Community and Cohesion in the Writing/Reading Classroom

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From all the evidence, group practices in writing/reading classrooms appear widely popular today. The theory, history, and practices of group strategies have been elaborated in books, journals and convention programs. Workshops and in-service programs offer practical models of group practices to teachers at both levels. The traditional "lecture/discussion" category now seems mostly practiced as discussion in writing/reading classrooms, where irritated notes on chalkboards instruct English faculty to "put the chairs back the way they're supposed to be." Yet despite the apparent satisfactions teachers and students find in group practices, such practices have also been widely criticized for their potential to dominate individuals and repress the expression of difference. These developments have brought about an interesting conjunction of views in English pedagogy today. Support for and resistance to group practices have developed into a kind of dialectic, which at the present time appears to be in a synthesizing phase. My purpose in this essay is to review this dialectic, identify some of its problematic issues, and suggest some ways to get beyond them.

Group strategies in English classrooms are typically theorized as processes of community-building in the sense associated with longstanding traditions of American schooling. Working together in writing/reading groups is often described as a paradigm of democratic education, exerting the power to bring about participatory social equality. In this way "community" has become a powerful trope in the professional discourses of English studies, appearing as a basic justification for every form of group behavior from workshopping to collaborative writing. In this communitarian perspective, the primary value of collaboration is to create cohesion, the dynamic power of a group to bring about satisfying experiences of commonality, mutual trust, and a sense of belonging. In the perspective of the human sciences—particularly social psychology—cohesion is fundamental to successful groups. John C. Turner and Penelope Oakes maintain that "the dominant theory of the group in social psychology is that individuals become a psychological group to the degree that they are interdependent for the mutual satisfaction of their needs" (235). They define "group cohesion" as "the degree to which members are attracted to the group, the individual members and its other activities" (234-5). In their view cohesion is a basic, necessary component of successful group experiences. Cohesion so
defined involves, most basically, feelings of connectedness and shared experiences, the sense of being in strong positive relationship with others.

However, this emphasis on the integrative power of classroom communities has been roundly criticized in recent years. A number of critics have argued that such communities can be inequitable and oppressive. Some of the sharpest criticisms have come from those who believe that education should aim at social transformation. Their general theme is that group strategies in English classrooms are an expression of middle-class liberalism, and fail to address the inequities of power relations and cultural and social differences: “knowledge-making communities ignore or erase difference in order to maintain a single, authoritative, ‘normal’ discourse,” says Carrie Shively Leverentz (168). To critics this enforced communitarianism enacts the hegemony of the dominant culture and class, ignores unequal power relations within society and the academy, and precludes confronting fundamental inequities of our society. Classroom groups are, if not synonymous with oppression, at least its ready and potent instrument. For these writers, the primary challenge for group interaction is to nurture “difference” and inculcate respect for otherness. Rather than emphasizing the power of classroom community to unify students, they value its differentiating potential, its power to frame and regularize conflict and preserve differences among students.

While both supporters and critics of group practices agree that collaborative and group practices do create classroom communities, they disagree on whether this is a good thing, and on how classroom groups might preserve difference as strongly as they encourage collectivity. Thus there is a persistent dialectic between those who defend group strategies as nurturing collaboration and commonality, and those who distrust such practices as diminishing difference and masking inequity. From this dialectic of support and resistance, some synthesizing efforts have emerged in the form of proposals that seek to combine the cohesive and differentiating functions of classroom communities. I will suggest that these efforts do not go far enough in recognizing the interrelation between the cohesive and differentiative functions of groups. Indeed, certain faultlines tend to recur in these proposals.

The most basic faultline appears in regard to the matter of cohesion: uncertainties emerge as to how mutual trust and interdependence can develop in classrooms committed to valuing and preserving difference, with its power to divide students from one another. In the following pages I will test these questions against some recent models of classroom community which emphasize a contested but integrative pluralism. Then, using the same questions, I will interrogate John Trimbur’s more radical model of classroom “dissensus” which emphasizes the preservation of difference. I will argue that a tacit but crucial assumption in these models—that if successful group strategies can be developed for recognizing and preserving difference, cohesion will naturally follow—is problematic and open to question. What is missing, I propose, is the matter of classroom motivations; I believe a crucial task for writing teachers is to nurture motives for both cohesion and differentiation in today’s writing/reading classrooms.
The Communitarian Trope in the Writing/Reading Classroom

