Reconsidering Behaviorist Composition Pedagogies: Positivism, Empiricism, and the Paradox of Postmodernism

DAVID WALLACE

For many people in the humanities, the word behaviorism conjures up images of Pavlovian dogs salivating at the sound of a bell or of Skinnerian rats running through mazes in search of food pellets. The theoretical assumptions and research methods of behaviorism are seen as reductive and essentially alien to areas of inquiry that characterize human behavior in its historical, sociological, and intellectual contexts. However, at least in the area of writing pedagogy, this rejection of behaviorist theory and research is based on a stereotyped understanding that overlooks important attempts to apply behaviorist principles of learning to the teaching of writing in a sensitive and humanistic manner.

In this article, I examine four proposals from the 1960s and early 1970s that attempted to apply the principles of behaviorist learning theories to writing instruction (Porter, Huntley, Bloom and Bloom, Zoellner, “Talk-Write”). These behaviorist composition pedagogies were notable for their emphasis on what students do when they write rather than on what they have written. In a decade when composition teachers were just beginning to react against text-centered teaching methods and to explore process-centered ones, these theorists proposed sophisticated pedagogies based on principles of extensive behaviorist learning research. Their emphases on in-process reinforcement and on sequencing writing activities, as well as their egalitarian assumption that writing could be taught to all, were important precursors to current process pedagogies. Thus, as Berlin suggests, these pedagogical statements should be seen as playing an important role in the transition from product to process pedagogies (Rhetoric).

I propose that re-examining these behaviorist composition pedagogies does more than just clear up a historical misconception; indeed, my primary purpose in reviewing these proposals is to demonstrate how empiricism may be usefully dissociated from positivism in writing pedagogy. By “positivism” I mean the belief that universal laws describing human behavior (or other phenomena) can be derived from sense observations—a position often credited to the nineteenth-century philosopher Auguste Comte (see Comte’s A General View of Positivism, especially 24-25). By “empiricism” I mean the attempt to describe human behavior (or other phenomena) according to a definable, limited system.
My purpose is not to provide a substantive review of positivistic and empirical epistemologies. Rather, I explore how positivism and empiricism may be distinguished in practice by examining four proposals for writing pedagogy based on behaviorist learning theory. I begin this investigation with two assumptions. First, both positivism and empiricism, as I am using the terms, assume that some method, which can be at least in part articulated, must be used to bring order to sense observations. Second, the critical difference between these two positions is that positivism assumes that human behavior is governed by the same kinds of laws as physical phenomena such as the movement of planets or the fusion of atoms. Empiricism does not. In fact, as I’ve defined it, empiricism assumes only that the conclusions drawn about sense observations must be adjudicated on the basis of the methods articulated for drawing those observations.

In the sections that follow, I review the four major behaviorist proposals for writing pedagogy to illustrate that empiricism can be functionally distinguished from positivism in writing pedagogy. Then, I propose three tests for doing so. In a third section, I raise what Douglas Hesse has dubbed “the splendid paradox of postmodernism” (230) and argue that empiricism provides a viable means for addressing this paradox in composition teaching and research. Finally, I suggest several implications for the practice of empiricism in light of postmodern critiques.

Behaviorism, Empiricism, and Positivism
Each of the four major theoretical discussions of behaviorist composition pedagogy attempted to bring systematic description to the teaching of writing by assuming that teaching and learning about writing could be usefully described as series of stimuli provided by instructors or peers, responses by students, and feedback from instructors or peers. Clearly such a system is reductive in that it focuses on pedagogical exchanges and not on the previous experiences that inform a teacher’s choice of stimuli or a student’s response. However, this reductiveness is not necessarily positivistic. Indeed, the manner in which two of the proponents of behaviorist approaches to teaching writing applied this system made their approaches positivistic while the two others were less so.

