
Reviewed by Kate Ronald, Miami University

It's good to step outside disciplinary boundaries, to venture across specialized borders, then turn around, look back and see one's home from new angles. I've been doing just that for the past three years, working as a writing specialist in Miami University's School of Business, charged with "improving the writing of the undergraduates" there. I've been forced to look anew at my sometimes facile assumptions about the purposes for writing instruction, surprised (and somewhat dismayed) by how much I take for granted through my insider's view of what teaching writing should accomplish. I've been humbled by my ignorance of other disciplines' vocabulary, epistemology, and methodology. Most of all, I've been challenged (and gladly) to rethink my own rhetoric, to practice more consciously than I've ever done a constant attention to audience, purpose, and subject. I've come to see composition's rhetorical context much more broadly, and as a result, I've come back to English (where I also work and teach every day) arguing that our discipline needs more consciously to extend and monitor the rhetorical contexts in which we speak and write.

Joseph Petraglia's *Reality By Design: The Rhetoric and Technology of Authenticity in Education* also argues for renewed attention to rhetorical context. In this truly interdisciplinary book, Petraglia makes a convincing case for the reasons teachers should regard themselves as rhetoricians who must invent and arrange compelling arguments, directed at an audience of students, about how and why their pedagogy and subject matter apply directly beyond the classroom. In other words, making education or learning "authentic"—connected to the "real world"—does not reside in subject matter or method alone, or even in the latest technology; authenticity, like education, is a concept that requires and deserves our best rhetorical arguments. In fact, Petraglia says that education is best seen as argument. His basic goal in this study is to bring what he calls a "rhetorical perspective" to the disciplines of educational psychology and educational technology. Like my work in the School of Business, reading this book forces me to turn around, look from different angles, and rethink some of the basic assumptions of my field. I also see in Petraglia's work—although he doesn't say so explicitly—the insistence that all the audiences for our work (and not just an audience of students) deserve our best rhetorical efforts.

Bringing a rhetorical context to discussions of education and learning may not seem terribly new to many readers, but, like David Russell
in Writing in the Academic Disciplines, for example, or Cheryl Geisler in Academic Literacy and the Nature of Expertise, Petraglia demonstrates how rhetorical perspectives can seem foreign, or invisible, to scholars and teachers outside of English or communication studies. Conversely, he also argues that professionals in rhetoric and composition too often dismiss or ignore what may seem to be the scientific research and practice of educational technology and psychology. Petraglia says in his introduction that “rhetoric, when done right, has everything to do with everything,” and the entire work makes the case for crossing borders and learning new languages. Throughout this work, he insists on rhetorical awareness of audience and the need to persuade that audience of his meaning’s worth: “I am . . . struck by the similarities of the interests of cognitivists and rhetoricians, and, with the advent of constructivist and situationist variations on cognitivism, their increasing convergence. . . . In establishing our shared object of inquiry, the commonly misunderstood discipline of rhetoric may be demystified for cognitive scientists and educators, just as I would hope that readers coming from rhetoric-related fields may come to appreciate the essentially cognitive nature of their own interests.” I should point out, however, that this is not a writing-across-the-curriculum book. Petraglia is interested in more than how to improve the teaching of writing: he investigates the philosophical grounding and practical outcomes of what it means to connect learning and teaching to the “real world.”

Petraglia begins with a thorough review of the concept of authenticity as a goal—what he calls a desideratum—in education. He wants to show that the “Western educational tradition has culminated in the contemporary and widespread view that school learning should rightfully, and nontrivially, correspond to the world outside of school”; moreover, this objective is “the result of a confluence of socially and culturally informed choices.” Authenticity, he argues, is “not an intrinsic property possessed by an object but rather a judgment, a decision made on the part of the learner constrained by the sociocultural matrix within which he or she operates.” That’s why Petraglia insists that teachers must argue for the authenticity of their subject matter and their pedagogy. He also investigates teachers’ attempts to “pre-authenticate” by designing syllabi, selecting course readings, creating tasks, problems, or contexts that individual students will likely judge to be meaningfully connected to their conceptions of reality. Petraglia cites three conditions of authenticity: the learner feels “ownership” over or “responsibility” for learning; the task must be “project-based,” with the parts contributing to a clear “bigger picture”; and the work must encourage the learner to “generate multiple perspectives.” Despite the rather technical language here, which is part of Petraglia’s own subdisciplinary context, these goals sound remarkably similar to
those of process or critical writing pedagogy. What Petraglia adds is a close examination of how educators have attempted to make school learning approximate “real” learning, a task he acknowledges is easy to describe in theory and difficult to enact in practice: “it is one thing,” he reminds his readers, “to understand learning in everyday situations and entirely another thing to capture the dynamics of that learning and then set them in motion on cue.”