The traditional application of the trope of community to English classrooms has its roots in the rhetoric of liberal democracy. Proponents of mass education in America traditionally believed in the capacity of education to harmonize and incorporate difference. The history of public education in the United States bears eloquent witness to the efforts of American schooling to develop social cohesion. The communitarian trope is adaptable and useful in educational discourse today, lending itself to a variety of political contexts. The goal of “civic education,” says Sandra Stotsky, is to enact the “civic” or “communitarian ethic” by teaching “individual responsibility for the common good” and “participation in public life” (2). Teachers of academic writing should do this, she maintains, by teaching their students “responsibilities . . . for both scholarship and citizenship in a republican form of government” (Stotsky 134). Teachers should insist that students “consider other writers as sincere as [themselves]” (138), that they “create unambiguous texts” and “provide correct examples” (150-153), and that they “assume open-minded readers” (156). The emphasis here on clarity and correctness suggests the traditionalist flavor of Stotsky’s use of the communitarian trope to connect schooling with the shaping of republican citizenship.

But the trope appears equally useful within a traditionally liberal frame of argument. Gregory Clark, for example, maintains that a democratic community must be grounded in a deliberate nurturing of collaborative “dialogue, dialectic, and conversation” by means of which “the knowledge that enables us to meet our common needs and reach our common goals” is constructed (68). For Clark, the terms of participatory liberalism—“democracy,” “equality,” “participation”—are quite sufficient to motivate students to form cohesive classroom communities. “When we teach our students that writing is a ‘practice,’” he says, “we are teaching them that reading and writing is a democratic practice, one sustained by the skills and judgment that a rhetoric of public discourse provides” (68). Clark’s praise of writing as a socio-political instrument suggests his loyalty to a version of community in which group members work readily and willingly to create equality.

Anne Ruggles Gere similarly emphasizes cooperative equality in applying the communitarian trope to classroom communities. She urges writing teachers to discover their responsibility for “initiating students into communities of educated people” (120). She emphasizes the power of group writing pedagogy to develop social cohesion by putting writers into dynamic relationships with one another and with their audiences, emphasizing the “social relationships between writers and readers” (66). The work of cooperative writing/reading groups directs students’ motives naturally toward cooperation: “collaboration ameliorates alienation by reorienting writers toward their readers”—not the implied readers of texts but the live readers of a collaborative group (68). Thus in group writing activity “[t]he collaboration and language development inherent in writing groups insure that participants will begin to develop the cognitive abilities essential to literacy in the broad sense,” so that “writing groups offer a means for individuals . . . to enter literate communities” (121).
Kenneth Bruffee's "collaborative learning" model of classroom groups also relies on the trope of community, but is grounded in the epistemology of social construction, advocating "collaborative learning" based on "nonfoundational social construction" (3). Learning is "an interdependent, sociolinguistic process," he says (8). Thus building knowledge is inherently social; what is "known" is by definition the result of interaction, through "negotiating with one another in communities of knowledgeable peers" (9). By "communities" Bruffee appears to mean both the classroom as a whole, and small "consensus groups" which operate within the classroom. It is the responsibility of the consensus groups to reach agreement on tasks set by the teacher and report back to the whole class. Thus the teacher's managerial skills are crucial: if the teacher sets the stage properly and communicates her positive expectations, "skillfully managed classroom collaboration" will help students "enjoy the freedom to reinvent in the class the collaborative peership... [of] their everyday lives" (27). Motives for cohesion flow naturally from group interactions, in Bruffee's view: students will be rewarded with a sense of belonging to "a new community," one which will provide "a powerful force changing" those who participate (20). Participants must first "overcome resistance to change" generated by the desire to linger "at the boundaries of the knowledge communities that we already belong to"—that is, students will resist being changed (23-4). But the excitement of the process will carry its participants along, Bruffee urges: if they persist, students will discover "the value, interest, and often in fact the excitement" of collaborative consensus-building (27). Conflict thus is represented as a temporary dysfunction within the communalizing body. If students can't "get along with others," then the teacher must remind students of group rules, must insist upon politeness, or perhaps revise group memberships to defuse problems, Bruffee advises. Classes whose members discover the cohesiveness created by rule-bound ethical choices will enjoy the rewards of collaborative learning.

