Peer Response in the Multicultural Composition Classroom: Dissensus–A Dream (Deferred)

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The use of peer response in writing classes has long been touted as a means of granting students increased authority over their reading and writing. By instituting peer responding, the theory goes, the teacher gives up his or her place as the only authority in the classroom, allowing students to share authority in the evaluation of their own and their peers' writing. As such, peer response has often been seen as an integral part of a liberal, sometimes even a radical, pedagogy. Early proponents of peer response, particularly Kenneth Bruffee, have argued that asking students to work collaboratively on their writing eases their initiation into academic ways of thinking and writing and gives them some power over that initiation. Operating from an epistemology that sees knowledge as socially constructed by members of established knowledge-making communities who "share the same paradigms and the same code of values," Bruffee reasons that in order for students to become knowers, they need to learn to "converse better" using the "normal discourse" of these communities (643).

To become "knowers" within the university, then, students must learn to use the university's recognized language.

As Bruffee has acknowledged, his commitment to collaborative learning grew out of his experience teaching writing during the 1970s in the Open Admissions program at the City University of New York, a program based on the ideal of extending higher education to students once excluded from the university. And on the surface, peer response as a form of collaborative learning does seem to advance the aims of a liberal pedagogy by treating students who were once outsiders as insiders, as apprentice members of the academic community. But as Greg Myers and John Trimbur have argued, Bruffee's model of peer response might not be as beneficial to students as he imagines. Although Bruffee's pedagogy does give students practice in how to become members of established knowledge-making communities, it does not give them a mechanism for critiquing those communities. Basing their views on a Marxist critique of knowledge production in a capitalist culture,
Myers and Trimbur find particular fault with Bruffee’s valorization of community consensus. As Myers and Trimbur see it, a theory of collaboration that emphasizes consensus downplays the existence of conflict or dissent and ignores the role that existing power relations play in the collaborative group and in the larger culture. As a result, Bruffee’s pedagogy fails to address adequately the issues of cultural difference that have become an increasingly important focus in composition courses, especially those that seek to be “multicultural.”

Both Myers and Trimbur argue for an approach to collaborative learning that attends to the nature of difference and dissent that exists within groups. Such an approach would enable teachers and students to go beyond a mere replication of established knowledge-making communities to a critique of those communities’ practices, practices that inevitably include the silencing of difference and the maintenance of the status quo. Myers admits that he does not have specific suggestions for how to implement this collaboration-as-critique in the classroom. Instead, he recommends that teachers adopt a new stance toward their teaching, “an awareness that one’s course is part of an ideological structure that keeps people from thinking about their situation, but also a belief that one can resist this structure and help students to criticize it” (169). Trimbur sees collaborative learning as the means by which students can learn to do this kind of questioning. According to Trimbur, “Students’ experience of non-domination in the collaborative classroom can offer them a critical measure to understand the distortions of communication and the plays of power in normal discourse.” For Trimbur, replacing an emphasis on consensus in the classroom with “a rhetoric of dissensus”—a way of talking productively about difference—can help students “demystify the normal workings of discourse communities,” workings that typically include the erasure or silencing of difference (615).

Because of this emphasis on dissensus, the view of collaborative learning espoused by Myers and Trimbur seems particularly relevant to writing courses that seek to recognize multiculturalism by validating the cultural differences that exist both inside and outside the classroom. If, by working in groups, students can learn to recognize and value their own and others’ differences, then perhaps they will be equipped to critique the ways in which established knowledge-making communities ignore or erase difference in order to maintain a single, authoritative, “normal discourse.”

Or perhaps not. While both Myers and Trimbur note the ways in which institutionalized groups work to normalize themselves, they hold out hope that student groups within progressive classrooms can somehow escape from, or at least step outside of, this normalizing function. Unfortunately, they can give only theoretical answers to questions regarding how collaboration might play itself out in concrete classroom settings. Important as their work has been, it has not told us what really happens when groups of students work together in writing classes that explicitly value difference. When we
look at real classrooms, the way dissensus works becomes complicated. Despite the efforts of teachers to create the critical stance toward academic discourse that Myers and Trimbur advocate, the normalizing function of the institution does not always allow for such idealized dissensus to occur. In this article, I offer a small but detailed picture of how a dissensus pedagogy can be constrained by the institutional context in which it is taught. In particular, I focus on one peer response group in a class designed to be multicultural and to value difference. While I realize this one group does not allow me to generalize about all dissensus or consensus pedagogy, I believe that such microanalyses of real students are a necessary part of the dialectic between our theories and the reality of practice.

Collaboration in the Multicultural Writing Class: Institutional Contexts

In order to explore the role that difference might play in collaborative groups in a multicultural composition class, I conducted an ethnographic study of peer response in a second-level writing course entitled, “African-American Voices in Literature: Intermediate Essay Writing.” Taught at a large state university in the midwest, this course was designed as part of the University’s new General Education Curriculum which requires students to take three writing-intensive courses. According to the university's guidelines, the second-level writing course should emphasize the skills of expository writing and oral presentation, with the ultimate goal of extending students' ability to read carefully and express ideas effectively. The guidelines also state that the second-level writing course should focus on cultural diversity in America with special attention given to issues of race, class, gender, and ethnicity. Like many multicultural courses lodged in an institutional context, this course seems to embody an irreconcilable tension between the institution's goals for teaching writing as “preparation” and the goals of valuing difference within the academy.

