Ideology and Composition Scholarship

JOHN SCHILB

Although the term ideology has figured in political theory for two hundred years, it has evolved over the last twenty in ways highly germane to composition studies. Consider, among other developments, the British neo-Marxists' regard for culture as a significant political realm in itself, the Althusserians' theories of how ideological state apparatuses constitute subjectivity, the French feminists' concern with how phallocentrism pervades language, the revived interest in Gramsci's idea that ideology saturates daily experience, Foucault's analyses of how power infuses knowledge, and Habermas's association of human freedom with certain conditions of speech acts. Overall, there has emerged a belief that to study ideology is to study the political ramifications of all discourse. And, presumably, those of us who professionally study how discourse is composed are in a good position to undertake this important work.

But composition studies isn't exempt from ideology itself. If we should embrace the invitation to analyze the composition of ideologies, we should also ponder the ideologies of composition. This latter imperative seems pressing for at least two reasons. First, as the profession is increasingly institutionalized through graduate programs as well as undergraduate curricula, its impact on the lives of students broadens. Second, as more composition scholars adopt the kind of scientific discourse often associated with professionalism, the chance of obscuring ideology behind merely 'empiricist' language increases.

Here, I want to examine a particular article to suggest how composition scholarship can itself purvey ideologies. Even though I'll analyze a specific text, I basically wish to raise issues I think we should consider in reading any composition article or book. The text I've chosen is Carol Berkenkotter, Thomas N. Huckin, and John Ackerman's "Conventions, Conversations, and the Writer: Case Study of a Student in a Rhetoric Ph.D. Program" from the February 1988 issue of Research in the Teaching of English. Using scientific language typical of the journal, the article focuses on how a particular student in the graduate rhetoric program at Carnegie Mellon struggles to accept the program's values and does so at last. Besides presenting a case study of the student, the article itself serves as a case study of how certain political questions can get dodged in the effort to legitimate both a certain research paradigm and a certain institution embodying it.
Geoffrey Chase has recently pointed out that it is the "inclusion and/or absence of particular cultural values, processes, and dynamics that gives any discourse on composition a particular ideological expression, one that may or may not serve emancipatory interests" (13-14). Of course, ideology in composition scholarship or in other kinds of discourse can function largely because the "absence" that Chase alludes to is harder to discern than the "inclusion" of particular cultural references. The need to contemplate ways of surmounting this difficulty is another reason why, in the following analysis, I emphasize what the article marginalizes or evades.

In the beginning of the article, the authors declare that they're addressing these questions: "If there is such an entity as a disciplinary community, what constitutes 'membership'? How does achieving membership within a community affect a writer's comprehension and production of texts?" (9). But despite their briefly wondering whether "disciplinary communities" actually exist, the authors proceed to accept them automatically as an empirical reality. In fact, they reify them as "entities" rather than acknowledge them as conceptual products of the particular language-game the authors themselves are playing.

The point seems especially worth making because the term communities, so pervasive in composition studies these days as a tool for understanding the "social construction of knowledge," can be a highly unreliable guide to social conditions. For one thing, it obscures the extent to which the groups referred to experience internal strife, and leaves relatively unexamined as well the ethical and institutional connections between one "community" and other possibly oppositional ones. Mary Louise Pratt calls for the restoration of these missing dynamics when she criticizes "the linguistics of community" for being "a utopian project that postulates unified, idealised social worlds" (58), and when she urges pursuit of a linguistics that decenters community, that places "at its centre the operation of language across lines of social differentiation," that focuses on "modes and zones of contact between dominant and dominated groups, between persons of different and multiple identities, speakers of different languages," that focuses on how such speakers "constitute each other relationally and in difference, how they enact differences in language" (60).

The term community is also problematic because it straight-away confers a positive resonance upon the group being studied. As Raymond Williams notes in his book Keywords, the word community, "unlike all other terms of social organization ... seems never to be used unfavourably, and never to be given any positive opposing or distinguishing term" (76). Thus, whatever the pretense of the authors that they're engaged in neutral, scientific research, their very choice of an analytical master-term blocks off consideration of the internal and external conflicts that might beset the institutional setting involved and, in effect, valorizes that setting.

