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**Are Shared Discourses Desirable?**

**A Response to Nancy McKoski**

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Nancy McKoski’s principal objection to my work, as expressed in her essay “A Postmodern Critique of the Modern Projects of Fredric Jameson and Patricia Bizzell,” is that, according to her, I want to impose a “universalizing methodology” of “rational debate” on everyone (334). Perhaps McKoski
sees me doing this because I did once advocate teaching traditional academic discourse to all students. And traditional academic discourse is often characterized by its defenders (such as contemporary proponents of so-called “critical thinking”) as possessing a universally applicable method of rational argument. Still, in my presentation of academic discourse, I stressed its social construction in particular academic communities rather than any putative transcendent structure, and I justified teaching it primarily on grounds that it would enable previously disenfranchised students to succeed in college and gain access to more power in the wider culture. I did not claim that it would teach them to think.

In my more recent work, however, starting with “Foundationalism and Anti-Foundationalism in Composition Studies” (1986), I have moved away from the advocacy of teaching traditional academic discourse, and I explicitly reject it in the “Introduction” to Academic Discourse and Critical Consciousness (1992). Indeed, the reason-for-being of this book is to state publicly that my views on academic discourse have changed and to chronicle the process of change. In “Marxist Ideas in Composition Studies” (1991), I try to analyze the rejected position as a now-failed strategy for coming to terms with my own complicity in social injustice as a middle-class white person. I no longer advocate teaching traditional academic discourse to all students.

I do, however, still believe that some kind of shared discourse is needed for the shared work of the academic community to continue; and even more so, I believe the nation needs some kind of shared discourse in which to address the pressing political problems that confront us all. McKoski seems to be operating within a fairly rigid analytic system in which anyone who expresses a hope for anything shared is automatically advocating a monolithic discourse, the definition of this discourse’s content in terms of traditional cultural materials and argumentative practices, and the imposition of this discourse by force on all social groups. I am not advocating any of these things.

Actually, I think what is needed is precisely a pluralistic discourse. Academic discourse’s own claims to universality have been discredited by the growth of the population of college students who do not feel comfortable with it; it must not be universal if so many have trouble with it. I never thought it was universal; in my earlier arguments, I treated it something like a foreign language, such as French, which has no inherent superiority over any other language but which can and should be learned by anyone who wants to communicate well with French people (see, for example, Bruce Herzberg’s and my attack on E.D. Hirsch’s argument for the cognitive superiority of Standard English). I now reject even this moderate, “bi-cultural” view of teaching academic discourse, mainly because I now see it as too wasteful of the brilliant rhetorical resources that could be brought to common discourses by cultures that were largely excluded from the formation of academic discourse.
What is now happening is that new common discourses for the academy and the national polity are being formed by the negotiated incorporation of different cultural elements. For example, styles of writing more congenial to women are becoming accepted as “scholarly” due to experimentation by feminist writers; styles of oratory more congenial to African Americans are becoming accepted as appropriately “political” due to claims to the national stage enforced by the Reverend Jesse Jackson and other powerful African American political leaders. I don’t say that we have new, pluralistic discourses now. I don’t say we will ever have them; rather, I think a truly pluralistic discourse is one that regards itself as provisional and continually in need of revision and negotiation. But the effort I see happening that I want to participate in and foster is the effort to keep this project of pluralistic shared discourses going.

Insofar as I can contribute to these projects as a teacher and scholar in the field of rhetoric, in my most recent work I have tried to build up theoretical arguments to legitimize the project as a project, and to legitimate teachers’ directive participation in the project with their students. I have attempted to articulate these arguments not because I think that if they exist they will magically bring about the desired changes, but rather because I hope they will persuade other teachers and students to join in the project and not hang back because, like McKoski, they are overcome with fears that such a project must be exclusionary.

McKoski does not seem to be aware of these developments in my most recent scholarship, and she seriously misrepresents some of my views. I feel obliged here, then, to note a few representative misrepresentations before I go on to address the pedagogical implications of our disagreement over the desirability of shared discourses.

