At one point, Ryder expresses her concerns this way: "Unless students already believe in social constructionism... we will not be able to persuade them by saying either, "This is more sophisticated," or 'Look inside and you will understand what I am saying." (519). I do not know if Ryder is here suggesting that "teaching" need always involve "persuading," but characterizing social constructionism as a position requiring "belief" hints that there are occasions when this epistemology or one of its tenets seem dubious. When do they seem dubious? I may be reminded that my responses of admiration, sorrow, loyalty, and outrage are "socially constructed," but this may often answer a question I feel no need to ask. Because humans have demonstrated the virtues of inclusiveness, friendliness, and compassion in all ages, in all cultures, it might be more instructive to say that such capacities are psychologically constructed, which, at times, means little more than "taught" or "passed on." Knowledge, like experience, animates (and fails to animate) character and values in very inscrutable ways, making these questions the live ones they are for teachers of writing.

Works Cited


Putting "it" in Context: Diversity in Composition Classes

Phyllis Mentzell Ryder

Thomas O'Donnell and I appear to be in the same camp—leftists who seek pedagogical theories to help us counteract threats to diversity. In my article I posit that one way to engage our students in discussions of power and equity is to consider how these issues are tied to epistemology. If we begin to see the knowledge as socially constructed, rather than as foundational, we have more chance of questioning the social factors that lead to a particular knowledge claim.
O'Donnell proposes that "the index of the capacity to welcome diversity is best charted along psychological lines, not epistemological ones," though he "does not wish to deny that [psychology and epistemology] cross at key points." I would emphasize the ways that the two fields intersect each other: surely what one "knows" is tied up intert Sikhly with one's mental, physical, and spiritual experiences. Social construction does not deny the place of the personal. Our lives are constructed because of our multiple experiences with multiple others: our sense of what is true and what is possible is "created" out of these relationships. In this sense, epistemology and psychology overlap considerably. It is not surprising, therefore, that theories of psychological development, such as *Women's Ways of Knowing*, define psychology in terms of people's conception of their and other's relationship to "knowledge."

Because of the backlash among rhetoric and composition scholar-teachers who find discussions of power irrelevant and inappropriate for our composition classrooms, I seek a theory which demonstrates why such discussions are necessary to composition curricula. I lean toward the epistemological (rather than the psychological) framework because I find epistemology offers explanations for the interrelation between composition and politics that are more persuasive to rhetoric scholars-teachers. If we accept the claim in the new rhetorics and postmodernist theory that rhetoric is epistemic—that is, that language does not reflect, but selects and deflects our view of the world (to paraphrase Burke)—then questions of how power and ideology are manifested in language become relevant to the teaching of composition. Within a skeptical disciplinary context, I find it hard to use psychological theories to justify addressing issues of diversity in a composition class, though I would be very interested to hear such a position developed.

What concerns me most about attempts to define issues such as racism in terms of psychology is its individualist bent. What is lost, I fear, when we focus on psychosocial psychological explanations of people's aversions to diversity, is an earnest questioning of how social forces merge to create hegemonic and naturalized views of what is "right" and "good" and "true." If we treat racism as a psychological problem, then the solution is to send all "racists" for counseling. We never have to acknowledge how institutions promote racism, how racism is embedded in our language practices, and so on. We might not pause to examine how deep-seeded societal norms—such as America's valorization of individualism—might work together with other norms—such as capitalism—to obscure those American commonplaces that continue to make racist and classist practices acceptable.

Now, I recognize that there are movements in psychology—social psychology, feminist psychology and others—that investigate the intersection of the personal and the social. And yet, most often the way psychology is practiced does not account for these outside forces; instead, we are asked to look at individuals and their personal experiences—important investigations, but ones which can deflect our attention from political forces at work. Consider, for example, bell hooks' analysis of how the self-help movement co-opts the
political force in feminism by asking women to look inward instead of outward for
the causes of "their" "problems." What I gain from looking at societal issues through
the lens of feminist epistemology is the sense that a culture is more than the sum
of its individual members. And the collective force of a culture—its hegemonic
power—must be accounted for if we want to change the dominant perspectives.

This kind of awareness of power dynamics helps me to resolve the apparent
conflict O'Donnell sees in my call, on the one hand, to scrutinize "every belief and
action" according to its rhetorical context and, on the other hand, to practice
"preverse reading." O'Donnell supposes that the reason to practice preverse
reading is "only in order to fuel willful reaction." It's not. I don't promote a notion
that all reading should lead to cynical skepticism; I don't value the hip smirk for
its own sake any more than Patricia Bizzell does. And yet, I don't wish to claim that
all readers should first open their hearts and minds and then enter a dialogue with
a text. We can't always trust that writers have our best interests in mind. In fact,
for many minorities, including the lesbian readers Zimmerman discusses, we can't
presume that writers have us in mind at all. For a lesbian to read a heterosexist text
with an open heart, she must deny her own heart, her own eroticism, and must accept
the author's negative depiction of homosexuality while she takes on the role of the
invoked heterosexual reader. I claim that as soon as a reader recognizes cues that
ask her to take on a persona that undermines her power, she should read with her
guard up. And, if she wants to do that playfully, she can read "perversely" by re-
writing the text to endorse the very part of herself it seeks to erase.

O'Donnell's interpretation of this kind of reading as "self-interested rejoin-
ing," and "a dogmaticism, not a hermeneutics of 'welcoming,'" suggests a
different understanding of the power relationship between the writer, the reader,
and the dominant pressures of a society. The feminist reader, or the politically
active lesbian or African American reader is, by definition, aware of the values
of the dominant culture and the differences between this dominant view and her
or his own experiences. Their views are not the expected ones, the controlling
ones, the hegemonic ones—so reading the world from this perspective means
always already recognizing the tentativeness and partiality of their experiences.
Speaking and reading from a minority perspective means being aware of the
power dynamics surrounding our positions.

In the reverse situation, where a member of the dominant culture reads a
minority text "perversely," or in situation where the power dynamics among
reader, writer, and dominant culture are equal, then I agree with O'Donnell's
claim that resisting reading is dogmatic and short-circuits any learning. Surely
it is more comfortable to resist the perspectives of those groups who are
oppressed, but as teachers we are irresponsible to allow it. This is the kind of
discomfort that bell hooks relies on in her pedagogy: one which forces us to
examine how we oppress others.

Finally, I'd like to raise a concern I have about my article which O'Donnell
does not address—one that suggests possible new directions for research. When
I look back on my use of terms such as "oppression," "liberation," and "equality,"
I recognize that as I used those terms in my article to persuade readers to act for leftist goals, I relied on leftist definitions. A greater difficulty arises, I think, when we attempt to persuade conservative or even moderate educators to follow this agenda. As California’s Proposition 187 and other anti-affirmative action policies are proposed in legislatures and discussed in the media, it becomes clear that the political camps don’t use the terms “oppression” and “equality” the same way. For those of us who wish to raise students’ awareness of the power dynamics at work in such legislation, we must focus on how we negotiate these terms in order to speak persuasively in our classes and beyond the academic circle about such apparent ideological impasses. Just as the apparently liberal term “respect” can be co-opted to serve the status quo, so we must be wary that the concepts that motivate us to action—the perspectives surrounding what I called “liberation morality”—can be read “perversely” by the dominant powers in ways that subvert our more radical goals.

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Imitation and Composition Pedagogy: A Response to Mary Minock

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While I was reading Mary Minock’s “Toward a Postmodern Pedagogy of Imitation,” I found myself increasingly frustrated by her handling of what should have been—and could have been—an intriguing exploration of how to translate some very complicated ideas and concepts on language, reading, and writing into