A Pedagogy of Listening:  
A Response to Kristie Fleckenstein

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I'd like to respond to several issues that Kristie Fleckenstein raises in "Bodysigns: A Biorhetoric for Change": change, the existence of a reality beyond and besides discourse, and relationship. But, as English teachers are wont to do, I begin by quibbling with the language—though, as you will see, I find Fleckenstein's ideas valuable.

Even after several readings, I never felt that I had a secure grasp on Fleckenstein's term "bodysigns." I wanted drawings, diagrams, or more examples. For me, this term took too much time away from Fleckenstein's argument for double seeing, double speaking, and double living. What I read as most important in this essay—and I don't want anything, even terminology, to diminish its importance—is the idea that we can recognize and name the tensions, ambiguities, and contradictions in our own positions, in the socially defined roles we both accept and resist.

At first, I liked the term "biorhetoric"—rhetoric connected to the body—but the more I thought about it, the more I came to believe that a biorhetoric is redundant. After all, the term "rhetoric" includes the body. Rhetoric is neither merely logos, rational argument, nor ethos, the credibility of writer or speaker. According to the sophist Gorgias, the sensual qualities of language are part of its power, a power Gorgias compares to drugs and to magic, forces that act on the body. Gorgias drew his own listeners in with assonance and alliteration, with the sounds; other rhetors use other devices: repetition, allusions, vivid images, to name only a few. As Gorgias says, "Speech is a powerful lord: it can stop fear and banish grief, create joy, and nurture pity"—all feelings that we apprehend through the body (41).

Our culture—which separates mind and body, mind and spirit—posits emotions in the head, or in something we call the heart but which
is more an abstraction than a part of the human body. As academics we intellectualize, erasing the body. But emotions, feelings, are nevertheless—despite Anglo-American discomfort—bodily things: our skin crawls, lumps in our throats prevent speaking, we laugh out loud, tears sting our eyelids, our voices crack, our stomachs hurt, our shoulders are weighted down, our cheeks burn with shame, we are left breathless. Excitement, fear, horror, anger, anxiety, joy—these start in our bodies. Rhetoric affects the body but also rises out of the body. Without the body and its feelings, we are left with only *logos*, which is not enough, even Aristotle tells us, to convince. The best writers and speakers find their eloquence in strong feeling, in passionate belief, in a deeply felt cause, in involvement—even when the discursive fashion is, as it is particularly in the academy, to appear removed, detached, objective.

My final language quibble, which has to do with the use of "transformation" and "change," moves into the substance of Fleckenstein's essay. I want to foreground the problematics of these terms. Fleckenstein acknowledges in her first footnote that transformation is "always value-laden, never ethically neutral" and that "the boundary between transformation voluntarily pursued and transformation imposed is a narrow and vitally important line." *Transformation* is typically a God-term, indicating a change the speaker approves of. More negative terms—degradation, erosion, brainwashing—are used for changes the speaker disapproves of. In composition studies, the term "transformation" often means the shedding of false consciousness in order to work for justice (see, for example, Henry Giroux's notion of teachers as "transformative intellectuals"). Despite her footnote, Fleckenstein seems to assume change or transformation of students to be both a good thing and the goal of teachers. I want to know more. What is it teachers are supposed to change students from? To what? For what purpose? Using what methods?