Critiquing The Trope
These models of community in writing/reading groups are sharply questioned by their critics. Writing within the framework of transformational pedagogy, these critics question the impact of shared, participatory work. They point out that since deep inequities of race, gender and class remain in American society, efforts to harmonize conflicting voices by forming classroom communities stifle individual differences. Postsecondary teachers of English, say these critics, are well situated to co-opt or suppress voices that may question or resist the dominant discourses. One of the strongest critics has been Patricia Bizzell, who, writing in *Contending With Words*, suggests that she has come to regret her earlier enthusiasm for classroom communities. She proposes that though the practice of classroom community appears a "welcoming" and "flexible" means of helping students gain academic literacies, "the academic community possesses much more power than its incoming students do, especially if they display culturally determined 'otherness' of social class, race, or gender" (58). In practice
"community seems [to serve more as] an utterance that helps middle-class teachers fend off criticism" than as a participatory or inclusionary experience (59-60). Other critics of community condemn what they see as a romanticized liberal faith in classroom community as a positive learning environment. Writing teachers’ efforts to make communities out of their writing classes are well-meant but ineffective, says James D. Williams, because white middle-class teachers do not understand “the dynamics of social interactions and communities” (835). Compensatory efforts of well-meaning white middle-class teachers to “validate the language and the nonacademic worlds of their students by bringing both into the classroom as the focus of study,” says Williams, unfortunately does “little to modify the status of students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds” (835). Indeed, maintains Susan Jarratt, group pedagogy whose goal is to empower individual students runs the risk of confirming them in exclusionary career orientations served by the “competitive self-interest” of the culture (109). “[W]hen groups do work together in these pedagogies,” says Jarratt, “the ideal is homogeneity, another way of avoiding confrontations over social differences” (109).

Within this context the test appears to be whether group pedagogy encourages equality or enforces inequality. According to critics, present group practices are inescapably oppressive because, in their push toward cooperation, they encourage participants to avoid conflict. Yet only through disagreement and conflict can inequitable power relations in society be recognized and confronted. “Differences of gender, race, and class among students and teachers,” says Jarratt, “provide situations in which conflict does arise, and we need more than the ideal of the harmonious, nurturing composition class in our repertory of teaching practices to deal with these problems” (113). Thus, the customary association of communal strategies with shared interests and mutual tolerance ignores that which ought to be confronted.

This perspective poses a challenge to collaborative models like Bruffee’s which position teachers at the center of group interactions in the classroom. In Bruffee’s acculturative process, “severing and weakening ties” with their old selves, students must become more like each other as they all become more like the teacher-master who rules the knowledge-group. “Difference,” far from being preserved, must necessarily be abated. Is this rebuilding of student self-identity a laudable act of imparting expertise, or a sordid instance of academic oppression? The problematic aspect of Bruffee’s project is that the ideological space it occupies is not clearly marked. “Knowledgeable” and “like-minded” are labels that exclude as sharply as they include. Bruffee’s collaborative knowledge-communities are certainly likely to exhibit the cohesion flowing from shared goals. The question would be whether this kind of cohesion stifles some element of diversity that, maintained and sharpened, might preserve different ways of knowing within a given learning community. If the very essence of learning means gaining entry into certain knowledge groups, but if—at the same time—that entry diminishes racial, cultural and class difference, how is this apparent conflict to be dealt with?
Achieving Community Through a Contested Pluralism

Several recent proposals maintain that cohesion is a natural outcome of a strategy of contested pluralism in group work. I'd like to begin with a thoughtful essay by Gregory Clark, in which he revisits the issues treated in his earlier monograph. Addressing group interactions in the "composition classroom," Clark proposes an ethical model of community which balances "collectivity and difference." Too often, Clark says, students and teachers feel obligated to set aside their differences to avoid conflict and permit the class to cohere, having been convinced that the "ground for cooperation" has to be "agreement" — consensual behavior is seen to be essential for classroom cohesion ("Rescuing" 61). But, says Clark, the drive toward agreement risks a "denial of difference" and poses "dangers to equality" (62). He is prompted, therefore, to "seek some ethical ground for collectivity" other than agreement; his term is "democratic collectivity" (62). This "collectivity," he continues, can be accomplished through "a relational ethics of rhetoric" which "directs people to determine their interests" by a continual gauging of the need for "agency and deference" (64). By "agency" Clark seems to mean something like asserting one's own needs or views; by "deference," a recognition of the equal validity of the needs or views of others. These acts of self-assertion and self-yielding, says Clark, will generate "a provisionally deferential exchange with differing others" (68). This scenario suggests autonomous and self-aware individuals entering consciously into a rigorous ethical contract with each other.

