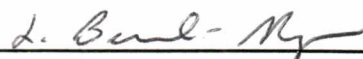
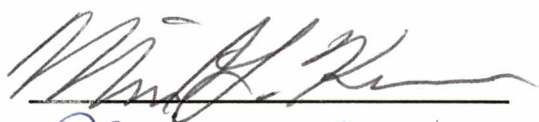
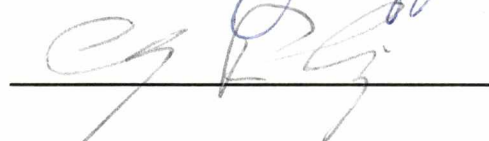


To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Stuart Francis Swain entitled "Social Construction: A Redefinition in Context." I have examined the final copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in English.


Linda Bensel-Meyers, Major Professor

We have read the dissertation
and recommend its acceptance.


Thomas J. Heffernan


Accepted for the Council:


Associate Vice Chancellor
and Dean of The Graduate School

Social Construction:
A Redefinition in Context

A Dissertation
Presented for the
Doctor of Philosophy
Degree
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Stuart Francis Swain

May 1995

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my parents, C. P. and Patricia Swain, and to my wife, Kathryn Black Swain. Their affection for me and their interest in my work made the composition of this dissertation possible.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

During the composition of this dissertation, I have had the benefit of the patience and advice of my major professor, Dr. Linda Bensel-Meyers, and the members of my committee, Dr. Christopher Craig, Dr. Thomas Heffernan, and Dr. Michael Keene. I appreciate their efforts on my behalf. I am especially grateful to Dr. Bensel-Meyers for recognizing the value of my ideas and helping me to frame them in a form more worthy of the profession.

ABSTRACT

Social construction is found less often as a systematic theory than as a perspective adopted by thinkers in many disciplines who share an interest in the impact of social process on thought and its expression. Many in composition studies are attracted to the concept because an emphasis on the extent to which ideas are socially constructed commonly leads to a complementary emphasis on rhetoric and its role in generating, as opposed to only disseminating, knowledge. In practice, those drawn to social construction also tend to gravitate toward a cooperative conception of rhetoric, and anti-foundational recognition of the instrumental nature of theory, a belief in the incommensurability of conflicting ideas, and an interest in the paradigmatic quality of revolutionary shifts within disciplines. Taken together, these ideas can be used as an operational definition of social construction. This expanded definition proves to be a useful tool in the examination of four important issues in composition studies (the history of rhetoric, relativism, consensus and individual thought, and the social locus of authority in the composition classroom) which constitutes the bulk of this dissertation.

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CHAPTER ONE

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION AND COMPOSITION

"Social construction" is a term imported into rhetoric and composition studies from the social sciences and defined most effectively for many in composition studies by Kenneth Bruffee in an article published in *College English* entitled "Social Construction, Language, and the Authority of Knowledge: A Bibliographical Essay." In the article, Bruffee links the thought of many theorists in a number of fields who share an interest in the way social context shapes individual thought and expression. In formulating his interpretation of the concept of social construction from the sources he considers, Bruffee draws together a variety of thinkers who share a belief that social factors such as culture, language, and education play more important roles in the genesis and evolution of the things we think and say than has been generally acknowledged.

While few of these thinkers use the term "social construction," they all, in one way or another, assert that our ideas and utterances are largely social constructs, formed as much in a social crucible as in the privacy of our own intellect and imagination. It is important to note, however, that a shared belief in the social provenance of individual thought and expression operates as a premise underlying many different theories in rhetoric and composition. Thus, many independent thinkers who include social construction as an important element in their theoretical

programs arrive at pedagogical ideas quite different from those employed by Bruffee. Social construction, then, is seldom presented as a systematic and inclusive theory that can be used to organize and explain disciplinary domains in the way that theories such as Marxism, evolution, and relativity work to model the inquiry contained in the fields they shape. Instead, social construction is generally employed as a theoretical framework, as a means of directing attention to the social dimensions latent in nearly every question that we might study.

THE ELEMENTS OF SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION

The purpose of this dissertation is to examine four important topics that currently generate discussion in composition studies—the history of rhetoric, relativism, the search for consensus, and the locus of authority in the teaching of writing—to which those interested in social construction can contribute insight. In order to conduct this study effectively, however, we need a precise definition of social construction itself. It would be difficult to overemphasize the importance of viewing social construction instrumentally, as a series of tools useful in many situations, because social construction is employed more as an element of other theories than as a self-contained entity. Also, although nearly everyone with anything to say about writing factors in social dynamics to some degree, many in the field neither use the vocabulary associated with social construction nor participate actively in developing

its implications for our understanding of composition. Thus, simply connecting social construction with an interest in the social context of what people think and say leads to an unproductively broad sense of the term that does little to explain how the inclusion of social construction can affect theory. To illustrate the dynamics of social construction at work in rhetoric and composition, a useful definition of social construction is needed—one that faithfully reflects the cooperative conception of rhetoric, anti-foundationalism, incommensurability, and attention to the role of paradigms in the flow of discourse at the heart of the concept. Investigation of these central elements of social construction should help us understand the concept. Still, the instrumental definition under construction here is meant as a tool for looking at the issues covered in the chapters to follow and not as the main focus of the study itself.

The relationship of social construction to these key elements—cooperative rhetoric, anti-foundationalism, incommensurability, and paradigm theory—is complex. If one's focus shifts, social construction can, in fact, be seen as a constituent part of any of the elements subordinated to it in the definition above. For example, in many diplomatic contexts, a cooperative view of rhetoric moves to the foreground; on these occasions, the overriding imperative to come to a workable agreement that can satisfy all parties is seen as more important than the philosophical questions surrounding such an agreement. Similarly, in epistemology, anti-foundationalism seems primary, and social construction appears as an operational consequence (for if we cannot rely on objective and absolute principles as the foundations of thought, the social

generation of knowledge fills the vacuum). Also, paradigm theory takes center stage when we seek to understand how the central concepts of a discipline can change. Finally, however, when we consider language, thought, and communication as social entities in themselves and seek a better understanding of the ways in which they interact, social construction becomes primary.

Given this inter-related view of the central elements of social construction, cooperation, anti-foundationalism, incommensurability, and paradigms can be imagined best as traces of the influence of social construction at work and not as the concept itself. Perhaps they make the most sense if seen through analogy to a solar system like our own in which the orbits of the various bodies are subtly interconnected through their gravitational fields. Thus, while each element has its own properties that differentiate it from the others as surely as the lethal gasses of Jupiter and the lifeless cold of Pluto can be distinguished from the Earth's hospitable atmosphere, all the elements pull upon and help shape one another, just as the Earth prevents the Moon from spinning off into interplanetary space and the Moon reciprocates by setting the rhythm of the tides. Coming to a better understanding of the relationships among these concepts should yield a better sense of how the constituent parts of social construction interact than might be gained from a static inventory of its parts.

Cooperation

The first element to consider is an insistence on a cooperative basis for discourse. Those who would place rhetoric on a cooperative, rather than a competitive, footing reflect the influence of the New Rhetoric formulated by Chaim Perelman in the decades immediately following World War Two. The urgency behind his insistence on a cooperative basis for rhetoric may well stem from Perelman's experience as a "Belgian Jew and one of the leaders of Belgian resistance" who "had personally experienced the effects of a massive collapse of reasonable discourse in the violence of that war" and won unenviable insight into a period that illustrates the excesses of competition as few have (Handelman 66). Based on this experience of the consequences of allowing advocates of any one point of view to impose their ideas on others, Perelman advocates a style of "nonformal argumentation" which consists

not of a chain of ideas of which some are derived from others according to accepted rules of inference, but rather of a web formed from all the arguments and all the reasons that combine to achieve the desired result. ("New" 18)

The very form of Perelman's conception of discourse establishes a cooperative basis for argument—a "web" of ideas suggests a variety of perspectives rather than the lock step order implied by the "chain of ideas" forged in the traditional formal argumentation Perelman seeks to supplement.

This structural basis of cooperation in nonformal argumentation promotes Perelman's most important goal in formulating his system of discourse. Faced with

traditional, single-sided forms of argumentation that “may justify coercion and the use of force against the recalcitrants in the name of God, of reason, of truth, or of the State’s or party’s interest” when they do “not succeed in persuading everybody of the truth of their point of view,” Perelman seeks a process for promoting a cooperative framework for discourse (63). In “The Philosophy of Pluralism and the New Rhetoric,” a lecture delivered in 1977 at McGill University, he advocates a multifaceted rhetoric which stems from a view of social relations that “is based on respect for individuals and for the many groups which sometimes cooperate with each other and sometimes oppose one another” and seeks solutions that are “acceptable, reasonable and fair” because they are “well balanced” (“Pluralism” 67). Rhetoric becomes a means for reaching common agreement instead of enforcing one point of view on all sides of a question—the focus shifts from argumentative conquest to rhetorical cooperation.

Anti-foundationalism

Both Patricia Bizzell and Stanley Fish define the next central element of social constructionism, anti-foundationalism, through contrast with its opposite, foundationalism. Foundationalism, Bizzell writes, “has its origins in a search for truth” that is “supposed to exist on a plane beyond the material and the temporal” and that “becomes the basis” of one’s “entire world view” (“Beyond” 664). Fish sees foundationalism in “any attempt to ground inquiry and communication in something more firm and stable than mere belief or unexamined practice” and “to identify that

ground and then so to order our activities that they become anchored to it and are thereby rendered objective and principled" ("Anti-Foundationalism" 65-66). These foundations include many of the most familiar and powerful ideas that can be found in human history, including the great chain of being, the divine right of kings, and the fundamentalist insistence on the literal truth of the Bible. Both Bizzell and Fish emphasize the philosophically idealistic and impersonal quality of the concept—the goal of placing knowledge beyond factors of time, place, and culture.

The use of anti-foundationalism, predictably, negates this emphasis. Bizzell describes "the new anti-foundationalism" in which "knowledge is non-foundational, made by people," and "the discourse used to frame and promulgate knowledge takes on new importance" ("Beyond" 664). In the anti-foundational framework, "knowledge is really the product of cultural activity, shaped by ideology and constituted, not merely conveyed, by rhetoric" (664). Fish echoes the insistence on the social provenance of knowledge by insisting that

anti-foundationalism teaches that questions of fact, truth, correctness, validity, and clarity can neither be posed nor answered in reference to some extracontextual, ahistorical, nonsituational reality or rule, or law or value; rather, anti-foundationalism asserts, all of the matters are intelligible and debatable only within the precincts of the contexts or situations or paradigms or communities that give them their local and changeable shape. ("Anti-Foundationalism" Fish 67-68)

The influence of time, place, and culture that sullies the purity of truth in strict foundationalism is a hallmark of the process that animates the creation of knowledge in anti-foundationalism. While there may be relatively few who actually take the position to this extreme, we need to understand the implications of the stance.

The skepticism of received knowledge and the emphasis on social interaction associated with anti-foundationalism embed the concept deeply in the structure of social construction. The most important connections come to light, ironically, when Bizzell and Fish turn to consider the limitations and contradictions of anti-foundationalism. Bizzell regrets the lack of a “positive program” in anti-foundationalism and the related tendency for anti-foundationalist thinkers to “end up tacitly supporting the political and cultural status quo” in their zeal to expose the ideological biases underlying foundationalist thought (“Beyond” 667). Similarly, while Fish discounts the argument that adoption of anti-foundationalism would lead to “the loss of everything necessary to rational inquiry and successful communication” on social grounds, he argues against the real temptation to embrace anti-foundationalism as a panacea

and claim it as the basis for a better set of methods for operating in the world we are constantly making and remaking, a better set of rationales and procedures for making judgments, and a better set of solutions for the problems that face us as teachers of writing.

(Fish 69)

Most of all, Fish warns against using anti-foundationalism foundationally, of turning anti-foundationalism into the ultimate foundation.

Given these objections, what benefit do Bizzell and Fish see in anti-foundationalism? Interestingly enough, they seem to consider it a catalyst for the social process associated with social construction. Bizzell yearns for “a more collective, pluralistic, inclusive national discourse” that could “contribute substantially to the redress of our national ills” (“Beyond” 663). Such a discourse begins with social context. It leads us to acknowledge the ways in which “our professional identities are shaped by our genders and sexual orientations, religions or secular ethical traditions, racial and ethnic identifications” and other communal factors that contribute to our thoughts and their expression (674). Fish responds to the emphasis on social context so central to social construction in a slightly different way. He begins by paying careful attention to “the lesson of anti-foundationalism, that lesson that we are always and already situated” (“Anti-Foundationalism” Fish 72) and the need to, in Kenneth Bruffee’s term, identify “in nonevaluative terms their own beliefs and the beliefs of the local, religious, ethnic, national, supranational, and special-interest communities they are already members of” (Fish 70-71). Advocates of anti-foundationalism, like those of social construction, remind us of this situatedness and tell “us that as situated beings our practice can make perfect, and that we already know more than we think” (“Anti-Foundationalism” 78).

Fish’s purpose in invoking the temporal, spatial, and cultural situation is to work against the temptation to turn anti-foundationalism into a new eternal verity. He

warns that any claim in which the notion of situatedness is said to be a lever that allows us to get a purchase on situations is finally a claim to have escaped situatedness, and is therefore nothing more or less than a reinvention of foundationalism by the very form of thought that has supposedly reduced it to ruins (72). Thus, any absolute injunction against intellectual foundations of any kind violates the spirit of anti-foundationalism by transforming the concept into exactly the sort of dogma its advocates so strenuously oppose. Correctly understood, using anti-foundationalism allows us to employ any idea, even one traditionally seen as foundational, as an intellectual foundation only so long as we use it instrumentally, so long as we recognize its utility for constructing coherent theory that seems to fit with the data before us and avoid claiming to have discovered inalterable and universally valid truth within it. Accepting the validity of anti-foundationalism as a concept does not rule out our using ideas as foundations for other ideas or even coherent and elaborate theories: systematic thought is too valuable an intellectual tool to simply toss away. It does, however, rule out confusing the ideas that lay the groundwork for our sense of the world with the structures and phenomena they seek to explain. Anti-foundationalism's most important contribution to social construction lies in this sense of the historical and spatial situatedness of thought and expression and the sensitivity it brings to the social context that always surrounds the creation and propagation of ideas.

Incommensurability

Like anti-foundationalism, the concept of incommensurability is important to social construction because it places the primary locus of knowledge in the social sphere rather than in the interaction between individuals and external reality. Early in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Richard Rorty speaks of competing systems of belief such as “‘objective knowledge’ and other, less privileged, areas of human activity” and the new ways of viewing any given claim to reality that are embodied in a “distinction between ‘normal discourse’ and ‘abnormal discourse’ (11). These relatively unheralded theoretical frameworks hold an important place in the lexicon of social construction. Rorty believes that the most important disagreements stem neither from faulty observation and analysis, as in the empirical positivism that has undergirded the theory and practice of science since Locke, nor from merely personal opinion, as critics of social construction’s alleged excessive relativism contend, but from incommensurate, or fundamentally different, perspectives rooted in the language of thought and expression that serious inquirers in any discipline use when they attempt to communicate.

Rorty argues against a traditional view which leads some to insist on a false choice between empirically grounded, objective, verifiable, and rational knowledge and intuitive, subjective, and irrational belief. Disagreements often arise among disciplined scholars who follow equally rigorous methods and reflect incommensurate differences in perspective. For example, cosmologists argue about the origin of the universe and ethical theorists disagree on the wisdom of *in vitro* fertilization. Rorty

and others interested in the implications of incommensurability wish us to pay increased attention to our tendency to hammer knowledge out through the deliberative processes of conversation and intellectual accommodation, rather than through the predominantly referential force of evidence or the whims of fancy.

Rorty turns his attention to incommensurability in the course of his analysis of Thomas Kuhn's theory of scientific change. At critical moments in the history of science, the scientific community must choose between different theories purporting to explain the same phenomena. Rorty seizes upon Kuhn's opposition to the positivism implicit in the traditional claim that

what changes with a paradigm [Kuhn's word, in this case, for a theoretical position that defines a discipline] is only the scientist's interpretation of observations that themselves are fixed once and for all by the nature of the environment and of the perceptual apparatus. (Kuhn 120)

He insists that the usual empirical justifications offered in defense of scientific theories miss the central matrix of decision and are, in fact, all but irrelevant.

If empirical arguments do miss the point, then the concept of incommensurability serves those inclined to social construction. When we approach ideas with a perspective that incorporates incommensurability, we work against the dependence built into traditional science and philosophy on what Richard Rorty identifies as the "suggestion that if we could get to the real data, unpolluted by our choice of language, we should be 'grounding' rational choice" ("Philosophy" 325). We also

undermine the empirically based view that sensory data clearly seen are all that matters and that interpretation serves only to get in the way of knowing, not to enhance it or make it possible. In the absence of a socially-rooted interpretative intelligence, the real data cited above are “of no help whatever in bringing decision between theories under an algorithm, any more than in bringing decisions about guilt or innocence in jury trials under an algorithm, and for the same reasons” (“Philosophy” 324).

In arguing against the potency of this real data, Rorty moves the decision-making process from the realm of individual observation and analysis into the social spheres of probability and jurisprudence. Because the data we see are inevitably colored by the language we use, we have no standard through which language can be rendered absolutely commensurable, through which it can become an absolutely transparent and reliable medium for the transmission of perceptions. Thus, we fall into the domain of the incommensurable, of human conversation and negotiation.

When we shift from commensuration to conversation and negotiation, the philosophical framework for the production and transmission passes from epistemology to hermeneutics. According to Rorty, epistemology “sees the hope of agreement as a token of the existence of a common ground which, perhaps unbeknown to the speakers, unites them in a common reality” that should convince all rational thinkers. Hermeneutics, conversely,

sees the relations between various disciplines as those of strands in
a possible conversation, a conversation which presupposes no

disciplinary matrix which unites the speakers, but where the hope of agreement is never lost so long as the conversation lasts.

Furthermore, the hope attached to hermeneutics "is not a hope for the discovery of antecedently existing common ground, but simply hope for agreement, or, at least, exciting and fruitful disagreement" ("Philosophy" 318). Adherents of these two schools of philosophy work toward opposite ends: where epistemology depends on the search for a single ground of knowledge, hermeneutics thrives on the possibilities offered by the absence of such a standard.

The fact that accepting incommensurability pulls us into hermeneutics plays a key role in the dynamics of social construction. Adopting a social constructionist approach leads us to emphasize the social component in thought and expression. The willingness to admit that differences in ideas are just as likely to reflect differences in perspective and language as they are to reflect differences in opinion or inaccuracies in perception is also characteristic of social construction. This admission places us in Rorty's hermeneutic world, where intellectual life more closely resembles an ongoing conversation than an all-or-nothing struggle for domination. Rorty's work with incommensurability affords a glimpse into the underpinnings of social construction and the possible interactions between the sentient individual and the variety of social spheres that we all inhabit.

Paradigms

Thomas Kuhn's treatment of the role paradigms play in major scientific change can shed similar light on movement of ideas among groups of people. Kuhn distinguishes between two senses of the word "paradigm." On the one hand, Kuhn uses "paradigm" to stand for "the entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques, and so on shared by the members of a given community." On the other, "paradigm" denotes "the concrete puzzle solutions, which employed as models or examples, can replace explicit rules as a basis for the solution of the remaining puzzles of normal science" (175). The first sense reflects the more personal dimension of paradigms because the "beliefs, values, techniques, and so on" are "shared by the members of a community" only after each individual member subscribes to them for his or her own reasons.

While it makes perfect sense to treat coherent scientific disciplines as corporate entities based on the common theories and practices that distinguish them from other social enterprises, we must remember that their members are initiated one by one. The interconnection of personal conviction and socially held belief implicit in this sense of paradigm pulls rhetoric into the process of forming and sustaining paradigms. Just as the scientific enterprise continually draws new adherents, the work of its members continually redefines the ideas and methods at its core. The institutionally entrenched theories and practices at the heart of science or any important social edifice never change on their own; the acolytes of the new must convert the proponents of the old if they are to be converted at all.