Representative Misrepresentations
As for McKoski’s complaint that the methodology I would impose is “universalizing,” I have never claimed this and have in fact explicitly rejected it:

A focus on the means of persuasion implies not only a notion of the provisionality of all arguments but also a view of literacy as something local... In classical times, such study [of the means of persuasion] appeared to be the study of universal human nature because rhetoricians typically had to do with a single, homogeneous audience. Increasingly since the Renaissance, however, rhetoric has sought to deal with the pluralism of the modern condition. (“Arguing” 249)

Someone who believes in rational debate will not see all arguments as provisional, as I do above, because presumably for that person some arguments can be proven rationally to be correct. Someone who seeks a universalizing methodology will not condemn the classical scholars, as I do above, for imagining that their culture-bound work reflected universals. And someone who ignores the social structure of both ancient and contemporary
communities will not note, as I do above, the homogeneity of the classical audience or the pluralism of more modern ones ("modern" meaning post-Renaissance Western times).

Moreover, to foster a rhetoric that represents the pluralism of the (post)modern condition, I have urged the development of collaborative processes in both academic rhetoric and a general civic rhetoric. I call for "teaching academic literacy" to become "a process of constructing academic literacy, creating it anew in each class through the interaction of the professor's and the students' cultural resources" ("Arguing" 251). I describe the academic discourse community as "fraught with contradiction" and "polyvocal," and I claim that "this instability is a sign of its health, its ability to adapt to changing historical conditions. I think it would be a mistake to rush closure on a unitary conception of what academic discourse should be and then turn this concept into a Procrustean bed that all student—and professorial—writing must fit ("Beyond" 258). If I were nostalgic for some imagined unitary academic discourse, I would certainly not call instability a positive condition.

Similarly, on a general civic rhetoric, I note that "a relatively stable and unitary form of this discourse" does not exist and could only exist in unacceptable "circumstances that greatly limited the group of people who had access to it in terms of race, sex, and social class" ("Beyond" 259). Far from deploring this lack of a unitary discourse, I say that I "regard the present instability of national discourse—or more precisely, the open-endedness of the question of whether we can have a national discourse at all—as an opportunity" ("Beyond" 259).

It is true that I hope this opportunity will allow a national collaborative project to work on a new, more pluralistic shared academic discourse, and a "more collective, pluralistic, inclusive national discourse" ("Beyond" 259). But I acknowledge the difficulties of this project. I hope to address them, in part, by arguing that the authority to be persuasive can only be "derived from ideologies that already have some currency in the community" ("Beyond" 273). The collaborative integrity of this process is maintained if we believe that

Knowledge is not a content conveyed by rhetoric; knowledge is what ensues when rhetoric is successful, when rhetorician and audience reach agreement. If this is true, then by the same token, rhetoricians cannot share a community's knowledge while remaining unchanged. . . . Your own thinking is inevitably influenced by what you have to do to persuade the other person. ("Arguing" 249-50)

I have recently tried to suggest that critical pedagogy can only function if this notion of authority is substituted for the exercise of power in the classroom by teacher or student (see my review-essay on the work of bell hooks, Henry Giroux, and Mike Rose, "Classroom." It follows that the content of the new discourses cannot be nothing but traditional canonical material, such as McKoski claims I advocate. The content must represent the cultural archives
of all groups involved in the collaboration. Achieving this kind of synthesis is so difficult that I note: "I do not know that anyone has yet articulated a truly collaborative pedagogy of academic literacy, one that successfully integrates the professor's traditional canonical knowledge and the students' non-canonical cultural resources. Certainly I cannot do so" ("Arguing" 251).

The kind of collaborative work for which I am calling requires a very different kind of scholarly writing than that practiced by McKoski here. James Sosnoski has characterized the kind of work I am looking for as embodying "intellectual compassion" which "allows one intellectual to enter imaginatively into the problems of another" (52). But I feel that McKoski not only does not make a good-faith effort to understand what I am trying to get at, but she bases many of her criticisms of me on phrases taken out of context and interpretations that ignore the tendency of my recent work. Sosnoski also calls for "intellectual concurrence," that is, "an agreement to join intellectual forces to get something done," in which "differences among the researchers are allowed free play" because "any idea that helps solve the problem helps" (52). In contrast, McKoski is practicing what Sosnoski calls "getting-at-my-truth" criticism, in which the object is to show that the ideas of no one but the present writer have any merit (52). Sosnoski notes that this may be helpful to the individual's career—indeed, his analysis begins in the argument that nineteenth-century capitalistic, male-coded models of competition pervade contemporary agonistic styles of criticism—but not to addressing the pressing cultural conflicts on which criticism ought to try ultimately to shed some light.

