A Language of Possibility: A Response to Homi Bhabha

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As a compositionist, I'm intrigued by Homi Bhabha's work for a variety of reasons, and Gary Olson and Lynn Worsham's insightful, carefully organized questions give him ample opportunity to discuss the major themes of his writing as they directly relate to composition theory. Bhabha has an uncanny ability to make his own work demonstrate the possibilities for academic writing, both as a genre of writing and as a means of "breaking the continuity and the consensus of common sense." While his facility with language can make him a challenge to read, it is always interesting to watch how he "stages" his theory. Beyond my admiration of him as an academic writer, Bhabha also appeals to me because his work generally champions the possibility that writing can do, as he says, "revolutionary" work, and that is what I like most: his is a language of possibility.

As Bhabha makes clear in the JAC interview, writing and the teaching of writing are, for him, political activities that must be linked, therefore, to the possibility of political action. By itself, this is not a new idea to compositionists; in fact, the notion that writing and writing instruction are political is a familiar idea. Of late, however, it seems that the political possibilities of writing and writing instruction, at least as they have been expressed in liberatory or critical pedagogy, have been increasingly challenged. Recent criticism of critical pedagogy has ranged from Susan Miller's worry that practices based on critical theory can sometimes infantalize students and privilege interpretation over production (498) to Jeff Smith's argument that it is our ethical duty to help our students who want to join the managerial class do just that—regardless of our own political agendas (306). What is easy to do is to say that writing and the teaching of writing are political; what is hard to do, as the last twenty years of composition theory has demonstrated, is to find a way to support critical practice.
in an academy (and this includes most of the administration, many of our colleagues, and some of the students) that is most often concerned only with how well we teach students to write within academic and professional conventions.

My own reading of the problem is that a great deal of the composition theory that arises from the notion of the politicized composition class seems, at times, to end with the idea that writing and politics are linked; or, at best, such theory expends itself in theorizing the political nature of writing and writing instruction and then turns away from discussions of theory to discussions of classroom practice. What has been left under-theorized is just how writing serves to "interrupt the dominant and dominating strategies of generalization within a cultural or communicative or interpretational community."

Critical compositionists and literacy theorists such as James Berlin, Patricia Bizzell, Henry Giroux, C.H. Knoblauch, and Ira Shor have long called for compositionists to recognize that writing is always political and to address the ramifications of teaching students to write within the institutions of culture and the academy. Too often then, the literature of critical pedagogy turns to issues of application, which only serves to draw a bolder line between theory and practice, between theory and writing. While these compositionists have urged us to use the political possibilities of the writing classroom to empower our students to resist the unthinking acceptance of values within the context of academic and cultural texts, the reality of a student-centered, politicized composition pedagogy operating from such theory has proven to be illusive. Serious questions have now been raised by scholars on all sides of the political spectrum about whether critical pedagogy can, or should, even attempt to "liberate" and "empower" students. Other scholars have wondered whether this form of critical thinking and resistance actually has any use outside of the academy. As Evan Watkins notes, "we'll look a long time to find something somewhere else that looks like 'resistance' as we know it—in 'writerly texts' and trenchant analyses of semiotic codes" (28).

Usually, these problems have been addressed as if they were problems of application, and this is where Bhabha can be a most useful tonic. As it is, the theoretical work of critical pedagogy often seems to end with an expanded notion of writing and with the idea that writing is a political activity; Bhabha's work begins there. Too often, composition theorists simply point to writing as a site of possible political action and then turn to a discussion of the problems of applying that idea to a writing class. In spite of our best intentions, such moves merely reinforce the idea that theory and practice are two separate issues. Instead, I would hope now that composition theory might be growing into what Bhabha calls "political maturity," where we might, as he writes in *The Location of Culture*, find a new approach that "introduces us to an exciting, neglected moment, or movement, in the 'recognition' of the relation of politics to theory; and confounds the traditional division between them" (22). Such a moment might encourage us to see our own theorizing as a form of practice and, perhaps more importantly, to see classroom activity and even student texts as theory—
theory defined as a mediation into discourse. To paraphrase Bhabha, it is not as if the student paper is short on theory while a more speculative article written by a theorist ought to have more practical examples or applications. In fact, Bhabha is most useful to these discussions because he demonstrates just how compositionists might theorize the move away from a critical pedagogy that stresses student critique and response papers and toward a critical pedagogy that emphasizes the act of writing as the enacting of theory—what Bhabha would call the possibility of writing "as a kind of agency, as a performance, as a practice."

Critical theory as it is expressed in composition studies is in danger now because too many can point to what they see as its failure to produce any lasting effect in culture and to what they see as its failure to produce a coherent practice. As such, my fear is that more compositionists will abandon the language of possibility and come to the conclusion that composition best functions by serving an apolitical service agenda, or that they will become convinced that concerns about critical literacy must remain a secondary agenda for writing theorists and teachers. In answer to these critiques of critical pedagogy, I would suggest that we employ Bhabha's expanded notions of the mediative and reconstitutive power of writing to further theorize the way that writing "presences" the subject—student or scholar—in the space of the political.

Part of the problem may be that theory finds itself, as Bhabha points out, in the position of the other when it enters the political realm. This may be why theorists who write about critical literacy often seem to be searching for a practice to justify their theorizing, and why so many in composition studies still seem to be afraid to fully embrace theory. In fact, Bhabha is often one of those scholars so criticized by those who believe that writing teachers have abandoned their concern with teaching in favor of theory building. Bhabha, however, makes no apologies for his prose or for the scope and nature of his ideas. For instance, after hearing that a colleague found one of his papers "of forbidding difficulty," Bhabha responded:

I can't apologize for the fact that you found my paper completely impenetrable. I did it quite consciously, I had a problem, I worked it out. And if a few people got what I was saying or some of what I am saying, I'm happy. If not, obviously it's a disaster. ("Postcolonial" 67)

I think that Bhabha's writing is anything but a disaster. To be sure, his dense and metaphor-rich writing style would seem to be at least partially a product of his literary training, and I was interested to hear that he often prepared for a writing session by reading poetry, but it is more than that, I think. Bhabha's work is also meant to be a direct expression of his theories about how literacy and writing function; it is, in particular, an expression of his idea that literacy works outside the level of the sentence, "where the pauses occur in the sententiousness, where there is a hesitation within it." Bhabha's prose represents the enactment of his theory—a theory that hopes to move language past its sententiousness and to enact its potential to "open up" discourse.
For me, Bhabha’s writing is a lesson in the way that style can serve as an expression of theme and an example of one of his most important points—that theory writing is a form of political action. If we are, as Bhabha believes, to reject the idea of a transparent language, then we ought to become more open to the possibility of metaphor and non-senteniousness in our theory. This is writing as “mediation, not medium.” Although we may find Bhabha daunting at first, I think his growing popularity as a scholar is a hopeful sign for academic writing. These are values that I would like to see spread.

Because of their carefully crafted questions, and because they are, as compositionists, concerned with writing, Olson and Worsham’s interview with Bhabha goes a long way toward explaining why Bhabha writes as he does and just what he hopes to accomplish in his writing. I hope that readers who have been daunted by Bhabha’s work will listen carefully as he speaks to Olson and Worsham, for it turns out that he may, in fact, be the writer who most clearly and coherently addresses the major tensions in current composition theory—the tensions between theory and practice, between style and context, between affect and rationality, between the modern and the postmodern, and between politics and aesthetics. But it is his language of possibility that I find so hopeful.

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Works Cited