While the institutional goals of the course pose a subtle challenge to the normal workings of the academic community, the local context made these goals more explicit. Even the racial make-up of the class let students know that this course was somehow “different” from most of their classes. At this university, a majority of the students are white; in a typical class of twenty-five, it is unusual to find more than one or two students of color. “African American Voices,” however, enrolled eleven African American women, five African American men, two white women, and one Asian American woman. For many students, this was the first class they had ever taken in which African Americans were so clearly the majority. Another important “difference” in this class was that the instructor, MJ, was one of the few female African-Americans on the faculty. MJ, a specialist in rhetoric and composition who had written the original proposal for this course, was committed to giving students access to literature not normally taught in the English department. In the specific class I observed, the reading list included only
works by African American authors, ranging from *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* to the film *Straight out of Brooklyn*. By asking students to read texts exclusively by African Americans, MJ implicitly challenged the norms of the academy.

MJ also challenged the established standards of the institution in the kind of writing she asked students to do. On the first day of class, MJ made it clear that although they would be reading literature, this would not be a traditional literature class focused on the interpretation of texts. Instead, students would be writing about the *issues* raised in the texts, and they would be permitted to use their own experience, in addition to the texts, as support for their ideas. MJ intended this dual validation of authority to be both liberating and challenging for students. She explained,

> As we got started talking about the issues, I realized many of the people in the class don't have a lot of experience talking about texts so to get them to move from [talking about their experience to talking about texts] might be harder. Or all their experience would be outside of texts and the whole idea of using texts as support for your position would be something that we would have to learn over time. . . . I'm one of those people who actually thinks that in the academy lived experiences always get pushed aside as invalid, and I am not the kind of scholar who likes to call on texts all the time. I think lived experiences have to find a place in the academy or you just exclude a whole group of people. . . . As far as I'm concerned, though, the goal is to bring the two together.

MJ was committed to giving her students, and especially her African American students, the opportunity to feel that their experience counted, an opportunity she thought rarely happened in “normal” academic practice. But MJ did not want students to reject academic ways of thinking and writing altogether. MJ commented, “I'm really trying to affirm their own experience while at the same time trying to move them to a more balanced view of academic ways of thinking.” For example, she felt obligated to teach them to use textual authority in ways that were deemed acceptable by the academy and that were mandated by the university's guidelines for the second-level writing course. Thus, while MJ wanted to complicate and extend notions of academic authority, she did not discount that authority. In this sense, MJ took exactly the stance that Myers recommends. She saw herself as obligated by virtue of her employment in the institution to pass on the institution's values. But she also sought to teach students to question those values. While class discussion often focused on analyzing literary texts, for example, MJ encouraged students to draw on their experience in understanding those texts. In one class discussion, MJ was particularly pleased when a student compared Langston Hughes’ folk philosopher Semple to Mr. Gaines, a character from the television show “A Different World,” remarking that in most English classes students don’t dare admit that they watch television.

We can also see MJ’s dual stance toward the norms of the institution in one of the prompts she gave students for their second critical essay:
Many people believe that one criterion of good literature is that it is timeless (i.e., has universal appeal across time and audience). Pick two poems from our selection of readings which, though written many decades ago, speak to (or articulate) a contemporary issue(s). Explain the issue(s) and how the poems illustrate this universality.

This prompt reveals MJ's careful attempt to validate both the textual authority that is normally valued by the university and the authority of lived experience that is typically devalued. The notion that good literature is timeless or universal, that it can articulate an enduring truth, is a traditional literary one that grants certain texts a kind of transcendent power. However, by asking students to discuss the ways in which a poem might speak to (as distinguished from articulate) a contemporary issue, she is asking them to use their own sense of relevance in determining what makes a text “timeless” or “universal.” In other words, she is suggesting that texts are not universal in and of themselves but have relevance to contemporary readers only because those readers designate them as relevant. By extending academic authority to include the authority of lived experience, MJ implicitly allowed multiple grounds of authority to coexist in her classroom. Such a move challenges the rules of “normal” academic discourse that require there to be one source of authority: the authority of texts.

Through her course goals, assignments, and the nature of class discussions, then, MJ validated the use of at least two different kinds of authority on which to base a claim: lived experiences and textual authority. By continually validating both types of authority, MJ ensured that her students would feel free to argue from both. However, when these students were left on their own, in peer response groups, their responses to texts did not mirror MJ's goals of accepting multiple levels of authority. Instead, in the group I examined, the strength of the normalizing discourse of the academy made itself present. In particular, I will show how one student's alliance with established academic standards, especially the emphasis on textual authority, led to a forced consensus by group members that silenced the very kind of differences being validated by the class.

**Peer Response in “African American Voices in Literature”**

MJ assigned students to peer response groups early in the quarter and asked them to respond to each of the four essays they were required to write. In putting the groups together, MJ tried to be sure that each group had at least one strong writer or leader and that there were no apparent conflicts among group members. Because I was particularly interested in the role that “difference” would play in students' responses to their peers' texts, I chose to study closely the peer response group that seemed the most diverse. The group had four members: Beth, a white woman who was a senior majoring in English; Carol, an African American woman and sophomore honors student; Patricia, a Korean American woman and senior history major; and Robert, an African American man who was a well-known college athlete majoring in business.