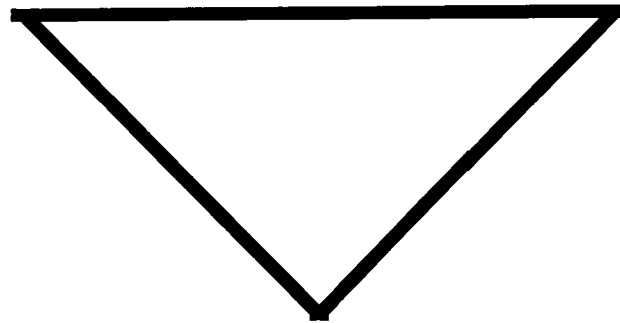
In distinguishing “concrete puzzle solutions” that function as “models or examples” from the constellation of shared beliefs that gives a discipline coherence and purpose, Kuhn separates the social artifacts, the specific ideas the community shares, from the social process, the fact that this community must share important ideas in order to function at all. This second sense of paradigm emphasizes the tangible products of a discipline’s development, the parts practiced in the laboratory or in the field and recorded in the literature. Taken together, the paradigm as a social construct and the paradigm as the simultaneous assent of many individuals to that construct explain both the stability and the fragility of science. They give us a case history of social construction and cooperation among groups of people that supplements Rorty’s more broadly philosophical work with incommensurability and hermeneutics and the sense of social presence in the here and now lent by advocates of anti-foundationalism.

The Rhetorical Triangle

Composition specialists can better understand the view presented here of how social construction operates by comparing the triad of anti-foundationalism, incommensurability, and the combination of paradigm theory and cooperative rhetoric (which, though treated separately above, can be profitably combined here since both are commonly used to understand how audiences react to texts) to the three angles of the rhetorical triangle. This triangle is a standard concept in the communications field and is usually depicted as follows:

Author

Audience



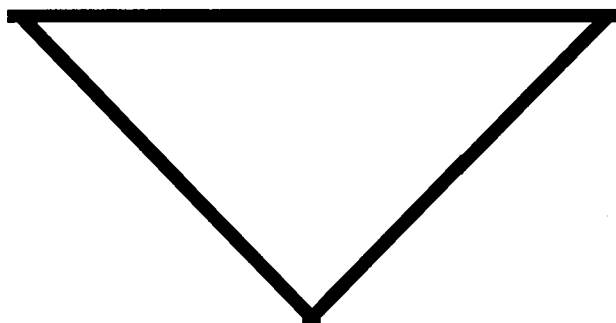
Text

Each angle in this traditional rhetorical triangle can be seen as an analogue to one or two of the elements of social construction discussed above. For example, anti-foundationalism generally refers to an author's stance toward his or her subject matter and a willingness to treat the ideas and theories that matter to him or her instrumentally, as tools for interpreting perception rather than as unimpeachable representations of reality. Likewise, our acceptance of incommensurability leads us to question the authority we invest in texts available to us, our desire either to place our full faith in a single theoretical perspective or to consider the merits of a number of competing theories. These theories are often incommensurable because they signify genuinely different approaches to the problems at hand instead of merely reflecting differences in the accuracy of measurement and perception or simple matters of opinion. Finally, attention to the joint role that paradigms and a cooperative conception of rhetoric can play in better understanding audience prompts us to respond to the social dynamics of audience, of how ideas gain and lose

acceptance in a process in which both social influence and personal conviction are deciding factors. Using our definition of social construction, we can redraw the triangle:

Anti-Foundationalism

Paradigms and Cooperation



Incommensurability

THE IMPLICATIONS OF SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION

The characteristic traits of social construction that have played such an important part in this discussion—cooperation, anti-foundationalism, incommensurability, and paradigmatic change—are used to help lend focus to the examination of the important topics often discussed in composition studies presented in the remaining chapters of this dissertation. The examination of these key elements yields a clearer picture of the anatomy of social construction, but, according to the emphasis on understanding the social context of ideas implicit in the theory itself, we also need to consider the practical implications of these elements if we are to gain insight into its

dynamics, into the relationships between the elements and the operating principles of the whole enterprise. Each element has much to offer the theory as a whole, but each, used clumsily, could exact a devastating price. The search for a cooperative basis for discourse, for example, offers the hope of a less divisive and more productive framework for the interchange of ideas, but, if the pursuit of consensus translates into the total elimination of conflict, it could undermine the integrity of individual inquiry. Anti-foundationalism, similarly, promises freedom from an unreflective acceptance of received ideas that threatens to suppress fresh inquiry, but it could also, if transformed into an absolute dictum, isolate us from intellectual history and silence academic discourse. These interrelationships are explored in the chapters described below.

CHAPTER TOPICS

Our use of the term “incommensurability” and of the concept of paradigms offers similar rewards and carries similar dangers, especially for the diversity of inquiry and conversation and our understanding of the political implications of thought and expression. In the balance of this study, I contend that if these elements of social construction are misunderstood and consequently misapplied, a perspective informed by social construction will prove counterproductive. The examination of four important issues in composition studies—our connection to the history of

rhetoric, relativism, consensus, and the workings of social authority in the teaching of composition—should serve to distinguish the useful from the misleading applications of social construction and its central components. More importantly, it should provide examples of social construction in operation.

I begin with a chapter that considers important figures in rhetorical history in the context of social construction. The main benefit that social construction has to offer those of us in composition is a sensitivity to the power of social forces to help shape individual thought and discourse and an appreciation of the potential of that recognition to alert us to previously underexamined dimensions of current rhetorical activity. If we recognize the influence that contemporary social forces have on what we think and how we express it, how can we ignore the effect that earlier rhetorical thought, much of which continues to be read and discussed today, has had on that of the present? Given the continuing impact of the traditional canon, a large part of the social context of social construction in composition can be found in investigating attempts to account for social reality in the rhetoric of the past.

The central concepts of social construction prompt us to consider the social context of contemporary ideas. By extension, we also need to examine the historical antecedents of these same ideas. Thus, if the questions raised by social construction are of more than merely local importance and are valid for more than a moment of rhetorical fashion or an isolated corner populated by a like-minded coterie of thinkers, attention to social concerns should be discernible in earlier rhetorical thought, at least to the extent that we identify rhetoric with the attempt to describe

the conditions that enable the production of acceptable discourse for a given set of people, as opposed to a prescriptive set of rules meant for any time and any place. Unless social construction either applies only to the rhetoric contemporary with it or fails to apply to any rhetoric whatsoever, we can expect to find many of the questions that those drawn to social construction tend to ask embedded in earlier systems of ideas, particularly when they seem largely concerned with social, as opposed to strictly personal, realms of thought and experience. In an effort to present examples of earlier thinkers working along parallel lines to social construction, this chapter will include analyses of elements of anti-foundationalism in the rhetoric of Cicero, traces of a paradigmatic structure in the eighteenth century subordination of rhetoric to the service of social mobility by Hugh Blair, hints of an awareness of the incommensurability of theoretical perspectives in the recent application of rhetorical theory to political and psychological contexts advanced by Kenneth Burke, and an orientation toward cooperation in all three.

In selecting these thinkers out of the many who have formulated answers to problems of rhetoric for better than two thousand years, I have tried to choose figures from periods of social and political turmoil or transition in the hope that their social dynamics might appear in particularly bold relief. Although Cicero's ideas have served as a cornerstone of traditional education in rhetoric, I believe that his own rhetoric emerges to a large extent from his refusal to accept uncritically any one of the earlier traditions that he studied in formulating his own approach to the exclusion of all others. While his work has long been accorded a prominent place in the canon

and been used as a foundation for later thought, his theory rejects foundationalism as a working method. Blair's work serves as a particularly striking example of rhetoric in use as a social tool, especially since it comes from a period when scientific, political, industrial, and cultural revolutions offered new opportunities to, and placed new responsibilities on, those who could understand their implications. Finally, examination of Burke's view of rhetoric reminds us both of its extraordinary power and of the consequences of misunderstanding or abusing its potential to frame the world around us. The following sketches are presented only as enquiries into the willingness of past, and in Burke's case, the very recent past, rhetorical leaders to account for some of these social dynamics in rhetoric, not as definitive expositions of the most important ideas advanced by these thinkers.

The second chapter consists of an examination of the potential for the elements of anti-foundationalism and incommensurability in social construction to lead to the promotion of an excessive and unproductive relativism. Locating reality largely in shared social experience threatens to privilege language and shared conception over perception and external reality in dangerous ways. Once we abandon an objectively verifiable standard of knowledge or absolute reality, whether it be Platonic, positivistic, Christian, or otherwise, how we can hope to evaluate the ideas we do share? The relativism implicit in a social basis for knowledge flirts inevitably with excess unless the proponents of social construction can show that there are other standards for testing the coherence and utility of ideas and perceptions besides an absolute external reality. Elements of foundationalism and commensurability in the

cultural literacy theories of E. D. Hirsch and Allan Bloom also pull social construction into the relativism debate. Advocates of social construction can point to the emphasis on cooperation, pluralism, and the universal audience central in the work of Chaim Perelman as an example of a central tenet of an important theorist in rhetoric who addresses many of the same concerns that those attracted to social construction often confront. In addition, the interaction of competing anthropological visions seen in the work of Clifford Geertz merits close attention, as do the perspectives on relativism of Wayne Booth and those shared by Earl Croasmun and Richard A. Cherwitz, all of which clearly reflect the influence of social construction.

In the third chapter, I consider the possibility that the influence of social construction fosters a collectivist mindset that inhibits individuality, an impetus toward consensus that leads us to discount the contributions of individual thinkers who differ in important ways from their colleagues. In emphasizing the social component of thought and expression, do adherents of social construction fail to recognize and encourage the very real contribution that individuals make to what Kenneth Bruffee follows Richard Rorty and Michael Oakeshott in calling “the conversation of mankind”? Those influenced by social construction often value consensus as a means of identifying and refining important strands of thought. What impact might this emphasis on agreement have on philosophical foundations and the incommensurability of ideas? Others identified with social construction advocate a composition pedagogy designed to prepare students for the demands of writing in, or, in some cases, against, academic English. If we focus on paradigmatic models of

academic English, do we run the risk of either enforcing mindless conformity or lapsing back into a reliance on prescriptive grammar or the old rhetorical modes in order to initiate students into the academic discourse many identify in college and university settings, or into other social discourse? I will rely heavily on the work of Mikhail Bahktin, David Bartholomae, Patricia Bizzell, Sheryl Fontaine, Joseph Harris, Thomas Kuhn, Richard Rorty, and John Trimbur in examining this topic.

A fourth and concluding chapter examines the implications of social construction for the questions of authority that often occupy our attention in composition studies. In this chapter, I examine the extent to which our instructional practices derive their legitimacy from social considerations through study of the general surveys of English departments and composition programs of James Berlin, Gerald Graff, and Stephen North and accounts of the pedagogical approaches of those who seek to understand the social context in which writing takes place, represented by David Bartholomae, Patricia Bizzell, Michael Keene, James Kinneavy, and John Lannon and a second group more interested in cultivating the voices needed to work effectively in the social contexts presented by writing, including Linda Bense-Meyers, Kenneth Bruffee, Peter Elbow, and John Gage.

An understanding of social construction as it applies to our thought and language in general and composition in particular can help us decide how or how not to use insights gleaned from thinking about social construction in the composition classroom. This decision applies not only to our institutional roles as composition teachers, rhetorical theorists, and members of the academic establishment (for how could social

construction be limited to any one discipline since all involve thought and use of the language?), but also to our private pursuits as individuals seeking to think and communicate effectively and responsibly. The need to seek a thorough understanding of the content and implications of social construction theories in order to make an intelligent decision about how to use them in our thinking and teaching affects both the private and the public dimensions of our lives.

CHAPTER TWO

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION AND THE HISTORY OF RHETORIC

The books and articles most closely associated with social construction tend to focus on the present without ignoring the past. The explanation of the process of revolutionary theoretical change in contemporary science that Thomas Kuhn presents in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, for example, includes a description of pre-scientific practice. Similarly, in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Richard Rorty grounds his exposition of the choice facing modern philosophy with an account of the discipline that reaches back to classical times. This attention both to the past and to the present follows from the nature of social construction itself since the history of ideas in a given field of inquiry must work as a social force helping to mold thought and expression in any context in which social construction operates. The main benefit that social construction has to offer teachers of writing is a sensitivity to the power of social forces that help shape individual thought and discourse and an appreciation of the potential of that recognition to alert us to previously under-examined dimensions of current rhetorical activity. Because I believe that social construction does offer general insights into these realms, I follow the practice of others sympathetic to the theory, such as James Berlin and Patricia Bizzell, in considering the past. In an important sense, searching for traces of the defining

questions and processes of social construction in earlier rhetorical thought leads to at least a partial social reconstruction of the key elements of social construction itself.

In an effort to demonstrate this process of reconstruction, I present brief treatments of the traditionally derived rhetoric of Cicero, the eighteenth century subordination of rhetoric to the service of social mobility by Hugh Blair, and the recent application of rhetorical theory to political and psychological contexts by Kenneth Burke. In selecting these thinkers, I have tried to choose figures who might illustrate some of the central elements of social construction identified in the introduction to this study—cooperation, anti-foundationalism, incommensurability, and a paradigmatic process of change—and who represent periods of social and political turbulence or transition in which social dynamics appear in particularly bold relief.

CICERO

Cicero lived and worked in an age very different from our own. Still, the often confusing variety of theoretical approaches that confront us in contemporary academic life should help us appreciate Cicero's skill in navigating through the complex intellectual territory of his own time. We in composition find ourselves working our way through the often competing claims of process pedagogy, academic English theory, and collaborative learning, to name just a few of the approaches

available to us. In much the same way, Cicero's dialogues stand as a record of his encounter with the intellectual movements of the day, including the thought of figures as various as Epicurus, Plato, Socrates, Aristotle, the stoics, and the sophists. Although we often remark on the complexity of our world, we can readily see that Cicero had difficult decisions of his own to make. In this section, I contend that while the specific elements of the choices that Cicero had to make generally differ from our own (after all, many of our concepts were unknown in his day), the process that he used in making those decisions closely resembles the anti-foundationalism found in the social construction of so much thought today. Although Cicero clearly regarded some ideas—for example, the importance of defending the welfare of the state—as foundational to his personal thought, his general method for making sense of the complex intellectual landscape surrounding him seems strikingly similar to the anti-foundational approaches that many take today.

Cicero's decision to use the dialogue format in which characters representing different points of view contend with one another reflects his training in Greek philosophy and rhetoric. More importantly, however, the form Cicero chooses for much of the work most important to his rhetoric places the conflict between varying perspectives in the forefront of the documents in question; the philosopher Michael J. Buckley tells us that Cicero uses such controversy "both to discover that the different philosophers are stating the same truth in different ways and to judge probabilities by setting one doctrine against its real opponent" (Buckley 149). In an

extended passage in book two of *Academica*, for example, Cicero reports on an argument between Lucullus and Cicero himself. Lucullus speaks in favor of the reliability of sense perception as a basis for judgment and rational behavior. In his reply, Cicero advocates a moderate skepticism that leads adherents to distrust perception but allows them to take action after carefully considering the probable outcomes of different approaches to dealing with the question at hand. Both speakers demonstrate an encyclopedic knowledge of philosophical precedent and, in effect, bring the full history of the topic to bear on their discussion (II. iv-xxxiv. 10-11).

The formal inclusiveness that we have just noticed in Cicero's dialogues is complemented by the balanced quality of the ideas presented in their contents. As the classical scholar A. E. Douglas notes, "Cicero, by temperament and by training an orator and lawyer, was always ready to see both sides of a question," an attitude which "enabled" him "to set forth a very wide variety of views with as much impartiality as one can expect of mortal man" (143). When Cicero makes the skeptical point in the *Academica* that "nothing can be perceived" and bolsters it with Empedocles' opinion that we humans "do not possess sufficient force to enable" us "to judge the objects that are submitted to" us (II. xxi. 68; II. iii. 74), we should not be surprised later to find these and other skeptical statements counter-balanced by other perspectives. Although, for example, Cicero declares "that the highest form of activity wars against sense-presentations, withstands opinions," and "holds back

acts of assent on their slippery slope,” he does not allow this principled and scrupulous intellectual caution due to the unreliability of perception to induce a paralysis in the face of the need for action. Cicero’s philosophical skepticism gives way to practical urgencies when appropriate, as when he asks whether skepticism should hamper one in “going a voyage, in sowing a crop, in marrying a wife, in begetting a family, in ever so many things in which you will be following nothing but probability” (II. xxxiv. 109). Philosophical theory here is used instrumentally, as means for separating the probable from the improbable, and is not taken as an absolute end in itself.

Cicero’s ability to consider many sides of any given issue finds expression in his statement in book two of the *Academica* that “our disputations have no other purpose than to elicit and to form in expression whatever is true or seems most likely—and to do this by speaking on both sides of any question” (II. iii. 7). Speaking from his philosophical perspective, Michael Buckley identifies this approach with the *multiplex ratio disputandi*, an “antithetical method” based on a “negative cross-questioning or refutation against any assertion whatever, and constituting the properly philosophical treatment of any subject as an argument in which affirmative and negative positions were represented.” According to Buckley, this process “necessitates that both sides of any question be heard, and within the resulting disputation, invention and judgment of truth or verisimilitude is obtained”

("Philosophic" 146). Thomas Conley, a prominent historian of European rhetoric, sheds yet more light on this *multiplex ratio disputandi* by defining it as a

multivoiced method, which begets *controversia*, a dialogue in which practical or philosophical formulations are situated in divergent frames of reference, brought into conflict in debate, and tested for their respective claims of *probabilitas* (37).

The argument Cicero presents in *De oratore* reflects this pluralistic and anti-dogmatic approach. We can see evidence of it in the multi-dimensional personality that he assigns to the ideal orator that he describes in the dialogue. We can also detect traces of a feeling akin to an anti-foundational discomfort with the thought of relying on any one method of getting work done in the eclectic mix of elements that Cicero includes in outlining the shape of the rhetoric such an orator would actually employ. In much the same way that the search for most human truth leads us to weigh the relative probability of several competing solutions to the questions that we encounter, the pursuit of the most effective means available for communicating the concepts we formulate prompted Cicero to consider more than one rhetorical approach.

The character of Cicero's ideal orator unites wisdom with eloquence. In *Classical Rhetoric and Its Christian and Secular Tradition from Ancient to Modern Times*, George Kennedy maintains that Cicero intends to "reconcile the ideal orator with the eloquent philosopher in a form which has both intellectual depth and civic

usefulness” in his dialogue *De Oratore*. The portrait of this ideal orator thus projects “the role Cicero himself sought to play in Rome” (89). Two strands stand out here: a strong sense of civic duty and a close relationship between philosophy and rhetoric. The eloquent speaker or writer employs the technical resources available through rhetoric to construct discourse that communicates more effectively with the intended audience than does that of the opposition. At the same time, the conscientious citizen attends to the content of the discourse he creates, using the philosopher’s wisdom to lead the audience to productive and morally defensible agreement.

Moreover, Cicero concedes that “no little part of the disasters” of humanity is “brought about by men of eloquence.” In the introductory passage to *De Inventione*, he goes on to warn that the man who “neglects the study of philosophy” and “devotes his whole energy to the practice of oratory” is apt to find “his civic life is nurtured into something useless to himself and harmful to his country” (I. i. 1). In such cases, Cicero echoes the Platonic warning that rhetoric, especially rhetoric unalloyed by philosophical insight, often does more harm than good.

Still, Cicero’s willingness to accept the possibility that oratory could lead a society into imprudent, impractical, or even morally unacceptable behavior is amply counterbalanced by an Aristotelian faith in its potential for good. Historical study leads him to realize that “many cities have been founded” and “the flames of a multitude of wars have been extinguished” not only “by the use of reason but also more easily by the help of eloquence.” If we interpret eloquence as both the

possession of the technical resources of rhetoric and the conviction that one's cause is just, then "the man who equips himself with the weapons of eloquence" promises to be "a citizen most helpful and most devoted both to his own interests and those of his community" (*De Inventione* I. i. 1). In Cicero's view, neither the orator nor society can grow to full maturity unless the two grow together. Those inclined to social construction would agree: the ability to participate effectively and cooperatively within society depends largely on the correlative ability to recognize and build upon the social roots of expression. Those hoping to qualify as ideal orators need worthy ideas to express and the skills required to gain them a fair hearing.

In his defense of the wisdom so essential to his ideal orator, Cicero connects the glory of oratory to the maturity of the society that supports it by having his philosophical alter ego, Crassus, assert that, "in every free nation, and most of all in communities which have attained the enjoyment of peace and tranquillity, this one art [of oratory] has always flourished above the rest and ever reigned supreme." Crassus goes on to ask: "what achievement so mighty and glorious as that the impulses of the crowd, the consciences of the judges, the austerity of the Senate, should suffer transformation through the eloquence of one man?" (*De Oratore* I. viii. 30-31). The triumphant tone of the question put above seems warrant to assume that Cicero believes oratory and the state mutually indispensable. While the wisdom that conquers "through the eloquence of one man"—as a result of the orator's overwhelming rhetorical skill—is manipulative rather than cooperative and thus hardly

in line with social construction, we should not ignore benevolent social intentions in the philosophical orator's eloquence that allows the triumph of this civically directed wisdom to take place.

