academy deeply fragmented into various fields. Does the project of "social construction," then, ultimately depend on social deconstruction? To answer this question, we must keep analyzing not only the shifting dialectic of individual and society, but also the institutional conditions through which theories of it "travel."

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**Hurling Epithets at the Devils You Know: A Response to Carol Berkenkotter**

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Having been described by Carol Berkenkotter as "hurling epithets," "conjuring images," and "perceiving devils" (of positivism), I feel positively possessed—with gratitude that she's taken up the issues I wrote about, and with curiosity as to just what she's actually saying. I must admit, I always thought devils were what were conjured, and images perceived, but perhaps the conjurer's hand and the perceiver's eye hoodwink us differently in the present postmodern twilight. Her rhetorical strategy appears to be to polarize the attitudes of composition scholars between the "hermeneutically-oriented" and the "experimental research community," the latter of which must continually cope with the paranoid "xenophobia" of the former. I was prepared to be offended until I reread my own article and discovered much the same polarization there; it's a habit of mind composition specialists tend to harbor—I clearly among them—and I wonder now whether I could have found a way to make my argument with less divisiveness. I'm not sure. I do find her article interesting and informative; it helped me understand more clearly some of the historical roots of the positivistic tradition. But it did not help me understand as clearly as I had hoped just what Berkenkotter thinks the place of empirical research in composition today is or ought to be. Indeed, her essay left me at least as perplexed as it did informed.

Early in her essay she says that she is "not sure that [she] entirely disagree[s]" that scientific assumptions and empiricalist rhetoric heavily influence the discourse of composition today; then she traces positivism's influence as a way (so I thought) of indicating her modest agreement. Yet, at the end she returns to her accusation that "hermeneutically trained colleagues" are suffering from "epistemological ethnocentricity" for indulging their "fear of a positivist-minded hegemony"—just that hegemony whose
roots she outlines. Nor does it help that the term "positivism" tends to slip and slide in meaning as she uses it in various contexts. I understand the term to imply a confidence that empirical observation has meaning because there is something to observe, measure, and generalize about. But Berkenkotter shifts from "positivism" to "behaviorism" to "experimentalism" without making clear to me how closely she sees these systems to be related. Is positivism alive and well in the form of current empirical research in writing? If so, is it acknowledged adequately by researchers who carry its spirit and use its methods? Do empirical researchers in composition sufficiently identify the assumptions that shape and energize their work so that especially those new to the profession will understand what such researchers mean by "knowledge" and "discovery"? I argued that I thought not. What puzzles me is what Berkenkotter thinks. I'd like first to examine some of her points, and then to suggest some perspectives which may further clarify the question of science's role in composition study.

Citing a study by Charles Bazerman, Berkenkotter suggests that the "behaviorist rhetorical universe" of psychological research has shaped educational research and thus, in turn, composition research itself. That seems to me absolutely right; for example, most of the empirical studies cited by George Hillocks in Research in Written Composition embody the observational, statistically-based studies of writers in experimental and control groups. Those that don't—case studies that focus on individual writers talking out their composing habits—are seen by Hillocks as inherently limited because they aren't "controlled" by observable comparisons: "In qualitative research studies, control groups were almost universally absent . . . severely limit[ing] the assertions which can be made" (244). According to Hillocks, if you didn't observe groups and compare them statistically you haven't discovered anything valid about "the way students write." This seems to me just the sort of unacknowledged privileging of quantitative methodology that needs to be called up short; I wonder if Berkenkotter agrees.

I also wonder if she's aware of the linguistic cues embedded in her own arguments. She describes the "social accounting" by means of which empirical researchers justify their conclusions for the community of experimental researchers: "Having located the study in the community's established knowledge . . . the researcher is positioned to introduce original claims in the results section" (76). Note the apposition of "established knowledge" and "original claims," a pairing that suggests a fundamental positivistic/scientific habit of mind—the judgment of all claims in terms of previously accepted ideas. Such a habit of mind may be phrased like this: if the "new" knowledge fits the "old," the old is alive and well; if the new consistently contradicts the old, then the old must be discarded, like phlogiston and humors. Though even the most bedrock truths are subject to revision if powerful new "evidence" is discovered, knowledge is cumulative, building upon the most persuasive and acceptable conclusions of the time—for all
knowledge must begin with what we agree has been most strongly proven. In Berkenkotter’s words, “accumulated knowledge” is “contextualized into the community’s existing knowledge.” She is describing a rhetorical pattern whose terms fit the positivist way of thinking. The new builds upon the old or displaces it; truth will eventually displace error when our observations become fine enough and our accumulated understandings are finally sorted out.

