Reviews

Works Cited


Reviewed by Daniel L. Smith, Pennsylvania State University

Marshall Alcorn’s *Changing the Subject in English Class: Discourse and the Constructions of Desire* poses an intriguing and timely challenge to rhetoricians and compositionists, particularly those committed to promoting social change through their pedagogy. As the book’s title implies, Alcorn argues that facilitating social change through teaching requires effectively changing the subjectivity of students. However, Alcorn claims, while we have changed the subject matter engaged in our classes, most rhetoricians and compositionists have not adopted a sufficiently complex understanding of subjectivity. Without such an understanding, it is claimed, teachers’ attempts to change their students’ subjectivity are unduly impeded. Developing a sufficiently complex conception of subjectivity is the first part of Alcorn’s challenge. The challenge also lies in conceptualizing and enacting pedagogies that take these more complex understandings of subjectivity into consideration. In addition to presenting what’s at stake in this twofold challenge, *Changing the Subject* responds to it boldly.

Drawing heavily on, but also deviating from, a Lacanian psychoanalytic theory of subjectivity and discourse, Alcorn attempts to provide a
more complex conception of the subject; one that, as his introduction explains, works from the psychoanalytic premise that the "problem of politics is a problem of desire." Psychoanalysis has not had much currency in rhetoric and composition when compared to its deployment by our counterparts in literary studies. Alcorn, however, offers a provocative argument for why this should not continue to be the case. A psychoanalytic conception of subjectivity demands that we disabuse ourselves of the pervasive assumption "that if we teach politically correct knowledge, we can generate politically correct practice." In other words, engaging students solely in terms of what they know or don't know is rarely enough to prompt significant and lasting changes in subjectivity and therefore motivations and action. Focusing on knowledge does not address what, for Alcorn, is at the heart of subjectivity and politics—namely, subjects' libidinal or affective attachments to ideologies, as well as the "authorities" or "masters" ideologies make possible. These authorities function to maintain the invisibility of ideologies' numerous contradictions and also play a key role in enabling and maintaining the subject's ideological attachments. Consequently, what must be promoted through the teaching of reading and writing, Alcorn argues, is "an anti-ideological identity." It is a mode of subjectivity suspicious of "masters" and capable of overcoming ideology's primary mechanism of control: "repression," and the "false understandings" and "pathological distortion" it produces. The key to cultivating subjects capable of existing anti-ideologically is, for Alcorn, the pedagogical practice of "consciousness raising." Consciousness raising is featured in the progressive political pedagogies of numerous figures in rhetoric and composition, so one is prompted to ask how Alcorn's project is any different from other liberatory pedagogies? The book's subsequent chapters address this question in detail.

Following his introduction, Alcorn devotes chapter two to examining and critiquing the pedagogical-political project of James Berlin. Alcorn is sympathetic to the progressive political aims of Berlin. He argues, however, that Berlin's work fails to consider the significance of desire, rendering his conception of subjectivity, discourse, and politics inadequate. Alcorn argues that Berlin's pedagogy places too much emphasis on—and too much faith in—the transformative powers of rational debate and argument, ignoring the libidinal dimensions of discourse and subjectivity. Furthermore, according to Alcorn, Berlin mistakenly identifies the source of the subject's stability outside the subject in ideological discourses. For Alcorn, on the other hand, the stability of subjectivity "is not
found in some ideological realm of discourse outside subjectivity but precisely in the structure of subjectivity itself.” (I would interject at this point that Alcorn’s position presupposes an acceptance of an inside-outside binary that Lacanian theory eschews.) More specifically, subjectivity is continuously stabilized by “libidinal investments and defensive subject functions.” That is, subjects have the capacity to form affective attachments to particular signifiers and discourses, and therefore ideological subject-positions. These attachments or investments in ideologies translate into an intense loyalty to the logics and discourses of those ideologies, for they provide the “materials” that subjects use to define their subjectivity and thus their identity. Moreover, according to Alcorn, anything that threatens the integrity of the discourses, ideologies, and subject positions in which a subject is affectively invested is “managed” by the subject’s defensive functions. Thus “other” discourses and the ideologies they articulate tend to have very little effect on subjects because (a) they have very little value or currency in the cognitive-affective economies of the subject, or (b) whatever challenges these discourses make to the subject and its ideological investments are rejected, ignored, or dismissed as insignificant (that is, repressed). These same “management” mechanisms, Alcorn explains, function not only in response to discourse but also to the subject’s perceptions and experiences of the world and others.