Cicero's construction of the ideal rhetoric for his orator to use is perhaps best seen in the interplay between Crassus and Antonius throughout *De Oratore*. We can identify Crassus with Cicero's philosophical side and Antonius with his pragmatic side and conclude that Cicero needs both in order to give his ideas a full hearing. Thus, while Crassus and Antonius seem diametrically opposed on the issue of whether, as Crassus at first maintains, rhetoric should be approached as a science demanding a grasp of all the liberal arts (I. xvi. 70–73) or, as Antonius claims, as the ability to “use language agreeable to the ear, and arguments suited to convince, in law court disputes and in debates of public business” (I. xlix. 213), their underlying positions about the defining qualities of a complete rhetoric are much closer together.

At this point in the argument, Cicero reinforces his anti-dogmatic refusal to adopt opinions based on received wisdom without considering the circumstances attached to each rhetorical occasion with another application of this process similar to anti-foundationalism which is directed to more formal matters. Cicero declines to take either an exclusively philosophical or a completely technical approach, but frames discourse in a public arena with dimensions that shift from situation to situation. Instead of modeling his rhetorical practice exclusively on any one of the schools that he studied so assiduously, he engages in a pragmatic search for the

clearest philosophical perspective from which to view any matter at hand and the best technical means to convey his conclusions to the proper audience. Exclusive commitment to either the philosophical or the technical views of the rhetorical process would preclude this flexibility—Cicero’s practice in this matter, which closely resembles anti-foundationalism, makes it possible.

Crassus admits that such a complete education finally represents a probably unattainable ideal and satisfies himself with specifying only the “division of philosophy, concerned with human life and manners” as required study for the orator, leaving the other two divisions, “which respectively deal with the mysteries of nature” and “with the subtleties of dialectic” to specialists (*Oratore* I. xv. 69). Antonius, for his part, admits that while “a man who has grasped the principles and nature of every subject and every art” will “be far better equipped as a speaker,” “such knowledge is hard to win” and can lead us “away from our practice of speaking in a style acceptable to the commonalty and suited to advocacy” (I. xviii. 80–81). Both seek a balance between ideal virtuosity and practical intelligibility. Crassus exemplifies Cicero’s concern with the broader philosophical goals of rhetoric, Antonius his attention to the more pragmatic social realities of attaining these ends. We need to understand both the philosophical and the pragmatic perspectives represented by Crassus and Antonius in order fully to understand Cicero himself.

Cicero’s anti-dogmatic emphasis on the importance of the practitioner of rhetoric becoming an integral part of the social context runs parallel to modern anti-

foundationalism. We can see this emphasis on social practice once again in his advocacy of writing. In *De Oratore*, Cicero makes two claims for the practice of writing in educating an orator: the actual process confers distinct cognitive benefits and the content translated and copied out affords an introduction to the best work drawn from the past. The chief thing, Crassus confides, is “to write as much as possible” because “the pen is the best and most eminent teacher of eloquence.” Writing demands discipline, for discourse that has been “written with care and diligence” surpasses oral speech even when it has been “prepared and thought out,” because the “actual marshalling and arrangement of words is made perfect in the course of writing” (I. xxxiii. 150–151). At this point, writing seems most useful in promoting the technical component of rhetoric, the process of becoming exposed to the possible ways of framing discourse considered in past rhetorical practice.

Cicero sees another benefit in writing. Writing out earlier discourse allows us to try it on, to test its rhythms and patterns before incorporating it into our voice. In so doing, rhetorical training becomes more a matter of philosophical experimentation and adaptation than one of blind mimicry. Thus, an important benefit of training in written discourse comes from exposure to the ideas contained in the models one copies. The orator who writes not only becomes more aware of the rhetorical options that come from “care and diligence” and “marshalling” words to show their full potential, but is also exposed to the thoughts contained in the discourse considered worthy of historical preservation. Cicero’s injunction to read and

“translate freely Greek speeches of the most eminent authors” reflects Cicero’s immersion in the culture of his time and his recognition that the effective orator needs to reach out to the best sources available in the surrounding cultural context in order to gain the philosophical and cultural breadth needed to develop opinions worth expressing (*De Oratore* I. xxxiv. 155): in fostering discipline and precision in expression and acquainting the orator with the history and intellectual content of the craft, instruction in writing promotes the confidence to reach beyond theory to active participation in the practice it describes.

Cicero’s work also anticipates the rhetorical triangle. In reserving the right to adapt the earlier rhetoric gleaned from his careful study of the discipline to the circumstances of each occasion that elicits discourse, he operates along the writer/audience leg of the figure where scrutiny is centered on consciously framing arguments that effectively reach a targeted audience. His anti-dogmatic flexibility in formulating the content of his work shifts his focus to the writer/text portion of the triangle where, consistent with the Aristotelian search for right reasons, writers fully engaged in rhetorical process learn more about the question at hand as they seek ways to present it to their constituencies. It is interesting to detect these contemporary echoes in the work of a figure who all too often seems frozen in the past. Much of Cicero’s canonical stature stems from this ability to engage social questions that reach us across time and continue to puzzle us.

BLAIR

The case for re-interpreting Cicero's work in the light of social constructionist theory rests mainly on the anti-foundational echoes in the way that Cicero uses the rhetorical tradition that he inherits. Instead of clinging to earlier rhetorical or social theory as the foundation for a moribund and inflexible response to the issues that occupied his attention, Cicero turns to his studies in rhetoric and the liberal arts in order to craft discourse appropriate to the social context of the cases he confronts. Hugh Blair's rhetoric also fits the circumstances that define the social temper of his time, but his work comes closest to Thomas Kuhn's paradigm theory. In much the same way that Kuhn's work describes the social dynamics that govern the operation of contemporary science, Blair's work on genius and taste describes a rhetoric designed to help students to succeed in the aristocratic social order of his day.

Blair writes in a period of social transition. In the process, he echoes the interaction between social context and individual behavior that is so important to social construction. When his *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* came out in 1785, his eighteenth-century Scotland had been formally incorporated into Great Britain for less than a century, and the traditional power of the court continued to be challenged by the rising power of the legislature. I think that Conley best captures Blair's response to the opportunities offered by the social realities of his age in noting how solidly Blair stood "in the tradition of rhetorics designed to turn students into

gentlemen . . . if not in Parliament, the pulpit, or the bar, then certainly in polite conversation” by sharpening their “critical faculties . . . in order that they might consequently exhibit good taste and an easy familiarity with the best the literary world had to offer” (223). As Blair himself puts it,

studies of this kind, it is not to be doubted, will appear to derive part of the use to which they may be applied in furnishing the materials for those fashionable topics of discourse, and thereby enabling us to support a proper rank in social life. (12)

The principal ways in which rhetorical learning could help were in initiating the student into conventional professional discourses and in inculcating an appreciation for polite literature, a useful virtue in a society in which, as Conley quotes Lord Chesterfield, “Manner is all, in everything; it is by manner only that you can please, and consequently rise” (212).

Although this emphasis on manners and polite literature might seem an elitist approach to us after two hundred years of further democratic reform and the rise of universal education, it makes sense when we consider that many of the means to advancement remained under the control of the court and the aristocracy. It is true that Blair does little to support the interest of the parliamentary democracy of his time. Instead, he concentrates on opening the life of the aristocratic court to those with the intelligence and the ambition to enter; in so doing, he explains the process of developing the skills needed to succeed in the social status quo in much the same

way that Kuhn outlines the process through which new ideas come to be accepted as orthodox, or normal, science. Although Blair's rhetoric prepares students for existing society, and Kuhn's theory is rooted in constant change, both thinkers operate at the intersection of the old and the new.

Blair follows in the footsteps of Francis Bacon and other advocates of a plainspoken "scientific" style in his treatment of the professions of his day, which runs on two main tracks. First he considers the practical details needed for effective performance—cautions against verbosity, indistinctness, and flippancy for lawyers (ii 274–278), warnings against "impetuosity" in public speaking (ii 240), and an injunction towards utility in the pulpit (ii 308) are all good examples. More importantly, however, Blair examines the role each profession needs to fill in society by presenting a personal and intellectual profile for the practice of each. In this attention to the features of the prominent varieties of professional discourse, Blair anticipates the attention to the political dynamics of language use common in social construction today and the author/audience leg of the rhetorical triangle, thus beginning to address the questions about what attributes are prized within professional discourse and how assertions are framed within disciplines.

In an article taken from *The Quarterly Journal of Speech*, "A Comparative Criticism of Hugh Blair's 'Essay on Taste,'" John Waite Bowers demonstrates how well Blair's theory of taste fits both the rhetoric and the more general thought of his period. Bowers explains Blair's incorporation of taste—which would be considered

an almost purely aesthetic consideration in our time, when most “might say that the only discursive art concerned with ‘beauty’ is poetic and that rhetoric’s concern is with argument”—into the rhetoric he formulates for a period when “poetry and oratory more frequently combined under the single term ‘eloquence’ than would be permitted” today (385). To the extent that his work serves the needs of his contemporaries and their characteristic cultural arrangements, Blair does promote the growing professional and democratic interests of his time. His most striking and influential work, however, lies in his treatment of genius and taste.

At first glance, Blair’s emphasis on the role of creative genius would seem an elitist and exclusionary, if not actually self-defeating, position for a theorist of rhetoric to take since genius is generally perceived as an innate faculty, rather than as a learned skill. Blair, however, defines genius as a “talent or aptitude for excelling in some one particular” that is “necessary to form the poet, or the orator,” a prerequisite for the creation of discourse worthy of critical attention (i 52–53). If this genius were an absolute quality, either fully present or completely absent, there would be little for rhetoric to do but ratify and describe the gifts of the aesthetically blessed and praise their creations. As it happens, Blair sees genius as a relative matter, subject to improvement through study and diligence, for, “as no human genius is perfect, there is no human writer but may receive assistance from critical observations upon the beauties and faults of those who have gone before him” (i 48).

Note that as Blair seeks to illumine the boundaries of individual genius, he looks to a social standard, which he works out most fully in his theories of taste.

In examining the concept of taste, Blair extends the realm of social judgment and persuasion well into that of individual aesthetic life. Bowers, for example, faults Blair precisely for the local quality of this theory of taste, claiming that because Blair “obviously thought that the standard of taste resided somewhere in the eighteenth-century British Isles,” his “standard is useless because it is totally unstable” and “shifts with every nation in every age” (388). Bower’s judgment makes sense from his relatively foundational philosophical perspective, but he demonstrates his inability to appreciate the benefits that such a flexible concept might confer in a rhetorical system meant to prepare students to function in the fluid realm of human affairs, where taste functions less as an absolute measure of enduring worth than as a faculty for appreciating those things that “each nation” in “each age” values. Although Bowers clearly grasps the intensively particular and historical nature of Blair’s concept of taste, he does not recognize how useful it can be in adapting to cultural features that shift as surely as Kuhn’s scientific paradigms.

Blair’s cultivated individuals gain access to taste only after they achieve an appreciation of aesthetic judgments that have been ratified and passed on by cultivated society and that go to the heart of what a culture most values. Blair rests his view of taste upon critical consensus, on “the Taste, as far as it can be gathered, of human nature” (i 39). The powers of taste enjoyed by individuals might be partially traced to the “nicer organs, and finer internal powers, with which some are

endowed beyond others" (i 24), but Blair lays his prime stress on our capacity to improve even the most sensitive aesthetic apparatus through social experience: "in Taste, considered as mere sensibility, exercise opens a great source of improvement" (i 27). Taste should rest upon those "beauties which have been found to please mankind most generally" (i 47), on the canon of literature most respected by the cultivated members of society.

In this work on taste, it is easy to see that Blair participates more fully in the spirit underlying social construction than in the letter of its specific ideas. Still, while Blair's theories fail to acknowledge social construction in the modern sense, they do represent an impressive attempt to grapple with political realities of language and society in his time that runs parallel to the efforts of many who call upon the theory today. Like the normal science that serves as the basis for the routine and repetitive investigation that leads to revolutionary discoveries in Kuhn's paradigmatic theory of scientific change, Blair's socially and historically grounded theory of taste offers those possessing sufficient ambition, intelligence, and verbal and social ability the opportunity to develop individual genius along with the rhetorical skill needed to let it shine.

BURKE

Cicero's anti-dogmatic approach to defining ideal orators and the rhetoric they would use and Blair's paradigmatic instruction in the art of personal advancement in polite society echo important components of social construction. Both look on rhetoric as a means to worthwhile social or personal ends or as a set of tools for social advancement. Cicero, like Aristotle, views rhetorical invention as the key to uncovering the partial and probable insights that govern in human affairs and, like Plato, seeks to promote the health of the community. Blair's rhetoric serves as a way to make one's voice heard in the increasingly confusing professional and artistic forums of his time, but not as a way to begin to make sense of the issues at stake. Both thinkers, then, share a sense that rhetoric works more as a means for achieving worldly success or societal goals, of building on the foundations underlying one's view of the world, than as a way better to understand one's self and one's place in a world with no unchanging foundations.

Kenneth Burke's conception of rhetoric may well divide him from Blair and Cicero more profoundly than the centuries, and, in Cicero's case, millennia, that separate the three figures. Like Cicero and Blair, Burke examines the instrumental potential of rhetoric. All three figures explore rhetoric as a tool for confronting the social dimensions of life, for expediting the processes—persuasion, explanation, negotiation, and the like—that we face whenever we venture into community life.

Burke, writing in the same cultural and intellectual context that gives rise to social construction itself, also attends to the constructive qualities of rhetoric. Our use of language, and the rhetorical choices that accompany it, leads us to create our world even as we pass, often obliviously, through it.

James Chesebro presents an important explanation of Burke's double-sided view of rhetoric in his article "Epistemology and Ontology as Dialectical Modes in the Writings of Kenneth Burke," which originally appeared in a 1988 issue of *Communication Quarterly*. Reacting against purely epistemic conceptions of rhetoric, which lead adherents to argue "that epistemic modes of inquiry create all sensations, ultimately denying the existence of any independent, physical, and phenomenal reality," Chesebro insists that, "for Burke, a dialectical relationship—an epistemic and ontic interaction—defines and determines the functions of rhetoric, fostering creative human responses to environments but also responding reactively to the nature of environments" (136). Stated in less technical language, Chesebro asserts that "a comprehensive view of communication must necessarily invoke both ontological and epistemic modes of inquiry" and that

all methods of rhetorical criticism presume that distinct substantive entities exist, an ontological assumption, while simultaneously holding that human beings create, construct, or impose—to some degree—their own understandings regarding these entities, an epistemic assumption. (139)

Burke fulfills this requirement that an adequate rhetoric address both ontological and epistemological questions by formulating a rhetoric in which he pays due attention to both the creative and the transactional functions of rhetoric.

Burke's success in understanding rhetoric as both an entity that helps form the world humans live in and a means of living within that world begins with his concept of motivism. Burke's concept of motives arises by analogy to his distinction between action, which "is a term for the kind of behavior possible to a typically symbol-using animal" (such as man) and sheer motion, or "the extrasymbolic or nonsymbolic operations of nature" (53). According to Burke,

- (1) There can be no action without motion—that is, even the "symbolic action" of pure thought requires corresponding motions of the brain.
- (2) There can be motion without action. (For instance, the motions of the tides, of sunlight, of growth and decay.)
- (3) Action is not reducible to terms of motion. For instance, the 'essence' or 'meaning' of a sentence is not reducible to its sheer physical existence as sounds in the air or marks on the page, although material motions of some sort are necessary for the production, transmission, and reception of the sentence. (54)

Although symbolic action registers as the central domain of human behavior, motion plays an indispensable supporting role by providing the physical background that makes action possible.

Burke treats motives as a social and behavioral counterpart to motion. While motives are customarily treated as links in a direct causal chain, as can be seen when jealousy is assigned as the motive in a murder and treated as the immediate cause of the criminal action, Burke defines motives "as shorthand words for situations" which are "assigned with reference to our orientation in general" (127). Moreover, "motives are distinctly linguistic patterns" and "we discern situational patterns by means of the particular vocabulary of the cultural group into which we are born" (130). Thus, our motives consist of the language resources available to us as we seek to explain the experiences that we face. A motive provides the social and linguistic background for our behavior in much the same way that motion serves as an enabling context for action.

Chesebro identifies two strains of rhetoric that correspond to the dialectic that runs between the ontological and the epistemic and between motion and action. Dramatism, the ontological version, is a "theory of symbol-using" that "deals with universals of the human condition and universals of communication" and which "would seek to provide a general conception of all human beings as symbol-users" (143). Chesebro cites Burke's term "logology" to account for Burke's epistemic rhetoric. Burke's use of logology allows him to examine "particular constructions of

socially shared symbolic realities” and to focus “upon the study of how and why people use certain symbols in particular circumstances to create and to control specific social settings.” Moreover, in the words of the poet and critic Howard Nemerov, Burke places us into

the distinctively human world in which we struggle along on the guidance of phantasy, the world of human action as over against the world of sheerly physical motion described by physics according to models that positivist philosophers constantly claim to emulate by various ‘reductionist’ schemes according to which human motives are viewed as mechanisms . . . (69)

and in which “language is literally making, constitutive, or *poetic*, of reality” (69), a reality so compelling that, as Burke himself puts it, “if we get involved enough in the using of words, the words in turn begin using us” (quoted in Celeste Michelle Condit, “Post-Burke: Transcending the Sub-stance of Dramatism,” page 272). Logology also enables him to “deal with particular social management applications of rhetorical principles designed to achieve specific objectives within a certain context” (Chesebro 142). The most important of these applications has to do with the urge toward identification. By examining Burke’s use of dramatism and identification, we can move beyond Chesebro’s philosophical distinctions and gain insight into Burke’s vision of rhetoric as a force that simultaneously constitutes and exploits social reality.

Dramatism serves as Burke's ontological tool for uncovering the motives underlying human behavior. It is important to realize that Burke treats dramatism as more than a metaphor for behavior. He considers its origins in "the analysis of drama" as sufficient justification to use dramatism for his analysis of the behavior that the stage is traditionally held to mirror. More explicitly, when asked if dramatism is merely metaphorical, Burke's answer, according to Chesebro, "was decidedly no. He held that dramatism also provided a 'literal' definition of the human being 'as an animal characterized' by 'a special ability for "symbolic action," which is itself a literal term,'" (141). Dramatism, which is designed to shift along with the changing shape of human society and thus can hardly serve as an unchanging foundation for theory, nevertheless, seems clearly meant as an anti-foundational basis for consistent analysis of the human condition.

The key elements of dramatism are contained in the pentad, which consists of act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose. These terms suggest a series of standard questions:

any complete statement about motives [or about the social context that governs the interpretation of behavior] will offer some kind of answers to these five questions: what was done (act), when or where it was done (scene), who did it (agent), how he did it (agency), and why (purpose). (Burke "Ways" 139)

Thus far, Burke's direction in dramatism seems obvious, if a bit mechanical and familiar in the resemblance of his questions to the well known set of journalists' questions. The dramatistic method really comes to life, however, with the application of ratios, Burke's term for pairs of his five elements such as scene-act and act-agent, which function in much the same way as the pairs of terms making up the rhetorical triangle. In tracing the inter-relations between the terms, Burke anatomizes the conjunctions and disjunctions between the individual and the surrounding social contexts and between the various segments of those social contexts. An interpenetration of the personal and social spheres of human experience is highlighted.

A few of Burke's examples will help illustrate the dynamics underlying this interpenetration. Burke cites a passage from Thomas Carlyle's *Heroes and Hero-Worship* to explain the scene-act ratio. In the process, he examines the connection between a person and his or her time and place. Carlyle describes the Arabs as a "swift-handed, deep-hearted race of men" and supports this judgment by referring to the "savage inaccessible rock-mountain, great grim deserts, alternating with beautiful strips of verdure" and the "fierce sun blazing down on it with intolerable radiance"; their adaptation to an inhospitable environment has altered their corporate character, the social dimension that qualifies them as a distinctive people (Burke "Ways" 150-151).

