course. In addition to vague directions about audience, sharp distinctions between personal and public discourse fade. "Public" discourse is no longer synonymous with argumentative stance-taking on "political" issues; "personal" discourse is not made up of purely expressive statements independent of audience consideration; and neither is sharply distinguished from "informative" writing, meaning positivistic descriptions devoid of values and uninfluenced by interest.

There are problems with Habermas. One objection to making the classroom the ideal speech situation is that the requirements of such a situation and the goal of consensus exclude students whose language or value systems are different. The argument is that trying to orient students toward consensus will orient them toward compromise. Consequently, students with minority views will be forced to express them in rational, possibly logocentric ways, and they might feel forced to give them up if they can't find rational and logical defenses.

Imagine, for example, a female student who wants to argue that certain apparently harmless practices (whistling at women on the street) are actually destructive, and imagine that she is in a primarily male class. If her peers insist that verbal comments on attractiveness are always compliments, that compliments are always nice to receive, and that she, therefore, has some kind of problem, she may have a great deal of trouble reaching that audience. One might interpret Habermas to mean that if this student cannot find rational arguments to get her peers to recognize the legitimacy of her reaction, then she must abandon not only that argument but that way of feeling. Although this concern is justifiable, it rests on a misunderstanding of Habermas. In the first place, the purpose of class discussion and shared drafts is not to have the class reach agreement, but to increase constructive disagreement, to encourage students to identify differences as well as potential areas of consensus. Students are trying to investigate the general issue, pursue different arguments, think through various stances, and hear the opposition(s). The students need not persuade each other in class.

They should try to persuade each other in their papers; but it is important to understand that the goal of consensual communication is "reciprocal
understanding, shared knowledge, mutual trust” (Communication 3; emphasis added). Each student has the same obligations. Just as the female student must recognize the inner reality of her opposition and attempt to get them to share her knowledge, the male students must do the same. Neither “side” is inherently more rational than the other; neither side has less obligation than the other.

Further, the goal of papers is consensus, not compromise. A compromise is a middle ground between two positions. Such middle ground is often not possible; even when possible it is more difficult to defend than either side, since it relies upon the sense of two divided sides. It is not possible on some issues because there is not really a middle ground. If one student wants to ban all handguns and another wants to require all homeowners to possess and be trained in the use of handguns, the middle ground position would seem to be something like half the people in the U.S. must own handguns and the other half is not allowed to (or, perhaps, all homeowners must own half a handgun). If one could find a reasonable policy that really did mediate between the two extremes, it still would not end the dispute. If one student wanted to ban semiautomatics to reduce gang violence and another felt that any weapons ban was a violation of the U.S. Constitution, they will both be dissatisfied with a policy that makes possession of a semiautomatic within city limits a felony (which would appear to be a middle ground position). The problem with the idea behind compromise is that it assumes the very model of discourse that is so problematic and then tries to tinker with it. It assumes that there are only two positions, that the two positions are extreme, and that one side or the other must abandon his or her position to resolve the difficulty.

The consensus does not have to be a grand statement of position. Attempting to fulfill the validity claims in a way that a specific opposition audience will grant will generally lead students to fairly specific claims. Rather than require students to reach agreement or compromise on the issue of gun control, we should invite students to work toward a conditional agreement on some specific aspect of it. That is, if I persuade my readers that banning semiautomatics will not reduce gang violence, I may not have changed their minds about gun control in general, but I have done something significant. It helps not to think in binary oppositions: for or against gun control, for or against abortion. I might feel that banning handguns will not reduce gang violence but still favor a ban because of other consequences I think it will have. Or, I might feel that banning handguns will reduce domestic violence but still oppose a ban for other reasons. Once students see that they don’t have to take extreme stands, that it is not a question of picking teams or of presenting an argument that must be able to withstand any attack, they are more likely to voice their opinions.

Nor is attempting to reach consensus the same as reaching Truth. Consensus is necessarily a conditional agreement. It is highly contingent in
that one may at a later date reconsider the consensus reached today. In the *Gorgias*, for example, Socrates and his interlocutors come to the conclusion that rhetoric cannot be a true art with systematic knowledge, but at best a sham art or knack. In the *Phaedrus*, though, Socrates and Phaedrus agree that it can be an art if pursued in certain ways. What seems in one circumstance to be true because the participants reach intersubjective agreement on it, is, in another circumstance and with different participants, altered. In the same way, it should be clear to a student that the argument he or she makes in one paper may be reconsidered in a later one. The student may use a paper to explore the consequences of a particular stand without vowing lifelong fealty to it.