In calling his version of classroom community a "collectivity," however, Clark creates a faultline in his argument. For a "collective," Karen Burke Lefevre points out, is a "unit that is greater than the sum of its parts," in which individual identity is shaped by participation in the supra-individual whole (80-1). Self-identity in a collective takes shape and definition from the group of which it is part: "the collective view sees ideas as imposed on individuals from without" (81). In a collective, cohesion is achieved in the sense that each individual participates in the dominant group identity; self-identity is group identity. But in Clark's model self-identity appears individualistic and autonomous: group members "function socially as differing but interdependent equals" (71). So defined, students would be unlikely to want to collectivize unless strongly motivated to do so. Thus they must be taught—"directed"—to enter mutual relationships with others. Yet it is not clear what would motivate individual students well aware of their differences and not predisposed by some common group identity to want to seek collectivity in the first place. The ethical moves Clark proposes emphasize the preservation of difference, but the motives for cohesion are not clear.

By contrast, Bruffee's model does make clear his assumption that students' desire to join a knowledge field is the basic drive toward group success. Bruffee represents his students participating in the knowledge-making dynamics of the classroom group because they want to identify with the knowledge fields embodied by the teacher. But Clark rejects this kind of group identification with disciplinary knowledge-building: "[t]he solution," says Clark, "is not . . . to
reconstruct the classroom as a collectivity of practitioners engaged in a common project—at least not when the end of that project is expertise” (71). Instead, Clark would have his students “go beyond expertise” to enter into the “political practice of a discursive exchange of equals” (71). Clark represents his ideal classroom group as one that establishes a consciousness of equality as its primary goal. But what would motivate students to seek that consciousness as a group is not clear. For as Clark describes his group process, students would resist any group consciousness until they are taught how to achieve it by a series of ethical moves and adjustments. In effect, that is, the ethical decisions which Clark advocates are checks and balances in the group dynamic, moves that curb the centrifugal forces of competing differences. These acts are not in themselves motives for community; rather, the desire for community would be necessary in the first place to motivate such acts.

The motives for cohesion are also problematic in a proposal by Stephen Fishman and Lucille Parkinson McCarthy to define a paradigmatic version of classroom community. They propose German sociologist Ferdinand Tonnies’ distinction between “gesellschaft” and “gemeinschaft” as a useful way of thinking about classroom communities. The “unattached,” self-interested individuals living in “gesellschaft,” they argue, relate only through self-interest, as a “means to personal ends” (65). In contrast, groups moved by the spirit of “gemeinschaft” “form a totality with others,” an “organic whole whose various parts serve their unique functions while working toward a common good” (64).

Tonnies’ distinctions provide Fishman with two versions of community: one based on commonality and shared values (gemeinschaft), and one on mutual self-interest (gesellschaft). Fishman converts these distinctions into a narrative about pedagogical values. As a teacher he has moved, he says, from a teacher-centered to an “expressivist” classroom in which “student and teacher self-discovery” emerges from their co-equality. This transition, Fishman believes, has entrapped his teaching between gesellschaft and gemeinschaft. As the class gains the “shared devotion to common goals” characteristic of gemeinschaft, Fishman as the teacher loses the gesellschaft power to enforce “classroom rules and contracts” (65-66). The students rebel against his assignments, but he has relinquished the powers of enforcement.

In their view, gemeinschaft wins: students’ “differences were positioned and valued as if they were vital parts of an organism working toward a common goal” (79). Yet it is not clear just how gemeinschaft was created. The only group practice in the class appeared to be whole-class discussion with the teacher present, playing first a “convener’s” role and then that of “wise elder” (66). Thus Fishman’s presence must be a major consideration in analyzing the dynamics of the group, but it is not clear what role Fishman played. Students interacted “with a kind of brotherly and sisterly affection,” says McCarthy, as Fishman “sat quietly by” during the class (71). Perhaps the growing cohesiveness of this classroom group was due to the omnipresent (but perhaps low-key) influence of the teacher. Or perhaps it was the result of a methodological move—granting
expressivistic freedom in a decentered classroom. Fishman's role was probably more important—his values more influential within group discussions—than it is reported here. It seems likely that Fishman adopted teacherly roles—consciously or perhaps unconsciously—which enhanced his chosen strategy and fostered the cohesion he sought. But these issues need fuller consideration, and composition and dynamics of the group itself need a clear accounting.