The “other” view—that truth is not a goal but a continuum of co-present, mutually compelling perspectives—differs in both methodology and rhetoric as a way of assessing our experience of the world. And there I go again: even as I attempt to restate my disagreement with the position I think Berkenkotter is defending, I begin to set what I think is the scientific of positivistic perspective in opposition to the humanistic (what she terms the “hermeneutic”) perspective. Unfortunately for all of us, I suppose, I’m not the only one who perceives positivist devils and conjures up scientific images when describing recent composition research. Self-confessed humanist William Irmscher writes in College Composition and Communication (1987) that he finds that “recent studies, especially of process, have not escaped the impelling force to be scientific by creating clinical, laboratory-like conditions to observe subjects, ignoring that they create a foreign environment . . . [and] set up obstacles to what might be natural or normal behavior [for a writer]” (83-84). Suggesting that we need to look on writing with Kenneth Burke’s eyes, as “dramatistic . . . a rhetorical Act, inseparable from Actor, Scene, Agency, Attitude and Purpose,” Irmscher insists that we need to “reassert the humanistic nature of our own discipline,” thereby implying, I suppose, that studying discourse can never be done within a positivist framework (84, 85). In this view, science and humanism—like the two cats of Kilkenny—can’t live together in compositiontown. Steven Jones, on the other hand, relies on hermeneutic theory to question research on composing processes. Writing in the Journal of Advanced Composition (1988), Jones argues that in attempting to “reify” the writer—to turn the writer into an object of study—“cognitivists often misconstrue the act of composing by isolating the subject . . . from the social world.” In so doing, he argues, cognitivists overlook the truth that “rhetorical conventions and discursive norms are social and institutional; they do not arise out of the head” (14, 15). And if they don’t come from mind, then writers’ behaviors, however observable, can’t help us infer any useful generalizations about all writers and writing; in Jones’ view, only a recognition of the “sociality” of writing—not the writer’s individual composing—can lead to any real understanding of the nature of writing.

So there is plenty of polarized, either-or thinking in composition today. Yet I believe, despite my own susceptibility to such thinking, that science and humanism, cognitivism and contextualism—so often presented as antithetical—are not as autonomous as our shared habit of polarizing them.
would imply. I believe they are in important ways reciprocal and interactive, interpenetrating one another, scientific knowing blending with "hermeneutic" and humanistic perceptions. And those encountering for the first time the various thought-fields active in the study of composition should be encouraged to think of scientific and humanistic ways of knowing as partners rather than as rivals, with much to say to one another.

Consider the impact of individual "case-study" research upon the discourse of composition. The scrutiny of individual writing processes—a major form of composition research—appears to arise from a blend of scientific assumptions: that empirical data (in this case writing behavior) can be observed and assessed objectively on a one-to-one basis; that generalizations can be inferred from such data; and that our understanding of writing can be cumulatively enhanced by such generalizations. Yet, case-study researchers strive to generalize their findings, not with statistics but with contextualized descriptions of relations among writers, their environments, and their readers. As Hillocks disapprovingly notes, they do not seek to limit "variables" and exert "controls" over their subjects. This is precisely because case-study researchers tend to resist the limiting pressures of that purely scientific model to which Hillocks, for example, evidently aspires. They see writing from the humanistic perspective of rhetoric—that is, that all discourse is inherently relational, a function of the interaction of writer, reader, and the situation which occasions them. As Louise Wetherbee Phelps points out in Composition as a Human Science, "Contextualist themes are latent in the very origins of process. . . . The rhetorical tradition never lost its grip on the imagination of the new discipline [composition]," so that when "process research brings new facts into view," the very complexity of them uncovers the "oversimplifications" of the process view of writing "in a self-correcting fashion" (44). Though I don't agree with Phelps' conclusion that in this way the "concept of process" itself is deconstructed, I do believe that the inherent sense of ambiguity and complexity which marks the humanist attitude to knowledge influences those who study individual writers, making them wary of the very kind of claim Hillocks wants them to be able to make. What we think we know about writing ultimately escapes positivistic or scientific ways of speaking: it is neither falsifiable nor cumulative, but subject always to occasion, place, and the infinite variability of human thought and utterance.

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