Reviews


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How do we explain Mikhail Bakhtin's enduring influence on composition studies? Apart, possibly, from Kenneth Burke and Paulo Freire, no other twentieth-century thinker continues to be so voraciously—and, I would add, creatively—appropriated by scholars in our field. But why is this so? What is it about Bakhtin's work that makes it so durable among compositionists?

Certainly, Bakhtin's most persistent theme, dialogue, has enormous appeal for teachers of writing. It is a theme that, ironically, enjoys a certain insularity from dispute. Who among compositionists, after all, could be said to be against dialogue, even should some of us be unfamiliar with Bakhtin's specialized uses of that term? In addition to the cachet that dialogue carries with it, a number of technicalities within the Bakhtin corpus lend a remarkable degree of malleability to his work. The probably unresolvable questions surrounding Bakhtin's partial authorship of texts signed by his colleagues V.N. Volosinov and Pavel Medvedev has resulted in an expanded flexibility as to certain ideas that are routinely, though arguably, credited to Bakhtin. Add to this the already formidable difficulties found in those works known to be authored by Bakhtin, and what remains is a thinker who continues to provoke bountiful comment and inspire a large body of scholarship, both in and out of composition studies.

All the more surprising, then, that given the sheer number and variety of ways that compositionists have appropriated Bakhtin over the last fifteen years, we have yet to witness a comprehensive, full-length study that attempts to situate Bakhtin within composition studies. Until now, that is.

Kay Halasek's *A Pedagogy of Possibility: Bakhtinian Perspectives on Composition Studies* is nothing less than a tour de force, a consummate travelogue of the many sites where Bakhtinian ideas intersect productively with composition theory and practice. Yet, in mapping out these sites, a rather curious doubling effect becomes apparent in her ap-
proach: not only does Halasek identify those places where Bakhtin and composition studies come to meet, she does so in a manner that records her encounters—often first encounters—with both Bakhtin and composition studies. This approach lends a compelling, personal texture to her discussion, as well as a narrative quality that contrasts nicely with the work's organization along more thematic or conceptual lines.

The book is divided into two major sections. The first, "Reimagining the Rhetorical Situation," is composed of three chapters, each of which roughly corresponds to one of the points on the traditional rhetorical triangle. Part two, "The Power and Politics of Pedagogy," is also composed of three chapters, but here with a more pointed emphasis on the larger social implications of the practices we enact in our writing courses, especially as these arise in our everyday classroom activities. Her final chapter, "Toward a Pedagogy of Possibility," reprises the author's guiding purpose by articulating a revivified pedagogy along Bakhtinian lines. Here she enumerates the defining features of the pedagogy she hopes to see established—a pedagogy that her foregoing discussion has sought to illustrate through serial encounters with composition practices (e.g. collaborative learning, audience analysis), composition theorists (Bizzell, LeFevre, Bialostosky, Elbow, Bartholomae, et al.), and even composition truisms. Indeed, regarding the last of these, how she interrogates one of our most stalwart commonplaces may offer some insight into her characteristic approach.

In her first chapter, "Redefining the Student Writer," Halasek recognizes the laudable motives behind asking our students to view themselves as practicing writers, and yet she reveals, at the same time, her own misgivings about doing so. She admits both her personal and professional struggles "to come to terms with the almost universally accepted and unquestioned assumption among composition scholars and teachers that [our] students are 'writers,' that [our] classrooms constitute 'communities of writers,' and that coming to voice in those communities means coming to voice as a writer." And to underscore the idea that our commonplaces may not be so eagerly accepted by those on whose behalf they are meant to empower, she quotes a disarmingly simple question from a student's journal: "Just because I write, can I call myself a writer?"