For the peer responding session that is my focus here, Beth, Carol, and Patricia were present. Of three writing prompts, each had chosen to respond to the one that invited students to consider the universality or
timelessness of the poems they had read. They did so, however, in strikingly different ways. Beth wrote a fairly traditional literary essay, one based on a close reading of the texts and organized around a single thesis. In this essay, entitled “Feminist Interpretations,” she argues that Jean Toomer’s “Karintha” and Langston Hughes’ “Harlem (A Dream Deferred)” are universal in that they deal with what she calls “the keeping down of women.” Beth makes her case for the universality of these texts by comparing them to Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* and Doris Lessing’s “To Room Nineteen,” two more-or-less canonical literary works by white women. This essay was fairly characteristic of Beth’s approach to all of the reading and writing assigned in the class. For Beth, what makes a piece of literature “good” is not its relevance to her personal experience (as a white woman, none of the literature read in class spoke directly to her experience) but its appeal to what she called “universal human emotion.” As an English major, Beth has been trained to read and value literature for its transcendent qualities; and as a writer of fiction, Beth tries to create literature that she imagines will have universal appeal. Because Beth values the power of literary texts, it is not surprising that she uses her knowledge of literature to construct herself as an authority in her writing, providing as support for her arguments textual evidence gleaned not only from the texts assigned in class, but from texts she has read elsewhere, texts that are often unfamiliar to her classmates. Significantly, she did not seem to see her approach as one option among many, but as the “right” way to write about texts.

Carol took a much more experience-based approach in her essay about the universalism of literature. In “Going Out With a Bang,” Carol wrote in response to the poems “If We Must Die” by Claude McKay and “We Wear the Mask” by Paul Dunbar. For Carol, what makes these poems universal is not their appeal across audiences but their relevance across time. Specifically, Carol argues that McKay’s call for African Americans to struggle to their deaths for freedom is as compelling today as it was when the poem was written, citing the Rodney King case as support for her claim. While Beth relies on texts by white women as her source of authority, Carol relies on examples from contemporary African American experience; and while for Beth, “universal” necessarily implies an erasure of race-specific appeals, for Carol there can be no such erasure. In an interview, Carol admitted that even in her introductory writing course where she was the only African American student and where the only text they read by an African American was a poem by Langston Hughes, she still managed to write exclusively about racial issues.

Patricia’s essay was different from Beth’s and Carol’s, most notably in its multiple focuses. In Patricia’s paper, titled simply “Toomer and Cullen,” Patricia asserts two unrelated theses, each with a different kind of support. In the first part of her essay, Patricia argues that Toomer’s “Karintha” is universal because it illustrates the devastating consequences of sexual abuse.
This part of her paper is composed largely of generalizations: Patricia cited neither textual support nor personal experience to lend authority to her assertions. In the second half, Patricia argues that what makes Countee Cullen's poem "Heritage" universal is that it describes the problem of being torn between two cultures, which Patricia sees as a continuing problem for minorities in the U.S. Here, Patricia supports her discussion of the problem of double consciousness by referring to her experience as a Korean American who came to the U.S. when she was ten years old. This essay is typical of much of Patricia's writing in the class. While Beth relied on the authority of literary texts and Carol relied on the authority of her perspective as an African American, Patricia struggled throughout the quarter to find a way to speak authoritatively. In her "Toomer and Cullen" essay, Patricia took what came to be a characteristically dual stance toward the issue of African American experience. On the one hand, like Beth, Patricia wants to erase or downplay an emphasis on racial difference. According to Patricia, one of the problems with these "culture classes" as she called them (and here she included the one she had taken on Korean American experience) is that there is too much emphasis on difference and not enough on commonalities. On the other hand, Patricia is sympathetic with the special problems faced by minorities in the U.S., often comparing the problems of African Americans to the problems of Asian Americans. In this sense, she is like Carol, who relied on her lived experience as a source of authority in her reading and writing about texts. But, of course, she is also not like Carol: she is not an African American whose perspective is especially validated by the course content, or by the class dynamics, or by the instructor. In this class, perhaps as much as or more than in a class dominated by members of the majority culture; Patricia felt herself to be an outsider.

By MJ's standards, all three writers based their arguments on acceptable types of authority. However, Beth, in assuming that she knows the correct way to write about texts, tried to convince her group members that these multiple authorities are inadequate. Because Beth's group members acknowledge her experience with texts, they allow her to subvert the local contexts MJ set up in the class, and grant authority to what they intuit as her more authoritative voice.

Reading A Peer Response Session
Beth, who easily asserted a text-based authority in class discussion and in her writing, assumed a similarly authoritative stance in her peer response group. From the moment peer response began, Beth seemed completely comfortable acting as an authoritative reader of her peers' writing. Beth opened the peer response session (the group's second but her first) by telling Carol and Patricia, "Before we start this, I do a lot of workshopping and used to tutor writing students, okay? So I'm not being harsh when I'm saying stuff on your papers. I don't mean it that way." In response to Beth's announcement,
Patricia said, "I think that's kind of good," and Carol added, "Yeah." Since both Carol and Patricia had described the first peer response session as difficult primarily because they were inexperienced as responders, it seems likely they found Beth's authoritative stance comforting: certainly she would know what they were supposed to do. After all, Beth's claim to authority in peer responding was based on her certification by the institution; she had taken the university's peer tutoring course and had been authorized by the institution to advise other students about their writing.