Porter and Huntley: Predictability and Assimilation
The first two behaviorist proposals appeared in 1962 College Composition and Communication articles: one by Douglas Porter, from the School of Education at Harvard, and the other by John F. Huntley, who described a programmed teaching approach that he had developed. As Berlin notes, these two approaches focused largely on grammar and usage issues (Rhetoric). Each must ultimately be deemed positivistic because each assumes that language learning is governed by universal laws that provide an objective basis for pedagogical intervention. Porter’s and Huntley’s beliefs that learning is governed by universal laws does not mean that their pedagogical proposals were without merit. In fact, their
instructional theory and methods anticipated one of the chief tenets of current approaches to composition—the process that students engage in before they produce final texts is not only relevant but critical for writing instruction. For example, Porter called for a pedagogy that intervened and guided students as they wrote. He explained: "[B]ehavior is created and altered in an individual by the consequences it produces;" thus, "an English student learns the language responses that are approved by the various social groups of which he is a member" (14). Similarly, Huntley proposed that learning about writing was not mastering facts about grammar but developing a set of skills that must become habitual. He said, "Composition is a skill or habit, not a system of doctrine nor a dictionary of labels. It should instill the discipline not describe it" (8).

Despite these progressive elements, Porter’s and Huntley’s proposals must be seen as positivistic because neither explicitly recognizes the interpretative nature of meaning making and language learning and because both take the teacher’s starting points and goals for instruction as unproblematic, as if these were based on some objective standard. For example, the approach that Huntley proposed was essentially a stage model of writing that assumed all students would proceed through a writing assignment in roughly the same orderly process. His method of programmed learning frames was atomistic—trying to make learning about writing into a sequence of discrete tasks that each student would follow. His programmed learning frames attempted to "shape behavior" by identifying "a minimum number of necessary operations involved in composing expository or argumentative essays" and providing feedback at the completion of each (17).

Porter’s discussion of his basic plan for pedagogy made his positivistic assumptions explicit, particularly in his discussion of the teacher’s role in learning. He identified two of a teacher’s chief tasks as (1) to see that students get the feedback necessary for them to understand the consequences of their linguistic choices and (2) to ensure that students "are faced with a carefully designed sequence of tasks designed to provide mastery of complex performances" (14-15). Apparently, Porter saw reinforcement monolithically—as necessary because students deviated from an accepted standard. This same sort of monolithic standard is also implicit in Huntley’s comparison of the teacher/student relationship to a parent/child relationship. Huntley explained how the reinforcement provided by the teacher through the programmed frames would help students learn:

Ultimately we must train the student to intuit these alternatives for himself and always to choose with the reader’s recalcitrance in mind. Along the way he will make mistakes in his choices, but if we control the stimuli, he won’t make too many. And if we feed him back the results of each choice, effective choices will begin to be habitual. (10)

Despite Huntley’s concern that students learn to anticipate audiences’ needs, the model of learning here was clearly one in which teachers not only had all the right answers but could predict students’ learning needs so accurately that they
could anticipate what feedback students would need at any point in the process. Thus, for both Porter and Huntley, the teacher's role was to set up learning activities that provided more and earlier feedback in a student's writing process, but the nature of that feedback was not adjusted for individual student differences. Further, their approaches treated deviations from the expected responses as aberrations to be rooted out. In short, Porter's and Huntley's proposals were progressive in that the stimulus-response-feedback emphasis allowed them to conceive of writing pedagogy as more than *post hoc* responses to students' texts. However, they remain positivistic in that their approaches did not expect and value individual students' responses and in that they assumed that their approaches could be based on an objective goal toward which they could move students.