To hear this question in a Bakhtinian way, as Halasek does, is to hear the term writer populated with numerous, contending voices, with an abundance of social and cultural evaluations. But it is likewise to hear one student's voice simultaneously responding to and addressing the voice of a classroom authority who seemingly desires her to assume the role of writer—a persona, the author notes, so thoroughly suffused in "cultural, social, moral, and political assumptions" that students may find it impossibly "difficult to define themselves as writers, even
secondarily." Not surprisingly, then, Halasek hears a great deal of resistance in this student's question, a resistance borne of the likelihood that this student does not want to be asked to assume an identity that she might otherwise "be unwilling or unable to imagine (or choose)" for herself. Nor does she want one to be chosen for her.

Halasek's point is that the democratizing move to encourage our students to see themselves as writers may reinforce the very kind of problem that such a move seeks to correct. Her concern is that those who promote this move "do not question, perhaps do not even recognize, the colonizing gesture they make when they claim the right to name for students the role they will assume in a writing classroom." To name our students as writers is to exercise a privilege we enjoy, one that "protects our own self-interest, our own privileged position in the Academy." She further observes that by valorizing a particular identity for students, we risk negating "other subjectivities and self-representations" that students might use to "cultivate their voices not as writers, but as people engaged in the act of writing about their lives and their beliefs—as mothers, chicanas, historians," and so on. She recommends that instead of asking our students to adopt the somewhat ambiguous, intimidating title of "writer," we would do far better in asking them to turn their attention to the voices and communities that animate their everyday concerns, that genuinely motivate their desire to say something, or perhaps more accurately, to say something back.

I recount this episode at some length because it represents what I think are just a few of the many strengths that Halasek brings to bear upon her distinctly Bakhtinian reading of composition studies. Here, as elsewhere, she listens closely to, and takes seriously, what students tell us when they resist certain of our practices, assumptions, and shibboleths. Here, as elsewhere, she interrogates the matter at hand not to refute or dismiss it, but to make it proximate so that we might gain a larger understanding of that matter than we now have. Here, as elsewhere, we can glimpse Halasek as she struggles with the received, "authoritative" discourses of both Bakhtin and composition studies, making those discourses her own—or in Bakhtinian terms, making them "internally-persuasive" for herself and thereby bringing them into a zone of dialogic contact for us as well. In fact, thoughout her work, she models for us a Bakhtinian style of reading, if only because we are invited to participate in the narrative of her coming to terms with the two "heroes" of her study.

As I indicated, these are largely matters of approach. But, specifically, what does Halasek contribute to an understanding of the ways Bakhtin can enhance our shared concerns as teachers of writing? I think there are many, but let me briefly note two applications that I think are especially insightful.
First, by showing how our present understandings of audience might be advanced in light of Bakhtinian categories, she opens up a new and promising line of inquiry for scholars investigating the complexities of audience theory. I refer especially to her appropriation of what Bakhtin and Volosinov call the "hero" of discourse, or what is conventionally known as the "topic" or "subject" point on the rhetorical triangle. As she explains, for Bakhtin and Volosinov, no speaker (or listener) is utterly indifferent to the topic of discourse, and because neither speaker nor listener cannot help but express some attitude toward that topic, there is a tendency to incarnate, to personify the subject of our utterances. As Halasek shows, this places the topic (the hero) into a dialogic configuration with both speaker and listener, thus complicating our traditional understandings of audience in some very promising ways.

For example, Halasek asks us to consider the possible alliances that emerge in our classrooms when we ask students to view the "topic" as an active participant in written discourse. In our conventional approach to audience, we posit the writer and reader as allied (or incipiently allied) in their relationship toward the hero, the writer depending on what Volosinov calls the "choral support" of the reader. But, as Halasek points out, it is also possible to imagine situations where the writer must confront an existing alliance between reader and hero, as when we write a letter of complaint to a manufacturer about shoddy wares. It is even possible to imagine the writer and hero allied against the reader—as often happens, say, in a satire or apologia. Halasek notes that while "current rhetorical analyses" tend to focus exclusively on the relationship between author and audience, writer and reader, the Bakhtinian hero adds a dynamic that has gone largely unnoticed.