Beth's statement also reveals that she is accustomed not just to responding but to issuing criticism in response to others' writing, criticism that is sometimes considered "harsh." By assuring Carol and Patricia that she doesn't intend her remarks to hurt their feelings, she is setting them up to expect negative comments while also warning them not to take those comments personally and to see her criticism as in their best interest. She is thus putting them in a position of having to take whatever she says without questioning it. Given her remarks, it seems likely that Beth does not think of Carol and Patricia as peers who share her values. In an interview, Beth told me that one of the reasons she disliked peer response was that, as a creative writing major, she was used to workshops in which everyone took their peers' writing seriously and people felt free to criticize each other's writing without fear of hurting people's feelings. In this class she felt she had to control her criticism, depending on how much a person could handle. While her sensitivity might be seen as a good thing, it was, by her own admission, a product of her sense that her classmates were not up to her standards of critiquing. Beth commented, "Maybe it's just because I'm impatient, I don't know, but being older than most of these students I'm in class with, and having much more writing experience than they do, really gets frustrating."

After these introductory remarks from Beth, the group agreed to read and then discuss one paper at a time, writing comments directly on the draft. They started with Patricia's paper. As might be expected, Beth found it easy to act as an authority in response to Patricia's draft, both in her written comments and in group discussion. For example, Beth asserted her authority in the sheer number of marks that she made on Patricia's text, marks that included crossing out sentences, correcting verb tenses, changing words, and underlining and circling words and phrases that Beth then commented on. In addition, Beth's discursive comments on Patricia's draft were written in an explicitly authoritative tone. Beth often gave instructions for revision, for example, "This needs clarifying!" By using the imperative voice, Beth further established herself as an authority whose advice must be obeyed. More important than Beth's tone, however, was the nature of the commentary she uttered so forcibly: in both her written comments and discussion of Patricia's draft, she constantly searched for the textual authority the institution values. For example, Beth questioned Patricia's assertion that "Cullens had become an example for the black people," asking if she had gotten this information.
In the group's discussion of Patricia's draft, Beth continued playing the role of the authority. She initiated and controlled the discussion, the bulk of which was devoted to Beth's explanation of her written comments. Although Beth began her critique of Patricia's paper by commenting on what she called "superficial things" like inconsistent verb tenses, she quickly extended her criticism to the content of Patricia's paper, questioning Patricia's interpretations of "Karintha" and "We Wear the Mask." For example, Beth asked Patricia if she really meant to say that Karintha felt worthless, adding that she had not interpreted Karintha that way. She then told Patricia, "You have to quote directly from the text to back up your idea." In this exchange, Beth took the position of the skeptical academic reader who requires textual evidence in order to be convinced. But she also represented the "teacher" who has the "right" interpretation confronting the student who is "wrong." Beth took on a similar stance when she asked Patricia, "In Dunbar's 'We Wear the Mask,' remember? Who do you say wears the mask?" Recognizing by Beth's tone that she may have made an interpretive error, Patricia responded not by looking at her draft to see what she had written, but by declaring that she doesn't know and will have to reread the poem. Even though Patricia acknowledged a need to reconsider what she has written, Beth went on to correct her reading of the poem, saying directly to Patricia: "It is 'we' who are wearing the mask. 'They' may be wearing the mask but that's not the issue. That's not what the poem was about; that's not what the poet was talking about. So, you are forced to deal with what the poet is talking about. You've got to stick with the text." Beth did not seem to trust Patricia to "get it right" even on a second reading and thus felt compelled to give her the "right" answer and to remind her that "right" answers can only be found through a correct reading of the text.

In addition to presenting herself as an authority in the interpretation of literature, Beth also presented herself as an experienced member of the academic discourse community, at least the one that values textual evidence above all. Beth told Patricia, "I wrote this everywhere [on your paper]. The text is your authority. The text is always your starting point." Commenting on one of Patricia's unsupported generalizations, Beth warned, "You have to get that out of the text. If you don't you're not allowed to put that in. It's against the rules, whatever rules there are." Near the end of the response session, Beth advised Patricia to draw more explicit parallels between her experience as an Asian American and the double consciousness Dunbar describes in "We Wear the Mask." Said Beth,

All the time, I wrote this all over the place, you need comparable parallels to the text. The text is your authority and you're reaching from the text out to find examples from what you are to bring back to the text and compare it. The text is always your starting point. The text is your authority. Either you have it from the media or literature or everyday life but you need something to prove it, okay, and that's what the text is. That's why you have to stay with it.
Here, Beth seemed on the verge of allowing that something other than literature could stand as support for Patricia's ideas—media or everyday life, she suggested. But such a suggestion was buried in the middle of a long comment that began and ended with an assertion of the text's authority.

It is not particularly surprising that Beth was able to act as an authority in response to Patricia's writing. During whole class discussions of the readings, Patricia's comments were often tentative, exhibiting neither the authority of experience with literary interpretation nor the authority of personal experience with African American issues. As a consequence, Beth might have easily felt herself to be a more authoritative reader than Patricia, even before she read her writing. And because English was Patricia's second language, her writing contained many surface errors not common in the writing of native speakers—problems with word endings, prepositions, verb tenses—that might have reinforced Beth's sense that she was a more authoritative writer as well. Further, Patricia acknowledged Beth's authority, commenting, "[Beth] knows what she's doing, she's very qualified, I think. She just tells me a lot of things that I can do better."

What is somewhat surprising is the ease with which Beth asserted authority over Carol's writing. Given that "African American Voices" focused exclusively on literature by African Americans, was taught by an African American instructor, and enrolled a clear majority of African American students, one might expect Beth to grant Carol some authority as an African American, an authority that Beth herself could not presume to assert. But Beth proceeded to judge Carol's writing according to the same standards she used to judge Patricia, and presumably herself: the established standards of "normal" academic writing that privilege textual authority and devalue the authority of lived experience.