Later in the article, Fleckenstein gets to these questions. But I find myself increasingly bothered by a rhetoric that talks about education as transformation, as an instrument of change, without being specific or concrete about what those changes should be. Of course, I've engaged in this sort of talk myself, but these days, less sure than I used to be, I now see a kind of arrogance in language that speaks with certainty about how necessary it is for us to change students. Certainly, if we teach, we are by definition trying to change people, trying to get them to see some corner of the world as we do; after all, being a professor means you have something to profess. But much of the discourse in composition studies
over the last decade or so has seemed to assume, as I’ve said elsewhere, that our main job is to recruit for a leftist revolution. In this discourse, our college students, even ones at elite institutions, become either Paulo Freire’s Third World peasants oppressed by the evil capitalists, or the children of the evil capitalists, while teachers get to be heroes of liberty. But here at the beginning of the twenty-first century, our students come in combinations of colors, races, sexual orientations, socioeconomic positions, and ethnic, regional, and religious backgrounds that defy easy dichotomous representations. Our job, I contend, is to help students acquire the reading and writing skills they will need to have some control over their lives in a world where levels of literacy “accumulate” quickly, as Deborah Brandt points out. These skills include certain kinds of knowledge and certain kinds of critical thinking skills—the machinery to think with. Toward the end of “Bodysigns,” Fleckenstein seems to see that changing students is much more problematic, much more complex than some of our discourse has indicated. I wanted more discussion of the ethics of transforming people.

The ethics of ignoring the materiality of people’s lives—that is, the relationship of materiality and discourse—is the central problem Fleckenstein takes up in “Bodysigns.” She argues for attention to materiality in an intellectual climate that proclaims that everything is discursive. She points out that language permits us to talk about discourse and materiality as two separate entities when in fact they are inextricably intertwined. Though her focus is different, Fleckenstein is troubled by the same problem that has vexed me: is it all just language, just texts? Is there anything beyond discourse? Does discourse have anything to do with what’s out there? As Fleckenstein puts it, “By privileging either discourse or materiality, we rob ourselves of any way to alter the linguistic systems that, in a paradoxical move, evoke and reify material inequities by decreeing them nonexistent.” She continues, “[I]f we are caught within competing discourses of the real, how do we determine which discourse is ‘true,’ or as Susan Griffin asks, how do we call into question the lie that torture in Brazil never took place?” (764, 765).

This was essentially the situation I faced a while back, but not with such a dramatic issue as torture in Brazil. My dilemma focused on the relationship of language and research. Some years ago, I conducted a series of interviews with several women in Al-Anon who used their reading and writing in the service of their spiritual lives. When I began to write a book about what I discovered from this inquiry, I realized that I would have to deal with a number of research issues in ways I had not done
in brief articles and conference papers. As I've said, conducting research with real people was easier than writing about it. Juxtaposing speeches, adding words and phrases for clarity, leaving out material that didn't fit my categories of analysis ran me smack into Foucault's will to truth. Even though I could agree with Peter Mortensen and Gesa Kirsch that interpretation is "central to all research," and even though I had no problem with my "values permeat[ing] and shap[ing] the research questions, observations, and conclusions," I still had the sense that what I was writing must be true (xxi).

The literature on research only muddied the water. Linda Brodkey said that the point of ethnographic research is to find and tell stories the academy hasn't heard yet. Okay, I could do that; the experiences of the women I talked to showed something new about how literacy is used in real life. Tom Newkirk said that the case study writer and not the case study method tells the story. Yes, I could be clear that this was my research. Newkirk also said that to be believable, the story must retell some cultural myth that the listeners are already familiar with. The cultural narrative was one I wanted to tell: that the women who talked to me, like generations of women before them, used literacy to make their lives better. But still, was I putting words in my informants' mouths? Did this woman really say this, or is this what I wanted her to say? Was I writing other people's stories or only my version of other people's stories? Or was I writing my story? Was this research, or was it fiction? Was there anything out there besides my words? In other words, was there a truth that exists between the certitude—the "hard standards of reliability, validity, and generalizability"—of positivism, on the one hand, and the abstract, theoretical, and sometimes paralyzing relativism of postmodernism, with its emphasis on representation and contingency, on the other (Mortensen and Kirsch xxi)?