**Community, Subjectivity Theory, and Difference**

While the polarities of individuality and collectivity are beset by the problematic tensions of self vs. other, the subjectivist perspective of postmodern theory carries with it a different set of problems in envisioning classroom communities. At the heart of these problems is the difference between the constructs "individual" and "subject." Paul Smith warns that "it is necessary to guard against the epistemological trap inherent in conflating the 'subject' with the 'individual'" (24). The individual is typically presented as a self-aware agent capable of choice, shaped by both social and personal factors—the students portrayed in Clark’s and Fishman and McCarthy’s studies, for example. The subject, on the other hand, is a site or position within which cultural discursive practices may be inscribed. It becomes difficult to attribute to students conceived as subjects, the same freedom and critical consciousness accorded students seen as autonomous individuals. As Lester Faigley observes, "postmodern theory decisively rejects the primacy of consciousness and instead has consciousness originating in language, thus arguing that the subject is an effect rather than a cause of discourse" (9). Terminological questions arise: "who" experiences cohesion either as reinforcement or familiarization? How is the participant in the dynamics of group interaction to be characterized? In any effort to describe the student/subject’s participation in classroom communities, it becomes a challenge to describe how a critical self-awareness may form, how a capacity for choice might develop, and/or how a felt freedom to act may emerge in group interactions.

Faultlines peculiar to the subjectivist paradigm have recently been noted in discussions of student writers. For example, Frank D. Walters observes that "there seems to be a double-bind afflicting the Foucauldian writer, a conflict between the subject, whose disappearance is the sign of the statements' historicized presence, and the subject-function, which is present, within the historicized moment, to write, if not actively to carry out the function, 'to author'" (825). The hesitation in his phrase "if not actively to carry out the function, 'to author,'" suggests a sensitivity to the ambiguity in Foucault’s formulation, as applied to student writers. It suggests Walters’ awareness of the consequences of defining student writers as subjects. Walters maintains that personal agency must be attributed to student writers, because although “to write is necessarily to take on a subject position,” still “it does not follow that to write is to become subject to outside forces. If for no other reason than that hegemony feeds on the silence of the oppressed... it is imperative that we (and our students) write” (825). But
“outside forces” are not a major issue in Foucault’s explanations of discourse and power. Politics is not a function of “outside” forces, but a set of discourses within and against which resistance must be devised. Occupying a site where discourse and power speak, the writer discovers the space within which resistance can be created. The problem of envisioning how the subject-writer recognizes a site of resistance is precisely the problem of agency in Foucauldian terms. Political resistance is the outcome of agency, not its cause or source.

This question of agency for student writers becomes particularly important in discussions of transformationalist pedagogy. Thus it is crucial in John Trimbur’s influential discussion of group practices in the English classroom. Just as Clark proposes to abandon agreement as a group goal in his writing classroom, Trimbur proposes to replace “consensus” with “dissensus” as a pedagogical strategy in English classrooms. As an advocate of a transformationalist pedagogy, he believes in the power of classroom community to bring about social change. Conflict and difference are posited as preferable to harmony and agreement in classroom groups. Collaborative pedagogy, Trimbur argues, should teach students to value “participatory democracy” above “traditional hierarchical relations of teaching and learning” (611). In order to achieve this, pedagogy in English classrooms should seek, not “collective agreements” but “collective explanations of how people differ, where their differences come from, and whether they can live and work together with these differences” (610). To help students learn to disagree without threatening group disintegration, says Trimbur, consensus must somehow be redefined “as a matter of conflict” (608). Rather than remaining a practical classroom goal, consensus should be recoded as a “utopian,” infinitely deferred ideal. In its place is a strategy of ongoing conversation offering “a way to orchestrate dissensus and turn the conversation . . . into a herotopia of voices” (615). The recognition of difference becomes the primary goal of Trimbur’s classroom community.

He identifies what at first seems an individualist view of students in writing/reading groups. Students, he suggests, may be considered part of “normative communities” in the sense that individual identity is shaped by sociocultural contexts. However, he adds that “in effect there is nowhere else [except in normative communities] the individual can be: consciousness is the extension of social experience inward” (604). This suggests a version of “consciousness” as subject—a site upon which cultural identity is inscribed. Here the problem of agency arises: if consciousness is defined as the site of cultural inscription, how is a student to understand his or her own position as a separate, differing entity within a group? This matter is crucial to Trimbur’s formulation of dissensus, but it is not clearly addressed. It places in question how his pedagogical goal of helping students learn to create dissensus can be enacted. If a student is defined as the subject of normative discourses, from where is the motivation for students to dissent going to arise? Louis Althusser’s classic statement of the problem of subjectivity—“individuals are always-already subjects” (176)—formulates the problem succinctly. More recently, Roger Gottlieb has trenchantly described
the plight of the individual as subject: “culture does not only tell people what to do or what authorities to obey; it represents us to ourselves,” inducing a “cultural schizophrenia” that creates “a numbing sense of personal unreality” (157). The consequence of this, he says, is that “an unreal self cannot provide direction for itself. Without authority, it is lost” (157). Indeed, the “unreal self” would likely find it difficult not only to recognize “difference” as a facet of self-identity, but even to make volitional choices about collaboration or deliberate community-building. To lack a critical sense of self is to lack agency; the “unreal self” goes along with the tide, making few choices in any direction.