Even more to the point, Burke goes on to explain how “the sheer nature of an office, or position, is said to produce important modifications in a man’s character” that can be traced through attention to the act-agent ratio. For example, we can see the effect when a new president takes the oath of office or a priest dons “priestly vestments” (Burke “Ways” 153). The role one takes in society, the function one performs as an agent for the community at large, affects one’s behavior, for good or for bad, largely as a result of the social expectations, the motive, surrounding the position. The roles we assume in life, the new responsibilities they place upon us, and the expectations others begin to have of us are all comprehended in Burke’s act-agent ratio. Burke’s interest in the dramatic staging of experience seems to parallel social constructionists’ interest in the interpersonal dynamics of language, and his highly individualized vocabulary recognizes the need to search for new terms in an effort to reconstruct our view of what might constitute reality. Burke employs all of these ratios in dramatizing the productive tension between personal and social realms of experience.

Whether applied to drama or the world beyond the stage, dramatism examines “language and thought primarily as modes of action” (Burke “Ways” 146). The parallel between human behavior on the stage and across the proscenium arch gives dramatic theory an authentic insight into general human behavior. More importantly, perhaps, drama’s verbal quality links it to Burke’s view of human thought and action, which depends heavily upon his conviction that we are primarily linguistic and

symbolic animals and that language and its images function as the medium through which our deeds move. Thus, dramatism provides a vocabulary to track behavior and the thought behind it through this sustaining medium of language.

Burke's account of ontological and epistemic rhetoric as counterparts is echoed by his work on the social and personal dimensions of language. Burke pointedly emphasizes how intrinsically rhetorical human beings always are, even to the extent of entitling a lecture "Bodies That Learn Language," a title that employs Burke's characteristic irony to place our linguistic dimension in the foreground. Burke's exploration of the ubiquity of rhetoric in human affairs moves in two directions. First, as Conley notes, Burke's conception of rhetoric is "radically social," especially as he attempts to trace "the conduct of life itself in the movement 'towards a better life,'" to focus upon "the abilities to overcome faction instead of contributing to it" and to "make possible the introduction of attitude and value into the emotionally barren universe dictated by technology and science" (272). This potential for rhetorical forces to move between the personal and the social can be seen best in Burke's use of identification. The complementary transfer of social concerns to the deepest level of individual personality is shown most clearly in Burke's use of dramatism. This constant intertwining of the social and the personal may well be the most important defining characteristic of his thought as a whole, and it certainly seems to constitute his closest approach to the questions prompting those who use social construction as a theoretical perspective.

Through the concept of identification, Burke studies the penetration of the personality into the realm of social persuasion and, ultimately, social behavior. The concept also places Burke within the line of theorists working to develop a cooperative conception of rhetoric. We generally think of identity and identification as private matters, as the content of our self-images or as the ideas or social movements towards which we choose to pledge our allegiance. Thus, in conventional terms, we might describe ourselves as liberals or conservatives and ally ourselves with the Democratic or the Republican party. These identifications operate in a social context, especially for those who become active in the social institutions that reflect them, the political campaigns, the church groups, the environmental organizations and so forth, but they are not seen as arising directly out of a social context. Instead, according to the conventional wisdom, we work toward our own identities and enter into our own allegiances depending on how each of us sees the world around us. Individuals reach out to the social forces and resources surrounding them for their own reasons; there is no real recognition of movement in the opposite direction, of overtures tendered from the social to the personal.

Burke grounds the existence of the social and the personal in one another. He grants the sense of identity as the existence of "an entity in itself and by itself, a demarcated unit having its own particular structure," the sense that we celebrate as each individual's uniqueness, but insists upon a seemingly paradoxical corollary: the interconnection between identity and division (Burke "Identification" 181). Burke

reminds us that identification implies “in it at every turn, its ironic counterpart: division” (Burke “Identification” 183). Our search to identify with others arises only in a social context. Unless we recognize our differences from those around us, how could we feel the need to overcome our sense of separation? Identity and division register as incommensurable modes of perceiving and experiencing the world, but each makes the other possible.

Seen in this poignant light, then “rhetoric is concerned with the state of Babel after the Fall” (Burke “Identification” 183). We cling to our identity, our sense of individual uniqueness and worth, as a shield against our sense of division, our awareness of many other individual selves surrounding us. At the same time, this sense of personal identity presses us to seek out and participate in the social, even when it works against our interests, as happens in “that ultimate *disease* of cooperation: *war*,” in which “millions of cooperative acts go into the preparation for one single destructive act” and which functions as the “most tragically ironic of all divisions, or conflicts” (181). In any case, “identification is compensatory to division. If men were not apart from one another, there would be no need for the rhetorician to proclaim their unity” (182). As it is, we need rhetoric to “lead us through the Scramble, the Wrangle of the Market Place, the flurries and flare-ups of the Human Barnyard” (182).

If people never felt unique, they would never feel alone and isolated, and the promise of identification with something important, something larger than oneself,

would lose its unparalleled persuasive power. Burke dissects this power perhaps most tellingly in his analysis of Hitler's rhetorical exploitation of his audience's fear of this isolation during his rise to power. Wherever we encounter identification in Burke, we need to acknowledge his mastery of the political and rhetorical interaction between the personal and social in the lives of all of us.

The dialectical process implicit in both Burke's theory of identification and his use of the pentad also promotes a healthy balance between collaboration and conflict. In an article entitled "Some Implications of Kenneth Burke's 'Way of Knowing' for Composition Theory," Virginia Allen observes that the terms of the pentad reflect

the basic forms of thought for a symbol-using, symbol-abusing animal who is impelled in one direction by the 'principle of perfection' and pulled back 'from the abyss' by the power of the negative. (Allen 17)

Bill Karis, in "Conflict in Collaboration: a Burkean Perspective," proposes that we embrace the tension between perfection and the abyss or between our ideal visions of the world and the conflict and disorder that threaten them. He asserts that "collaborators should be reassured that conflict over ideas, over *substantive* matters, can be a positive development in the collaborative process" and that "Burke's cooperative competition" figures in "some of the theoretical underpinnings of social constructionist theory and collaborative writing" (Karis 121). Burke's theory intersects social construction here in his drive to lead us through the maze of

incommensurable forms of language and to encourage the cultivation of cooperative varieties of discourse.

Finally, we should follow Wayne Booth, an important voice in pluralist theory in his own right, in attending to Burke's warning against mistaking, no matter how elegantly framed or cleverly developed, theory for the reality it should be meant to illuminate. According to Booth, in Burke's world "what something *is* is always too rich and complex for any one statement" ("Comedy" 251). Given this caution, we do well to fear concepts that seem suspiciously tidy or complete, since Burke is "convinced that man's 'symbolicity' is disastrous whenever any symbolic direction is followed to some kind of logical 'perfection'" and "has consistently sought ways of mitigating, or undermining, the rage for perfection that each monistic mode of thought exhibits" ("Comedy" 249). Burke's opposition to this false perfection that substitutes logical consistency for the texture of the social fabric surrounding us culminates in his concept of the terministic screen, a concept meant to capture the "self-justifying" quality of language that meets us at every turn, in which, as Booth notes, "every perspective expressed in a symbolic language becomes a 'terministic screen' which both reveals some truths—obviously 'demonstrated' to anyone employing the language—and conceals others" ("Comedy" 250). In this concept of the terministic screen, an echo can be detected of the incommensurable view of language often associated with social construction. While neither Booth nor Burke would have us completely divorce our theories from the realities they purport to

explain, they would both caution us to heed the uniqueness of the theories themselves—their status as human interpretations of their subjects—and to take care not to mistake them for substitutes for reality.

In an article originally written for *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* entitled “Post-Burke: Transcending the Sub-stance of Dramatism,” Celeste Michelle Condit provides an example of how the key concepts associated with Burke himself function as terministic screens and need to be placed into the social and intellectual contexts surrounding their generation if they are not to lead us away from the ideas that Burke was trying to communicate in the first place. She notes that “in Burke’s writing there is basically one gender—man” and although “Burke referred supportively to the women’s movement and to the expansion of women’s rights,” he “portrayed this expansion as the inclusion of women under the sign of ‘man’” (272). While Condit acknowledges Burke’s use of a single gender as “a progressive move” for the time, she goes on to demonstrate the problems it can introduce into Burke’s ideas when seen from a more contemporary perspective. For example, Burke’s often-quoted definition of Man taken from his *Language as Symbolic Action* as

the symbol-using (symbol-making, symbol-misusing) animal
inventor of the negative (or moralized by the negative)
separated from his natural condition by instruments of his own making
goaded by the spirit of hierarchy (or moved by the sense of order)
and rotten with perfection

is, according to “essentialist feminism,” a “fairly perceptive summary of the average Euro-American heterosexual XY” but not a “good summation of the majority of experiences of the other genders” identified since the definition was composed. Condit points out that “the essentialist or radical feminist” would feel compelled to supplement Burke’s definition with one of “Man’s woman,” which she claims would read:

Woman is
the symbol-receiving (hearing, passive) animal
inventor of nothing (moralized by priests and saints)
submerged in her natural condition by instruments of man’s making
goaded at the bottom of hierarchy (moved to a sense of orderliness)
and rotted by perfection. (274)

Condit’s ideological commitments register clearly here and in the revisions she suggests to Burke’s handling of the related issues of culture and class. Whether we share all of these positions or not, her point about Burke seems well taken: it seems difficult to believe that Burke himself would wish for his excursions into the cultural space of his time to be hardened into unyielding foundations for the thought of others, to be transformed into terministic screens that finally conceal more than they reveal.

CONCLUSION

No application of theory can encompass the full scope of any mind, particularly one as adventurous and comprehensive as Burke's, but examining Burke from a perspective informed by social construction can give us insight into an important dimension of his thought, the tension between the personal and the social explored above. Similarly, applying ideas drawn from social construction helps us appreciate Blair's achievement in framing a rhetorical system so well adapted to promoting personal advancement within the exacting social system of Blair's time. The same process even allows us to re-acknowledge the social processes at work in the formation of Cicero's rhetoric. Although I have focused upon the elements of anti-foundationalism, paradigm theory, and incommensurability that Cicero, Blair, and Burke have incorporated in past rhetorical theories, there is nothing to stop us from adopting a greater sensitivity to these elements in contemporary rhetoric. Attending to the objections raised against social construction should lead us to do just that.

CHAPTER THREE

RELATIVISM

Supporters of social construction focus on the social genesis of knowledge. Because it will always be subject to the mechanisms of consensus inherent in the process, this socially-generated knowledge cannot provide a constant and irrefutable foundation for further thought and scholarship. Thus, those who espouse social construction theory must accept a certain measure of instability, largely as a result of the anti-foundationalism and incommensurability so important to it. Given this instability, they also must accept the relativism that accompanies such a fluid frame of reference, along with uncertainty and the loss of the comforts traditionally associated with received wisdom. Although it is possible to conceive of a narrow and solipsistic version of relativism, one that has little or nothing to do with the social dynamics of the hermeneutic conversations that characterize social construction and flows either from the limited perspective of the isolated individual or the popular politics of an insufficiently tested consensus of the poorly informed, this stance is not inevitable.

Fear of the negative consequences of relativism arises largely from a lack of awareness of the power of social construction to change relativism in important and beneficial ways. Examination of the interaction between relativism and social construction sheds considerable light on both. The more clearly we understand the

possibilities for relativism inherent in social construction's central elements, the more likely we are to embrace relativism as a productive and surprisingly secure perspective from which to encounter the world around us. A reappraisal of relativism through the lens of social construction yields a concept softened by a shift from the perceptions of the isolated individual to the negotiated judgments of social consensus.

A good source for a consideration of the broad outlines of the battle over individualistic relativism is James Davidson Hunter's book *Culture Wars*. Hunter, whose home discipline is religious studies, frames the conflict over this relativism in the context of a larger social division, in arenas as diverse as education, the family, media, the arts, electoral politics, and the law, between the forces of orthodoxy and progressivism. Though Hunter takes care to distinguish the common element of all the orthodox systems ("*the commitment on the part of adherents to an external, definable, and transcendent authority*") treated in his book from that of all the progressive views ("*the tendency to symbolize historic faiths according to the prevailing assumptions of contemporary life*") that he considers, the bulk of his book records the passions generated on either side of the divide (44).

To take an example from Hunter, if responsible orthodox parties in our society can insist that "equalizing the role of women will be undesirable if it appears to threaten the 'traditional' patriarchal family structure," a view that obviously reflects the orthodox reliance upon "external, definable, and transcendent authority," other, equally responsible, factions believe that

if the "bourgeois family" is regarded as just one possible familial arrangement (and one that tends in practice to be oppressive), legislation on the behalf of women will seem both fitting and desirable, (127)

a stance that clearly owes a great deal to the progressive inclination to reevaluate moral imperatives "according to the prevailing assumptions of contemporary life" mentioned above. Two points stand out in this and in the dozens of other conflicts Hunter documents. First, these disputes arise from more than local, if heated, differences of opinion; they "reflect the *institutionalization and politicization of two fundamentally different cultural systems*" (128). One side searches for fixed, unshifting absolutes as a basis for judgment, no matter what extenuating circumstances might be present; the other side just as habitually seeks new answers to suit the contexts in which important questions continue. Second, those that Hunter identifies as progressive employ a relativistic standard of judgment foreign to the absolutism of those on the extreme edge of the orthodox side of the cultural schism that he describes.

A good example of the dynamics at work in the interaction between the progressivist proponents of relativism and its critics is the debate over cultural literacy. Despite important differences that are all too often ignored or misunderstood, the cultural literacy theories of E. D. Hirsch and Allan Bloom both arise as a reaction against the relativism they find at the heart of contemporary

American education. Hirsch, who shares the concern with the social context underlying thought and its expression that motivates many who employ social construction but differs from them on methods, attacks relativism indirectly. According to Hirsch, the theorists with the most influence on the course of contemporary education focus almost exclusively upon skills. In framing the curriculum for the schools, they, in Hirsch's opinion, demonstrate a belief that "any suitable content will inculcate reading, writing, and thinking skills," thus rendering the specific content of education largely irrelevant, a function merely of what the local authorities happen to value. In short, these educators stand accused of abdicating their responsibility to teach a coherent and commensurable body of knowledge.

Under these circumstances, Hirsch fears, we "share very little common knowledge" any longer as a culture (21). Hirsch complains here of the ultimate relativism. Not only does what we know depend almost entirely upon where we live and when we live there, but our culture has become so fragmented that we no longer possess much shared cultural information of any kind. Hirsch frames his argument about the lamentable state of contemporary education in an attempt to ground the content of education in the cultural context of America in the past and in the present. In the process, he echoes the concern for historical situation that Bizzell and Fish touch upon in their work on anti-foundationalism, although all three would presumably find the association ironic, if not downright unfortunate. To this extent, his theory seems consistent with this central element of social construction.

The bulk of Hirsch's remedy for the state of American education clearly strikes off in another direction entirely, rejecting the pluralist approach to education that follows as a natural consequence of Bizzell and Fish's acceptance of the incommensurability of ideas, as discussed in the introduction to this study. Hirsch's theory rests on his belief that the American educational establishment has neglected the explicit teaching of content in favor of a one-sided emphasis on the teaching of skills. Content surfaces in Hirsch's work as "cultural literacy," which he defines as "the network of information that all competent readers possess," as "the background information, stored in their minds," that allows readers to "take up a newspaper and read it with an adequate level of comprehension, getting the point, grasping the implications, relating what they read to the unstated context which alone gives meaning to what they read" (Hirsch 2). More importantly for social construction theory, Hirsch's search for content in education leads directly to the idea of a set of commensurable standards for knowledge, which he embodies in his appendix of references that all culturally literate Americans should recognize.

An important device Hirsch employs in gaining wide acceptance for such a commensurable standard is an attempt to make peace with the progressives responsible for the educational system he attacks. In the preface to *Cultural Literacy*, he acknowledges that the endorsement of William Bennett, Ronald Reagan's secretary of education and "an influential person of conservative views," gave his "ideas some currency." However, Hirsch regrets that Bennett's support "was not

likely to recommend" cultural literacy "to liberal thinkers," who have assumed that he "must be advocating a list of great books that every child in the land should be forced to read," a "*prescriptive* list of books" rather than the "*descriptive* list of the information actually possessed by literate Americans" that he actually means to append to the end of his book (xiv).

Hirsch's main strategy to correct this impression begins with inclusivity. Entries as contemporary and unexpected as the Beatles, the Gallup poll, and Star Wars share the list with Bach, Gutenberg, and Socrates (152–215). In his headnote to the list, Hirsch characterizes it as "provisional," admitting that "different literate Americans have slightly different conceptions of our shared knowledge" and claiming not "to create a complete catalog of American knowledge but to establish guidelines that can be of practical use to teachers, students, and all others who need to know our literate culture" (146). In his reluctance to take up willingly the conservative cause, and in his claim merely to describe essential cultural knowledge that Americans already share rather than to prescribe the knowledge that we should share, Hirsch understands the need to put forth a list that can gain wide acceptance, even among those least likely to agree with him.

In this concern for the political reception of his ideas, Hirsch seems aware of the power of social construction but ultimately distrustful of the potential impact upon society latent in the relativism associated with it. Given Hirsch's version of cultural literacy, then, we can see that he acknowledges the power of social forces in our

thought and language but seeks to circumscribe the range of forces allowed into the dynamic, to bring them under the control of an educational establishment. Hirsch, then, is careful to include representatives from all segments of American culture in order to reflect the pluralism held so dear in our society. Still, unlike most who include an element of social construction in their theories, he would limit the scope of the conversation, would narrow the possibilities of new perspectives arising, by teaching to a preselected, though provisional, list of cultural topics. In his desire to formulate a commensurable standard for education, Hirsch creates a new orthodoxy by simply putting forth a list because the prescriptive influence of the use of any standardized list in the embattled context of American public schools will not be likely to be fully undercut by the wide scope that Hirsch gives it.

The reaction to Hirsch's work can tell us something about how relativism operates in an academic setting, as can be seen in a series of articles published in *Profession 88* by the Modern Language Association in 1988. He has his academic supporters, including Jeff Smith, then a graduate student at the University of Chicago and a lecturer in the writing program at the University of California, Los Angeles. Smith argues that Hirsch "shares large parts" of the "social and political agenda" of his leftist critics and that the elitism they accuse Hirsch of fostering "arguably consists not in teaching them the Hirschian way but in not doing so—that is, in arrogating to ourselves the right to decide what they 'really' need to do in school" (25, 26). As

Smith sees it, Hirsch encourages, rather than dampens, the flow of ideas in society; he

does not want to conserve culture as such, though many take him as wanting to. Rather he wants to conserve information *about* the culture so that people can more adeptly negotiate their way through it, or even past it. (26)

For Smith, the level of social concern about the quality of education and the curiosity about the processes through which ideas circulate freely in an open society in evidence in *Cultural Literacy* override the impulse to social control also present in Hirsch's book. He looks upon the commensurable standard embodied in Hirsch's list as a tool for social mobility that can initiate the disenfranchised into mainstream American society rather than as an arbitrary and irrelevant burden imposed upon them by the cultural elite. Smith obviously takes Hirsch's apparent anti-foundationalism at face value.

Hirsch's detractors read him very differently. Some oppose him on relatively technical grounds. Working within the framework of literacy theory, Paul B. Armstrong, head of the Department of English at the University of Oregon when these articles on cultural literacy were published, insists that since "American culture is extremely diverse and is becoming even more so every year," we need "a pluralistic conception of 'literacy' because different communities practice different ways of reading, and competence in one mode of understanding is no guarantee of facility in

another" (29). When we frame Armstrong's ideas in terms often used by those attracted to social construction, he seems to find Hirsch's concessions to specific features of contemporary American society disingenuous in the face of the unifying effect his list would have upon our pluralistic society. From a slightly different point of view, Andrew Sledd, then Assistant Professor of English at Harold Washington College, and James Sledd, Professor Emeritus of English at the University of Texas, Austin, base their judgment that "*Cultural Literacy* is an uncompromisingly bad book" on both the "obvious contradictions and non sequiturs . . . rash claims, unsupported assertions, and false promises" that they find throughout his work and on Hirsch's faulty use of linguistics (38). Although the linguistic grounds that they claim as the basis for their argument seem to have little to do with social construction, their sweeping indictment of contradictions and false promises in Hirsch's work indicates that they approach the questions that Hirsch addresses from a radically different perspective. Their dispute with Hirsch serves as an example of the political quality, the eagerness to attack those who appear to represent perspectives that threaten—ideologically, socially, or even economically—one's place in the academy, which often characterizes intellectual discourse.