This still leaves the objection that students whose legitimate views are strongly shaped by the ways in which they are different will be forced to think and act like the dominant rational society. This issue is especially significant given recent arguments that some students (particularly women and minorities) know the world in different ways. Does asking them to participate in the ideal speech situation mean that they must give up their ways of knowing? Must all students think and write like Habermas? Habermas points out that people are frequently excluded from discussions, often on the basis of status. Sometimes this exclusion is conscious and formalized: there are clear rules about who is allowed to speak in a courtroom and when; in many classrooms, only the instructor is allowed to speak; only certain people are allowed to vote in the United States. More often, though, exclusion is the result of unspoken rules: children are often excluded from conversation or their contributions are ignored; a layperson's suggestions are likely to be disregarded in a technical discussion. Yet, if someone's right to engage in the discussion is curtailed by his or her status, consensual communication is disrupted. That is, in the ideal classroom, women and minorities have an “equality of chances to assume dialogue roles” (McCarthy 308). Once again, in the ideal speech situation, the obligations and options are reciprocal; each student is equally obligated to redeem validity claims when necessary.

It could be argued that this is still logocentrism, especially since Habermas does say that the speakers should validate their claims through rational argument and counterargument, and it is unclear exactly what Habermas does mean by “rational.” It is clear, however, that he is not talking about some positivist goal of an objective language. After all, one of the major impetuses for his life-work is to reduce the domination of positivism. By “truth of the proposition,” Habermas does not mean only statements of fact which can be verified through technical, scientific means. A partial answer to the charge of logocentrism may be that theorists who make the arguments that women and minorities do not think logically or rationally assume that logic, rationality, and strategic action are all the same. That is, the kind of discourse that women do not want to be part of is strategic action, not what Habermas means by rational argument.
In essence, I am arguing that we try to make the classroom the ideal speech situation. Generally, it is not. Our culture tends to encourage people to resort to strategic action and to present strategic action as indistinguishable from persuasion. Persuasion and argument are often taught as fights in verbal form. In most classrooms, writing is described not as a way to reach consensus with an equal, but as a method to display knowledge of information or competence at correctness to an authority: the teacher, who knows the truth and has all the power. Incorporating Habermas' theory of communicative action will provide a different and richer model of discourse.

At this point it may sound as though I am saying that to incorporate Habermas is to end up with Freire's "liberatory education." It is not. This is not an argument for an authority-free classroom. Such a classroom, even if it's possible, may not be beneficial. We should distinguish between authority and authoritarian, or as Habermas does, between authority and violence. Following Hannah Arendt, Habermas argues that authority is given to someone whereas violence is used on someone (Profiles 171-88). That is, when someone has "authority," it is because people have freely chosen to give that person power (and they may equally as freely choose to take that power away). This is authority in the sense of someone being an authority on an issue. Arendt argues that the only legitimate source for the teacher's authority is greater knowledge. If the teacher is an authority in that sense, then ideally the teacher need not rely on various forms of coercion. In the ideal classroom, the students do work not because they are forced to but because they respect the teacher and want to learn what the teacher has to teach. According to Arendt, "The most legitimate source of the teacher's authority" is that he or she is "the person who, turn it whatever way one will, still knows more and can do more than oneself" (182). If the teacher can rely on personal authority, he or she may "abstain from all methods of compulsion." The more authority an instructor has, the less coercion he or she needs. The less authority he or she has, the more authoritarian the teacher must become.