This way of accounting for students’ lack of direction in group contexts is helpful in suggesting why they might prefer an easy consensus and hesitate to assert difference. Trimbur acknowledges that students often seek “noncontroversial consensus without considering alternatives” (603). And critics like Bizzell argue that the dominant members of classroom communities—well-schooled students and middle-class teachers—cannot recognize the subject positions they occupy precisely because they are shaped by economic privilege and the culture of the academy. That is why these critics distrust well-meaning efforts to create classroom communities. In their view, the middle-class majority, imprisoned in their privileged positions, cannot recognize the silence of disempowered others. Trimbur agrees that “we cannot realistically expect that collaborative learning will lead students spontaneously to transcend the limits of American culture, its homogenizing force, its engrained suspicion of social and cultural differences, its tendency to reify the other and blame the victim” (603). And indeed, students immersed in their own cultural positions will have as much trouble recognizing the importance of cohesive mutual regard as they will the necessity of deferential acceptance of difference.

Implications for Theory and Practice
In writing/reading classrooms which rely on collaboration and group work, motives for both cohesion and differentiation are equally necessary. Clearly, these efforts are intertwined; both must be shaped by thoughtful pedagogical strategies. We teachers need to foreground the importance of cohesion by shaping motivations that hold students together, while also encouraging the recognition of competing differences. It is perhaps the fundamental pedagogical challenge of our university culture today. We must encourage students to want both community and difference, with its besetting tensions, in achieved group settings.

In theorizing about classroom models of group and collaborative work, then, we need to foreground the role of cohesion and account for its presence, especially in models emphasizing resistance and difference. In the classroom models discussed earlier, the prevailing assumption is that students will, if given the right opportunities, make rational, positive choices to achieve community. Clark, for example, expresses confidence that his ethics of incorporation—“cooperative consideration”—will succeed in the classroom if properly nurtured. But the success of ethical strategies in shaping classroom community is
contingent upon classroom members' readiness to work with (and within) such structures. Trimbur, urging the replacement of consensus with dissensus, salutes "the desire of humans to live and work together with differences" (615). Yet "the desire to live and work together" is itself a set of motives which students do not necessarily bring to the classroom; such motives often need to be developed. It is possible to imagine, for example (as some of the critics of community have suggested), that racial/cultural differences can be so profound as to completely undermine assumptions about students' willingness to work together to create classroom community. Teachers relying on writing/reading groups must see the desire for community itself as a pedagogical construct. Thus students' motivations for seeking community should be theorized and conceived as an intended outcome—rather than a hidden assumption—of any classroom experience.

Paradigmatic assumptions about identity constructs and motivations in models of group pedagogy should be made clear. For example, Donald C. Jones argues that Dewey's "pragmatic theory of agency" offers a way out of the conceptual "paralysis" resulting from efforts to imagine how discourse may be resisted by writer/subjectivities formed by discourse: "if an individual tries to escape discursive oppression, then all the prior experiences . . . with that discourse would have to be denied" (86). Certainly John Dewey's understanding of human freedom as deriving from a socially-constructed individuality offers a helpful way to think about students in group relationships, but it requires a shift in the terms of the conversation from a subjectivist to an individualist framework: "Dewey does not consider language to be an oppressive cultural constraint or an endless solipsistic system" (93); rather, says Jones, Dewey "emphasize[s] that the individual and the environment are mutually affected by each other" (88). Jones makes a good case for the applicability of Dewey's formulations to individual writers and the interactions among them. Dewey's experiential orientation offers an antidote to the abstracting effect of subjectivity theory. But it should be recognized that Jones repositions his discussion of discursive oppression within a Deweyian, individualist framework, changing the terms of the governing paradigm.