*Bloom and Bloom: Moving Toward Empiricism*

The third major behaviorist approach was Lynn Bloom and Martin Bloom's 1967 *College English* article "The Teaching and Learning of Argumentative Writing." In this article, they argued for a structured outline of writing activities that provided reinforcement through the symbolic presence of the teacher. Like Porter and Huntley, Bloom and Bloom argued that the lack of immediate reinforcement was "the major deficiency of traditional methods of teaching writing" (131). Bloom and Bloom defined their notion of the writing teacher against the role played by teachers in "the traditional method for teaching writing" in which "the evaluation process is just as hidden from the student as the writing process is from the teacher" (129). In such a system, they argued, teachers have no idea if their *post hoc* corrections would serve as positive reinforcements. Thus, they shared both Porter's and Huntley's concern for providing students with in-process reinforcement and their uncritical acceptance that the teacher could judge the direction in which that reinforcement should have for each student. However, their pedagogy might be deemed as moving away from positivism and toward empiricism for two reasons. First, their plan recognized, at least tacitly, that learning about writing would not be governed by universal laws. Indeed, their approach assumed that students would have different needs and included individual conferences in which students received expert feedback about the quality of their choices.

Second, their pedagogy was based on observations of a student's writing process. Martin Bloom, a social psychologist, "spent a series of evenings with one student as he wrote several themes" (130). Bloom "stood looking over his shoulder as he worked on his theme," recording each sentence or fragment as well as noting "the errors and corrections, pauses, interruptions, 'environmental events,' and timing" (130). From these observations, Bloom and Bloom developed a series of exercises to serve as "successive approximations" that would lead students to awareness of problems, encourage them to generate possible solutions, and guide them to selecting the "best" solutions (131).
Like Porter and Huntley, Bloom and Bloom seemed to have a more or less monolithic goal in mind for their pedagogy—its aim was to move students toward “preferred goals of writing,” and its methods privileged the “expert opinion on the quality of [those] choices” (131). However, their approach also anticipated later empirical approaches in the sense that they based it on detailed observations of a student’s writing process rather than on guesses of what might be problematic and in that they allowed for individual feedback. Given the paucity of writing research available, their concern to base pedagogy on observation was commendable, even though, in retrospect, we might question the advisability of basing a teaching method on observation of one student who was writing under what must have been uncomfortable conditions.

**Zoellner: Empiricism as Tapping Students’ Oral Fluencies**

Like the other behaviorist composition pedagogies, Robert Zoellner’s proposal of a talk-write metaphor for teaching writing was a reaction against current-traditional writing pedagogy. Zoellner’s proposal took up nearly all of the January 1969 issue of *College English*. His proposal drew two sets of comments and responses in later issues (see Boyle; Campbell; Hendrickson; Sarbin; Shelby; and Shutt) and has been reconsidered recently by several composition theorists (see Hatch and Walters; Rubin and Dodd).

Zoellner challenged what he called the dominant “instrumental metaphor” for writing, arguing that writing had been defined “as thought on paper” (269). He argued that this transcriptional view of writing underemphasized the role of the “writer-as-actor” and led to a “product-oriented rather than [a] process-oriented” approach (270). Zoellner’s talk-write method was designed to address what he called the “vocal-scribal schism” caused by this instrumental view of writing. He argued that this schism could be healed by pedagogy that focused not on “generalized specifications for getting from one side of the writing situation to another” but by tapping students’ oral fluency to develop their scribal abilities (284). Specifically, Zoellner proposed a writing clinic of sorts in which students talked out segments of their texts that they had difficulty writing to a teacher or peer as a way to try out the segment before committing it to writing.

Zoellner’s application of the stimulus, response, and feedback formula was the least positivistic of behaviorist approaches because of its basic assumptions about learning—that intervention should be based on the students’ utterances and that writing pedagogy should be a social process (teachers or peers could aid students in talking out their intentions). He explained: “[V]ocal specification is never imposed from without, except to the extent that the instructor or a fellow student makes a suggestion that the student then revocalizes, but rather springs from the student’s own unique way of saying things” (302). In Zoellner’s talk-write proposal, response began with individual students’ needs, and both students and teachers actively contributed to learning. The teacher or peer became a coach, listening (or reading) first and then helping students to shape
their discourse. Thus, Zoellner's approach is the most empirical of the four in that he explicitly recognizes that language learning is not governed by universal laws.