In effect, what Alcorn is offering is a framework for understanding and explaining the limitations of “rational” discourse governed by the rules of logic and evidence, especially with regard to teaching students and getting them to care about the world, others, and the problems of both. This permits a broader focus than Berlin’s approach, which, according to Alcorn, ignores the “libidinal power of ideological language and of the power of anti-ideological language.” Alcorn’s focus on these aspects of language are what distinguish his consciousness raising project from that of Berlin. Thus, Alcorn’s approach to consciousness raising involves an engagement not only with issues of knowledge but also, first and foremost, the affective dynamics of desire. He would have us pay particular attention to the dynamics that repress contradictions and conflicts into the unconscious as well as those that form affective attractions, repulsions, and indifference to beliefs, ideas, practices, conventions, truths, institutions, and various “others.” To the extent that Berlin’s pedagogy is loosely representative of a substantial contingent of liberatory scholars and teachers of reading and writing, Alcorn’s project sets itself apart from a prevailing conception of theory and pedagogy in
rhetoric and composition.

At the same time, however, despite Alcorn’s thought-provoking—and I think necessary and very productive—turn to affect and desire, his project reterritorializes itself on the very humanist logic of "enlightenment" and self-actualization that drives much of the liberatory pedagogical theory and practice in rhetoric and composition he seeks to distinguish himself from. For example, Alcorn writes, “Subjects will develop freedom and rationality only to the extent that they are encouraged to discover, recognize, and take responsibility for the unconscious libidinal codes of desire and repression that underwrite their own subjectivity.” This development of freedom and rationality enables, as Alcorn writes in a later chapter, “the recovery of emotional life from repression, [and] the development of an anti-ideological identity as opposed to an ideological one.” Despite the psychoanalytic foundation of Alcorn’s framework, operating within that framework is a humanist discourse-ideology of self-consciousness and self-reflexivity that enables practices of autonomy and self-actualization. The force of this humanist logic is reduced by the affective and psychoanalytic dimension of Alcorn’s project in that the self-actualizing process of developing enlightened self-consciousness “is not a rational act of thought but a painful and protracted mode of reflection.” Thus, “enlightenment” and self-actualization become a complicated and ongoing process of “mourning” (a concept I’ll examine below). In the end, however, the primacy of rationality still holds insofar as the recognition of and working through the repressions that are woven into the fabric of one’s subjectivity is a means to the ends of rationality and freedom—two terms with significant status in humanism. This is why the one of the key questions for Alcorn is how to teach in a manner that overcomes the apparent “inability of subjects to be rational about conflicting libidinal attachments” (emphasis added). It appears that Alcorn may have his own attachments to the master discourse of humanism.

The operation of a humanist logic of enlightenment and self-actualization is also evidenced by Alcorn’s goal of using the affectively charged process of reflection and self-analysis as a means to overcome “false understandings” and “pathological distortions,” as we saw above. Alcorn seems to want his students to be changed in a way that enables them to have “true” and “healthy” understandings of what is really going on in their psyches and in the world, as opposed to the distortions and pathologies created by the dynamics of repression. Perhaps I misunderstand Alcorn’s position, but these desiderata sound very much like the humanist Marxist goal of escaping from the shackles of false consciousness so as
to inhabit a space "outside" of ideology; hence the objective of helping students develop an "anti-ideological identity." But such an "unrepressed" identity would be impossible to achieve from a Lacanian psychoanalytic perspective. In other words, repression is subjectivity's very condition of possibility. Additionally, "mis-knowing" or "misjudging" (méconnaisance) is a constant feature of subjectivity in Lacanian psychoanalytic theory. Thus, overcoming "false understandings" and "pathological distortions" created by repression is a dubious aspiration from a Lacanian perspective. Such a goal seems more congruent with Freudo-Marxian (Fromm) and humanistic (Maslow and Rogers) theories of psychology than Lacanian psychoanalytic theory. There is, it seems, a tension in Changing the Subject between Lacanian and humanist discourses.