From a discussion of allied audiences, she then identifies two other distinctly Bakhtinian audiences. The immanent audience, for example, is an intrinsic, albeit socially constructed, listener—one akin to Ede and Lunsford's "invoked" audience, and one who likewise exercises a considerable influence on the writer's discourse. The immanent audience, as Halasek notes, is a safeguard against whatever pressures a writer may feel to mollify, or pander to, a reading public at the cost of betraying the hero (her topic) or the allied, immanent listener (her representative "best" reader). Halasek also mentions a superaddressee audience, one that guarantees the writer a "just" understanding, in the event one is not present in immediate circumstances. Though not as crucial to writing pedagogy as allied or immanent audiences, the superaddressee reader marks a dimension of audience awareness that has simply gotten little or no attention. After discussing these kinds of audiences, she then identifies six Bakhtinian qualities that such audiences possess: intertextuality, intonation, creative understanding, active response, answerability, and addressivity.
What we have here, then, is an extraordinarily full discussion of audience from a Bakhtinian perspective. Not only does the author provide a number of key insights regarding how we might revise our current understandings of audience, it seems to me that in the process she has opened up some of the most imaginative, promising lines of inquiry that we may yet see emerge in the near future. If there is to be a new “turn” in audience research, I suspect that it may well ensue from these pages.

A second major contribution that Halasek makes can be discovered in her comments on reported speech, the manner in which speakers and writers impart other people’s words to an audience. Typically, of course, reported speech assumes the forms of direct and indirect quotation, as well as summary and paraphrase. Our struggles to teach these forms as forms, she observes, do not get us much further along than what current-traditional approaches might have suggested at mid-century. There are some notable exceptions, of course, and Halaskek identifies a few of the rare texts that attempt to surpass the ubiquitous (and abundant) prescriptions concerning how students should execute these forms. But for the most part, traditional approaches persist as we continue to present our students with a teeming body of minutiae regarding the proper handling of quotation, paraphrase, and summary.

We need not approach reported speech this way, however—or, rather, only this way. Taking her cue from Volosinov, Halasek asks us to consider how truly rife with meaning are the complicated relationships between reporting and reported discourses, how stylistically, rhetorically and ideologically charged are the possible ways that our students can position themselves in relation to their sources. In much the same way that a writer makes a hero of her topic, a writer likewise makes a hero of her reported speech, those “utterance(s) with an utterance.” And for exactly the same reason: “A writer cannot simply present another’s words,” the author tells us, “without valuing them, valorizing or denigrating them.” In Halasek’s opinion, this fact alone tells us a great deal about how larger, cultural values underwrite the seemingly innocuous task of presenting “authority, knowledge, and texts.” It also tells us that our approaches to teaching reported speech might be better served by emphasizing not so much the “conventions of reporting discourse but . . . the possible orientations between reporting and reported discourses.”

How might that be accomplished? Halasek suggests that we attend to the two most obvious orientations that are available to writers, what she calls (after Volosinov) the linear and ludic styles. Linear styles of handling quotations, for example, are those styles “almost exclusively” represented in textbook examples. They assume a strict boundary between an author’s words and those he or she reports, and, in so doing,
they reinforce the distant, valorized authority of a source's words—words that exist somewhere beyond dispute and engagement. Ludic styles of reporting discourse, on the other hand, enter into dialogue with the discourse being reported, and thus are more likely to be contentious, questioning, subversive, or parodic. For Halasek, linear and ludic styles recapitulate the Bakhtinian idea of centripetal and centrifugal forces at work in all language, forces of consolidation and dispersion, respectively. Just as Bakhtin does not posit these forces as dichotomous, neither does Halasek see linear and ludic styles as absolutely breached from one another. The problem, however, is that we so overwhelmingly privilege linear styles, we nearly exclude ludic styles from our textbooks and scholarship altogether.