Despite this tendency toward empiricism, Zoellner's pedagogical proposal was also positivistic in the sense that it assumed that all students have the same kind of problem with writing—getting what they want to say out on paper. Zoellner himself admitted that his pedagogy did not mean that writing teachers and students should ignore planning and organization. However, he said little about how teachers should structure the initial stimulus and assumed that nearly all students would suffer from the vocal-scribal schism.

Behaviorism and the Dissociation of Empiricism from Positivism

The behaviorist theorists' main contribution to composition theory is their articulation of how the basic behaviorist framework—stimuli, response, feedback—for learning can be applied to composition. Like other forerunners of the process movement, these theorists recognized that teaching writing meant more than teachers presenting information for students to absorb. Their approaches were empirical in the pragmatic sense that they attempted to account for the impact of teacher-student interactions in terms of stimuli, response, and feedback. It is also clear that they applied this basic framework in ways that were—to greater or lesser degrees—positivistic. I contend, however, that dissociating their empirical aspects from their positivistic ones is useful not only for understanding how these behaviorist composition theorists were progressive in their historical context but also for avoiding epistemological and methodological misunderstandings in our current attempts to understand the intricacies of literacy learning. Indeed, their cases suggest three tests for distinguishing empiricism from positivism in instructional practice.

The most basic test concerns the generalizability of human behaviors. The question here is not whether generalizations are possible at all but the extent of predictability. As David Foster argues, "Drawing inferences in order to know is in our grain . . . . It is not this experiential orientation of scientific knowing that poses a problem for composition inquiry but, rather, the urge to over-define composition study in terms of the conditions of knowing which attend scientific inquiry" (33, emphasis added). Clearly, Huntley's and Porter's approaches attempt to obtain the over-definition that Foster fears from empirical research. Indeed, the rigidity of their instructional methods implies that literacy learning could be managed as a set of lawful relationships—that learning could be reduced to a predictable series of stimuli, responses, and feedback. Thus, Huntley's and Porter's applications of the behaviorist learning model are positivistic in the classic sense that they appear to believe that universal laws describing human behavior could be derived from sense observations. The danger of believing in such complete predictability is two-fold. First, it is unrealistic to assume that all humans will respond to the same stimulus in the same way. And, second, as
Glynda Hull and Mike Rose argue, monolithic assumptions about the way learning should work too easily allow for those who don’t fit expected patterns to be labeled as aberrant or remedial.

In contrast to Porter’s and Huntley’s lawful approach to generalizability, Bloom and Bloom’s and Zoellner’s pedagogical proposals illustrate more tenable, empirical approaches. In both approaches, the interplay of stimuli, responses, and feedback is not completely predictable. In fact, the teacher’s feedback depends on observation of students’ individual responses to stimuli—the starting points chosen by the teacher. Thus, in a practical way, these proposals illustrate that an empirical approach can avoid at least one aspect of positivism: belief in universal laws that describe human behavior and meaning making in absolute terms.

The second test for positivism in pedagogy has to do with the stimuli or starting points that instructors choose. If we strip away positivistic claims for universal laws or Truth, then no starting points for pedagogy are justifiable in any absolute sense. The problem, then, for teachers and writing program administrators becomes identifying bases for intervention. Bloom and Bloom attempted to solve the starting point problem by observing a student writing and trying to identify kinds of problems to address. Zoellner’s starting point—the vocal-scribal schism—was apparently based on his observations of students in his own classes.