Indeed, the problem of defining what individuals are and what they can do within a subjectivist framework must be addressed more fully. The effect of defining a self within a subjectivist context, says Paul Smith, is that we are tempted to picture the self as "determined—the object of determinant forces"—that is, as a coherent effect of a totalizing culture (xxxiv). For example, to envision the writing subject as speaking from "the silence of the oppressed"—in Walters' phrase—portrays the subject purely as a silenced, presumably agentless entity. Yet as Kurt Spellmeyer points out, "the subject always speaks from a 'discontinuity,' from a point of intersection between divergent interests, channels, and communities" (76). The student/subject shares the discontinuities of the spaces he/she occupies. Smith argues that we should avoid imagining student/subjects as abstract entitities either wholly subject to discourse or wholly autonomous. "It is necessary," says Smith,
It is the “living person” who must be represented in models of classroom community, so that each student’s “lived activity” is seen as the real issue in describing the development of group cohesion and commonality. In students’ “lived experience,” say Daniel Mahala and Jody Swilky, they experience conflict between their “identifications with the dominant culture” and their “struggle to define [themselves] as distinct from it” (380). “We all experience . . . what W. E. B. DuBois calls ‘twoness,’” they continue, “somehow being, and often in asymmetrical ways, participants in the dominant culture, even if we are part of groups that are commonly seen as marginalized or oppositional” (380).

Because student subjectivities are complex, divided and open to reformulation in group settings, classroom structures should provide ample spaces for students to develop critical self-awareness. This can best develop in self-reflexive discourse. Thus in classrooms dominated by collaborative interactions and group awareness, considerable space should be made for students to speak and write about their own roles and attitudes. Because group dynamics reshape individual perspectives, models of classroom community should provide students with the structure to articulate the stresses they feel in the contest between wishing for and resisting group identity. “Teachers can help student illuminate ambivalence,” say Mahala and Swilky, “by initiating examination of the source and functions of . . . biases in the student’s life” (382). For us as teachers it is tempting to approach group work as a positive—if not always achievable—good in students’ learning development. But students ought also to be asked to articulate how group formations may create conflict for them, what new roles will be required of them, and what stresses are induced by such roles. They should be encouraged to see themselves as a space where several communities come together, and to write about how such positioning might generate conflicts in roles and demands made by different communities. They should be asked to describe particular kinds of knowledge, languages, or behaviors which go with specific communities. Because group experiences can force changes in students’ interests, goals and attitudes, students must be given the chance to articulate the impact of these experiences on their sense of self. Frequent recursive writing about the pressures and conflicts of community will enhance the self-awareness necessary for a positive sense of personal agency.

We teachers need not only to theorize but to think practically about how students can be motivated to seek cohesion within a framework of competing differences. Edward Pauly’s study of classroom environments offers a provocative approach based on the uniqueness of each classroom and students’ and teachers’ collective awareness of shared vulnerability and mutual power. Pauly cites studies in high schools that indicate classroom experiences themselves—not the curriculum or teachers—determine students’ and teachers’ judgments of
successful and unsuccessful learning in classrooms. The same curriculum works differently in different classrooms; the same teachers experience different outcomes in different classrooms. Thus, argues Pauly, “the important differences” in comparing learning experiences “are between successful and unsuccessful classrooms, differences which cannot be traced to...teachers, curricula, [or] teaching methods” (33). What determines the quality of learning in a given classroom, he maintains, are the interactions and power relations which develop in it. Students search for ways to identify their own power in a classroom, while being intensely conscious of the power others have over them, and of the extent to which their own power is subject to collective control: “their shared vulnerability is not necessarily unpleasant, but is a constant reminder of how surrounded they are” (48-9). Such “reciprocal power” is dispersed among all group members, so that “no controller can escape knowing that he or she also is being controlled” (57).

If students decide to work together in a classroom, suggests Pauly, it is not necessarily out of a desire to share commonalities, but because they want to resist domination by others: students learn “how to evade, then how to respond, and finally how and when to counter any attempt at one-sided power” (65). Even these motivations for cohesion do not always create satisfying experiences of communality in classrooms, continues Pauly, because the consciousness of reciprocal power may translate into a feeling “of being at other people’s mercy,” so that “classroom life often feels like an unending struggle” (67). Pauly’s description articulates the tensions inherent in group strategies and suggests why student ambivalence may be an inescapable feature of classroom communities.

The emphasis on classroom groups as an expression of power relations has the very real virtue of suggesting why students and teachers might want to make group strategies succeed. This model does not posit an instinctive desire on the part of students to form communities in the classroom. Instead, it suggests why students might perceive communalizing behavior as the most appropriate way to stabilize power relations which, when unstable, threaten the self. Such a model suggests an ethics based as much on enlightened self-interest as on an instinct toward collectivity or mutual regard. It helps explain why students may not want to share their differences within a group setting, or why they may prefer relationships with teachers to those with peers. This perspective suggests some practical applications:

A) Students should be encouraged to recognize that cohesion—mutual interdependence and a sense of connectedness—can help them resist domination and secure relations with others helpful to their own personal success. In other words, self-interest can be nurtured as a fundamental motive for cohesion; if students find it appropriate to build cohesive relationships, it may be to enhance their ability to succeed with their own goals. Judith Rodby reports her experience with an ESL class of migrant workers who feared “the mainstream English community” but who wished to diminish their feeling of marginalization. To accomplish this Rodby organized them into teams charged with preparing
videotapes of their life narratives which could be shown to "outsiders" in the mainstream community. Videotaping their stories in their second language for an imagined audience of mainstream English speakers, Rodby says a sense of "communitas" emerged which helped them to "a new awareness and consciousness of mainstream society against which [they could] define themselves" (154). These students were both fearful of and resistant to opening their lives to outsiders, but were convinced by the teacher to form teams and develop the video project in order to articulate both their mainstream goals and their sense of difference from those already within the dominant culture. The more fully students can articulate their own interests and goals, the more likely it is they will be able to discuss differences with others with the kind of deference that Clark urges for classroom groups. Opportunities for group members to build self-awareness by articulating their own fears about the costs of working together are crucial in helping students confront the threat posed by new classroom relations.

B) When students refuse to recognize or discuss differences substantively, it is usually (though this seems counterintuitive) because the group lacks cohesion—lacks that connectedness which provides the genuine freedom to differ. We naturally seek freedom from pressures to change, rather than freedom for real transformation. The pedagogical solution for this, again, is motivation: students will risk conflict only when they feel secured through cohesive interdependence. Carol Shively Leverentz provides an apt example of students’ unwillingness to risk conflict in the absence of cohesion. She describes her observation of one racially mixed small group within a literature-oriented writing/reading class. The students, wanting to avoid "what they rightly sensed were potentially explosive ... conversations about racial differences," distanced themselves from each other "by constructing a rhetoric that allowed them to maintain some ... engagement without risking face-to-face disclosure" (300, 301). Group members evaded discussing racial attitudes by focusing on marginal issues and missing class at times when racial issues might arise. At one point the group decided to avoid discussing a student text critiquing racial attitudes, chatting instead about general matters unrelated to the text (307). These evasions came about not because they wanted to preserve an already-developed group cohesion, but precisely because they lacked the cohesion necessary to confront collaboratively the "touchy' subject matter" of race (302). Leverentz’ conclusions illustrate my point here: "solidarity rather than consensus is a necessary prerequisite to productive talk about difference," because students must feel connected with each other in order to differ openly (310). And expressing difference leads to the most important outcome of strengthened classroom community: a more critical self-awareness. Examining their own needs and dependencies, students can develop that intelligent self-awareness which motivates both the urge to connect and the desire to differ and accept difference.

The development of both cohesion and the agency to differ in a classroom group is a result of complex interactions among students, teachers, and class-
room goals. As Maureen Hourigan observes, "good pedagogies must always be local ones, changing from one place to another, from one semester to another, often, indeed, from one classroom to another" (xviii). Each classroom has a unique mix of variables which determine the kinds of experiences its members have. Motivations for successful group experiences are clearly part of the larger context of the individual classroom. In the future, efforts to predicate the formation of communities in writing/reading classrooms must take into account the contexts within which particular variables will operate. It must be asked for what purposes classroom groups are formed, what specific goals are set for them, how the teacher interacts with them, what connections they have with the larger learning goals of the class, and what sorts of ethnic, cultural and socioeconomic variety are represented among class members. Only in this way can the real complexities of intentions and interactions in English classroom groups be better understood.

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Notes

1 Some of the best known titles are Anne Ruggles Gere's Writing Groups: History, Theory, and Implications; Karen Burke Lefevre's Invention as a Social Act; David Bleich's The Double Perspective: Language, Literacy, and Social Relations; Karen Spear's Sharing Writing: Peer Response Groups in English Classes; Gregory Clark's Dialogue, Dialectic, and Conversation: A Social Perspective on the Function of Writing; and Kenneth Bruffee, Collaborative Learning: Higher Education, Interdependence, and the Authority of Knowledge.


3 The venue of this book and its author suggests the combination of educational authority and political conservatism it represents. Stotsky's work has been done at Harvard; the book is published by the Teachers College Press of Columbia University; and Stotsky is the editor of Research in the Teaching of English. She is also a member of the Committee to Review National Standards, a body appointed by the conservative American Enterprise Institute to respond to the perceived multicultural tilt of recent secondary-teaching-standards reviews in such disciplines as history.

4 Foucault treats this matter, for example, in Part Four, "The Deployment of Sexuality," in The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Vol. 1, and in Chapters V through IX in Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason.

Works Cited


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