Alcorn’s book a provocative piece of scholarship that should be engaged. It will, I suspect, stimulate productive dialogues and interesting future research.


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Marshall Alcorn’s new book _Changing the Subject in English Class: Discourse and the Construction of Desire_ addresses a timely set of issues: the role of desire and emotions in a pedagogical context in which teachers and students struggle not just with knowledge, but also with cultural conflicts and political negotiations. Alcorn’s book certainly makes a significant contribution to a debate that was begun in the 1970s in the United States as feminist pedagogy, emerging from efforts of second wave feminists, first created a theoretical and conceptual space in which emotions formed the basis for political resistance. Indeed, as we have witnessed in the years since, the educational arena has seen a great deal of theoretical and practical effects of such attention to emotional matters; for example, sexual harassment legislation has been addressing the problematic nature of sexual desire in a gendered society, teachers have adopted more student-centered, emotionally infused, anti-authoritarian teaching methods, and scholars such as Jane Gallop have made the case that a healthy dose of eroticism informs all good teaching. Arguably, however, the issue has not been exhausted. Social dynamics, pedagogical relations, and emotional experience form a contested and complicated terrain, and Alcorn’s book clearly attests to the need to continue discussions about the affective dimension of teaching.

The book focuses on the role of desire in the composition classroom, as Alcorn employs psychoanalysis and some aspects of postmodern theory to examine how pedagogy works on both ideological and emotional levels. From postmodern theory he draws the general argument that discourse and culture shape and construct subjects, and through psychoanalysis he identifies that such social construction involves subjects’
libidinal and affective attachments. Alcorn certainly offers a complex reevaluation of our understanding of subjectivity and emotional experience in the classroom. He also points out that a number of pedagogical approaches in which teachers have the best intentions to enact a socially progressive pedagogy, risk alienating students and rather than ending practices of exclusion, actually engender new ones. And he argues convincingly that we cannot neglect the emotional realm as we intend to teach in a socially responsible way. While readers will learn much from the book, in the end they might also struggle with some frustrations that emerge as a result of a fundamental binary structure in the argument. Some of Alcorn's classroom suggestions and conclusions regarding subjectivity remain suspect because he still assumes a dichotomous structure of power and agency. He correctly critiques a simplistic notion of the subject in a number of recent composition pedagogies, but in the end the psychoanalytic assumptions about desire and social space that he enlists imagine a pedagogical space that disavows crucial workings of power and cultural norms.

The book is structured around the premise that current approaches to teaching writing fail to consider the constitutive role that desire plays in the pedagogical process. Alcorn uses variations of what he terms “current cultural studies practice”—a problematic terminology I examine later—to point to approaches in composition studies that assume an impoverished understanding of human subjectivity, an understanding that foregrounds subjects’ interpellation by ideology at a level of abstract knowledge alone, thus overlooking the importance of the underlying issue of subjects’ emotional lives. Alcorn argues that teaching knowledge is not sufficient and that “desire must be mobilized to use knowledge” because ideology involves a certain amount of libidinal coercion. Thus, political intervention must address and redress emotional attachments, particularly in the composition classroom. He critiques James Berlin’s version of social-epistemic rhetoric and student empowerment as invoking knowledge and thinking alone in an effort to change ideological subject positions. Even though Berlin’s postmodern understanding initially sets up the subject as constructed and fractured by culture and ideology, Alcorn argues that Berlin assumes a rather simplistic notion of subjectivity, calling for a miraculous change of consciousness in a self-reflective and willful agent. Further, in Teresa Ebert’s pedagogy Alcorn sees the working of “teacher authority to promote a truth” that falls short of engaging students’ genuine involvement with culture and education. Alcorn believes that such a pedagogy “risks producing a Stalinist society
in which the truth of social experience is whatever any master wants to say it is." Moreover, this approach signals for Alcorn a radical and nihilist construction of culture within which desire "is quite simply a preexisting social product" and ideological effect that remains irrelevant to bringing about political change.

Generally, Alcorn takes "early poststructuralist theory" to task for conceiving of a subject "as a simple linguistic illusion," failing to imagine positive notions of subjects' agency and political resistance. A consequence of such poststructuralist posturing, Alcorn continues, can be seen in students' resistance to what they perceive to be ideological manipulation by an educator's political agenda, as they "are assassinated as subjects by a discourse that purports to be educational." Against this position Alcorn affirms an alternative pedagogy that can address the emotional realm of student and teacher agency. He thus contrasts "cultural studies" pedagogies that focus on logical, abstract production of knowledge to a psychoanalytic pedagogy that can acknowledge "real conditions of human experience, particularly experiences of suffering and enjoyment." He sees the composition classroom as an ideal site for examining the work of desire and emotional repression because "writing is always haunted by masters and interlaced with forms of authority or correctness that we cannot easily abandon without guilt or discomfort." Psychoanalytic pedagogy, as Alcorn explains, would be much better suited to recognize "an actual other person" in the classroom through "attention to, and freedom in, self-expression." Alcorn explains that his notion of "self-expression" does not imply a return to an uncritical expressivist rhetoric, but rather assumes a constructed, ideologically interpellated self whose subjectivity is established in large part through a repression of desire. According to Alcorn, as desire becomes attached to us through emotional investments, "self-expression" entails an enunciation and awareness of repressed desire.