As the article proceeds, the authors indeed suggest that the Carnegie
Mellon rhetoric program is to be commended as a progressive force, not simply viewed with clinical detachment. They create this impression by inflating the significance of what the graduate student, "Nate," is trying to learn. For example, they enthusiastically assert that "the conventions and conversations of the rhetoric program community" relate "by implication" to "those of larger research and scholarly subspecialties" (11). They remark that Carnegie Mellon is "known for its strength as a research institution," with "several departments, including cognitive psychology and computer science . . . ranked among the best in the United States" (12-13). They contend that Nate's "new local community is part of a rich, diverse national community of teachers, scholars, and researchers who comprise composition studies" (39).

Along with these insinuations of the rhetoric program's professional stature, the authors come to suggest that in mastering its conventions, Nate isn't just moving from one "community" to another but actually making a great leap in cognitive sophistication. The discourse of the program is at times identified with "social science expository prose" (17), "expert academic writing" (26), "formal expository discourse" (38), and even "the code of academic writing" itself (21). Nate—who's, again, a graduate student—is described as struggling to emerge from "writer-based prose" (20, 24), as making "an adjustment from using 'oral' to 'literate' strategies" (27), as aiming for "progress as an academic writer" (37), and as engaging in "linguistic development" (34).

Near the end of the article, the authors climactically assert:

For Nate . . . the acquisition of . . . multi-register fluency was impeded by his political and practical preferences for expressive discourse which preceded his graduate studies and his relative ignorance of a complex and far-reaching corpus of scholarship and research that defines the interdisciplinary Rhetoric program at Carnegie Mellon. (38)

Note that the word "political" is just briefly mentioned and then attached exclusively to the "preferences" of the student, while the program is simply lauded.

I want to linger on this moment in the article precisely because it signifies awareness of politics and yet pushes away the issues of difference and domination that Pratt foregrounds. More specifically, the authors fail to consider what's conceivably at stake in the relations between Nate and the rhetoric program if his resistance amounts to a political stand. In other words, the authors don't explore the meaning(s) of Nate's resistance, especially insofar as it illuminates the interplay of hegemonic and resistant ideologies within the overall society. They do say that they will present "a detailed discussion of the conflicts that Nate experienced in the program, and of the ways that he attempted to overcome them" (16). Note again, however, that the word "conflicts" is linked to Nate alone, as if conflicts were indeed elements of his psychological "experience" rather than concrete struggles with someone or something else. In addition, the authors
suggest that the sense of conflict itself is to be "overcome"—not whatever it is that Nate is in conflict with.

Geoffrey Chase notes that resistance "becomes extremely valuable behavior because in it we see more clearly the links between the social processes of a particular discourse community and the larger processes which characterize our culture" (15). As I've already indicated, I think the presence of resistance within a group makes "community" a problematic label for it. Moreover, I'm uneasy with Chase's further assumption that resistance is always "behavior that actively works against the dominant ideology" (15), since on several occasions it might be only in retrospect that we're able to distinguish genuine resistance from opposition that merely reinforces what it opposes. But the idea that resistance in any discursive context might very well have symptomatic value for the analysis of politics seems valuable in itself. Unfortunately, the RTE article also doesn't examine how Nate's behavior in the rhetoric program might have reciprocally influenced the thinking of his teachers. The faculty's responses to his work are presented simply as instantiations of a paradigm that Nate shouldn't challenge.