Petraglia analyzes authenticity as both a contested term and an implicit epistemology, a stance he traces historically and philosophically. He presents his analysis by connecting authenticity as a goal, a method, and a judgment to what he calls the “constructivist metatheory” that has come to dominate rhetoric, psychology, and education. Petraglia reviews constructivism as that term has been defined and developed in cognitive psychology. As someone raised in composition in the 1970s, I welcome this return trip to Vygotsky, Dewey, and many other thinkers from cognitive fields, and I encourage readers who believe that Kenneth Bruffee or James Berlin invented social constructionism to take a look at this book. Petraglia tells his readers that “the desideratum of authenticity in education has grown out of century-long intellectual progression. . . . Our professional interest in the ‘real world’ is not traceable to any particular constructivist theorist, but to a general dissatisfaction with transmission models of learning, instructivist modes of teaching, and theories of mind that preclude context.” For its interdisciplinary history alone, this book is a worthwhile read.

One of the real benefits of this study is that Petraglia reminds his audience(s) of the intellectual roots of our most basic assumptions about teaching. It’s no doubt a good idea periodically to reexamine one’s implicit beliefs and strategies, especially from new disciplinary perspectives. For rhetoric and composition, a field sometimes too eager to deem anything that comes with the prefix “post” an improvement, I think Petraglia’s careful look at the historical contexts of constructivism is useful. He shows how this term has been defined, argued over, and used in contexts outside the narrow confines of one disciplinary specialty. Petraglia describes the “triumph of constructivism” as evidenced in talk of the “real world, the everyday,” but also notes the irony of our certainty about the importance of student-centeredness, social/cultural/material contexts, and the contingency of knowledge: “just when the importance of the real world has finally made itself felt in education and psychology, the postmodernity that furthers the constructivist cause has cast the realness of the world in doubt.” The whole book, in a sense, attempts to answer this epistemological and pedagogical dilemma. As Petraglia notes, “constructivism highlights the contingency of knowledge and knowing, and thus, in a very real sense, threatens the entire educational enterprise.” Furthermore, even
if one is willing to ignore that epistemological bind, as Petraglia argues educators do all the time, not only is it difficult to capture the dynamics of authentic learning in a school setting, it is also problematic to assume the teacher can know anyone else’s reality: “taking constructivism seriously means facing the discomfort of not knowing ahead of time what students accept as an everyday or real-world problem and instead viewing authentication as an ongoing process that presents the teacher with many rhetorical opportunities but no guarantees.”

Yet, Petraglia also shows how much we take for granted about the basic tenets of constructivist philosophy and how much we need to believe in the authentic nature of our pedagogy: “the term authenticity and its synonyms lulls us into the belief that we do not need to explain ourselves. . . We do, in fact, fall back on faith—faith that what seems real (and thus, authentic) to me, seems real (and thus authentic) to my students.” So, he argues, by interrogating authenticity, teachers might “better understand the obstacles we face in designing genuinely constructivist learning environments, obstacles that may be obscured by our often facile references to ‘student-centered’ pedagogy, to ‘everyday’ problem-solving, and ‘contextualized learning,’ and to the ‘real world.’” In other words, Petraglia’s questions focus on how teachers might design real-world applications for their students, why they might wish to do so, and what the trade-offs of such design might be. Petraglia’s “solution” to his epistemological and pedagogical contradictions rests in a “rhetorical perspective” on these problems. He proposes that “the rhetorical tradition provides a framework that might be used to resolve the challenge constructivism poses to educators as it is a framework that emphasizes the explicitly dialogic nature of learning and accentuates the role of argument and persuasion.”

The heart of this study lies in Petraglia’s analysis of the ways educational technology has tried to negotiate this double bind between the desire to create genuinely meaningful structures for student learning while admitting that knowledge is itself constructed, contingent, and fluid. Petraglia focuses on educational technology as a field “representative of the challenge faced by constructivist educators generally” because its practitioners, “more than any other specialists, perhaps, have taken on themselves the challenge of literally constructing contexts for learning and accept the burden of making their ideas material.” A list of the tenets of educational technology might be useful here; it certainly was to me. According to the experts, technological learning “environments” should provide multiple representations of reality; focus on constructing, not reproducing, knowledge; contextualize rather than abstract information; rely on real-world, case-based tasks; foster reflection; and support collaboration.” This agenda should sound familiar to compositionists or to anyone who teaches where a liberal
Petraglia adds a perspective whose language may seem mechanistic rather than humanist, but part of his purpose in analyzing educational technology is to demonstrate its increasing attention to human learning—in other words, its rhetorical component. Petraglia reviews many technological methods for constructing authentic learning "environments," and in this section of the book, I'm truly far from my own home and expertise, but it's interesting to see the intersections of disciplines here. For example, it is much easier for me to understand efforts to provide, through educational technology, "anchored instruction" or "goal-based scenarios" when Petraglia describes them as attempts to create "thick problems," following Clifford Geertz's lead. According to Petraglia, multimedia, interactive computers, hypertext, and networked environments serve constructivist goals by providing "cognitive apprenticeship" for students—for example, coaching, responding, questioning, and encouraging activity and reflection.