This suggests that first we try to be authorities. Yet, this is not to say that we have all the answers; it is to say that we are well informed about the issues. In addition, we must be authorities about writing and argumentation. Students should be encouraged to question us, and we should respond with authority, not violence. It is inevitable that some students will not immediately accept what we say, that they will need assurance of our good faith and truthfulness. We are held by the same bonds as the students: to "regard a question as settled when a satisfactory answer is given; drop an assertion when it proves to be false... and so on" (Communication 62). If we vindicate our validity claims through a process of reciprocal understanding, this process will strengthen our authority and thereby reduce our need for violence.
My argument is that students often have no real purpose in writing a paper other than performing an apparently arbitrary task because perceiving communication as strategic action precludes perceiving a constructive purpose in discourse. And present methods of teaching composition assume, encourage, and reward strategic action. Habermas' theory of communicative action provides us with a much better model of persuasion. If students would perceive communication as consensually oriented, then they would have a significant intention in writing a paper. Further, they would have, as part of that intention, a motive for using language in a relatively conventional way, for providing reasons, giving examples, and gaining assent. In other words, rather than being arbitrary standards imposed from above, the characteristics of a good paper would derive from the intention. The situation would generate a purpose and the student would generate the standards. Correctness becomes a strategy, not an identity.

Changing Perceptions

But how do we change students' perception of communication? That is the hardest part of this issue, and the one on which Habermas is discouragingly vague. What follows are my suggestions.

In the first place, we need to create the ideal speech situation as much as possible within the classroom. We do this by taking on and fulfilling the validity claims ourselves. We invite students to be clear about their doubts and disagreements with us, accept their assurances of good faith, and try to be clear about providing evidence, reasons, and examples for the stands we take. That is, although the teacher still has authority, he or she may have to reclaim it. And, again, authority comes from knowledge, not from the power to grant grades, reward good behavior, or evict students.

Secondly, we must try to respond to the reasons that students don't want to participate. We can try to show students that people do change their minds by showing that we are open to having our own minds changed, and by showing them how their minds are changed through reading. This strongly suggests that close reading should be a part of teaching composition.

Also, we can use our authority in the classroom to encourage consensual communication and discourage strategic action. If our authority is not enough, we can use coercion to ensure that all voices are heard. There is a contradiction here: we may well resort to strategic action in order to prevent strategic action. It is a contradiction I have not resolved. Other than that which is necessary to preserve the discourse community, we should limit our use of strategic action.

Earlier, I listed three reasons that students don't want to participate in persuasion: that students feel what they believe doesn't matter, that they cannot persuade anyone, that to engage in discourse is to attack and be subject to attack. We can respond to the third by describing Habermas' theories and by teaching persuasion as consensual communication rather
than strategic action. We can respond to the second by showing how minds are changed. I am not sure what we can do about that first reason; that sense of insignificance and powerlessness is extremely difficult to confront. But it may be that by dealing with the second two, we can do something about the first. It may be that making students feel in control of their language, making them feel that they can persuade someone, will make them feel more powerful in general.

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Notes

1 It can also lead to absolutism. For example, a colleague of mine announced, "The right answers on issues like abortion and so on are clear; it's just a question of educating the masses."

2 See Habermas' essay on language and communication, "What is Universal Pragmatics?" in Communication. For more on Habermas, see especially McCarthy. For the best history of the Frankfurt School, see Jay.

3 Because Habermas is so thorough and so thoroughly concerned with philosophical rigor, it is more productive for the purposes of this argument to examine his theories than those of others who have made similar suggestions but in less rigorous ways (such as Wayne Booth, Chaim Perelman, Kenneth Burke, or Stephen Toulmin).

4 Also, Habermas is setting out a program of study. Searle and Austin clearly define the kind of language use in which Habermas is most interested.

5 For a rather moving description of despair about the consequences of radical skepticism upon a community of discourse, see Booth's Dogma.

6 This may not seem different but it is. The latest pedagogical trends put so much emphasis on group work that students might not discuss an issue as a whole class.

7 For this argument, see Simpson.

8 For example, see Lakoff; or, for a slightly different perspective, see Annas.

9 For example, see O'Reilly.

10 I am not imagining teachers taking stands on the issues about which students write, but on such matters as when papers are due, what the grading standards are, why there is assigned reading, and so on.

Works Cited


O'Reilly, Mary Rose. "'Exterminate...the Brutes'—And Other Things That Go Wrong in Student-Centered Teaching." *College English* 51 (1989): 142-46.


**ATAC Elections**

Elections for officers of the Association of Teachers of Advanced Composition will be held at the ATAC special interest session of the Conference on College Composition and Communication convention in March 1991. Please send nominations and self-nominations to Irene F. Gale; Department of English; University of South Florida; Tampa, FL 33620-5550. All nominees must be present at the special interest session.