Bloom and Bloom’s and Zoellner’s empirical efforts—defining starting points for intervention based on observed problems—were laudable particularly as they occurred in an era when composition theory and practice was largely content to diagnose students’ problems in post mortem analyses of their texts. We might charge Bloom and Bloom with narrowness for basing a pedagogical program on Martin Bloom’s observation of one student or Zoellner for his elevation of the problem that he saw as most important (the vocal-scribal schism) to such a prominent position. But their attempts to find starting places for pedagogy in the literacy experiences of their students should ultimately be read as moves toward empiricism and away from positivism. Thus, a second test for distinguishing empiricism and positivism in writing pedagogy is that attempts at intervention must move beyond simple recognition that students’ (or other literacy participants’) responses to stimuli (starting points) will vary. Instead, the innovator must actively expect and account for such response differences and adjust feedback accordingly.

The third and most difficult test for distinguishing empiricism from positivism in pedagogical practice is how one identifies the goals toward which feedback is used. Once again, barring the positivistic assumption that reality can be described in ways that are universally applicable, there can be no absolute basis for such judgments. All four of the behaviorist proposals seem to assume a pragmatic stance, perhaps best articulated by Mina Shaughnessy who recognized “that a person who does not control the dominant code of literacy in a society that generates more writing than any society in history is likely to be
pitched against more obstacles than are apparent to those who have already mastered that code" (13). Recently, postmodern theory has explicitly challenged the assumption that teaching the discourse practices is a means of empowering students (see Lu especially), arguing that because discourse practices are not culturally neutral (Berlin "Poststructuralism"), teaching the discourse practices of dominant culture must be seen as, at least to some extent, reproducing that culture (see Herndl; Clifford).

The most common response to this problem of reproducing culture is that pedagogy must invite critique of the very practices it teaches. Indeed, John Schilb argues that true literacy must examine society, and John Clifford argues that literacy pedagogy must create open spaces for student resistance to the discourse practices of dominant culture even though many will decline such invitations. However, this position, too, requires a leap of faith; it requires one to take critique itself as a worthwhile goal.

I contend that invitations for critique alone are not a sufficient base for eschewing positivism. In addition, we must actively attend to and attempt to describe the effects of those invitations on our students. Not to do so is to set up critique as an absolute value, to trust blindly in our own judgment, and, as Patricia Bizzell has argued, to make antifoundationalism into a foundation itself.

Empiricism and the Paradox of Postmodernism

Postmodern composition theorists have argued that we must complicate our understanding of pedagogy; we must give up our structural understandings of language and seriously consider the implications of ideology for teaching writing (see Berlin "Poststructuralism"; Brodkey and Henry). Perhaps the most valuable contribution of postmodern theory to writing pedagogy is the call to explicitly recognize that neither teachers nor students are completely free agents making independent choices. As Lester Faigley argues, considering the implications of postmodern theory for rhetoric and composition means reconsidering the subject roles in which we cast ourselves and our students. In the behaviorist terms that I have used in this article, we might need to see our students as providing many of the stimuli on which instruction is based and ourselves as responding to their understandings.4 Further, if we recognize that structural understandings of language and rhetoric are not objective and have no intrinsic basis in reality, then we must also recognize that any act of pedagogy that requires (or encourages) conformity to convention is ultimately a power move. As John Clifford argues, we must "think hard about the plausibility of the charge that in educational institutions writing is, in quite subtle ways, a servant to the dominant ideology" (39).

The paradoxical nature of this position becomes clear when this postmodern argument is extended. That is, simply making students aware of the existence of conventions is to influence them in some way—even if we are careful to explain that those conventions exist only as a fluid set of expectations held by readers who are in positions of power. Thus, any pedagogical act must be seen
as socially and culturally implicated because asking students to move in any direction—whether that be toward mastery of the conventions of standard written English or toward a critical awareness of the social and political consequences of acts of literacy—is to ask them to change not just what they know but who they are.