This tension recurs throughout Alcorn's book and is particularly evident in his repeated calls for modes of discourse that allow for "a genuine free circulation of desire in a community" and "a commitment to equal opportunities for the expression and communication of emotion for all people." Although his description of such modes discourse and what they foster cannot simply be labeled as humanistic, it still sounds quite similar to the humanist paradigm Alcorn eschews. In fact, it is similar enough to question whether his vision of ideal discursive conditions and practices has its roots firmly planted in Lacanian theory or in a liberal humanist democratic theory of politics, the two of which are at odds. The only difference I can discern between the two is that while the latter assumes autonomy and free choice are a given and ever-present in humans, Alcorn sees these as attributes that need to be developed and maintained; only then, after escaping from "false understandings," can a subject be self-responsible and practice freedom. Again, there is a definite psychoanalytic logic guiding Alcorn's work, but the ideals of humanism, against which that logic works, repeatedly surface at crucial moments in his argument. Some readers may find the Lacanian-humanist tension problematic. It is not, however, sufficient warrant for ignoring Changing the Subject, which offers its readers much food for thought.

In chapter three, for instance, Alcorn provides an insightful and informative examination of the phenomenon of student resistance to change in response to progressive pedagogies, demonstrating how such pedagogies can, in fact, intensify student attachments to questionable values and beliefs. Also in this chapter, Alcorn articulates a trenchant critique of Teresa Ebert's proposal for a "Red Pedagogy," which argues, according to Alcorn, "that students who learn to express their desires
freely generate social oppression." Alcorn explains how this claim justifies, for Ebert, the teacher's unilateral exercise of authority in the classroom to correct "improper" knowledge and beliefs when necessary. Using the psychoanalytic conception of "demand," Alcorn offers an intriguing analysis of Stanley Milgram's research on authority and obedience, which effectively demonstrates the dangers of Ebert's proposed pedagogy. Though Alcorn's claim that Ebert's pedagogy "risks producing a Stalinist society in which the truth of social experience is whatever any master wants to say it is" goes a little too far, his thoughts on the dynamics of demand and authority in and out of the classroom deserve serious consideration.

Alcorn devotes the next two chapters to fleshing out his vision of liberation and social change through pedagogy. Chapter four, the longest and most difficult chapter in the book, deals extensively with Lacan's theory of the four discourses, the "mathemes" that represent their structural dynamics, and how that theory can be used to understand how different modes of discourse and pedagogy "set in motion different responses to the forces of desire in discourse." Furthermore, Alcorn suggests that the four discourses can help pedagogues "to formulate a theory and an ethics of teaching composition." This dense but incisive chapter defies summary. Suffice it to say that despite the objections I raised while reading the chapter—e.g., the collapsing of demand and desire underwriting Alcorn's explication of Lacanian discourse theory—it contains one of the most innovative and fertile discussions of composition pedagogy and the practice of writing I have read in quite some time.

Alcorn opens chapter five by distinguishing his work from that of Richard Rorty, whose theory of personal and social change appears to be very similar to Alcorn's, but which is actually quite different and open to critique from a psychoanalytic perspective. Like Alcorn, Rorty suggests that change entails people developing new and different emotional responses to the world and others. For Rorty, this can be achieved by creatively (mis)using language. What Rorty doesn't consider, says Alcorn, is subjects' "resistance to new speech and understanding" because of their affective investments in various ideologies. Alcorn uses the remainder of the chapter to discuss two dynamics of attachment that contribute to subjects' resistance to change and new emotional responses. One is dubbed the "mourning effect," which refers to the difficulty of initiating and sustaining the process of recognizing "pathological attachments" and enduring and overcoming the sense of "loss" involved in disinvesting oneself of those attachments. The concept of the mourning effect claims
that subjects resist self-analysis, self-therapy, and personal change because these practices are painful and difficult. Alcorn sees the teacher's role as one that strives to promote processes of mourning in students, and not one of a therapist who takes students through the mourning process. On the one hand, I see this as a positive move insofar as it tries to avoid placing the teacher in yet another position of authority that students must (ostensibly) obey and please. On the other hand, however, I wonder if there's a risk of a teacher initiating a process that a student may not be equipped to handle on his or her own, leaving the student in an emotionally and psychically difficult situation. Indeed, who's to say that a teacher would be equipped to guide a student or students through the mourning process even if such a role for the teacher were not precluded by Alcorn's project?