What exists between these two extremes is argument, according to Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca. In The New Rhetoric, they say that the problem with western epistemology is the binaries "of knowledge and opinion, of irrefutable self-evidence and deceptive will, of a universally accepted objectivity and an incommunicable subjectivity, of a reality binding on everybody and values that are purely individual" (510). We can now add to this list the certitude of positivism and the relativism of postmodernism. Or materiality and discourse. Or bodies and signs. Perelman explains the way out of this impasse: "All intellectual activity which is placed between the necessary and the arbitrary is reasonable only to the degree that it is maintained by arguments and
eventually clarified by controversies which normally do not lead to unanimity” (Realm 159). This worked for me on a theoretical level, but pragmatically it didn’t help me decide about the truthfulness of my own text. Let me explain why.

Postmodernism undermines the possibility of telling any story other than one’s own or of even finding other people’s stories. The ethics of representation, the questioning of the researcher’s position in regard to the subjects/objects of research, the impossibility of language being unbiased or in any way referential, all of these have made inquiry and telling the truth seem hopelessly naive or altogether impossible. Postmodernism denies the authority of lived experience—which is what I looked for in my research and what I was aiming to recount. In postmodernist/poststructuralist views, experience is seen as itself discursively determined. So, are researchers caught in an infinite regress of narration and representation? Is what we know grounded only in discourse, or does it have some basis in actuality?

The solution to this dilemma came for me in an essay called “Telling the Truth after Postmodernism” by feminist sociologist Dorothy Smith. Smith begins by critiquing the postmodernist/poststructuralist treatment of the subject. She says, “Though postmodernism rejects the unitary subject, knowing and knowledge remain functions of an individuated consciousness” (107). She’s right: throughout postmodernist/poststructuralist theory, “the individuation of the subject is preserved, whether as fragmented, multiplied, layered, or various.” Even though postmodernism allows, Smith says, “multiple narratives revealing varied and many-sided versions of the world from multiple and fragmented discursively constituted positions,” it simultaneously omits the truly social from formulations of self and language and from concepts of research and truth (107, 101).

Smith posits an alternative theory that, she says, “does not view ‘knowledge’ as a solipsism of discourse, but preserves people’s active presence and views knowledge as a definite form of social act in which an object world is constituted by participants as a world in common” (109). Drawing on George Herbert Mead, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Valentin Volosinov, Smith’s theory argues that meaning, reference, and truth occur in the social act: “The social ‘grammar’ of naming and identifying or referring to objects called for a missing complement, [which is] the other’s ‘recognition’ in her assent, her glance towards the object, and her repetition of ‘its’ name.” She concludes that “the name-look-recognition sequence among people produces the object world among us and for each
The story she tells to illustrate this point is of a little girl of about six years old pulling on her mother’s skirt and saying, “Look, Mom, a cat. A cat. Mom, look. A cat.” When the mother broke off her conversation with another adult, looked in the direction of the cat, and then said, “Yes, Karen, a black cat,” the child was satisfied. Karen’s observation was confirmed; the existence of the object was attested to. According to Smith, an object gains its status as real—that is, “as object for others as well as for the speaker”—as this sequence is completed: “Even when the response corrects [‘No, Dave, not fish! Bird.’], the object has already been brought into the social act” (118, 119).

Smith contends that if we posit the “subject-object relation... wholly within discourse,” as postmodern thinking does, then we close off the possibility of “telling the truth in the sense of making reference to what is beyond discourse.” But for Smith, “referring is a social act in which more than one subject is active” (127). Smith’s dialogic view fleshes out, for me, Perelman’s theoretical argument about argument. Smith counters the postmodernist implication that inquiry into the actual (that is, what lies beyond the text) is either an impossibility (because there really isn’t anything beyond the text) or an exercise in solipsism (because it really is only about the researcher anyway).

The aim of the book I wrote is to say, “Look at this. Look at what I found when I looked beyond theoretical formulations of literacy to what actual women tell me about their uses of reading and writing.” The “truth” I tell depends on whether the community I write for sees what I see when they look in the direction I am pointing. If Perelman and Smith are right, then reality is a rhetorical construction. That doesn’t mean it consists only of language. That doesn’t mean it isn’t “out there.” It means we use discourse to bring it into being, in order to come to agreement that it’s out there. As Fleckenstein points out, discourse and materiality are not really separate, but in fact inseparable.