At the very end of the book, Petraglia pitches his own educational technology, a software package titled Reality Check: A Rhetorical Approach to Constructivist Learning. I'm intrigued by this system, since it attempts to enact precisely the work I do with professors and students in the School of Business, where I visit classes, read assignments and student writing, and try to help teachers see how writing and rhetoric might further their disciplinary goals. Reality Check uses the "metaphor of education as argument" and "prompts educators and students independently to construct a task profile by identifying relevant variables and giving reasons and evidence for the relevance in order to articulate and compare their sense of how elements of the task correspond to the assignment and to the 'real world.'" Specifically, the software program requires the teacher to enter an assignment and then to "profile" it by describing such things as what parts of the task will be weighted most heavily in evaluation or what parts require the greatest "student creativity or initiative." Next, the student "profiles" her or his understanding of the assignment, marking up the assignment just as the teacher did. Then, the program uses all this data to "contrast the evidence each side finds relevant in performing the task as part of an academic assignment." Reality Check may note, for example, that the teacher thinks using certain tools or sources is key to a successful response but that the student seems unaware that such tools exist. Finally, the teacher and student meet to discuss the results that Reality Check provides, a "textual as well as graphical representation... that identifies the variables and the evidence each side finds relevant." Petraglia says that the "real function" of this computer program is to "prompt sustained reflection" and "to provide structure for dialogue between teacher and student."

Would I sound naive and hopelessly retro if I said that this dialogue and reflection ought to take place in class, in cover letters on drafts, in
conferences? In other words, have we gotten to the point where we need the intervention of computer technology to initiate and sustain reflective practice and explicit conversation with our students about what we are up to in our courses? Petraglia says that the worth of his program is that it "highlights the argumentative nature of education and allows the teacher to present his or her case for the importance of the task to the overall assignment and the relevance of the assignment to the learner’s real world." Although I think this kind of presentation ought to occur in class, I realize how reluctant many teachers are to discuss writing explicitly. Therefore, I’m intrigued with this software program, and I’d definitely like to see its prompts, for much writing across the curriculum work demands precisely this kind of explicit discussion of rhetoric, and it particularly demands the savvy to translate underlying assumptions for teachers and students. It’s highly likely that many professors (in and outside of English) who are unaccustomed to thinking overtly about the rhetoric of their assignments would find such a tool revealing and useful. It might be particularly useful in my own interdisciplinary context—a school of business—where the “real world” is held up as the final goal and arbiter of teaching and learning.

Yet, I must say, for all the attention to authenticity and connection to context and experience in this study, the “real world” here sometimes seems oddly unreal. I would suggest three particular sites that Petraglia might usefully include in his investigation of authenticity. First, Petraglia does not acknowledge the teacher’s “real world” or the possibility that the teacher is a learner him or herself. My cross-curricular work has taught me that any attempt at changing teachers’ practices must begin with these two assumptions. Next, Petraglia pays scant attention to students’ lives outside of school, to the politics of social location that directly affect individuals’ concepts of “reality.” At the same time, there is little discussion of the day-to-day real worlds of students in school. Surely one “authentic” goal is for students to learn how to manage all the tasks required of them, how to maneuver and negotiate all the disciplinary discourses and expectations they encounter. I think we need to make more explicit—more authentic—connections across disciplines so that the entire experience of education becomes more meaningful, less fragmented. Finally, I would hope for more attention to the ways school “really” reflects and affects the public culture that creates, sustains, and uses education. We need not only to be inventing arguments for our students about how what we’re teaching is relevant to their “real worlds” in and out of school; we also need to convince the public that what we’re offering is also relevant to them.

Petraglia says in his preface that “an academic life without interdisciplinarity is not worth living.” I’m drawn to this powerful line, but I fear it’s one that not only requires but resists our best arguments.
My complaints about what’s not in this study arise, no doubt, from my own narrow disciplinary perspectives. I kept thinking that if Petraglia had looked toward feminist and critical pedagogy, for example, he might have arrived at more complicated questions and answers about connections between school and reality. If education is argument, then we need to examine more closely, and perhaps more generously, the evidence we accept and reject, the ethos of the speakers we listen to and ignore, the political and epistemological foundations of knowledge we embrace and resist. My reading of this new and useful book reminds me that what happens too often is that disciplinarity obscures other views, which only goes to show that the borders are rigid, that the disciplinary forces keeping us at home are indeed strong.

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