The other mode of attachment discussed by Alcorn is the "drive-fixated demand." These demands "are deaf to persuasion because they can find no objects of satisfaction outside their own forms of repetition." He also notes, "Drive demands are forms of repetition caught in the body; they operate on meanings that can be spoken by language, but they cannot be modified by the speech requests and demands of others." According to Alcorn, these drive-fixated demands are manifested as beliefs, values, and behaviors whose intensity and intractability defy all attempts by the subject and/or others to change or control them. The intransigence of drive-fixated demands stems from their origin "in the Real of body" in a manner that makes them "fixed and unresponsive to the dialectic of the symbolic." I am ambivalent about Alcorn's discussion of the role of the body in the dynamics of subjectivity and the social. In discussing the topic of corporeality, Alcorn highlights the importance of working the body and its extra-discursive materiality into our conceptions of identity, discourse, power, politics, and teaching and learning. Moreover, Alcorn's discussion of the body suggests the importance of attending to the other non-discursive forces that constitute subjectivity, attention that is much needed in rhetoric and composition. Of course, the importance Alcorn ascribes to the body is not new to rhetoric and composition. But the paucity of the discourse on the body in our field makes any discussion of it significant, as far as I'm concerned.

At the same time, however, Alcorn's conception of the body is problematic in a number of ways. Perhaps the most significant of these problems is the status of the body as something that is radically outside of and "other" to discourse (a position disallowed by Lacanian theory). It would seem that Alcorn sees this move as a necessary corrective to the
alleged discursive monism caused by poststructuralism (which Alcorn dubiously represents throughout his book as a homogeneous body of thought). Alcorn wants to remind us that language isn’t everything, and thus the constitutive effects of discourse cannot be our only vector of analysis. But to say that “the Real of the body” is radically outside of and unaffected by discourse is not the same as saying that the materiality of the body is more than discourse. The former claim is highly questionable. It presupposes that the boundaries of “the body” are self-evident because what “is not” the body or “outside” the body is also self-evident or natural. Moreover, it implicitly depends on a rather firm and problematic distinction between nature and culture and soma and psyche. It fails to consider that what can be referred to as resistant to and outside of discourse might be rendered as such by discourse and its connection to the operations of power, for which such “outsides” and “others” have served dubious political functions.

For example, to speak of the body as Alcorn does is, in one sense, to participate in a long tradition of Western discourse in which the body—typically articulated with the feminine or the uncivilized—is the radical other of the soul, psyche, mind, or reason, and thus an irrational and destructive force. This is evidenced by the fact that Alcorn’s discussion of drive-fixated demands focuses exclusively on the (self)destruction and other negative effects they promote, leaving unexplored the subversive and transformative possibilities of bodily drives examined by other Lacanian-inspired theorists. Again we see the logic of humanism at work in Alcorn’s project, insofar as that which cannot be managed or controlled in a manner that fosters “rationality” and “freedom” is necessarily marked as destructive or inimical to human self-actualization. It needs to be said that Alcorn’s willingness to grant importance to affect mitigates his participation in this entrenched discourse on the body, but the implications of his discussion of drive-fixated demands need to be examined.

I am compelled to repeat, however, that the problems and questions raised in the course of this review should not overshadow the importance of Changing the Subject. Alcorn has provided us with a monograph that contributes to the important and growing body of scholarship in rhetoric and composition that questions the prevailing (critical pedagogical) understanding of what it means, and what it takes, to teach a class that might contribute to social transformation. His extended engagement with issues of desire, affect, the unconscious, the body, motivation, authority and their connections to discourse and social relations makes
Alcorn’s book a provocative piece of scholarship that should be engaged. It will, I suspect, stimulate productive dialogues and interest future research.


Reviewed by Christa Albrecht-Crane, Utah Valley State College

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’