Helene Moglen, then Chair of Women's Studies at the University of California, Santa Cruz, takes a more broadly political approach, chiding Hirsch for avoiding the argument that any cultural literacy list "is necessarily biased—that it is political, as all canonical choices must be, in the principles of inclusion and exclusion that it employs

and in the ideological commitments that it represents" (60). In advocating such a list, Moglen continues, "Hirsch looks back nostalgically to a halcyon nineteenth century past . . . when the student body was relatively homogeneous, values unambiguous, and the curriculum traditional" (60). In Moglen's interpretation, the ideological implications of Hirsch's list undercut his strategy of including references from all segments of the culture.

More than any other aspect of his theory, the tension between Hirsch's apparently anti-foundational recognition of the importance of cultural information in grasping the specific texture of the times and his equally apparent desire for the commensurability of ideas seems to separate Hirsch's admirers from his detractors. Smith's attraction to Hirsch's anti-foundationalism appears to pave the way for his acceptance of Hirsch's advocacy of a standard, and, thus, commensurable, list of concepts as the basis for American education. Armstrong and Moglen's doubts about the sincerity of the anti-foundationalism, conversely, make it easier for them to dismiss the emphasis on commensurability as somehow sinister. In any case, the inclusion of anti-foundationalism and incommensurability in the vocabulary of social construction brings the complexity of Hirsch's cultural literacy into focus, given that he accepts the former and rejects the latter in formulating his theory.

Allan Bloom's attitude toward relativism is easier to categorize than the one taken by Hirsch. Where Hirsch rejects the relativism he detects at the heart of contemporary education as an epistemological and pedagogical mistake, Bloom seeks

to expose relativism as the clearest sign of the moral and cultural breakdown in our academic communities. Therefore, while Hirsch seeks to bring relativism under control, Bloom attacks it more directly, declaring that “almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative” and that, again according to students, “relativity is necessary to openness, and this is the virtue, the only virtue, which all primary education for more than fifty years has dedicated itself to inculcating” (25–26). Bloom devotes the bulk of his book to exposing the flaws of such a naive and unreflective adherence to relativism and openness, which he believes leads the youth he encounters to the conviction that “the true believer is the real danger” and the erroneous certainty that “all the world was false in the past; men always thought they were right, and that led to wars, persecutions, slavery, xenophobia, racism, and chauvinism” (25). After uncovering the errors he considers to be endemic to contemporary higher education, Bloom moves on to the positive thrust of his book, a call for a return to the best of traditional western culture and education, a return to the traditional foundations of knowledge. The use of the word “foundations” captures the essence of Bloom’s central challenge to both relativism and social construction.

Like Hirsch, Bloom pays attention to culture in its broad sense, including topics as diverse and popular as rock music and *Kramer vs. Kramer* and as academic as *Anna Karenina* and the dialogues of Plato. Unlike Hirsch, however, who allows the popular and the contemporary to take equal place with the traditional and the serious

in the content of his list, Bloom attacks the former in the course of his defense of the latter. Bloom thoroughly assails the contemporary academy, with his targets ranging from relationships, music, sex, love, and divorce to the self, creativity, and the nineteen-sixties. Feminism, for example, “ends, as do many modern movements that seek abstract justice, in forgetting nature and using force to refashion human beings to secure that justice” (101); due to our emphasis on personal independence, “people today must plan to be whole and self-sufficient, and cannot risk interdependence” (117); in considering the nineteen-sixties, Bloom argues with what he characterizes as the “fashionable” assertion that “although there were indeed excesses, many good things resulted.” Instead, he insists that “so far as the universities are concerned,” he knows of

nothing positive coming from that period; it was an unmitigated disaster for them. I hear that the good things were “greater openness,” “less rigidity,” “freedom from authority,” etc.—but these have no content and express no view of what is wanted from a university education. (320)

Again, in his characterization of the decade as a watershed in the decline of the university, we hear of openness, the term Bloom links to relativism at the beginning of his book and, interestingly enough, an echo of Hirsch’s complaint that modern education neglects content. A bit later, after admitting that the traditional requirements “taught very little, really did not introduce students to the various

disciplines, and bored them," Bloom nonetheless defends them as "a threadbare reminiscence of the unity of knowledge and . . . an obstinate little hint that there are some things one must know about if one is to be educated" (320). In presenting an alternative to the delusive "openness" and "freedom" that he believes have usurped the attention of the academy, Bloom constantly works variations on this theme of the unity of knowledge and the need for a single, time-proven, foundation for all education even as he confesses that the resulting product is often less than ideal.

The appeal to unity even appears in the course of Bloom's attack on rock music. According to Bloom, this music "has one appeal only, a barbaric appeal, to sexual desire." Moreover, its popularity results in "nothing less than parents' loss of control over their childrens' moral education at a time when no one else is seriously concerned with it" (73, 76). In attacking rock music, Bloom expresses a yearning for music that promotes a "cultivation of the soul" and that "uses the passions and satisfies them while sublimating them and giving them an artistic unity" (72). This contrast between the degradations of contemporary culture and the traditional virtues associated with western civilization and education constitutes Bloom's method throughout the book, culminating in the conclusion. Here Bloom asserts that the "real community of man, in the midst of all the self-contradictory simulcra of community, is the community of those who seek the truth, of the potential knowers, that is, in principle, of all men to the extent they desire to know" (381).

But how can we recognize those who desire to know in this way? Given Bloom's constant quotation of classic texts, especially from Plato and Shakespeare, it is not difficult to turn, along with Kenneth Alan Hovey, a critic of Bloom's book and an Assistant Professor of English at the University of Texas, San Antonio, to Bloom's first book, *Shakespeare's Politics*, which opens with the assertion that "the most striking fact about contemporary university students is that there is no longer any canon of books which forms their taste and imagination" (Hovey 41). Perhaps the constantly shifting and morally-empty relativism that Bloom sees as endemic to the American university has filled the vacuum left by the demise of the canon. The link between the two makes sense in the wake of reading Bloom's accounts of the student protests he witnessed as a professor at Cornell during the sixties. The stark contrast between "the professors, the repositories of our best traditions and highest intellectual aspirations . . . fawning over what was nothing better than a rabble" and his account of his students discussing Plato instead of participating in the upheaval around them at least indicates what the Bloomian seeker of truth would probably be reading (313). The classics serve as shelter from the gusts of relativism, from the open spaces left when the traditional foundations of intellectual life are pulled down to furnish the hovels of the masses.

The reaction to Bloom is as instructive as the reaction to Hirsch. If Saul Bellow, in his foreword to Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*, can call the book "an important statement" and "a completely articulated, historically accurate summary,

a trustworthy resume of the development of the higher mental life in the democratic U.S.A.” (18), many others have disagreed. Kenneth Alan Hovey complains of Bloom’s constricted perspective, countering Bloom’s attack on the modern university’s preference for the emergent over the traditional with the assertion that his “devotion to a few principles from a narrow canon within the canon of the European past is no better, and to such idolatry the American mind has always been wisely closed” (45). In the cultural literacy articles, William K. Buckley, then Director of Freshman Writing at Indiana University, Northwest, accuses Bloom of seeking “to encase the imagination within proscribed consensus and to secure the university against change” (51). Helene Moglen identifies Bloom with a faction that celebrates a canon of texts “that represent a tradition that is essentially Western, white, middle-class, and male” and considers “cultural diversity . . . a social disease for which cultural literacy is the appropriate cure” (59). Again, I suggest that Bellow’s and Bloom’s critics read the same work so differently because they stand on different sides of a cultural divide and respectively abhor and embrace the relativism they see operating all around them. Bellow seconds Bloom’s restriction of the permissible foundations of knowledge; Bloom’s adversaries resent it.

How can anyone actually embrace the uncertainty implicit in a relativistic framework? The distinction between excessive relativism and relativism that embodies the dialogic qualities associated with social construction is explored in Earl Croasmun and Richard A. Cherwitz’s 1982 article in *The Quarterly Journal of Speech*

entitled "Beyond Rhetorical Rhetoric." Croasman and Cherwitz, both instructors in speech communication, extend the notion of informal reasoning developed in Chaim Perelman's *New Rhetoric* decades earlier by working toward a social basis for a relativistic perspective. In so doing, they provide a starting point for an answer to Hirsch's and Bloom's assumption that relativism and social and intellectual instability are inextricably linked.

Croasmun and Cherwitz begin by exploring the limitations of a "consensus-produces-reality thesis" in which "the meaning we attach to a thing is all there is to a thing" and "rhetoric *creates* reality" (4-5). Their critique focuses upon "the inability of consensus-based theories of reality to escape relativism and its attendant dangers" (2). Taken to its logical extreme, such a reliance upon consensus "means that there can be no criteria for believing or disbelieving an idea other than consensus itself" (5). According to Croasmun and Cherwitz, such relativism amounts to an excessive relativism in which the sway of opinion, whether individually or communally held, leads us to abandon the "common ground" of a belief in the reality external to our discourse that should be the basis of all our intellectual exchanges. This common ground is the source of our "ability to argue, to apply critical standards to opposing propositions, and to accept the outcome of the assessment" (5). If we translate Croasman and Cherwitz's argument into the language of social construction, the excessive relativism that they describe reflects a naive understanding of anti-foundationalism and incommensurability in which anti-foundationalism translates into

a rejection of any rational attempt to interpret our surroundings and incommensurability precludes the productive interaction of ideas. It also makes no provision whatsoever for the political dynamics of paradigm shifts during intellectual change.

Thus far, Croasmun and Cherwitz attack relativism on fairly traditional grounds, outlining a solipsistic perspective that precludes critical judgment by making the case that, since "there can be multiple truths and multiple realities," no claim can be preferred to any other on anything other than the purely subjective grounds so familiar to freshman English teachers. According to Croasmun and Cherwitz, such relativists err on ontological grounds, on their sense of the nature of being or reality. They "argue that truth and reality are *created* by discourse." In effect, the proponents of solipsistic relativism confuse the intellectual utility offered by rhetoric's capacity to reflect reality with the reality that Croasmun and Cherwitz insist is "*distinct* from and *prior* to rhetoric" (1). The problems with relativism and rhetoric arise when too much is claimed in their names; like most tools, they can be misused.

In describing how rhetoric can be used properly in the process of looking for truth, however defined, Croasmun and Cherwitz propose a relativism less likely to claim ontological validity and more in line with social construction. When the function of rhetoric is seen as "*exploratory*, consisting in searching for truths and/or probabilities," a productive relativism that "avoids the problems of a purely relativistic view" begins to take shape along the lines of Rorty's conversations among

normal and abnormal lines of discourse and Kuhn's theory of paradigms (7). Croasmun and Cherwitz, in fact, point out that while Kuhn seems to ascribe the ability to create reality to discourse, he really maintains that the conflicting theories and explanations generated by scientific discourse, "far from 'creating' reality, must fit reality" and that the Kuhnian "paradigm is not self-validating; it must be tested against other paradigms and perspectives" (13). In their willingness to endorse a process that seeks knowledge through an "*argumentative seeking of consensus*" that validates ideas through social interaction, Croasmun and Cherwitz also pave the way for a modified relativism that embodies the social dynamics addressed by paradigm theory, an idea based on the anti-foundationalist insistence on grounding ideas in the current situation of a discourse, and the tolerance for diverging and competing perspectives promoted when we accept the incommensurability of ideas. Their unwillingness to identify the process as relativism apparently reflects the stigma of excessive relativism and their opposition to the view that "*the existence of a consensus in itself 'creates' knowledge*" (16).

Croasmun and Cherwitz provide a philosophical model for a version of relativism that incorporates the central dynamics of social construction, but it seems fairly abstract and difficult to visualize in action. Clifford Geertz's reflections upon the discipline of anthropology in his book *Local Knowledge* can help fill the gap for us. Geertz is plainly as comfortable in a world of relativism and social process as Hirsch and, especially, Bloom are uncomfortable. Where, for example, Hirsch would impose

a standard of arbitrary commensurability, Geertz celebrates its absence. Where Bloom yearns for the foundation of the traditional western canon, Geertz revels in the creative and evolving chaos of contemporary ways of looking at the world. Finally, where neither Hirsch nor Bloom appears to appreciate the power of paradigm shifts to remake our sense of the world, Geertz sees no realistic alternative.

Geertz portrays anthropology as a “contextualist, antiformalist, relativizing” discipline given more “toward examining the ways in which the world is talked about—depicted, charted, represented” than investigating “the way it intrinsically is” (4). Translated into the terms of our definition of social construction, Geertz’s relativism can be profitably seen as an amalgam of anti-foundationalism, incommensurability, and paradigm shifts, generally so subtly blended that one can be hard to tell from the other. Whether we use Geertz’s vocabulary or that of social construction, an intermingled concern for noting the concrete details of a situation and remaining open to the full range of interpretations of the matter under study and a fascination with the social implications of making collective sense of what disciplines encounter underlies all the essays in his book.

Geertz readily concedes the need for anthropologists to respond to “the fear of relativism,” in which the dependence of thought on social forces leads many to wonder “what is to guarantee its generality, its objectivity, its efficacy, or its truth?” (153). Geertz’s answer is that we have no real choice, that “thought is where you find it, that you find it in all sorts of cultural shapes and social sizes, and that these

shapes and sizes are what you have to work with" (154). The anti-foundationalist thread of this answer ("thought is where you find it") dovetails neatly with the incommensurability of the cultural shapes and sizes. In one respect, Geertz's answer could be restrictive and disheartening. After all, he tells us that definitive, neatly conclusive answers are not to be found and that we have no credible alternative to the untidily social processes of interpreting and negotiating the present state of knowledge. As Geertz puts it, many would trivialize this socially-based relativism to "a claim that there is nothing to say about it except when in Rome, to each his own, across the Pyrenees, and not in the South," in other words, to a system in which knowledge amounts to nothing more than a series of solipsistic clichés (154).

Geertz disagrees. His defense of relativism begins with his advocacy of a common sense that elevates relativistic judgment above merely personal opinion and requires

no esoteric knowledge, no special technique or peculiar giftedness,
and little or no specialized training—only what we rather
redundantly call experience and rather mysteriously call
maturity—involved. (91)

The key to this basic optimism lies in his anti-foundationalist faith in a Fish-like situatedness, in the meaning latent in "the world as a familiar world, one everyone can, and should, recognize, and within which everyone stands, or should, on his own feet" (91). Though common sense stems from social context and is as prone to cultural bias and prejudice as more educated thought, at least it offers the hope that

emotional maturity and experience in life give us a basis for reasoned, if not formally rational, decision-making in the ambiguous situations that make up the bulk of our lives. Geertz tells us that “common sense is not what the mind cleared of cant spontaneously apprehends,” an impossible goal for a species so dependent upon social context as ours, but “is what the mind filled with presuppositions . . . concludes” (84).

Even given the inevitable influence of cultural presuppositions, Geertz endorses the notion that

the similarities between ourselves and others removed in place or period are so much more profound than are the surface differences separating us from them that, given the necessary scholarship and historical care, their imaginative products can be put at the service of our moral life. (41)

Although this quote refers explicitly to Lionel Trilling’s theories of literature, it points to a concern with interpretation that allows us to breach common sense differences of local perception. For Geertz, the most important trait shared by people working in all social contexts is the urge to interpretation, to making sense of experience, that brings us not to a single commensurable standard of judgment but to a broad range of incommensurable standards.

A relativistic framework makes judgment more complicated, but, when enriched by social process, it promises a dramatic wealth of thought, an “ethnography of

thinking” that consists of “an attempt not to exalt diversity but to take it seriously as itself an object of analytic description and interpretive reflection” (155). Geertz insists that the multiplicity of world views available to us does not have to represent an excuse for intellectual insularity. Instead of insisting on an absolute and inflexible standard of truth as a means of defending against the bewildering and often contradictory barrage of assertions we face, he would have us view the diversity of contemporary discourse as an opportunity to learn from the interplay between many available points of view. Engaging in such a multi-faceted conversation might make it more difficult, for example, for partisans on the two sides of the abortion debate to either dismiss all pro-life activists as unreflective religious fanatics or end the practice of a doctor willing to perform the procedure with a blast from a shotgun.

This pluralistic version of relativism offers a richness, a range of potential thought and expression that no narrowly based epistemology can hope to match. We can follow the course of this ethnographic thinking and catalog the senses in which “the various disciplines (or disciplinary matrices), humanistic, natural scientific, social scientific alike . . . are ways of being in the world” and the “roles we think to occupy turn out to be minds we find ourselves to have” (155). Geertz describes the process of ethnographic thinking most tellingly through a series of examples meant to capture an “inward conceptual rhythm” manifested as “a continuous dialectical tacking between the most local detail and the most global of global structure in such a way as to bring them into simultaneous view” (69). Those who can contribute new insight

do not simply add to existing knowledge in Geertz's account; if their ideas are important, they correct existing paradigms—if really important, they lay the groundwork for new ones. The processes of education and theoretical change depend upon social contexts and inevitably lead us to participate in relativistic judgments. Many regret the relativism. Geertz embraces it as the best we can do.

Geertz's work represents the closest integration of relativism and the central concepts of social construction, but three of Wayne Booth's books written over the past two decades, *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent*, *Critical Understanding: The Powers and Limits of Pluralism*, and *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*, contain perhaps the most thorough and fruitful investigation of what relativism and social construction mean to each other. Booth raises serious questions about the place of relativism in modern thought. In considering them, he makes a compelling case for including an element of responsible relativism in our thought and expression.

In *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent*, Booth argues against the tendency of modern thought to undermine his "view of rhetoric as the whole art of discovering and sharing warrantable assertions," primarily through an unyielding insistence upon a motivism that teaches that behavior arises not from intentions, plans, philosophies, or theories, but from basic, often unconscious, drives and impulses (11). Taken to its extreme, Booth tells us, a true motivist can "explain why" Booth clings to humanist values by referring to his "upbringing as a fundamentalist Mormon" or to his "vested interests as a professor" (40). Motive becomes relative to time, place,

and environmental circumstance. This behavioral relativism registers as one of Fish's anti-foundational foundations, where the general principle that historical and personal circumstances deserve our attention has been codified into the absolute injunction to consider little or nothing else. Booth's modern thinker—in the thrall either of a scientism that values known facts, objectivity, reason, science, and empiricism or of an irrationalism that seeks values, faith, wisdom, the soul, and holism—seizes upon the forces that move us instead of upon our abilities to move ourselves or others (18). In outlining scientific and irrationalist versions of a modernist credo, Booth repeatedly touches upon this localized relativism in assertions that “all value judgments are ultimately on an equal footing” and “the truth found by reason is trivial or inhuman . . . the only truth worth knowing is what I can find for myself in an honest probing of my individuality, that is, my differences from all other men” (24). Both sides border on excessive relativism, either through an excessive reliance on the accidents of physical experience, which amounts to an indulgence in pointless objectivity, or an obsessive preoccupation with the illusion of an isolated psyche, which leads to an equally pointless subjectivity.

Booth's answer to the abuses introduced by both scientism and irrationalism is referred to in the second part of his book's title as the “rhetoric of assent.” The process Booth advocates takes place in the social setting implied by rhetoric, but the notion of assent hints at a personal dimension. Booth focuses on the self in “a field of selves” and defines the self as “*essentially* rhetorical . . . a social product in process

of changing through interaction, sharing values with other selves" (126). Assent, then, is a social matter, a product of interaction with others. Booth tells us that we "know the world in the first place, that is, through a willing assent to the process of making an intelligible world with" our "fellow creatures" (105).

While this formula places assent in a social context, the use of the word "willing" directs attention to the volitional quality of the act. Each participant in the rhetoric of assent must renounce the modernist strategy of "making doubt primary" and join in an agreement to accept as knowledge "whatever we can agree together that we have no good reason to doubt." Once this socially qualified assent replaces systematic doubt as the characteristic mode for creating and certifying knowledge,

assent becomes the prior act of knowing: what we believe together with sureness is "the benefit of the doubt"; the doubts I entertain must offer reasons for themselves at least as good as I have for the initial belief. (106)

A rhetoric of assent reverses the standard upheld by modern dogma. The burden of proof is not "always placed on assent." The act of saying "I will believe unless I am given a *reason* to doubt" is no longer "self-evidently absurd" (101). By making assent the primary term in a new conception of modernist thought, Booth suggests that a socially productive conception of relativism might be found.