This reluctance to accept Nate's point of view, if only provisionally, comes across in the authors' commentary on selected passages of his writing. Critiquing Eliot Mishler's essay, "Meaning in Context," for a class assignment, Nate writes, "My questions about communication and instruction have led me to an environment which espouses empirical research—research that at first glance suffers from the tunnel vision that Mishler condemns" (21). The authors' judgment: "The writer was neither able to reframe the abstract propositional information in the Mishler essay to fit a situationally appropriate purpose, nor able to marshal the necessary knowledge of genre and register to meet the requirements of the assignment" (22). In essence, the authors ignore the charge of "tunnel vision" and, thus, could be accused of displaying "tunnel vision" themselves. It's important to note that Nate's phrase is, in effect, directed against the authors' own methodology. Besides failing to examine whether the charge is in any way justified, the authors don't analyze the power struggles that might be involved in efforts to define what's "situationally appropriate," and they also neglect to consider what "rhetorical purposes" are ultimately worth having. To these criticisms, they might respond that they're merely conducting an impartial study of Nate's shift in "communities." But, as I've indicated, their presumed objectivity doesn't hold. And even if "objectivity" were, in some sense, possible within the limits of their research project, the relegation of larger political issues to the world beyond it would still need justifying—particularly because the relative absence of references to such larger political issues implies they don't exist.

In another excerpt from his writing, Nate compares himself to his former students: they, too, sometimes "write to become someone they really know nothing about" (23). In making this comparison, he suggests
that learning the discourse conventions of the rhetoric program entails his becoming another kind of subject himself. Several theorists, in the wake of Althusser's by-now classic essay on ideological state apparatuses, have in fact emphasized how subjectivity is constituted by cultural formations in ways that can be deemed ideological. Some of these theorists, including most recently Paul Smith and Stuart Hall, have challenged Althusser's presumption that individuals have relatively little capacity for resistance to hegemony. Nevertheless, they find useful his idea that understanding ideology involves understanding how institutions attempt to shape human identities.

Ironically, the article I've been looking at wields a vocabulary that these theorists might like, although it's employed in different contexts. The authors allude to "subject position" (25), but they have in mind the "subject position" of a sentence, and they point to what they deem Nate's excessive reliance on the first-person pronoun in the "subject position." Conceivably, they could have broadened their concern with syntax to consider how the system of human relationships that Nate is being inserted into affects his very identity in politically significant ways. But no such elaboration is forthcoming.

Contrast its absence with Stuart Hall's analysis of ideology in contemporary Britain:

"Thatcherism has been able to constitute new subject positions from which its discourses about the world make sense, or to appropriate to itself existing, already informed interpellations. These have arisen through some process, central to the mechanism of ideology itself, by which new positions have interrupted and partially displaced older ones; or else new discourses have emerged that secure real points of identification. (50)"

Hall's last word here is, ironically, echoed by the authors' observation that a particular comment by Nate "clearly reveals a growing identification with the values of a writing research community" (32). Hall might want to ask the authors how Nate's role as a citizen might be altered in his process of "identification" with the rhetoric program's discourse, and how we might construe the program differently if we substituted for the term writing research community the term ideological apparatus. References to "identification" could summon up not only the perspectives of neo-Marxists like Althusser and Hall, but also the rhetorical insights of Kenneth Burke, who has repeatedly focused on the term identification while probing the nature of political authority in various kinds of societies. "Burke is a chief example of how the historical traditions behind composition studies might supply us with ample resources for the investigation of ideology, if only we choose to tap them. The continuing failure of most composition scholars and teachers to integrate Burke's work into their own probably relates to their discomfort with the range of political issues he relentlessly explores.

The authors of the RTE article also raise concerns of contemporary
theorists of ideology when they remark that the conventions Nate is learning are ones "that communicate (semiotically) distance and objectivity" (34). Their brief, parenthetical reference to semiotics parallels the conclusion of John Frow: "A theory of ideology is a theory of semiotic value, because within the symbolic order the position and intensity of values are the index of a mediated tactical assertion, the site of a struggle for symbolic power, and are charged with the intensity of that struggle" (64). Yet, by confining the word semiotically within parentheses, the authors block off consideration of how other semiotic systems, other sets of values, exist as at least potential rivals. They don't examine the extent to which the putative "distance and objectivity" of the rhetoric program's discourse—or of their own article, for that matter—conceivably masks contests for dominance between the program and possible initiates into it, between the program and other possible systems of discourse within universities, between the program's values and other values asserted within the larger society.