If the object world is a function of at least two human beings, then how does Fleckenstein have a discussion with her student Eileen who, believing that women with careers are bad mothers, cannot, or will not, look where Fleckenstein’s language is pointing? A similar question is asked by Virginia Anderson in a recent article in College English: how do you get the Texas conservatives to trust Linda Brodkey to create a syllabus for English 306 at the University of Texas at Austin? How do you get the professor and graduate students who designed this syllabus to take seriously the concerns of its critics?

Anderson cites Kenneth Burke, Jean-François Lyotard, and Emmanuel
Levinas to argue for inclusion. She says that listening to the other—even to people we don’t like, even to those we think are morally reprehensible—is the ethical thing to do. If we don’t listen, the gaps get larger. If we don’t listen, we don’t have to grapple with the issue. We don’t have to look at our own role. We don’t have to decide, consciously and self-consciously. But listening to the enemy requires compassion and patience—and a willingness to be honest with one’s self and perhaps with the other. This requires a highly evolved person. I admit: I’m not that good. There are some arguments I just won’t listen to. But I try hard to listen to my students. I can’t have the I-thou relationship with them that I think Freire’s pedagogy calls for if I won’t listen to their points of view, if I don’t serve as an audience who takes their opinions seriously, if I don’t help them make as good an argument as can be made for their perspective.

And I provide them with other folks who also listen—the class, the peer group. One of the things I learned from my Al-Anon informants is that being listened to is essential to forming voice. According to one of them, the woman I call Lilly, “People don’t just speak. They have to be listened to first.” She explains, “I don’t care what your language is like. If nobody’s listened, you won’t speak.” Peter Elbow phrases it somewhat differently in Writing with Power: “The wild child brought up only by animals in the woods does not speak at all. Any ‘back to the basics’ movement in the teaching of writing needs to start by ensuring each child the most basic thing of all: a real audience for his written words—an audience that really listens and takes the interchange seriously” (184). So my students talk, and write, and listen to one another, and read one another’s work. And I listen. Although I am not always successful, I try hard to hear them. When I listen, I see parts of the assigned texts I had never paid attention to. I see implications I had not known were there. I discover relationships that weren’t obvious the first five times I taught this text. Because I listened, I learned something I didn’t know. Because I listened, what I teach changes, and who I am changes. Because I have listened, the students sometimes listen to me—taking my corrections not as personal criticism, but as information they need or as mini-lessons in writing and thinking.

At the end of the semester my students tell me that they have learned from one another. They cite specific classmates who have given them a richer or deeper view of the subject than they could have come to by themselves. From this pedagogy, they learn that they can change one another’s minds—at least a bit. We may not be able to change each other’s positions—the material conditions under which we live—but
we are able to modify a bit, or a lot, our interpretations of those positions. This is the transformation we seek in our classrooms—not persuading students to agree with us about particular political issues, but giving them the opportunity to see that human beings can influence one another with words. That one person can say, "Look, a cat." And if we look in the right direction, we too may see the cat. This is the most basic unit of power—being able to modify the beliefs of another human being.

Near the end of her article, Fleckenstein describes listening to her student Eileen, realizing that her own resistance to Eileen’s opinions runs deep. Trying to engage in dialogue with Eileen, Fleckenstein looks at her own role as a mother and as a woman with a career. As Fleckenstein admits the ambiguities and contradictions of her life, she is seeing double and speaking double. Perhaps Eileen will be able to listen. If so, then perhaps the two women can each live double in the conflicting and conflicted roles allowed to women in this culture. If not, the only change pedagogy can promise has happened: the transformation of the teacher.

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Works Cited


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**Questioning the Cultural Discourse of Composition**

**Donna G. Strickland**

When I began studying rhetoric and composition, I was hungry for scholarship that challenged orthodoxies and for pedagogies that didn’t