And what are the consequence of that exclusion? Most obviously, we limit our approaches in the classroom. Halasek asks us to rethink the conventional ways we approach the teaching of quotation, paraphrase, and summary, bringing to our pedagogies some needed awareness that handling sources is not simply a problem of mechanics, but a problem of how we—students, teachers, and scholars alike—choose to answer and address the words we report. More than that, she asks us to bring some imagination to how we might teach what seldom gets mentioned in our texts: a ludic sensibility regarding how the authority of other people's words might be challenged. If we don't attempt this, she warns, we simply condition students to believe that, insofar as their relationship to "learning and knowledge" is concerned, they must always "subordinate their own opinions and positions to the discourses of more authoritative persons."

Perhaps just as important, the author's exploration of reported speech also serves to remind us that some of our discipline's most rarefied debates—about academic discourse, teacher and institutional authority, politics and pedagogy, and so on—play out in what some would regard as one of our more trifling, humdrum challenges: the teaching of quotation and paraphrase. Here, as she does throughout her study, Halasek resists familiar dichotomies, the oppositions we sometimes embrace between theory and practice, teacher and students, academic and home discourses, and so on. And here, too, Halasek seeks again to bridge what is for some a divided realm, demonstrating not only how linear and ludic styles may exist in dialogic relation to each other but, more elaborately, how one of our most pedestrian, classroom concerns may embody a number of our discipline's most important and lively disputes.

Is a reexamination of quotation, paraphrase, and summary one of "the most crucial issues facing composition studies?" Hardly, the author admits. But it is one of the many sites where Bakhtin's ideas challenge us to think differently about what we do as teachers and
scholars of writing—and where Halasek fittingly challenges us to contemplate what possibilities might be open to us once we begin to think this way. Possibility, of course, is a theme found throughout all of Bakhtin’s writing—in such well-known ideas as the superaddressee and carnival, in the notion of great time, in his firm denial of last words, and in such lesser-known concepts as noncoincident selfhood and the ethical category of the yet-to-be-achieved. It should come as no surprise, then, that Halasek appropriates the Bakhtinian theme of possibility, and yokes it to her overarching concern with pedagogy. Indeed, it seems right that she has done so.

So what exactly, then, is “a pedagogy of possibility?” With dialogism as the cornerstone for an “architectonics” of possibility, Halasek identifies the key features of the kind of pedagogy she envisions. Foremost among these is an emphasis on the performative nature of teaching, her view that the act of teaching is analogous to the act of utterance: both entail reciprocal interaction, both require addressees (students and teachers) to become “coauthors and heroes” of their shared discourse (learning), and both imply the ethical imperatives of answerability (their mutual obligations to one another). Moreover, while her pedagogy acknowledges the significance of what she calls traditional, “proficiency” models of learning, these must be complemented, Halasek insists, by “productivity” models as well, the latter of which involve the student not merely in the task of acquiring knowledge, but of making meaning. Productivity models allow students to encounter, and potentially resist, those discourses that, in Bakhtinian terms, would be labelled “monologic, distanced, authoritative.” Both proficiency and productivity models are needed, Halasek argues, for it is in their interaction that we are best able to cultivate our students’ “ideological becoming.”

I cannot do justice here to Halasek’s architectonics of a pedagogy of possibility. Yet, the best sense of what she intends, I would maintain, can be gleaned from the chapters leading up to her closing descriptions. Indeed, if her final chapter serves as a blueprint for the architectonics she has in mind, then all that comes before might best be considered a groundbreaking ceremony. For in her efforts to show how Bakhtinian thought can inform our discipline, she turns over much new ground, offering us other ways to think about the familiar, moving us to novel perspectives and unconsidered possibilities. Clearly written, imaginative, and admirably researched, Kay Halasek’s *A Pedagogy of Possibility* should be read by all those heartened that the last word on composition has not been spoken.

I recommend it highly.