Booth restates his case against the excesses of modern thought and the relativism associated with it in *Critical Understanding: The Powers and Limits of Pluralism*, a

book about literary criticism that reflects Booth's constant interest in the dynamics of discourse in general. This time Booth traces the conflict between monistic and pluralistic modes of thinking. The monistic perspectives underlying most critical arguments assume that "some one view will prove to be right and all others wrong" (12). In pluralism, conversely, it is fully possible for any number of answers to be simultaneously correct, to shed their individual lights on the problems at hand. Pluralism operates from a much less imperialistic standpoint than monism: "it is more a way of living with variety than subduing it" (3). Booth's pluralism serves critical understanding in the same way that incommensurability serves social construction. It obliges us to take legitimate theoretical differences perfectly seriously—as products drawn from distinct modes of thought and expression and not simply as different opinions that reflect the intellectual inequities of the participants in the debate.

Fortunately for our understanding of relativism and social construction, Booth describes a characteristic form of relativism for both monism and pluralism. Monistic relativism reduces reasoning to the pursuit of "truer causes embraced as the single right way of dealing with the world" (27). The danger of this monistic relativism lies in the capacity of its practitioners to relate all knowledge to a single, often arbitrary standard of judgment. Pluralistic relativism, as Booth outlines its operation in literary criticism, allows the pluralist to "see each critic's conclusions indeed as relative" and to "relate them, not to something outside that critic's process of reasoning, but to the

kind of inquiry he has engaged in and to the quality of the endeavor he brings to it” (27).

The contrast could hardly be more instructive. In *Modern Dogma*, Booth follows the lead of the distinction made within the New Rhetoric between “rationalizing” (using rationalistic discourse to support preconceived ideas) and “reasoning” (engaging in a genuine, if often linguistically informal, attempt to come to a coherent understanding of an important topic). Monists rationalize when they employ a narrow relativism that judges all experience according to a standard they have long since adopted as a personal mode of processing the world. All the fundamental decisions of life have long been made; life becomes a continual effort toward reaffirmation and retrenchment. Pluralists reason their way into a relativism which leads us to engage the reasoning by others “with as much seriousness as they did themselves.” It opens us to a social world in “more than one mode” of thought and expression “emerges intact, irrefutable, viable, and not reducible or totally translatable into some other, superior mode” (27). It also reflects the tolerance for new and different thought implicit in the incommensurable ideas at the heart of the conversations that social constructionists continually hold.

Clearly this excessive relativism attached to monism exceeds precisely in cutting all links to any other standard for evaluating knowledge but itself. The impulse to relate everything to a single and arbitrary framework strikes Booth as something less than fully human, as is evident in his quoting Kenneth Burke’s dictum that “a man

is necessarily talking error unless his words can claim membership in a collective body of thought," in which the crucible of public exposure and evaluation is held to be a critical step in the transformation of formless thought into fully developed ideas (258). More pointedly, Booth reminds us that "not autonomy but autism is the fate of any infant who does not learn to perform understanding with at least one other person" (263). The analogy seems well framed: monistic relativism seems to lead to exactly the sort of self-referential withdrawal from the world and the same inability to communicate effectively with others that we associate with the autistic child. Seen in this light, the social experience inherent in pluralistic relativism serves a vital developmental function as it draws those entering intellectual life into the conversation that generates and authenticates knowledge, a realm Booth characterizes as "a place where at least two inquirers can dwell together in understanding" (339).

The obvious step toward a relativism consistent with social construction that Booth takes between *Modern Dogma* and *Critical Understanding* has to do with the mechanisms of intersubjectivity that Booth emphasizes in the latter book. *Modern Dogma* invites us to consider changes in personal attitudes and modes of thought. Thus, Booth speaks to us primarily as individuals and not as participants in any specific disciplinary enterprise. *Critical Understanding*, like *The Company We Keep*, is set explicitly within the discipline of literary criticism and promises to tell us more about how relativism functions as a means of intellectual intercourse, rather than strictly as a framework for personal thought and expression. In *Critical*

Understanding, Booth insists that “the crucial test” of critical assertions is “whether the claimed connections are persuasive” (154). I read this as an assertion that socially responsible relativism functions largely as a form of rhetoric. Relativism becomes rhetorical as it passes from the arena of personal judgment to a larger sphere of social discourse and evaluation. The necessity for those engaged in pluralistic relativism to consider the ideas of others in reaching firm theoretical commitments—not only to acknowledge the existence of discourse in the work of disciplines but to participate actively in the continuing conversations of the academy—is a necessity to engage fully in both the relativistic and rhetorical dimensions of thought and language.

Booth continues the rhetorical emphasis established in *Critical Understanding in The Company We Keep* by focusing on the ethical dimension of both writing and reading fiction. Although Booth does attend to the moral qualities of specific fictions near the end of the book, he does so only after carefully examining and extending the dynamics of the Aristotelian *ethos* between authors and their audiences. Aristotle turns almost immediately to “the available means of persuasion” in Book I, Chapter 2 of *The Rhetoric* and identifies the first mode of persuasion as that which “depends upon the personal character of the speaker” (24). This persuasion is “achieved by the speaker’s personal character when the speech is so spoken as to make us think him credible” and its effectiveness depends upon our willingness to make collective judgments based upon a performance. As Aristotle puts it, “we believe good men

more fully and more readily than others: this is true generally whatever the question is and absolutely true where exact certainty is impossible and opinions are divided" (25). As to performance, he adds that "this kind of persuasion, like the others, should be achieved by what the speaker says, not by what people think of this character before he begins to speak" since "his character may almost be called the most effective means of persuasion he possesses" (25). While we often consider character a personal, if not private, matter of one's ethical standards and behavior, Aristotle defines it in public terms, in the moral qualities that the speaker possesses *and* can communicate effectively to an audience.

The theme of friendship that Booth considers throughout *The Company We Keep* builds upon the social conception of the ethical set forth by Aristotle. At first, the idea that the work of literature should serve as a good friend to its readers seems an extraordinarily personal and subjective interpretive stance for the business of serious literary criticism. It is hard to imagine words more fully removed from the usual vocabulary of serious criticism than friends and intimacy, but I think that Booth hopes to break down the illusion of impersonality and distance intrinsic to the cold print and uniform bindings that house our literature and to force us to consider the human agendas and implications of the literature. He wants to break the glass of the museum cases to which pedagogy and abstract criticism have consigned our classics and interpret them in a way that more fully credits and evaluates the human values surrounding their composition.

Thus, even on the relatively passive level of the reader's personal response, Booth pushes us toward a fuller sense of the social implications of the works we read and of reading in general. More importantly, however, his conception of friendship would lead to a relationship of mutual responsibility between author and reader. Booth tells us that "our fullest friendships are with those who seem wholly engaged in the same kind of significant activity that they expect of us," in this case between the author of a fiction and the reader who actively enters and inhabits that created world (187). His ethical reading of *Huckleberry Finn* leads him from "untroubled admiration to restless questioning" and that of *Emma* gives Booth insight into Austin's ability to "abide by the demands of conventional form, while making the whole thing work for matters *unconventional*" (477-478, 434). Note that Booth does not use his own standards to condemn the morals of books that offend him; rather, he extends other authors the courtesy of assuming that they are as much moral beings in a social context as he is and seeks to understand their moral frameworks in an effort to fully understand their work.

Booth also explores the public dimension of a reader's encounter with books and their authors through his concept of coduction. He defines coduction as

what we do whenever we say to the world (or prepare ourselves to say): "Of the works of this general kind that I have experienced, comparing my experience with other more or less qualified

observers, this one seems to me among the better (or weaker) ones,
or the best (or worst). Here are my reasons." (72-73)

In his willingness to compare his reading experiences to those of other "qualified observers" and, presumably, adjust them accordingly, Booth seems to share the respect for socially accredited opinion underlying Hugh Blair's concept of taste. However, while Blair describes the cultivation of taste as a kind of internalization of traditional standards, Booth emphasizes the responsibility of each reader to defend his or her interpretation, to insist on being heard in the general conversation about the work's merits. For each work that we read, coduction should result in "a thoroughgoing particular engagement with *this* narrative, considered neither as based on nor leading to general rules but as an ever-growing awareness of what is humanly possible in some one kind of endeavor" (76). In this anti-foundational context, the specificity of each reader's interpretation of an important literary work places a premium on our ability to communicate our readings to others. Unless our private literary experience is to become merely eccentric and all but incommunicable, we bear a responsibility to the community of readers that mirrors the relationship Booth outlines between readers and writers.

Given Booth's attention to the social processes of the creation and reception of texts, we can see that his ethical readings clearly are not designed as moral litmus tests. Instead, Booth presumes ethical kinship with those of us who write and think in the world; he assumes that Twain and Rabelais also wrote in a world of human

values and bases his interpretive stance on his interest in engaging in human dialogue with the writers he reads. In evaluating works in the traditional canons of literature, Booth is less interested in sitting in judgment over the works as Hunter's orthodox moral absolutists or his own monistic relativists would be than in establishing his own *ethos* as a reader and contributing it to the conversation of those affected by the canon, as a pluralistic relativist might.

His reevaluation of *Huckleberry Finn*, for example, is undertaken reluctantly, as a reaction to widespread criticism of a book he has always admired. His criticism of the book, then, stems from a reassessment of his earlier views based on an attempt to see the book as others see it, as an artifact of immersion in a new and enlarged social context, rather than from a shift in personal whim. Figured in the language of social construction, Booth's anti-foundational willingness to look again at the ethical standards of his time, to review his sense of the current situation, has allowed him to consider and eventually adopt a critical judgment incommensurate with his own. His emphasis on responding ethically to the *ethos*, embodied both in the literature we read and in the critical communities we inhabit, yields an example of a relativistic process of creating and disseminating ideas that gains authority and stability through the dynamics of social construction found in its workings. While this stability might represent a sort of temporary foundation for future thought, Booth's relativism prevents it from hardening into an inflexible bulwark against further evolution of the concept.

CHAPTER FOUR

CONSENSUS

Many working in composition studies—including those of us seeking to understand group work, peer evaluation, the writing process, collaborative learning, and the New Rhetoric better—incorporate consensus as a central element in our theories. Even a cursory examination, however, of the ways in which the concept is actually used in the discipline shows as wide a range of meanings and purposes for the term as were found with relativism in the last chapter. Fortunately, several of the core texts cited in formulating social construction exhibit theorists who have learned to temper the search for consensus with a respect for the individual differences in perspective and expression that make the ongoing conversations at the center of knowledge-making in social construction possible. In this chapter, I begin by considering these ideas in the work of Thomas Kuhn, Richard Rorty, and Mikhail Bahktin. I go on to examine the implications of consensus for both supporters and opponents of the academic English movement, with an eye toward demonstrating how the application of social construction can clarify the situation for both sides.

I believe that taking a close look at the central texts of social construction helps us see the role that the process of establishing consensus plays in determining each individual's place in the collective conversations central to the social construction of ideas. Thomas Kuhn's theory of the role of paradigms in revolutionary scientific

change describes the transition from theory to theory as a rhetorical process that transforms large segments of the scientific enterprise largely on an individual basis: although paradigm shifts effect global conceptual shifts, Kuhn is careful to portray his revolutions, ironically enough, as gradual and tenuous processes. New theoretical touchstones are rarely so evident as to enforce instant consent across the board. Each member of the community must weigh the relative merits of the new position with the old until the view finds general acceptance and the new consensus begins to shape practice within the discipline.

Kuhn, then, insists that paradigms change through a persuasive process of establishing working consensus within disciplines, not in response to authoritative fiat from on high. In extending Kuhn's theory to other academic disciplines and cultural realms, moreover, Richard Rorty emphasizes the openness implicit in the conversation that social construction has uncovered. Neither perspective enforces a restrictive search for consensus that disenfranchises all but a few socially accredited individuals. Both Kuhn and Rorty reach out to pull as many distinct voices as possible into the conversation, to empower as many new participants as they can to speak up in ways that can be easily heard.

As a historian of science, Kuhn investigates the role of the individual in what most consider to be the context most hostile to personal expression, the hard sciences. In setting forth the central idea of his theory of paradigm change during scientific revolutions, Kuhn provides a solid framework for considering the social

dynamics involved in intellectual and cultural change. His explanation of the actual process involved in paradigm shift is especially important in understanding how individuals figure in the social milieu of intellectual change. The individual working scientists who contribute to a scientific paradigm shift are both the instigators of, and the people most influenced by, the social process of change.

In order to understand clearly how the same researchers can control and be controlled by change, we need to grasp Kuhn's distinction between "normal" and "abnormal" science. Kuhn defines normal science as "the genesis and continuation of a particular research tradition" followed by scientists who are "committed to the same rules and standards for scientific practice" and who have reached an "apparent consensus" about what these rules and standards are. Normal science operates through paradigms, "accepted examples of actual scientific practice," that "provide models from which spring particular coherent traditions of scientific research" (Kuhn 11, 10). Furthermore, Kuhn assures us that "when the individual scientist can take a paradigm for granted, he need no longer . . . attempt to build his field anew, starting from first principles and justifying the use of each concept introduced" (19-20). By limiting the scope of inquiry in the short term, participants in normal science increase the depth and intensity of the work they do in the long term.

Kuhn's normal science, thus, depends upon general acceptance of a productive social conformity, a consensus. Kuhn connects all science to three kinds of work—"determination of significant fact, matching facts with theory, and articulation

of theory”—that are intimately bound into normal science and the puzzles it presents (33). These puzzles, Kuhn’s favorite metaphor for the operations of normal science, give a scientific community “a criterion for choosing problems that, while the paradigm is taken for granted, can be assumed to have solutions.” In effect, they protect scientists from wasting time and resources on hopelessly eccentric projects while carving out an arena in which individual solutions to a generally accepted problem can be pursued. In return for this freedom, scientists must generally agree that “these are the only problems that the community will admit as scientific or encourage its members to undertake” (37).

The twin emphasis on the tedious, exacting process of verification and extension that characterizes the daily routine of science and on the underlying goal of problem solving that provides the motivating discipline needed to follow through on basic research allows Kuhn to illustrate the tension between the social and the personal that makes science possible. As participants in a social enterprise practiced in much the same way everywhere in the world, scientists subordinate their individual needs to the disciplinary task of consolidating the predominant paradigm, the governing consensus. In this sense, normal science can be accused of suppressing the individuals who make it work. These paradigmatic points of consensus, however, are always subject to change.

Scientific change, the transformation from normal to abnormal science, reminds us of the importance of the individual workers responsible for forging the consensus

threatening to overwhelm them. Abnormal, or revolutionary, science and discovery begin only “with the awareness of anomaly, i.e., with the recognition that nature has somehow violated the paradigm-induced expectations that govern normal science” (52-53), that sense that the paradigm-puzzle has shifted so far from expectations that it has become a new puzzle altogether. Note that the new science begins in the heart of the old. New ideas arise in the process of performing the duties needed to uphold the traditional wisdom.

Kuhn identifies this revolutionary awareness as a crisis state in which scientists are able to see that the rules of a paradigm “no longer define a playable game” and then go on to “conceive another set to replace them” (90). Thus, the very depth and intensity of the work devoted to an important theory can contribute to its demise and lead to a post-revolutionary paradigm that results in a new “normal-scientific tradition” that “is not only incompatible but often incommensurable with that which has gone before” (102). Abnormal science helps us bridge the gap to the new paradigm—which must arise in order for science to work again—by reframing the problem in a form that is clearly incompatible with the old paradigm. Abnormal science, if it truly represents a fundamental theoretical shift, “is far from a cumulative process, one achieved by an articulation or extension of the old paradigm”: such adjustments fall well within the range of normal science. It is marked by a reconstruction of the field from new fundamentals, a reformulation that changes some of the field’s most elementary theoretical generalizations as well as many of its

paradigmatic methods and applications (85). Kuhn boldly renounces any sort of gradualism or evolutionism in his theory of scientific change, insisting that “paradigm changes do cause scientists to see the world of their research-engagement differently” and that “after a revolution scientists are responding to a different world” (111). Post-Copernican astronomers can hardly live in a Ptolemaic universe in which the earth no longer sits in the center of the cosmos and complex calculations of orbital cycles and epicycles are no longer necessary to account for planetary motions. Similarly, Darwin’s legacy leads most of us to replace the traditional belief in a divine process of creation in six days that is justified by faith in the literal accuracy of the Bible with a new matrix based on billions of years and reliance on carbon dating.

How can such an abrupt mechanism of change, a complete shift in perspective that places the working scientist in a different world each time a paradigm shifts, continue without destroying the complex human institutions that have grown up around science? After all, the central virtue of normal science seems to be the stability it affords to those engaged in precise and detailed work. The first factor that seems to buffer the potentially destructive power of abnormal science is the relative rarity of paradigm shift. Abnormal science is a direct product of normal science, and—even given the rapid pace of change in this century—considerable time and investigative effort are required to uncover the anomalies needed to contradict a dominant paradigm. Another factor is the conservative nature of scientific institutions. As Kuhn puts it, “to reject one paradigm without simultaneously

substituting another is to reject science,” because scientific speculation conducted without the focus lent by a defining paradigm lacks the discipline associated with science proper (79). The determining factor, however, is the rhetorical process that must take place for a new paradigm to be accepted. Paradigms do not change in the instant that the flaw in the original paradigm is uncovered. Abnormal science changes the theoretical perspective of the community working on the problem, but the change does not occur on an instantaneous, community-wide basis. Instead, paradigm shift happens over time, in a process that persuades individual members of the community until a new consensus has been reached. “Like the choice between competing political institutions,” Kuhn asserts, “that between competing paradigms proves to be a choice between incompatible modes of community life” (94).

One passage from Kuhn describing the transition between paradigms is worth extensive quotation for the rhetorical elements of the process he describes:

to say that resistance is inevitable and legitimate, that paradigm change cannot be justified by proof, is not to say that no arguments are relevant or that scientists cannot be persuaded to change their minds. Though a generation is sometimes required to effect the change, scientific communities have again and again been converted to new paradigms. (152)

Kuhn makes it clear here that a paradigm shift is a matter of persuasion, of a change in a community’s way of looking at the problem rather than an incontestable

victory of empirical demonstration: when faced with conflicting bodies of empirical evidence, these scientists are won over by arguments rather than proofs.

The process of change that Kuhn describes here seems closely allied to Chaim Perelman's concept of non-demonstrative justification, in which

argumentation, unlike demonstration, presupposes a meeting of minds: the will on the part of the orator to persuade and not to compel or command, and a disposition on the part of the audience to listen." ("The New Rhetoric" 11)

The rhetorical process that Kuhn identifies in the revolutionary scientific change that occurs when the conventional approaches of normal science no longer fit the data commonly observed in research runs parallel to Perelman's insistence that, in all but the most formal of contexts,

the philosopher has at his disposal only an argumentation that he can endeavor to make as reasonable and systematic as possible without ever being able to make it absolutely compelling or a demonstrative proof. ("The New Rhetoric" 14)

and his related assertion that "argumentation has a wider scope of non-formal reasoning that aims at obtaining or reinforcing the adherence of audience" ("The New Rhetoric" 12). Returning to Kuhn, we learn that

these conversions occur not despite the fact scientists are human but because they are. Though some scientists, particularly the older and

more experienced ones, may resist indefinitely, most of them can be reached in one way or another. Conversions will occur a few at a time until, after the last hold-outs have died, the whole profession will again be practicing under a single, but now a different, paradigm. (152)

Kuhn's use of the term "conversion" and his attention to the human realities of the process identify these shifts firmly with rhetoric and with Perelman's cooperative conception of argumentation. In fact, we can plainly see adherents of the paradigm gradually introducing the text of the paradigm to the audience—which progressively changes as the paradigm takes hold—that constitutes the field itself.

Normal science has been employed as a social tool that is necessary to get important work done, to extend the range and depth of the theory and applications attached to the current paradigm. As a part of this utilitarian function, every subscriber to a ruling paradigm is part of the audience of science, whose support and patronage sustains the institution that guarantees his or her relative anonymity. The simplest act, however, such as noticing a spot in a petri dish where none is expected or detecting a subtle shift in the ten thousandth repetition of a spectral analysis, can impel the researcher to authorship, to beginning the rhetorical process that leads to a new paradigm, a new way of interpreting new evidence. Kuhn here argues against one commonly held image of the individual—the Romantic conception of the solitary, inspired genius. With the advent of normal science, the impetus for innovation arises

from the community that holds to the paradigm, from the collective body of those working on an important problem.