In her written comments on Carol's draft, Beth assumed her characteristic authoritative stance, circling and underlining questionable words and phrases and using the imperative voice to warn Carol against making unsupported generalizations: "These are vague references to the text. You've got something here, make it concrete." A careful reading of Beth's comments, however, suggests that she may have expected Carol to resist her authoritative stance. For example, in response to Carol's sentence "Also, these white people have purposely planned to continuously enslave African Americans economically," Beth circled "purposely" and wrote, "might try 'seemingly.' Makes the sentence less generalized. Quote from MJ: 'Don't make generalizations for which you have no evidence.'" Here, Beth bolstered her authority by explicitly aligning herself with the teacher. By doing so, she is less likely to be seen as personally objecting to Carol's statement and more likely to have her advice accepted as representing the institution's standards.

Beth did seem on the verge of validating some of the differences in Carol's writing when she praised what she called Carol's "rhetoric," comparing it to that of Martin Luther King, Jr. In addition to making positive
comments next to particular words and phrases on Carol's draft, Beth wrote at the end of Carol's paper:

Your opening and closing are simply close to brilliant. There's a lot of rhetoric working here, and you must use the text to back up that rhetoric. Make your text as powerful as you want by basing it in the poem! You have a touch for some of this—explore it! Watch generalizations. If you dare use them, back them up with concrete evidence.

In these remarks, Beth seemed to validate qualities of Carol's writing that would not necessarily have been validated by the academy. Her praise of Carol is undercut, however, by her continued insistence that rhetoric cannot stand alone, that it must be backed up not just by examples but by textual evidence. Note in this regard Beth's instruction to Carol that she make her text as powerful as she wants by "basing it in the poem." Here Beth conflated Carol's standards with her own and with those of the academy, assuming that there was only one way to construct a powerful argument.

The group discussion of Carol's draft proceeded in much the same way as the discussion of Patricia's writing. Beth initiated and dominated the discussion, explaining her comments paragraph by paragraph. Although Beth complimented Carol more than she did Patricia, she still emphasized Carol's need to provide textual support for her assertions. For example, after pointing out an effective generalization, Beth told Carol, "Keep parts like that so that you can compare them with the text. Compare it to the text constantly." And again, she explicitly aligned herself with the instructor when she reminded Carol that MJ had said, "You cannot make generalizations without having [support]."

Of course, it is one thing for Beth to assert herself as an authority; it is another thing for her to be considered one by her peers. But for a number of reasons, Beth's authority went more or less unquestioned in this peer response session. Throughout Beth's lengthy and detailed discussion of their papers, Patricia and Carol listened quietly, occasionally rephrasing one of Beth's suggestions to be sure they understood what she wanted them to do. And although Carol and Patricia had read and written comments on each other's drafts, Beth's analysis of their work left them with little to add but agreement. At the end of Beth's discussion of Patricia's draft, for example, Carol simply added, "That's the same thing I got out of it. You need an introduction, and after some of the things you were saying, it was, like, how do you know? Then when you were saying your problems as an Asian American, it's, like, well, how does that relate to the poem?"

Similarly, Beth's extensive response to Carol's paper seemed to leave Patricia with little to say. Patricia more or less reiterated Beth's caution against overgeneralizing and agreed with her recommendation that Carol provide more examples. But unlike Beth, who positioned herself as more knowledgeable than her peers, Patricia addressed Carol as a peer: "You're a lot like me. I try to get my feelings in there so hard and then you forget that..."
other people reading this are not going to get the same ideas I am. Like she's saying, use a lot of examples, because you do generalize a lot—and so do I.” Although Patricia saw Carol’s writing as similar to her own, she defined that similarity primarily in terms of their failure to measure up to existing standards for academic writing, standards that include a narrow focus, emotional distance, and extensive textual support. In separate interviews, Patricia and Carol both claimed they had a problem with wanting to make their papers “too big” by going beyond the texts discussed in class. Patricia admitted that one important lesson she had learned from Beth was that writing had to be based on the texts as “the facts” because “If you start with your own opinion, you can get into trouble.”

I have discussed Beth’s responding strategies at length because her responses dominated the peer response session. One reason Beth might have felt the need to explain her comments in such detail was that her handwriting was almost unreadable. But given the nature of her explanations—asking Patricia if she knew what a colloquialism was and asking Carol if she knew what “rhetoric” meant, for example—it is also likely that Beth saw her peer group members as incapable of understanding her comments. What is perhaps most distressing about Beth’s domination of her peer response group is that her assumption of an unquestionable authority seems to be a product of her institutional position as a successful writer (an English major and a creative writer) and responder to writing (a peer tutor).

When it came time to discuss Beth’s draft, Beth managed to control that discussion as well. Because Beth had brought to class only one handwritten copy of a partial draft that consisted of an outline of her ideas and a list of possible examples, Carol and Patricia, in effect, had no writing to respond to. While Beth was out of the room, Carol and Patricia conferred about what their response to Beth should be. Both expressed their frustration with being unable to respond:

Carol: It’s very, very rough.
Patricia: That’s why, I’m like, I don’t know what to say. I have no idea what to say.
Carol: It’s just like fragments of what she wants.
Patricia: Cause she’s going to elaborate on all this. So, it’s kind of like, should I even say anything about it?
Carol: She knows what she’s gonna do, but the thing is, she shouldn’t have brought it in like this.