Texts and Cultures

It may seem that I have proceeded unfairly in my reply to McKoski here, since I have cited some works of mine that she does not discuss. I feel justified in doing so, however, because McKoski claims to be the master of my whole "project," sufficiently so that she can take over from me the right to name it. I'm sorry that McKoski decided to take this tack in her discussion of my work. I wish she had focused on a few of my early essays and explained in detail what was wrong with the treatment of academic discourse there. It would have been particularly helpful, for example, if she had done that with "Cognition, Convention, and Certainty," because this is a widely read essay and I now think some of the ideas in it about academic discourse are wrong.

I'm also sorry to have to criticize McKoski's handling of my work because I agree with many of the ideas she affirms. I agree with McKoski's praise for "theories"—or, I would say, "rhetorics"—that "are admittedly interested and partial, as well as historically and geographically limited" (330). It is to attempt to reveal the interestedness of our own practices that I suggest we should be "forthright in avowing the ideologies that motivate our teaching and research" ("Beyond" 272). I also agree with McKoski's desire not to "categorize or essentialize" difference (330), which is why I recommend
seeking pedagogies that facilitate the "cross-referencing of interests" and students' (and teachers') exploration of "the historical rootedness of their own several... positions" ("Afterword" 291, 292). Furthermore, I agree with McKoski's contention that "Studying difference(s) may be the most useful way for mainstream students to understand how their responses—beliefs, opinions, language, arguments—reflect their own cultural backgrounds" (342). I would add that the same holds true for "non-mainstream" students (but I would question McKoski's use of the term "mainstream" to mean, apparently, naive white middle-class students whose views of difference are in need of correction; I think such naive students are really now in the minority and that most students have more experience of difference that McKoski gives them credit for).

McKoski also emphasizes that she wants to treat difference "simply in terms of itself, what it is in its own right" (330). This is why she faults Jameson for advocating the study of "popular and/or marginalized cultural texts" "only insofar as they provide the 'other' voice in reconstructing the class dialogue or struggle that (single-voiced) hegemonic texts suppress or reappropriate" (336). She argues that "texts affirming non-hegemonic voices might be important in and for themselves and the cultures they represent" (336). I agree with McKoski that these texts have value "in and for themselves." But while I know that texts from cultures other than my own have this value, I also know that studying texts from cultures other than one's own presents great difficulties. If I study a text from a culture other than my own, I am of necessity taking it out of its original cultural context. I don't think I am equipped to read such texts "in and for themselves." Indeed, I fear that any attempt by me to do so is likely to result in appropriation, disrespect, or what I might call "profanation" of these texts. At the same time, I believe that I can understand something about such texts. I don't want to rule myself out of reading or teaching them because I and my students need them in order to learn more about the diverse cultural riches that should be, and will be, in the new shared discourses that are developing.

One way to approach this difficulty is for me to begin with texts from other cultures that were written to be shared across cultural boundaries, that were intended for what Mary Louise Pratt calls "contact zones" where cultures meet and negotiate. For example, if I want my students and myself to learn more about Native American rhetorical resources, I would not go first to a text such as a written, English version of originally oral Navajo religious poetry; rather, I would go to a text such as the "Eulogy on King Philip" (1836) by William Apess (Pequot), written in English to be spoken to, and then published for, a primarily non-Native American Boston audience. And if we read this, I might also want my students to read Englishman William Bradford's account of Plymouth Plantation's dealings with Apess' people, so that they can appreciate how Apess takes his account apart.
Admittedly, in doing this, I am attempting to reconstruct "the class dialogue . . . hegemonic texts suppress or reappropriate," but I don't think this is such a bad thing. My project, in collaboration with rhetoricians alive and dead, early-nineteenth-century William Apess and late-twentieth-century Holy Cross students, is to try to construct shared discourses in which such dialogues can occur. I guess McKoski thinks we shouldn't rush on to that project before giving individual voices enough time to be heard. But I don't want to subscribe to this individual/collective dichotomy. I would prefer to think that the endless, ever-receding project of seeking shared discourses, pursued via persuasion exercised across cultural boundaries, is the best thing any individual can do with anyone else right now. I think we should all be helping each other to pursue this project.

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Notes
1 I would like to thank Sarah Schlegel, Holy Cross 1994, for bringing Sosnoski's essay to my attention.

Works Cited

—. "Afterword." Academic 277-95.
—. "Introduction." Academic 3-30.