Despite the collective emphasis intrinsic to paradigm theory, the persuasive process necessary to effect a change of paradigm gives each member of a scientific community a voice in setting the rules of the new puzzle the group adopts and prevents individual scientists from being trampled by the very institutions that command their vocational allegiance. Their willing conformity with the ruling paradigm is a mark of a simultaneously idealistic and pragmatic allegiance to the standards of the scientific profession and not a sign of intellectual cowardice or lack of personal commitment. Scientists accept paradigms such as quantum mechanics or relativity because the ability to work on narrowly and clearly defined problems allows them to function more efficiently and intensively than more obviously personal approaches ever could. At least in the context of the hard sciences, the only domain Kuhn claims to cover, it is difficult to see the use of consensus in paradigm theory as a force that represses the intellectual growth and expression of individuals. On the contrary, the disciplinary focus on specific areas that yield anomalies lent by paradigms has helped many individuals develop their personal and professional potential and contribute to the shape of new paradigms.

Once again, we should note that Kuhn speaks only for the sciences. Richard Rorty continues Kuhn's description of the tension between normal and abnormal science in his discussion of normal and abnormal discourse, an adaptation that both

applies Kuhn's ideas to new areas of thought and expression and gives a more complete explanation of the interaction between the needs of academic groups and those of the people that belong to the groups. In Rorty's usage, "normal discourse is that which is conducted within an agreed-upon set of conventions about what counts as having a good argument for that answer or a good criticism of it," a definition that runs closely parallel to normal science. The concept of abnormal discourse, which "is what happens when someone joins in the discourse who is ignorant of these conventions or who sets them aside" and can include "anything from nonsense to intellectual revolution," seems, in its inclusion of marginal voices, to cover ground Kuhn never traverses in his study of science (320). The added territory surveyed in the concept of abnormal discourse promises much for the development of an understanding of the possibilities for balancing the claims of community and individual participants in all fields of inquiry and for promoting a type of consensus in which groups tolerate, and even encourage, conflict.

Although Rorty follows Kuhn in insisting upon the interdependence of normal and abnormal in his binary pair, he seems clearly to prefer the abnormal and its potential for enlivening disciplinary conversations. As a working philosopher anxious to preserve credibility in his own field, Rorty is forced to admit that epistemology and systematic philosophy, its normal discourses, make all discourse, normal and abnormal, possible. We must pass "through stages of implicit, and then explicit and self-conscious, conformity to the norms of the discourse going on around us" in order

to develop a coherent and intelligible basis for our own ideas, no matter how revolutionary, eccentric, or abnormal they may seem to others (365). Abnormal discourse "is always parasitic upon normal discourse," and, therefore, "to attempt abnormal discourse *de novo*, without being able to recognize our own abnormality, is madness in the most literal and terrible sense" (365-366). At the same time, abnormal discourse is essential to the continued growth and vitality of philosophy's normal discourse. Practitioners of abnormal discourse have "kept alive the suggestion that, even when we have justified true belief about everything we want to know, we may have no more than conformity to the norms of the day" (367). Thus, abnormal discourse offers a defense against the accusation that the consensus attached to social construction promotes social and individual stagnation.

Rorty clearly sees the use of abnormal discourse as having the potential to liberate us from the conventions of normal discourse, the restrictions of business as usual. While necessary to the stability of conversation, Rorty's normal discourse is not treated as positively as Kuhn's normal science. In Rorty's discipline of philosophy, normal discourse reflects the impulse "in every sufficiently reflective culture" to "single out one area, one set of practices, and see it as the paradigm human activity" and try to "show how the rest of culture can profit from this example." Rorty clearly adds elements of foundationalism and Wayne Booth's concept of monism to Kuhn's pragmatic notion of the paradigm as a working fiction. His assertion that the paradigm embraced by mainstream Western philosophy is that

of “knowing—possessing justified true beliefs, or, better yet, beliefs so intrinsically persuasive as to make justification unnecessary,” identifies the normal discourse of philosophy with a stance that effectively makes it the foundation for all disciplines that could possibly make any claims to knowledge (366).

Rorty dramatizes the single-minded confusion of theory and reality that Wayne Booth warns against in his description of monism and his advocacy of pluralism in quoting the typical mainstream philosopher as follows:

now that such-and-such a line of inquiry has had such a stunning success, let us reshape all inquiry, and all of culture, on its model, thereby permitting objectivity and rationality to prevail in areas previously obscured by convention, superstition, and the lack of a proper epistemological understanding of man’s ability accurately to represent nature. (367)

Rorty’s account of his own discipline testifies to the power of normal discourse to swallow everything in its path, to set itself up as a commensurable standard for all thought and expression. When set in political terms, normal discourse becomes an imperialistic superpower bent on silencing any individual voice of dissent with the courage to speak up. If the version of social construction that Rorty has influenced were to drop its anti-foundationalism and its insistence on the incommensurability of ideas, it would be a force for the suppression, not the liberation, of the individual thinker and speaker.

Fortunately, Rorty refuses to leave us at the mercy of an all-consuming and uncontested normal discourse. In his extended example based on philosophy, Rorty distinguishes normal, or systematic, philosophy from its abnormal, or edifying, counterpart in a series of striking contrasts. For example, the “great systematic philosophers,” who include Descartes and Kant, “are constructive and offer arguments,” while the “great edifying philosophers,” who include Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, “are reactive and offer satires, parodies, aphorisms.” In a similar vein, the impulse of the systematic philosophers to, “like great scientists, build forever” is opposed by the edifying philosophers’ willingness to “destroy for the sake of their own generation.” Finally, “systematic philosophers want to put their subject on the secure path of a science,” but

edifying philosophers want to keep space open for the sense of wonder which poets can sometimes cause—wonder that there is something new under the sun, something which is not an accurate representation of what was already there, something which (at least for the moment) cannot be explained and can barely be described.

(369- 370)

According to Rorty, edifying philosophy saves the discipline as a whole from its normal impulse to reach consensus for its own sake and to close its ears to other, less orthodox, voices.

Rorty's concept of abnormal discourse does more to nurture and protect personal thought and expression than Kuhn's concept of abnormal science. Abnormal science arises from normal science, only to resolve itself into a new normal science so that a new consensus can form around the new scientific puzzle to be addressed. The persuasive element of the revolutionary crisis carves out a place for each working scientist to accept the new paradigm, but the collective sense of what should be studied and how it should be studied is eventually decisive. Abnormal discourse, at least in the example Rorty supplies from philosophy, reacts against the normal current of the conversation at the center of any given discipline and protects it against the overcomplacency and unthinking conformity that result when consensus becomes an end in itself. The attention Rorty pays to anti-foundationalism and incommensurability in describing abnormal discourse illustrates how those attracted to social construction can value consensus and the needs of those engaged in the collective conversations at the heart of disciplines without arbitrarily discounting those who would argue with that consensus.

Rorty, more than anyone else except the Russian literary critic and theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, answers those who accuse social constructionists of collaborating in the suppression of individual thought and expression. With his theory of heteroglossia, Bakhtin offers another perspective explaining the ability of thinkers like Thomas Kuhn and Richard Rorty to employ consensus with conflict as a means of encouraging many distinct voices to contribute to intellectual discourse without fear

of being drowned out by an overpowering and orthodox majority. Bakhtin seems anxious to investigate the novel as a reflection of larger social forces: he does not so much seek to uncover the social context surrounding a work as he works to discern the various voices embodied in the text.

Bakhtin identifies fully developed novels by the diversity of social voices (heteroglossia) reflected in them. He locates the style of a novel "in the combination of its styles" and insists that "the language of a novel is the system of its 'languages'" (262). This emphasis on the aesthetic and linguistic pluralism found in the mature novel culminates in the concept of the "living heteroglossia of language," a "multi-languagedness surrounding and nourishing" the author and growing out of his or her presence in the social medium of life that "is not invented in superficial, isolated rhetorical polemics with another person" (326-327). By skillfully orchestrating the voices in the social matrix of time, place, culture and circumstance that surround them, novelists blend "future and former languages, with prim but moribund aristocrat-languages, with parvenu-languages and with countless pretenders to the status of language" (356-357) into an artifact that reflects "language as a social phenomenon that is becoming in history, socially stratified and weathered in this process of becoming" (326).

Bakhtin's interpretative scheme favors novels that are especially rich in linguistic and social texture and that require sensitivity to social dynamics in a successful reader. Novels that lack the social diversity provided by heteroglossia are personal

and literary; while great novels that do not reflect the rich mixture of voices Bakhtin values certainly exist, they tell us less about the cultures surrounding their creation. Thus, Bakhtin's theory turns on an explicitly normative assumption: novels that are not constructed out of a vital social context are unlikely to appeal to readers in subsequent cultures. In rejecting the voices of their time, they become paradoxically trapped in the time and individual context of the author. According to Bakhtin's theory, we have little way into that private reality and generally even less incentive to want to go there. If this theory seems to grant precedence to the Faulkners (who are largely concerned with presenting elaborately detailed reconstructions of the language and manners of their time) over the Nabokovs (who generally seem more interested in the aesthetic possibilities in the novel as a genre) of the world, at least it gives us a consistent basis for talking about literature: a basis that is not unlike Blair's theory of taste, but is even more fully grounded in social context.

If social complexity is central to the full experience that novels can provide as a genre, critics can profitably unravel the social dynamics of the old in order to prepare for the new. Then the historical components of one work can guide us in reformulating our own history into a coherent text. The many voices in a great novel help us follow its characters as they become "more like real thinking people." In producing the artistic representation of the texture of socially experienced reality, "in these novels life is not only a touchstone, but a school" (393). Bakhtin, then, centers on the text, but mainly as a conduit back to a reading of the reality underlying its

composition. In preferring novels that blend many social voices into a single cultural artifact, Bakhtin presents a critical system that respects, indeed cherishes, a range of individual and distinctive voices without neglecting the need to portray fully the social context in which they interact. In this sense, those who view social construction as a heteroglossia of voices can achieve a balance between the claims of individual voices to be heard and the need to sustain an ongoing social dialogue capable of producing useful consensus, answering the charges that their theory suppresses individual expression.

An examination of academic English, a pedagogical movement intended to help inexperienced students learn how to think, speak, and write more effectively in academic settings, can help bring the question of consensus into focus. David Bartholomae and Patricia Bizzell, as teachers of composition and advocates of academic English, respect the power of social structures. More generally, those of us in composition studies work to create and evaluate discourse and to empower individual students to express themselves within the institutions that threaten, however unintentionally, to smother them. They understand the need for beginning academic writers to better understand the rules of the academic game and to use the expectations of cultural institutions to at least gain a hearing from an audience initiated into and fluent in academic discourse. Even so, they recognize the need for supporters of academic discourse to use their ideas to promote diversity in thought and its expression.

Bartholomae begins with diagnosis. He captures the emotional quality of the new academic writer's predicament nicely in observing that inexperienced writers either "must learn to speak our language" correctly or be forced to "dare to speak it or to carry off the bluff" in regions they've only newly encountered (135). Given this isolation from the norms of discourse that seasoned academics take for granted, Bartholomae insists that many college freshman "require a course to introduce them to the kinds of writing that are required for a university education" (159). Furthermore, we are called to help those students "refused unrestrained access to the academic community" because they lack the necessary language skills to adhere to the all-too-often unspoken conventions of format, diction, and syntax that academic audiences expect (159, 146). In failing to make these implicit audience expectations explicit, the members of the academy misrepresent it. Thus, one of the writing teacher's most important jobs must surely be to initiate students into academic discourse communities in order to lay the foundation for the future of the academy itself.

Bizzell adopts a more overtly political stance in that she grounds her advocacy of teaching students facility in academic discourse in her sense of "the connection between political oppression and academic disadvantage." In taking this approach, Bizzell is influenced by Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, a study of literacy among the peasant classes in Brazil, and Mina Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations*, an account of teaching writing at the City University of New York at the time when

the institution of open enrollment policies greatly broadened the range of students admitted to American college and universities. These works help Bizzell understand her “students’ initial unfamiliarity with academic writing” in terms “of group membership, with some groups experiencing disenfranchisements and exclusions that had kept them from encountering much academic writing in the past” (*Academic* 7). Like Bartholomae, Bizzell begins by surveying the gulf between the language systems students bring to our classes and those they need in order to succeed in their academic work. She goes a step farther, however, in tying social and political disjunctions in academic settings to the disjunctions found in society at large.

Whether we begin with Bartholomae in the classroom or with Bizzell in the surrounding society, most teachers of composition will recognize their students in these portraits of beginning academic writers. We spend a great deal of time helping our students find a voice for their writing, a comfortable way of responding to the communicative and intellectual challenges of college writing. The fact that students seem to need such a voice does not mean that all undergraduate writing looks the same to us; many students bring their distinctive patterns of fresh insight, mechanical confusions, and half-learned rhetorical patterns to their work. Thus, there are many, maybe too many, differences in the papers we collect. These various voices, however, seem to stem more from neglect than design, to arise by default rather than through a considered strategy for reaching an audience—a strategy that can succeed in an academic setting. Students are often left with eccentric, not purposeful, voices, voices

reaching out in the dark to an unseen, and apparently unseeable, audience. Bartholomae and Bizzell obviously would like to help these students find their way into the academy.

Bartholomae claims to turn knowledge of academic English against itself. His best students present “a writer claiming an ‘inside’ position of privilege by rejecting the language and commonplaces of a ‘naive’ discourse, the language of ‘outsiders.’” They, thus, approximate “the specialized language of what is presumed to be a more powerful and more privileged community.” If Bartholomae’s students have indeed attained such a sophisticated grasp of competing discourses, the awkward imitation of the surface features of an entrenched academic discourse that practitioners of a narrowly conceived academic English would promote is enhanced by a critical ability through which “the writer continually audits and pushes against a language that would render him ‘like everyone else’ and mimics the language and interpretative systems of the privileged community” (157). These newly initiated members of the academic conversation must strive to reach “some compromise between idiosyncrasy,” the eccentric voices they carry from their linguistic and cultural backgrounds, and “the requirements of convention, the history of a discipline” (Bartholomae 135). If, for example, our composition students can learn to apply to the questions that interest them a developed thesis in the critical spirit that characterizes the best academic inquiry and discourse, they can hope to contribute their distinctive ideas to our ongoing conversations in an intelligible and engaging form.

Bizzell also sees the process of teaching an academic version of English as one of initiation into academic communities and their characteristic forms of language. For her, "learning to write" means "immersing oneself in the discursive practices of a community composed of present social relations, cultural assumptions, textual traditions, political circumstances." Moreover,

along with this gradual internalization of the community's discursive practices would proceed internal adjustments and external discursive innovations as this community's practices were juxtaposed with those of other communities to which each writer might be presumed to belong. ("Introduction" 12)

Instead of visualizing academic English as a tool for imposing a preformulated consensus on beginning writers, Bizzell proposes a dialogue in which academic life and its attendant discourse are presented as useful alternatives to the communities and languages students bring to the academy, a means of gaining access to concepts and processes students could never hope to encounter elsewhere. Note that this approach blends consensus-building with cultural conflict. In order to succeed in introducing the benefits of academic discourse without obliterating our students' access to their original language and culture, we must allow these external perspectives, like those that Bahktin imports into the study of the novel, some influence on our own.

Bartholomae includes tolerance for diversity in academic English in the basis for consensus he seeks between college communities and their initiates. He believes that the most successful academic writers find a distinctive voice through working "against a conventional point of view" and setting "themselves in their essays against what they define as some more naive way of talking about their subject" (152-153). As Bartholomae suggests in the title of his essay "Inventing the University," they use the knowledge we give them about the conventions and expectations of academic discourse to invent their own universities, to build their own intellectual foundations both in and against the image of the academic English they inherit from their institutional forebears. In theory, at least, Bartholomae's version of academic English is no more likely to suppress individual thought and expression in beginning writers than the relativism grounded in social dialogue advocated by Clifford Geertz and Wayne Booth is to lead us to unqualified solipsism.

Despite the care that Bartholomae and Bizzell take to protect individual thought and expression in their pedagogy, Joseph Harris, Sheryl Fontaine, and John Trimbur feel that the teaching of academic English can often carry dangerous social implications. A version of academic English that focuses on the surface features of a narrowly defined academic dialectic could have a chilling effect on individual thought and expression. Inflexible strictures against the use of the first person in scientific discourse, for example, could result from a newly prescriptive approach to composition adopted solely in the name of promoting fluency in traditional academic

English. Those of us sensitive to the element of social construction operative in all language would rightly object to such an arbitrary return to instruction that leads us to ignore the process of writing in order to enforce a rigid set of standards for the final product.

While granting this point, however, we should also read Harris, Fontaine, and Trimbur in the political context created by the changes in writing instruction over the past few decades. The often harsh and polemical tone in their work is the result of their perception of the academic English movement as an attempt to reverse the reforms in composition instruction instituted in the nineteen sixties and seventies. One important group of reformers, led by teachers and writers like Peter Elbow and Donald Murray, struggled to acknowledge the value of the discourse that students bring to classrooms. In the process, they worked to place teachers and students on a more equal footing as members of writing communities dedicated to mutual improvement (though teachers always claimed the advantage of experience) and put a premium on encouraging personal expression rather than training students to fit into traditional academic molds. A prescriptive version of academic English that enforces consensus from above could easily seem a step backward to advocates of this approach.

Joseph Harris' article, "The Idea of the Community in the Study of Writing," contains a general attack on the academic English movement in which he appears to imply one of three possibilities in the light of Bartholomae's and Bizzell's work. The

first two, that he either overlooks or discounts the precautions against impersonal heavy-handedness we have already seen incorporated into their theory or that he considers them to be engaged in another pursuit altogether, seem relatively remote. More probably, he assumes that most practitioners of the approach operate under less enlightened principles and work “towards the mastery of some particular, well-defined sort of discourse,” creating writing settings that “exist at a vague remove from actual experience,” where they acquire amorphous and intimidating dimensions. They become “The University, The Profession, The Discipline, The Academic Discourse Community”:

quite literally utopias—nowheres, meta-communities—tied to no particular time or place, and thus oddly free of many of the tensions, discontinuities, and conflicts in the sorts of talk and writing that go on everyday in the classrooms and departments of actual universities. (13)

In this case, advocates of a general theory addressing the place of the individual in a community are accused of misrepresenting the community and misleading the individuals it purports to help.

According to Harris, a member of the Department of English at the University of Pittsburgh, the advocates of prescriptive academic English tend to overgeneralize in defining the discourse of the academic community into which they hope to initiate their students. They also tend to polarize “our talk about writing: One seems asked

to defend the power of the discourse community or the imagination of the individual writer" (12). The missing element in this bifurcated view is the perspective of the students themselves as experienced speakers of their native communities and novice speakers in the narrow confines of the academic community. Those teachers who seek to replace the variety of language patterns found in our multi-faceted culture with a prescriptively defined academic dialect through the agency of a version of academic English thus impose a simplistic linguistic imperialism. In the process, they misrepresent the complexity of American language and seek to deny the possibilities for enriching our understanding of the origin of ideas that social constructionists work to point out to the rest of us through their advocacy of anti-foundationalism and incommensurability.

Sheryl Fontaine's "Unprivileged Voices in the Academy of the Privileged" extends Harris' warning against the damage that an excessive promotion of consensus can do under the auspices of a mechanistic and unreflective application of academic English. Fontaine examines the experience of students at Harvey Mudd College, a "highly selective liberal arts college," where she taught for a time and found that the students had "a better sense of academic discourse than the average college freshman has" and were "by and large, at home in academia" (2). Fontaine is disturbed by her students' sense of the academy and its language as something "monolithic and unchangeable" and their willingness to know and accept the immutability of all institutional regulations, not as humanly created rules that affect our perceptions and,

in this way, create the world we occupy, but as objects of knowledge to which they must successfully accommodate themselves (3, 4). Seen this way, academic English turns against social construction, creating a new foundation for the control of language and the knowledge it carries, empowering further the educational establishment and the political and cultural institutions that support it. Such a foundation stands as a Rortian normal discourse to social construction's abnormal discourse, substituting a one-dimensional vision of education and society for the pluralistic and anti-foundational concept of the cooperative and incommensurate creation and exchange of ideas. The danger, perhaps, lies in the propensity of those who call for an unreflective and oppressive social uniformity under this misconceived view of academic English to assail the complex embrace of diversity and change implicit in our society that advocates of social construction value and seek to foster in their students.