When Beth returned, she asked her peers what they thought. Before they could respond, Beth explained at length what she wanted to do in the paper, something that she hadn’t invited either Carol or Patricia to do. Perhaps the most striking part of her explanation was her reflection on the kind of evidence she would provide in support of her ideas. She began by asking Carol and Patricia if they had read the book *Backlash*. When they admitted they hadn’t, Beth explained that “it has examples galore in it of what I’m
talking about in my paper.” Beth then pointed out that “[MJ] is very interested in our own personal experiences which is very interesting, and it’s a good idea for a class like this.” Reading aloud from the prompt that all three group members had chosen, Beth concluded, “So she wants text and personal [experience], so I made it a point to do that. I mean, you can do one or the other, but I made it a point to do both, to get the point across better.” Here Beth showed her awareness of the instructor’s desire to extend what will count as authority in this class and revealed her intention to use multiple kinds of authority to make her writing more effective. Unfortunately, Beth did not encourage Patricia and Carol to rely on their own experience as valid evidence, perhaps because she felt they needed to master a facility with textual evidence first before they could earn the right to go outside of the text. It is also possible that Beth felt less qualified to judge the effectiveness of her peers’ personal testimony: put in the position of having to judge their writing in an institutional context, she relied on the established standards of the institution. But a final explanation also seems possible: namely, that even Beth’s “nontextual” evidence was really “textual”; her references to women’s lived experience did, after all, come from Backlash, a text. So her claim to be validating personal experience as evidence, even in her writing, proved to be false.

In the end, Carol and Patricia’s only response to Beth’s draft was to say that because it was incomplete, they couldn’t really respond. Patricia closed the discussion by joking, “You really do your own criticism. You don’t really need us.”

**Beth and the Institution**

Although, inevitably, a multitude of factors contributed to what happened here, it seems important to highlight the authoritative stance Beth took in response to her peers’ writing and to look closely at the kind of authority she was asserting. Two important sources of Beth’s authority seem to be her confidence in her reading and writing ability and her unstated belief in a single standard for judging writing. As a consequence, Beth approached the “differences” in her peers’ writing as weaknesses or problems that needed to be corrected and that she felt in a position to correct. While Beth’s voice does reflect what many of us have heard (and said) about writing and texts, constructing her as the embodiment of the institution’s normalizing discourse, as I have done here, is a strong statement. In order to better understand how Beth speaks for the institution (and how Patricia and Carol recognize that voice), we need to look at Beth’s position within the class itself.

Despite MJ’s validation of multiple authorities, Beth never came into line with MJ’s view. Throughout the class, Beth seemed to contrast “universal” literature with “issue-oriented” literature that, in Beth’s opinion, appealed only to special interests or groups. Note that Beth acknowledges that
the use of personal experience makes sense “in a class like this.” Beth seems to have relied on her experience in other classes to presuppose that “literature in general” did not follow the rules of response MJ was advocating. In an early class discussion, MJ asked students to talk about books they particularly liked or disliked. When a number of African American students complained about the irrelevance of a book like The Great Gatsby, Beth adamantly defended it, arguing that Fitzgerald wasn’t interested in “surface things” like the signs of wealth in the book, but in “human emotion.” Later in the same discussion, MJ asked students if they had special expectations when they read books by African Americans. Beth responded that blacks tend to write about issues whereas whites don’t. When several African American students said that they expected African American literature to express the “truth” and to teach them something, arguing that white writers can’t write about what it means to be black and that white readers can’t understand black literature in the same way that black readers can, Beth insisted that good writing transcends differences, that it is about “universal human experience.” In an interview, Beth remarked, “I tend to shy away from issue-like things, issue-like books and literature and focus more on what I was talking about the very first day, you know, universal things and human emotion. That’s what I try to write, and that’s what I enjoy reading.” It should not be surprising that Beth’s position was different from the position of most of the other students in the class. And it is exactly this kind of difference that teachers of multicultural courses seek to highlight. Unfortunately, Beth was unable to see that her position was just one among many. Of course, Beth’s position is not just one among many: it represents the dominant paradigm in most English departments, at least those where a large number of faculty were trained under the doctrine of New Criticism. As a result, it is likely that Beth’s belief in the superiority of literature that dealt with “universal human experience” was one passed on by her professors and one that she was rewarded for adopting. Even in this class context, Beth’s “traditionalism,” although challenged, was subtly rewarded: Beth received “A’s” on all her papers and received a “+” for her peer response.

Although one of the goals of a course like “African American Voices” is to complicate the notion that there is such a thing as “universal human experience,” Beth was perplexed to find her views called into question by others in the class, going so far as to complain in private to MJ about her classmates’ insistence on discussing literature exclusively in terms of African American experience and their hostility toward her views. Ideally, having one’s established views called into question results in self-reflection and perhaps a modification or a qualification of those views, but Beth showed no sign of budging from her position. Even when MJ warned her against telling people that they were wrong, Beth said only that she knew she needed to learn to be patient.
Perhaps Beth's distress over the loss of her authority in the class as a whole contributed to the strength with which she asserted her authority in her peer response group. As we can see in the peer response session described above, Beth adhered to a New Critical approach in her discussion of literature and imposed that approach on her peers by emphasizing that texts, not one's interpretation of them, should serve as the foundation for writing in this class. In her criticism of her peers' interpretations, she also implied that there was only one "correct" reading of a text, and given Beth's years of training in reading and writing about texts, she was able to imply, fairly confidently, that hers was the correct reading.