This line of reasoning foregrounds a basic but often unexplained assumption about teaching—that any pedagogical agenda requires a leap of faith. Teachers or other curriculum designers must choose starting points and goals for instructional intervention, trusting that these starting points and goals will be of value for students. What the postmodern perspective on rhetoric and composition adds is the explicit recognition that teachers’ decisions about starting points cannot be justified by assuming that students will automatically benefit from mastering a body of knowledge or set of thinking skills (see Herndl’s recent discussion of teaching discourse and reproducing culture). The paradox of this position, as Hesse explains, is that:

On the one hand critical theorists challenge the existence of foundational truths, denying as natural the imperative to ‘do’ anything. . . . Yet on the other they must invoke, seemingly as foundational, the value of critical exchanges. Furthermore, such exchange can occur only if a starting point (a text, for example) exists, however provisional, transitory, exclusionary, or ‘wrong’ that starting point may prove to be.

(230)

The critical question, then, becomes how to implement pedagogy that aids teachers in understanding the implications of their decisions for students and engages students in substantive critique of their own learning. Ironically, postmodern theorists have been slow in coming forth with specific means for accomplishing this formidable task. Indeed, Sharon Crowley questions whether such a truly “deconstructive pedagogy” is possible (45).

To summarize, the value of postmodern theory, at least as it’s applied to composition, may be that it finally puts to rest the positivistic notions that truth can be known absolutely and that descriptions of universal laws can provide moral grounds for teaching. However, as I’ve tried to illustrate in this article, moves away from positivism in composition began at least as early as the behaviorist composition proposals of Bloom and Bloom and Zoellner. Further, I contend that the extent to which any approach—be it behavioral, cognitive, or postmodern—eschews positivism should not be determined by its incorporation of the critical theory du jour but by the practical means by which it allows one to account for the variable effects of whatever pedagogical starting points are chosen. In short, I am arguing that empiricism may be redefined to address the concerns of postmodern theory for literacy instruction.

Stripped of supposed claims for objective status, empirical approaches to teaching and research provide two important means of applying postmodern proposals for composition. First, empirical research methods can be seen as negotiations of meaning between researchers and participants. When the results
of empirical research are seen as contingent and dependent on context, then it becomes clear that they should not be taken as gospel—as indicative of what every teacher and every student who meet the sampling criteria of the original study should do. Instead, these results should be seen as starting points for pedagogy, as careful descriptions of general patterns or thick descriptions of specific situations that can and should be interpreted in terms of teachers’ and students’ own experiences. Some methods (e.g., case studies and participant observations) make this negotiation more explicit and focus more on describing diverse practices than other methods (e.g., experiments). However, even the results of experiments that typically hide the critical variable being assessed from the participants and privilege describing generalizable patterns over the participants’ diverse responses need not be applied in a positivistic manner.

A second way that empirical research methods can help to apply postmodern proposals to composition instruction is by reconceiving of teaching as inquiry. Linda Flower argues that seeing teaching as inquiry means that teachers test their predictions about students’ responses to pedagogical innovation against the actual experiences of their students. She argues that teaching is “a theory-building enterprise” when teachers engage their students in reflection activities designed to help teachers learn about how students learn or fail to learn given teachers’ pedagogical choices (3). Further, Flower argues that such inquiry-based teaching is as important as the scholarly activities that we typically refer to as “theory” or “research.”

I don’t mean to imply here, nor does Flower, that writing teachers need to become empirical researchers schooled in the intricacies of experimental research design or participant observation. Instead, I contend that if we as writing teachers are to substantively address the paradox of postmodernism we should participate in the empirical tradition that requires researchers to articulate their bases for making generalizations. It is clear that the conventions of reporting empirical research (particularly experimental designs) have made such claims difficult to interpret, particularly for those without training in empirical research methods. However, the principle lying behind those conventions is quite simple. It requires that researchers (and I would argue teachers or critics as well) must lay their cards on the table. They must describe what is valued in the hypotheses that focus their observations, recognize the limiting assumptions that they make in deciding what to value in designing measures or making judgments about texts, and describe how these assumptions limit the application of their observations to other situations.