To get at the complexity involved in uncovering this repression of desire, Alcorn draws on Lacan's theory of the four discourses—those of the master, the university, the hysteric, and the analyst. Because every subjectivity is essentially grounded in lack, according to Alcorn's reading of Lacan, various manifestations of desire fill this lack, but never absolutely. The master discourse comprises a large part of social repression, filling a subject's essential emptiness with the master's desire through nondialectical identification. University discourse enables the repetition of knowledge without libidinal engagements, as subjects experience only the effects of logic, objectivity, evidence, and facts of the
knowledge presented to them. Hysteric discourse, in contradistinction, is seen as a sort of antidote to master and university discourses, residing in an empty space not affected by social forces, from which it opposes "the forms of social control of desire utilized effectively by the master and by the university." In order for hysteric discourse to have any effective uses, however, analyst discourse must intervene by offering subjects a reading of their own and others' desire claims.

As far as the composition classroom goes, Alcorn argues that the analyst (teacher) discourse becomes paramount in helping students uncover how the master and university discourse have repressed their desire. Calling for "happy energetic speech," and "true freedom of expression," Alcorn argues that the composition classroom ought to enact discursive practices that allow for an optimum expression of all members' desires. Such practices as dialectical mediation, Alcorn argues, involve the work of mourning because desire is implicated in a self's attachment to culture and a process of de-attachment thus signals feelings of loss and anxiety.

In order to illustrate the dynamic of mourning, in the last chapter of the book Alcorn reads Jeffrey Berman's account of a psychoanalytic pedagogy as an example of a teacher/analyst facilitating the process of mourning as students undergo an emotional change from one set of libidinal attachments to another. As Alcorn explains, in Diaries to an English Professor, Berman recounts and analyzes his pedagogy that focuses on journal writing, encouraging students to reflect and question deeply held assumptions and beliefs in their journals without requiring them to change or perform any specific mental or logical task. According to Alcorn, Berman simply "lets students speak honestly" in their journals; he then reads journal entries selectively and anonymously out loud in class, asks students to listen to each other without teacherly judgment or intervention, and at the end encourages more journal writing. In this space of writing/listening, Berman "does not require students to write about anything," and students "have complete freedom to explore what they want." As students are offered this space and opportunity to consider each other's ideas, they engage in a slow and careful process of mourning, of unlearning established beliefs, and learning to build new ones without an authoritative teacher pressure to do so. For Alcorn, these heuristics exemplify how "Berman rejects the discourse of the master and the discourse of the university and uses, instead, the discourses of the analyst," which overall proves to be "more effective than most political training offered by many politically progressive teachers." This pedagogy illustrates for Alcorn the
difficult negotiation required of any teacher: the challenge to encourage debate and argument, but only insofar as they allow various class members to express their desires freely, to recognize themselves and others as desiring beings, and to shift emotional attachments in an environment free of coercion and defensive reactions through a slow, sometimes painful process of unlearning and mourning. According to Alcorn, such pedagogy represents an ethical, democratic engagement with ideology, discourse, and politics.

I appreciated Alcorn’s concern at the end of the book with the classroom, our students, and what our teaching practices might or might not achieve. This short overview of the book cannot do justice to Alcorn’s careful and erudite exposition of psychoanalytic theory and the many helpful examples he offers, both from personal experience and other scholars. For instance, when describing Lacan’s theory of the four discourses, Alcorn refers to Stanley Milgram’s experiments in 1961-1962 on obedience to authority and personal conscience. Alcorn’s more than twenty-five-year experience in the classroom lends his writing and argument a noticeable layer of genuine concern with the everyday aspects of teaching and relating to students. So, I want to believe him; I want to be able to walk into my classroom this week and tell my students to let go, to write freely, to express honestly how society has molded and constructed our subjectivities and our desires. Alas, it seems to me that the terrain of the classroom is much more complicated and compromised than Alcorn’s argument can acknowledge. It holds together in general: we need to address the constitutive role of desire in composition practices, and psychoanalysis, with its overt focus on emotional, non-conscious processes, promises to inform an alternative pedagogy that accounts for the affective dimension of learning. Most importantly, a number of approaches in composition studies (Berlin and Ebert’s included) tend to assume simplistic notions of subjectivity that cannot contain a more complex and dynamic structure of the subject that can address an emotional dimension.