Similarly, Beth seemed in full confidence that her approach to writing about texts was the correct approach. And the fact that all three group members had chosen to write about the universality or timelessness of literature (Beth's specialty) probably gave her even more confidence. If Beth's view of literature seems dominated by a New Critical paradigm, her view of writing—with its emphasis on a single thesis, textual support, and some matters of style—seems equally dominated by current-traditional rhetoric. Although "New Criticism" and "Current Traditional Rhetoric" are umbrella terms for a complex of ideas, they share in common a valorization of texts and a devaluing of personal experience, a belief in a single approach to the reading and writing of texts and a dismissal of other approaches, and a claim to be above the politics of individual and cultural differences. Perhaps most importantly, they once shared enormous power as normalizing forces in the field of English studies. And although on a theoretical level, the tenets of New Criticism and Current Traditional Rhetoric have been thoroughly disputed, their legacy lives on in many literature and composition classrooms as well as in students like Beth. Read in this way, the power that Beth asserted in the peer response group was a power granted her by virtue of her alliance with a very powerful institution.

This explanation of why Beth was able to position herself as an unassailable authority in the peer response group also explains to some extent why Patricia and Carol were unable or unwilling to resist her power. In the larger classroom setting, Beth's view was a minority view and one loudly opposed by many of the other students, but in her peer response group, Beth was able to assert her view without the opposition of a half dozen students and without the intervention of the teacher. Neither Patricia nor Carol had the experience or success with reading and writing about texts that might have given them the confidence to oppose Beth—Patricia was a second language user and Carol had received the lowest grade in the class on her first essay. In fact, they both responded positively to her authoritative reading of their work; in separate interviews, both reported that this peer response session had been helpful. Patricia, who felt insecure about her reading and writing abilities and was uncertain how to do the kind of writing required in "African American Voices," found Beth's corrections of her text particularly helpful.
Patricia seemed to want a clear statement of what an acceptable essay should be, and Beth was able to issue that statement. Patricia was also sympathetic to Beth's view of literature. It was Patricia who on the first day of class said that she had enjoyed reading *The Great Gatsby*, thus provoking the hostility of some of the African American students and the support of Beth. And Patricia's view that these "culture classes" overemphasize people's differences is not unlike Beth's view that good literature is universal.

In "African American Voices," where neither Beth nor Patricia could claim special insight into the literature based on their experience, an emphasis on universality or commonality gave them access to the texts they were reading. It also gave them a way of deflecting whatever discomfort they might have felt about their racial positions in relation to the class. Patricia, whose parents owned a grocery in a predominantly black neighborhood in Los Angeles, seemed especially uncomfortable writing or talking about African American experience. Admitting that among the Koreans she knew there was a great deal of prejudice against African Americans, Patricia explained that she had enrolled in "African American Voices" in order to overcome her limited perspective and to gain insight into African American culture. In spite of her desire to understand African American experience on its own terms, however, Patricia seemed unable to confront directly that experience and was made especially uncomfortable by the rage and hostility that some of the literature and some of the students expressed. Although Beth never referred to herself as "white," her frustration with the African American students' emphasis on their experience may also have been a product of her anxiety about racial difference and her desire to be free of accusations of prejudice or feelings of collective white guilt. Any discussion of the oppression of African Americans potentially implicated her, and she actively resisted such an implication. For example, by aligning herself with her African American instructor in her criticism of Carol's generalization about the economic oppression of African Americans, Beth lessened the chance that her criticism would be seen as racist. Similarly, Beth's retreat into claims of universality can be seen as an attempt to avoid dealing further with the problem of how to talk about African American experience without implicating herself as a white person. Unfortunately, her claims of universality served to mark her further as a member of the majority culture who had the luxury to choose not to deal with the messy matter of racism in America. Beth and Patricia's difficulty in dealing with racism was perhaps best illustrated during a class discussion that took place the day after the LA riots broke out. MJ opened the discussion by allowing students to express their anger and pain over the outcome of the first Rodney King trial. She then moved the discussion to a more general consideration of racism in America. When she raised the issue of racism against African American women, Beth questioned whether such a thing existed, admitting that although she frequently witnessed racism against African American men, she did not believe there was
racism against African American women. By making racism a male problem, she once again removed herself from racial guilt. Patricia avoided implications of racism by saying nothing during the discussion of the Rodney King verdict and the LA riots. In fact, Patricia told only me that she was from Los Angeles and that her father's grocery had miraculously remained untouched while most of the other Korean businesses in the neighborhood were destroyed.

Because Patricia was sympathetic to Beth's views and seemed comfortable with Beth's authoritative stance and because Robert was frequently absent from the peer response group, Carol would have been alone if she had chosen to oppose Beth. Although a number of African American students felt powerful enough to oppose Beth in class, they also knew they could rely on their peers for support. In the peer response group, Carol could not count on that support. Although Carol's writing indicated that she did not share Beth's approach to literature, Carol chose to voice her dissent only in the private space of her final draft. In spite of Beth's attempts to fit Carol's writing to the established mold of academic writing, Carol managed to resist Beth's authoritative voice in her revision and to continue writing "differently." This difference emerges in Carol's choice to support her generalizations not with more textual references to the poems but with additional references to Rodney King and to her own experience as an African American university student. And while in some cases she chose to tone down her assertions about the oppression of African Americans, in other cases she did not. Perhaps one of the most interesting ways in which Carol resisted Beth's advice was by borrowing and extending Patricia's misreading of Cullen's "We Wear the Mask." Beth had explicitly told Patricia that she was wrong to say that it was the oppressors who were wearing a mask, when according to Beth's reading the poet was clearly describing how the oppressed must wear a mask if they want to fit in with the majority culture. In Carol's revised essay about the continuing effects of racism, she wrote, "In the poem, the oppressed group of people are wearing the mask. However, the poem can be interpreted to read as the oppressor wearing the mask. Racism can cover itself from being seen as it really is and can dodge confrontation, by wearing a mask." In the margin next to this sentence, MJ wrote, "Good point," and at the end of the essay commented, "This essay is much better than the first one. Your tone is more confident. I love your use of masks as worn by the oppressors. That is quite innovative."