I don’t mean to minimize the work that still needs to be done by empirical researchers in considering postmodern critiques, in adapting their methods to address some of the issues raised by those critiques, or in making their research methods more accessible to those not trained in empirical methodology. For example, Sandra Harding’s feminist critique of empirical research rightly argues that social science research needs to explicitly recognize and account for the subjective stance of the researcher and to “challenge the grand theories and
the background assumptions of traditional social inquiry” (9-10). Although applying such critiques no doubt implies large scale changes in social science research, Harding does not seem to be calling for an end to empiricism. Rather, she calls for expansion of the kinds of questions asked, a broader range of methods to be used in addressing those questions, and the substantive participation of the researched in the design, analysis, and reporting of research data.

In short, I contend that addressing the postmodern paradox means that writing teachers cannotduck the question of what effects their choices of starting points and goals for instruction have for their students simply by being tolerant of multiple perspectives or by inviting students to engage in critique. One value of empiricism is that it provides both a philosophy and a set of methods that teachers may adapt for substantive investigation of the impact that their pedagogical choices have for students (see Flower, Wallace, Norris, and Burnett for examples of teachers’ inquiry projects). Further, more formal empirical research about writing can provide useful starting points or “texts” for pedagogy. In choosing starting points for pedagogy, there is much to be said for teachers and researchers who carefully observe students, who listen to students, and who expect to learn from their own observations and from students’ responses.

Implications for Theory and Practice
Accepting a postmodern reinterpretation of empiricism has far-reaching implications for the making of knowledge in rhetoric and composition. First, as postmodern theorists have suggested, it means that empirical methods have no special status: they are not inherently better at describing “reality” than humanistic methods because there is no such thing as a completely objective stance from which to decide what reality is. However, recognizing the contingency of knowledge is not enough. I have argued that empiricism provides a means for addressing the postmodern paradox for pedagogy (as well as research and theory) to the extent that teachers (as well as researchers and theorists) can articulate the values that underlie their methods and to the extent that the design or methods can provide for substantive feedback from students (or research participants). Thus, as Bishop, Crowley, Hatch and Walters, and others have noted, the arguments and limitations of what have been traditionally identified as empirical methods need to be carefully articulated on a case by case basis. And, if any *positors* claim that their observations or conclusions are inherently more valuable (i.e., closer to reality) than those of others without providing a rationale for those claims, then they are open to charges of positivism.

A second implication is that the canon of research methods is thrown wide open. Any method of observation (no matter how formal or informal) has the potential to be informative to the extent that its user can articulate a believable rationale and set of limitations for it.

The third implication is that methods should be judged according to how well they address what I will call “the empirical question.” That is, what means have researchers, theorists, or teachers provided for us to judge what is valued
and what is marginalized in their observations and the extent to which any
generalizable conclusions can be drawn. To be sure, this implication assumes
that drawing generalizations for theory and practice is a useful goal for rhetoric
and composition. However, I contend that if we presume to teach, to build
theory, or even to engage in hermeneutic acts of meaning making with others,
we have no choice but to recognize the paradox of postmodernism and deal with
it directly. We must recognize the problematic nature of such a decision and do
our best to understand not only how our choices enfranchise some and marginalize
others but also do all within our power to be as inclusive as possible.

Finally, the most important implication of considering what empiricism
might mean in a postmodern world is that we can no longer assume that preparing
students to participate in academic or workplace discourse is the transcendent
goal of literacy instruction. Expecting varied and unexpected responses to our
pedagogical initiations from our students must become more than a pragmatic
strategy the purpose of which is to get more students to think, talk, and write like
us. Further, recognizing that our interactions with our students reconstitute and
perpetuate academic or workplace discourse practices means that we cannot
assume that we, as teachers, have discharged our duty by providing our students
with opportunities to critique those practices. As writing teachers, our roles are
necessarily conflicted. On the one hand, it's our job to help our students gain
as useful a command of academic or workplace literacy practices as possible,
and on the other hand we must allow—even encourage—them to consider the
personal implications of learning such practices, fomenting change in the very
discourse practices that we teach. Ironically, if we are successful in walking this
fine line, some of our students may discover that participating in such practices
is too costly.6