One might claim that the "distant" and "objective" discourse of certain articles and programs in composition ultimately serves to insert subjects into a technocratic world order. The authors wind up lending support to this notion:

The informal, expressive pieces Nate wrote provided him the opportunity to give free rein to his intellect. It appears that by ignoring many of the constraints imposed by the genre and register of the academic writing expected of him, he could more easily explore new ideas. (27)

If the Carnegie Mellon program ultimately emphasizes a kind of writing which discourages Nate from "giving free rein to his intellect," from "exploring new ideas," does it then prepare him for the culture feared by the Frankfurt School theorist Max Horkheimer, one in which the "exploitation of meanings is replaced by an acquaintance with functions" (40)? One might claim further that such ideological work is accomplished largely by slighting rival premises and vocabularies that foreground issues of hegemony, resistance, subjectivity, and power.

Clearly, these are my own hypotheses about the article, and they're assumptions I entertain, more tentatively, about the program it purports to describe. But I don't wish to end with the claim that I've authoritatively identified the ideology of the article and the program and that I've precisely gauged their political consequences. As I indicated at the outset, my central aim is to suggest how an inquiry into the ideologies of composition scholarship might be conducted. I want to point out, therefore, two methodological cautions that should be observed when such an inquiry is undertaken.

First, the inquirer should hesitate to claim direct access to "the truth." This caution touches, of course, upon the eternally vexed issue of whether ideology is a matter of false consciousness that can be scientifically exposed or something that characterizes everyone, including those deter-
mined to ferret out the ideologies of others. Recent theories of ideology favor the latter stance. Adopting it doesn't mean ruling all appeals to reality out of order. Rather, it means considering how knowledge of reality is significantly mediated through semiotic systems, how various interpretations of reality might need to be accommodated, and how they can still be rationally compared. Furthermore, it means trying to keep the pragmatic force of theories in mind at least as much as their epistemological character—valuing, in the words of John Frow, "a practice which can continually, and effectively, pose to itself the question of its own use and usefulness, the question of the extent to which it reproduces or transforms institutional structures of knowledge" (234).

Second, the inquirer shouldn't engage just in the close textual analysis that I've tended to emphasize here. We need to consider, in addition, how publications, programs, and other institutions within composition studies interact with their intended audiences and with others. I hope I've been able to establish the worth of probing the RTE article along the lines I've emphasized, but I feel I need to pursue additional questions concerning the readership it aims for, the people it actually reaches, the effects it has on institutions as well as people, and the political nature of these effects. I've suggested that the authors invite us to take up a particular "subject position" as readers, but I've also suggested the importance of substituting for it the role of analyst of ideology, and part of that role involves considering how other people might bring other subject positions to the article.

It seems useful, too, to consider who doesn't encounter the article. In talking about it at various moments during the 1988 Conference on College Composition and Communication, I discovered that people interested in examining the ideologies of composition and people interested in empirical research aren't reading each other's work. This lack of contact shouldn't be construed as an absence of political relationship. Contests for hegemony go on in all professions, and these factions within composition studies are certainly engaged in a struggle for power, however latent it may at times be. To the extent that scholarship between them isn't exchanged and translated into their respective vocabularies, the interplay between them will be left unilluminated—as will the implications of their differences for the culture surrounding them.

*Associated Colleges of the Midwest*
*Chicago, Illinois*

**Works Cited**


---

**Computer-Assisted Composition Journal**

The *Computer-Assisted Composition Journal* seeks manuscripts on any aspect of computer writing. *CACJ* publishes reviews of software and articles on the application of computers to writing across the curriculum. Articles (no longer than 20 pages) should conform to the current MLA style format and should be submitted in duplicate or on diskette: Macintosh, WORDSTAR, or ASCII files for the IBM-PC. Please enclose a vita and a stamped, addressed return envelope or mailer.

*CACJ* publishes three times a year; an annual subscription, payable to *CACJ*, is $10 ($14 abroad). Contact: Editors, *CACJ*, Methodist College; Fayetteville, NC 28301-1499.