In spite of enormous pressure to conform to traditional conventions of academic discourse, in her revised draft, Carol clearly produced a different kind of discourse, one that challenged the narrow standards of text-based academic writing by relying on African American experience and by openly interpreting a piece of literature in ways that served her larger purposes. But Carol was able to make these challenges only outside the classroom, allowing Beth and Patricia to continue believing that the rules for academic writing
that Beth asserted were not open to question. In the public arena of her group and her class, the dissensus represented by Carol’s writing went unarticulated and unheard.

**Dissensus—A Dream (Deferred)**

If, as Myers and Trimbur have proposed, collaboration in the classroom can give students opportunities to understand and to criticize the normalizing function of established knowledge-making communities, “African American Voices in Literature” seemed a perfect site for such a critique. The content of the class, the racial make-up of the class, the teacher’s explicit validation of differences in the class, and the important role that collaboration played all seemed likely to yield the “rhetoric of dissensus” that Trimbur has argued is necessary. But, as this discussion has attempted to demonstrate, such was not the case. Rather, the peer response group that I studied functioned in ways eerily similar to the established knowledge-making communities that Myers and Trimbur attack. This group was not made up of knowledgeable peers who share the same paradigms and the same set of values but, instead, replicated an uneven distribution of power. And the member who had the greatest power was the one best able to articulate the authoritative and exclusionary rules of the “normal” discourse of the community and to use those rules to reject and hence silence the “abnormal” discourse of her group members. As a result, no “rhetoric of dissensus” made it possible for the group to talk productively about their differences because the rules of “normal” discourse had already determined that differences must be treated hierarchically. Although students recognized that their reading and writing were different, they could think about those differences only in terms of what was right and wrong.

I have, of course, presented here only one reading of one peer response session involving just three students, a sample too small to invite generalizations. But I believe by looking closely at one episode in these students’ lives, we can bring into focus the power of the institution to silence difference. Beth’s voice, after all, is the voice of the institution. It is the voice of every teacher who had ever given her an “A” for abiding by the established conventions and norms of academic writing. More to the point, perhaps, Beth’s voice is our voice. Hearing Beth speak in that voice proved especially unsettling for me, for she was a flesh-and-blood embodiment of institutional power, one who acted consistently to maintain the status quo and to silence difference. Even more troubling is the fact that Beth, a bright and thoughtful student, had been taught to maintain the status quo without what many teachers see as an equally crucial lesson: the capacity for self-reflection that would have enabled her to see the consequences of her behavior for herself, her peers, and ultimately her society.

Those of us who would answer the call of Myers and Trimbur for collaboration-as-critique must recognize that students’ experience in the
classroom is not one of "non-domination," as Trimbur has suggested. Clearly, students like Beth, Carol, and Patricia are dominated by the institutionalized context of the classroom. Critiques of the normalizing function of institutionalized discourse communities must begin, therefore, by challenging the assumption that any setting within the academy represents one of "non-domination," and thus with a critique of the peer response group, of the classroom, and of the established knowledge-making community known as school.

For teachers and students alike, such a critique requires us to listen closely to our own voices, to hear in ourselves the voice of the institution reifying the status quo and silencing difference over and over again. It is only through this kind of intense listening that a space can be created for a rhetoric of dissensus that would allow us to talk productively about the normalizing function of the university, of writing classrooms, and particularly of institutionalized courses on diversity. What this study reveals, in concrete and vivid detail, is the enormous difficulty of that task. In spite of this difficulty, or perhaps more accurately because of it, we will need a good deal of luck as well as tenacity and courage in meeting the challenge to create a rhetoric of dissensus that would animate not only our scholarly discussions but also the classrooms where students like Carol, Patricia, and Beth meet systems of discursive power.

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Notes

1 According to Bruffee, "normal discourse" is "pointed: it is explanatory and argumentative. Its purpose is to justify belief to the satisfaction of other people within the author's community of knowledgeable peers" (643). Although Bruffee allows for the emergence of "abnormal discourse"—discourse that occurs when "consensus no longer exists with regard to rules, assumptions, goals, values and mores"—this "abnormal discourse" is not the community's valued discourse (648).

2 Although any research project is inevitably collaborative, ethnographic research is especially so. I would, thus, like to acknowledge my special indebtedness to the instructor of "African American Voices" for giving me access to her classroom. I would also like to thank the students in that course, especially the students described in this essay, for allowing me to observe their learning. The names of the instructor and students are pseudonyms.

3 It is important to note that although MJ made peer response an important part of the course, requiring it for each of the four essays students wrote and deducting one-half of a letter grade from an essay turned in by a student who did not attend peer response, students' participation was fairly irregular. For example, Beth missed the first peer response session. Robert, who is described as a member of this group, missed the first two responding sessions and failed to bring any writing to either of the two sessions that he attended. Although Robert's absence may have influenced how the group worked, it is difficult to imagine what difference his presence would have made since he played a fairly passive role in the group and in class.
Works Cited


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