Notes

1 Lynn Z. Bloom's recent *College English* article, "Teaching College English as a Woman," provides a brief, but fascinating autobiographical account of the development of this pedagogy
and the article that reported it. Her discussion of the original article hints at a possible
alternative interpretation for the observational basis for Bloom and Bloom's pedagogy: they
may have based the pedagogy on Martin's direct observations of one student rather than on
Lynn's years of experience as a composition instructor because of Lynn's conviction that
"Freshman composition didn't count" and that "Only real professors with full-time jobs could
publish academic articles, and I knew that I wasn't one" (820).

2 Zoellner makes this point explicit in a later article arguing that behavioral objectives
must be adapted to individual students' needs ("Lucy's Dance Lessons").

3 The vocal-scribal schism that Zoellner describes may be a problem with what Britton
calls "shaping at the point of utterance" or what Daly describes as true writer's block: "When
individuals who are willing to write [i.e., not procrastinating] find that, as they write, nothing
comes" (70). The problem in this case seems to be primarily what Flower and Hayes would
call "translation." The person has something to say, but can't get it into words. If this
understanding of Zoellner's vocal-scribal schism is accurate, then it is an important, but limited writing problem and may not be an appropriate basis for designing a general pedagogy.

4 I do not mean to suggest that an empirical approach to writing pedagogy must be tied to the behaviorist model of learning as stimulus, response, and feedback. Other, less reductive descriptions of learning are certainly possible.

5 I should note that many empirical researchers deny the claim that empirical work in composition has ever been positivistic in the sense of believing in universal laws. Indeed, in a recent Research in the Teaching of English article, John R. Hayes argues that what Egon Guba calls the "postpositivist" revolution in social science research is a misnomer because the positivist paradigm it supposedly replaces never existed. Hayes also argues that similar charges of positivism about literacy research are equally unfounded. Hayes' point is important if we are to sort out substantive critique of empirical work from seemingly uninformed ones. For example, Hatch's recent claim that the early work of Flower and Hayes assumes that think-aloud protocols "reflect the actual cognitive processes of individuals" (246) unnecessarily clouds the issue of how empirical research may be useful in describing the intimate interplay between thought and language. Hatch's spurious assumption that Flower and Hayes believe that pure cognition is accessible through think-aloud protocols leads him to the equally spurious conclusion that "the protocol method of Flower and Hayes is an experimental method that contaminates its own sample" (247). Hatch's reading of Flower and Hayes' early work is disturbing for two reasons. First, it is superficial, ignoring the long tradition of research and theory in cognitive psychology and linguistics that informs protocol research (see Ericsson and Simon). Second, Hatch's critique seems motivated by a desire to find means to further estrange the so-called humanistic and social scientific strands of composition theory and research. He recommends that, as a discipline, rhetoric and composition should "turn away from psychology to recent work in linguistics and literary theory. The assumptions and methods of these fields are more familiar to those of us trained in English departments; there also has been much attention in these fields to writing and speech as signifying acts" (248). Hatch's recommendation not only smacks of an unhealthy isolationism but also erroneously assumes that recent work in cognitive psychology is unaware of the "signifying" functions of language.

6 The author would like to thank Stuart Greene, Linda Flower, Richard Leo Enos, Peter Smagorinsky, Wendy Bishop, John. R. Hayes, Rebecca E. Burnett, and Helen Rothschild Ewald for their insightful responses to drafts of this article.

Works Cited


Foster, David. "What Are We Talkin' about When We Talk about Composition?" *Journal of Advanced Composition* 8 (1988): 30-40.


A Reminder

Remember to renew your subscription to JAC. In order to reduce operating costs and subscription rates, JAC does not bill readers. We rely on your interest and support. We hope, too, that you will encourage your colleagues and librarians to subscribe.