However, Alcorn’s argument also engenders problematic implications that operate through numerous unproductive conceptual binaries. It is frustrating to see Alcorn’s rigid juxtaposition between “cultural studies approaches” in composition (his umbrella term for what he considers to be pedagogical models that focus solely on critiques of ideology) to what he sees as the alternative, a psychoanalytic approach. Such juxtaposition becomes a facile reduction and conflation of diverse approaches and arguments that is not accurate and productive. Surely, Berlin’s pedagogy
was informed by a version of "cultural studies," but the term itself and its disciplinary affiliation are notoriously difficult to define and certainly encompass work on more than ideology critique. A number of scholars in composition studies and in "cultural studies" have offered exciting and sophisticated work on agency, subjectivity, affect, and cultural change that Alcorn does not consider.

Moreover, he too quickly and relentlessly characterizes poststructural theory as not being able to offer positive notions of agency. This reduction and rejection also affect the book's overall argument in that the binary at work here—positive vs. negative notions of agency—becomes linked to the larger binary that sees agency as positive only when it is centered in a subject, and as negative when the subject's inherent ability to resist is being questioned. In much poststructural theory, agency and subjectivity are not erased as working concepts when the subject's ability to self-consciously act is being thrown into crisis. It would be too easy to say that the subject is a linguistic illusion, when in fact it exists quite forcefully as the very condition of a certain kind of cultural power. Agency and subjectivity are being redeployed as theorists as diverse as Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, Spivak, and Butler articulate agency to social forces and cultural negotiation, a terrain in which the subject is certainly a constitutive part. In other words, some of Alcorn's argumentative solutions remain too simple and unproblematic for me as a reader because of an initial reluctance to draw more complexity from poststructural theories.

Simple solutions emerge through various other binaries in the course of the book. For example, in trying to make the case that we have underexamined the role of desire in pedagogy, Alcorn establishes a dichotomy between "real-world experience" in the classroom that includes desire, and merely ideological knowledge that is devoid of emotional attachments. This element of implied authenticity and thus a heightened valorization of libidinal experience seems to polarize, repeatedly, classroom work as either rational/logical/ideological/conscious and thus ineffective, and emotional/irrational/unconscious/real, and thus effective. What is missing is a more complex interplay between these realms. Further, Lacan's understanding of desire as a fundamental lack perpetuates a tendency to assume a dichotomous structure throughout the analysis; a subject's constitution in desire becomes either repressive (through the master and university discourse) or empowering (through hysteric and analyst discourse). Underlying such a pairing is the notion that power is fundamentally negative and limiting, a notion that remains
inadequate in capturing what Foucault has called the productive aspect of power, the idea that power also produces things, induces pleasure, forms experiences and discourse.

Alcorn’s follow-up argument that “ideal” communities encourage “a genuine free circulation” of desire among their members is particularly difficult to accept. It emerges most clearly in the last chapter of the book, where Alcorn explains that Berman’s psychoanalytically informed pedagogy attempts to remove teacher authority from the scene so that students can express their desires freely. Richard Miller, Min-Zhan Lu, Deepika Bahri, Linda Brodkey, and many other composition theorists note how compromised the space of the classroom is at the very moment that we announce or allow a removal of authority. Such acts as students and teachers meeting in “the classroom,” teachers handing out a syllabus or assigning journals—no matter how “free” they are then supposed to be—indicate that little can be “genuine” or untouched by cultural signification and power (both repressive and productive power). We would still ask students “to write” for us, for a grade, or for the system that functions around us, and their writing, particularly personal writing, is continually haunted by confessional mechanisms of control.

Finally, Alcorn’s book connects to Elizabeth Ellsworth’s psychoanalytic study of education, Teaching Positions: Difference, Pedagogy, and the Power of Address [New York: Teachers College, 1997]. Ellsworth examines teaching as a performative practice that embraces the messiness and indeed impossibility of “teaching” subjects. One particular phrase in Ellsworth’s book seems crucial: “the ongoing work of deconstruction is to trouble every definition of teaching and studenting arrived at.” Any settled, conclusive solutions to teaching must remain suspect because they limit ongoing and constantly producing and productive relations across the space of the classroom. Changing the Subject in English Class has much to offer in terms of opening up understanding of pedagogy, and I agree that we need to listen and work with the insight that desire and emotional issues matter tremendously in the classroom and that many pedagogical practices in composition remain oblivious to the significance of affective struggles. Certainly, Alcorn’s careful exploration of psychoanalysis helps us understand how rich and complex work on matters of feeling need to be. And yet, as Ellsworth insists, an element of undecidability and rigorous vigilance regarding classroom analysis must also inform our pedagogical practices and theories.