When institutions become fixed and unchanging entities and academic discourse a perfectly reliable means of entry to the institutions, students need to be shaken out of the easy sense of security that facility in a series of standard rhetorical formulas can give. They need, as Fontaine puts it, "the knowledge that conventions change and that tensions exist among language users of different discourse communities" in order to save them from composing fluent but intellectually empty variations upon traditional themes. Rather than "becoming even better than they already are at finessing the language, at becoming faster and more efficient writers" of prefabricated

prose, Fontaine would prefer her students to “become more thoughtful, interested writers” (4). She would like them to adopt the anti-foundationalist’s stance of writers in productive conflict with the shape of their discourse that she believes was taken by many of the students in her freshman seminar “Different Voices.” In this setting, “texts by men and women from various ethnic backgrounds” were studied in an effort to induce “students to read and write ‘open’ non-canonical texts in contrast to the academic discourse they composed and analyzed in their first-semester freshman writing course” (7). Fontaine, echoing Bizzell, also hoped to help members of the class “learn to recognize how meaning is constructed” and to “experience how what they believe is tied to their social position” (7-8).

Fontaine’s belief that student writers should work against the grain of traditional writing patterns reflects the concern of other theorists about the implications of consensus. In the course of his argument with academic English, Harris questions the connection almost always seen between consensus and community, pointing out that “matters of accident, necessity, and convenience hold groups together as well” (20). An equally skeptical and more complete treatment of the place of consensus in composition theory can be found in John Trimbur’s “Consensus and Difference in Collaborative Learning,” an article in which he seeks “not to abandon the notion of consensus but to revise it, as a step toward developing a critical practice of collaborative learning” (603). The introduction of elements associated with social construction to our definition of consensus seems to reduce its vulnerability to the

charges leveled against it by its critics, in much the same way as with relativism and academic English.

Trimbur states his case against an excessive reliance on consensus in the collaborative learning that Kenneth Bruffee claims as a direct implication of social constructionist theory. Trimbur's "line of criticism" arguing "that the use of consensus is an inherently dangerous and potentially totalitarian practice that stifles individual voice and creativity, suppresses differences, and enforces conformity" is a common attack upon any theory that urges any sort of collectivist perspective in a society so profoundly attached to rugged individualism in its central ideology as ours (602). We tend to favor individual heroics over communal solutions and to flock to films lionizing Superman and Rambo rather than homages to the National Institutes of Health or the Ford Foundation. This extreme fear of consensus and the conformity it enforces upon the individual makes sense only when the dynamics of social construction are ignored or misunderstood.

Trimbur's rehabilitation of the concept of consensus in this article is based on a careful investigation of the implications of social construction for collaborative learning. Trimbur begins his exploration with Rorty's concept of the conversation, which he believes "has become a social constructionist code word to talk about knowledge and teaching and learning as social—not cognitive—acts." When, as in Trimbur's reading of social construction, the arena for discovering and disseminating new ideas shifts from "the confrontation of the individual mind with reality" to a

“conversation that organizes the available means we have at any given time to talk about reality,” learning becomes a process of “joining new communities and taking part in new conversations” (605). In this conversational, or, to use an even more characteristic term drawn from Rorty, hermeneutic, or interpretative, context, consensus works as a social and intellectual lubricant. It provides the recognition “that if we cannot discover truth in any final sense, what we can do is to keep on talking to each other: we can tell stories, give accounts, state reasons, negotiate differences, and so on.” Consensus here serves as a rationalization for our willingness to give up on the old foundationalist certainty. As Trimbur puts it, if “the conversation is simply the way we justify our beliefs socially, then we might as well relax, get good at it, and enjoy it” (607). Consensus is more settled for than achieved. This position is more attractive than the consignment of consensus to the repressive politics of conformity, but Trimbur feels it leaves much to be desired.

Trimbur’s reshaping of consensus depends on another of Rorty’s concepts, abnormal discourse, which Trimbur sees as a means to pull consensus away from the idealized realm of theoretical agreement into the more immediate territory of ever-present social conflict. Trimbur is troubled by a tendency he sees in social construction to minimize the conflict inherent in social interaction. He redefines consensus to shift the emphasis away from agreement to a view of “consensus as a strategy that structures differences by organizing them in relation to each other.” He then insists that “abnormal discourse is not so much a homeostatic mechanism that keeps the conversation and thereby the community renewed and refreshed” but more

a means of referring “to dissensus,” a word Trimbur coins to convey a type of consensus that not only tolerates, but actually encourages, conflict and dissent. He would have us listen especially closely “to marginalized voices, the resistance and contestation both within and outside the conversation . . . the discourses out of power” (608), although we must, of course, resist the temptation to pull them bodily into the existing consensus and thus obliterate the distinctive contributions they make to our society.

While Trimbur agrees with the social constructionists on the need to preserve “the value of civility and consensus,” he fears that the premium they place on working toward agreement works implicitly to support the interests of the status quo (610). The narrow meaning of consensus that all too often surfaces in the practice of collaborative education identifies “it with the current professional monopolies of knowledge” and concedes “the authority of knowledge to the professional judgment of experts, to academic specialties and professional training, to the wider meritocratic order of a credentialed society” (611). In such consensus, Trimbur seems convinced, all may have a voice in the agreement reached, but only a few, socially credentialed, voices have any real chance of being heard when critical judgments are being made. Conversely, Trimbur’s conflict-based consensus, or dissensus, functions as a “powerful critical instrument to interrogate the conversation—to interrupt it in order to investigate the forces which determine who may speak and what may be said, what inhibits communication and what makes it possible” (612). Dissensus would save

institutionalized misreadings of social construction from their holders' foundationalist complacency, from their willingness to confuse the social origin of much of what passes as "knowledge" with a valid standard for certifying the academic theory of the day.

Instead of settling for a version of consensus that restricts the society that counts to a few experts, a new class of academic priests, Trimbur would have us acknowledge the value of conflict in keeping academic discourse alive, in preventing it from settling into dogma. Harris, similarly, insists that "it might prove more useful (and accurate) to view our task as adding to or complicating" our students' "uses of language" (19). Fontaine endeavors to lead her students from mere imitation of academic norms into a more conscious awareness of the social dynamics at work in all discourse. She wants them to "understand language behavior as a set of specific linguistic choices that are politically and psychologically motivated and to understand the 'cultural battle' into which they enter when they join our classes." By her standards, good writers, then, will not be those students who mindlessly imitate or parody the academic community at their own expense; rather, they will be students who have made conscious choices about the language they use, aware that it deeply affects their knowledge and view of the world ("Unfinished" 94). Clearly, Trimbur, Harris, and Fontaine place a premium on imparting knowledge of the social forces surrounding discourse in order to prepare their students for entrance into the academic conversations around them with effective and original individual voices.

Trimbur's concept of dissensus clearly blends the goal of consensus with a tolerance of conflict and individual thought, but this vision of consensus registers as a constant throughout the wide range of thought examined in this chapter. Although Joseph Harris, Sheryl Fontaine, and John Trimbur unite in opposing academic English on the grounds that it suppresses other language and values systems, a close examination of David Bartholomae's and Patricia Bizzell's versions of the movement shows a similar respect for cultural and personal diversity. In fact, they seem motivated by desire to give students the tools needed to remake, rather than merge facelessly into, the present academy. On an even broader scale, Thomas Kuhn's account of revolutionary changes in scientific paradigms and Richard Rorty's account of the interaction between normal and abnormal discourse demonstrate the potential for balancing the search for productive forms of discourse that enable enquiry to proceed on a daily basis with respect for the new patterns of thought and expression needed to keep the academy and its disciplines alive as makers and re-makers of knowledge.

CHAPTER FIVE

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION AND AUTHORITY

We have already examined social construction and how using the concept allows us to place the history of rhetoric in social context and enhances our understanding of relativism and consensus through a clearer sense of the implications of pluralism and a tolerance of conflicting perspectives. Given the interest that social constructionists show in group interactions, the questions of authority that arise in the course of all social transactions also bear examination. As scholars and teachers, we should be particularly interested in the relationships of power and authority between writers and audiences. In the classroom, we should also pay attention to the relationships between teachers and students, especially given the often tenuous professional status of the graduate students and junior faculty teaching the majority of composition classes in many of the departments that house them within the institutional structures of colleges and universities. In this chapter, I examine several attempts to understand the lines of power drawn between teachers and students, beginning with the general historical studies of James Berlin and narrowing to the disciplinary studies of Gerald Graff and Stephen North. Finally, I survey classroom-level approaches to the issue of authority in composition instruction.

Using this survey, I hope to establish a simple hypothesis: concepts associated with social construction surface most often in the study and practice of composition

"discoveries are made by pursuing possibilities suggested by existing knowledge" (67) and links the value of any given scientific contribution to three factors highly reminiscent of Kuhn's theory: "its *exactitude*, its *systematic importance*, and the *intrinsic interest of its subject matter*" (66). More importantly for the question of authority, however, Polanyi identifies a level of implicit agreement that underlies these relatively explicit areas of common ground. He insists that this "tacit knowledge" is "an indispensable element of all knowing" and that

if we know a great deal that we *cannot tell*, and if even that which we *can* tell is accepted by us as true only in view of its bearing on a reality beyond it, a reality which may yet manifest itself in the future in an indeterminate range of unsuspected results; if indeed we recognize a great discovery, or else a great personality, as *most real*, owing to the wider range of its yet unknown future manifestations: then the idea of knowledge based on wholly identifiable grounds collapses, and we must conclude that the transmission of knowledge from one generation to the other must be predominantly tacit. (60-61)

This unspoken knowledge that grounds our explicit statements arises from social interaction, from functioning within any group committed to a set of common goals, and provides a coherent sense of shared experience that enables the expressions generated within the group to make sense to its members: to Polanyi, "the most

pedagogy when we seek either to fix or to place the loci of authority for the ways we teach. Thus, each author chosen for this chapter grounds his or her conclusion about the proper locus of authority for composition instruction in a distinctive judgment about the social contexts that matter for teaching. The contexts that these authors cite include society in general, the institutional arrangements that determine the structures of English departments, the many forms of research encouraged in composition study, and the specific needs of an actual classroom filled with students. Each of these figures participates in this search for context and either directly adopts social construction as a tool to use in the process or indirectly comes to similar conclusions. An examination of the very different conclusions that these teachers reach can help us understand the wide variety of social circumstances that influence writing instruction.

Michael Polanyi's related concepts of "tacit knowledge" and "mutual control" and the interaction between "claim," "data," and "warrant" within the logical system Stephen Toulmin introduces in *The Uses of Argument* can serve as useful tools for understanding precisely how social conditions on any scale can be interpreted to act as the "authority" for pedagogical theory and practice in all pursuits. Polanyi works to elucidate the philosophical and historical bases of authority for scientific knowledge and, like Thomas Kuhn, uses the paradigm as his point of departure. Thus, in an essay entitled "A Society of Explorers" from his book *The Tacit Dimension*, Polanyi identifies "the paradigm of all progress in science" with the proposition that

daring innovations of science spring from a vast range of information which the scientist accepts unchallenged as a background to his problem" (72). When scientists regulate their fields, moreover, Polanyi points to a "*principle of mutual control*" in which "each scientist is both subject to criticism by all others and encouraged by their appreciation of him" (72). Polanyi even expands the concept of mutual control to cover whole disciplines, since scientific fields "form *chains of overlapping neighborhoods* extending over the entire range of science" (72). The basis for this mechanism of self-regulation is both tacit and social, a largely unspoken sense of what will and will not work within a field.

Stephen Toulmin's concepts of claim, data, and warrant spring from a system of logic in which he seeks to make many of the implicit assumptions hidden within traditional logic explicit. In his 1958 monograph, *The Uses of Argument*, Toulmin stands against a school of philosophy for which "the implicit model for logic is now to be neither an explanatory science nor a technology, but pure mathematics" (4) and prefers Aristotle's acknowledgment "that logic is somehow concerned with the ways in which men think, argue, and infer" (5). To this end, Toulmin asserts that "logic (we may say) is generalised jurisprudence" (7). Once the analogy is accepted, we can see that in much the same way that "a main task for jurisprudence is to characterise the essentials of the legal process," those interested in logic are bound to "characterise what may be called 'the rational process,' the procedures and categories by using which claims-in-general can be argued and settled" (7). Three

of the most useful elements that Toulmin includes in the apparatus he constructs to carry out this task are the concepts of "claim," "data," and "warrant."

Toulmin's use of these terms stems from his judicial interpretation of logic. Therefore, he distinguishes "between the *claim* or conclusion whose merits we are seeking to establish" and "the facts we appeal to as foundation for the claim" (*Uses* 97). This distinction can be applied readily to the present attempt to connect specific methods of composition instruction to the conditions that have played an important part in shaping them: we can treat the pedagogy as a claim that approaching instruction in the prescribed manner represents the most appropriate response to the needs, both cognitive and social, of the students. The instructor's assessment of these needs, of course, makes up the facts, or "*data*," the instructional approach is meant to address. Thus far, Toulmin's scheme helps us examine the intended purpose of the composition pedagogy we encounter but offers little aid in evaluating the appropriateness of the prescription for the ailment it is directed against. More information linking data and claim is needed.

Toulmin's "warrant" fills this gap by allowing us to expand upon the circumstances that justify the logical connections that we make in the course of rational argument. The first example cited of the concept in *The Uses of Argument* presents "a man born in Bermuda will be a British subject" as a warrant for linking the claim "Harry is a British subject" to the data "Harry was born in Bermuda" (99). These warrants, then, operate as "general, hypothetical statements, which can act as

bridges, and authorise the sort of step to which our particular argument commits us” (98). In this chapter, I often treat the social conditions that seem to underlie instruction as a kind of data and the pedagogy itself as a claim about how best to respond to those conditions. The argument that ties the two together functions as a warrant for both the validity of the linkage (that is, for the incommensurable singularity of the fit between data and claim) and the claim that the process of social construction actually operates in a given case, that social forces really do play an important role in shaping a specific instructional approach. Finally, it should be noted that while Toulmin includes “modal qualifiers” and “conditions of exception or rebuttal” in his logic in order to allow for unusual circumstances, the concepts of claim, data, and warrant seem to suffice for the inquiry carried out in this chapter.

In *Rhetoric and Reality: Writing Instruction in American Colleges, 1900-1985*, James Berlin, a thinker known in composition circles for his Marxist orientation and his interest in the questions central to social construction, surveys this century’s writing instruction in the United States and devotes particular attention to the social context of the pedagogical movements that have come and gone during the period. In his “Overview” to *Rhetoric and Reality*, Berlin insists that, because “the transformations that occur in a society’s rhetorics are also related to larger social and political developments,” he feels compelled to account for the ideology of rhetoric and to tie it to “the pluralistic conceptions of social and political arrangements that are present in a society at any given time” (4). Berlin clearly is as concerned with

the social and political implications of the theories he examines as he is with their more purely educational facets.

Berlin's place in composition studies, in fact, depends upon a consistent theme in his body of work: his exploration of the connection between rhetoric and the cultural forces that help shape it. For example, he offers to regard composition teachers as modern sophists, proponents of a rhetorical conception of language practices who seek to unravel the mystifications of discourse found in a variety of theories of literary criticism. These teachers would also oppose those who "see literary texts as the products of a special class of people using the language in a manner that transcends the historical, the social, and the political" ("Reply" 135). Elsewhere, he stipulates that "to teach writing is to argue for a version of reality, and the best way of knowing and communicating it" that teachers must confront "whether or not they consciously choose to do so" ("Contemporary" 766). Throughout *Rhetoric and Reality*, Berlin looks as closely at the social and cultural context surrounding instruction as he looks at its theories and practices.

Berlin's treatment of the nineteen-thirties serves as a prime example of his attention to the ways in which pedagogy is constructed within the social realities of its period, a time when the wider circumstances enveloping education shaped its dimensions more than is usual. Berlin's consistently anti-foundationalist approach to history is shown clearly by his careful and thorough examination of the context surrounding the teaching of writing at the time. With the thirties, the most important

social factors to acknowledge are “the Depression at home and the threat of fascism from abroad” (88). These overwhelming calamities stimulated “a return to the social reform impulse found among the proponents of progressive education before World War I” that led to a willingness “to view writing as a social activity, growing within a social context and carrying social consequences” (81). Here, as elsewhere, Berlin takes pains to link society and rhetoric, viewing rhetoric not as a self-contained world in itself but as a natural outgrowth of the conditions present in society at any given time.

While Berlin examines the composition instruction at the center of his study in the context of contemporary culture, he supplements this synchronic focus with attention to an equally important diachronic dimension. Like Rorty and Geertz at work in their corners of the academy, Berlin works to illumine each instructional theory’s connection to the preceding theories that constitute its immediate pedagogical context within the universities. The approach to composition taken during the prewar progressive education Berlin refers to in introducing the social rhetoric of the nineteen-thirties finds its fullest expression in the work of Fred Newton Scott, a figure sufficiently immersed in the mainstream of the academy to have served as president of both the Modern Language Association and the National Council of Teachers of English, a resume that speaks forcefully enough of his standing within the profession to undermine any attempt to push his ideas to the margins of the field. His rhetoric serves as “the most complete embodiment of John

Dewey's notion of progressive education," centering around "the conviction that the aim of all education is to combine self-development, social harmony, and economic integration" (47). Scott is "throughout intent on providing for public discourse in a democratic and heterogeneous society" and advocates "a rhetoric of public service, a system distinguished by its ethical commitment to the public good" (48, 49).

Other components of the rhetorical heritage of the socially-conscious composition theory that marked the nineteen-thirties seem less obvious, for the framers of the movement reacted as much against the inadequacies of the two widely practiced existing approaches as to the social and cultural exigencies of the times. Berlin describes current-traditional rhetoric as "the rhetoric of the meritocracy" and as a "positivistic and practical" course "designed to provide the new middle-class professionals with the tools to avoid embarrassing themselves in print," which focused on "superficial correctness: spelling, punctuation, usage, syntax and on paragraph structure" to the exclusion of matters, such as audience and purpose, that stand at the center of most composition instruction today (35, 38). Others advocated an "elitist and aristocratic" rhetoric of liberal culture which contended that "the aims of writing instruction in the English department ought to be to encourage those few students who possessed genius" and to offer "courses in literature" in order to "provide lessons in taste, emphasizing appreciation, contemplation, and self-expression" for all the other students (35), a curriculum which seems to reflect the emphasis on genius and the cultivation of taste we encounter in Hugh Blair.

Berlin seems to believe that practitioners of each approach sought to cultivate the individual talents deemed socially appropriate for their students' position in society, but neither group looked beyond the individual to the events occurring in the larger world beyond the college gates. Those who taught in these ways found a ready-made warrant for their pedagogical claims in the traditional practices of American universities; they could derive the authority to proceed from the American preference for the individual over the community, the Polanyian tacit knowledge held within our culture that social change is best implemented one person at a time.

Yet another early twentieth-century rhetoric continued this emphasis on individual preparation in a fairly traditional academic vein but at least did so in order to further the good of society. An expressionistic school of rhetoric that combined the promotion of both aesthetic expression and Freudian personal adjustment fostered "individual transformation—not social change—as the key to both social and personal well-being" (Berlin 74). This transformation was encouraged through art. Berlin cites an article by Oakley Calvin Johnson of the University of Michigan in which he argued "that, since writing is an art, all writing teachers must themselves be writers," a sentiment echoed several decades later in the writing-as-process movement of the nineteen-sixties and later. Johnson asserted that "there must be less dogmatism, less pedantry, less arbitrary formalism, and more freedom, more up-to-datedness in language and in theme material, more emphasis on individuality." Again, parallels to more recent theories that emphasize individual voice stand out,

as does his egalitarian vision of the classroom community, in which “freshman composition teachers are the counterparts of painters, poets, and musicians, and must not allow ‘practical’ people to reduce them to theme correctors” (76). While this expressionistic rhetoric does establish a community of working writers, it still fails to respond to the social forces crashing around them, particularly in difficult times. The emphasis instead falls on the social dynamics of the group itself.

The instructional approaches described in Berlin’s section on social rhetoric turn from the attempt to improve society through cultivation of individual expression, literary taste, or mechanical correctness to the task of facing the “increasing store of human misery” accompanying the thirties by becoming “more clearly focused on writing as a response to social contexts” (82). Some of these teachers concentrated on subject matter, like Herbert Ellsworth Childs, “who wished to return a rhetoric of political and social action to the center of the curriculum” (84-85). Berlin refers to other instructors, including Karl W. Dykema, who “devoted an entire term to student essays” on the topic of “multiplying functions of government in the domain of economy, health, safety, education, and cultural development,” and Earl L. Vance, whose course centered for “an entire semester on the student’s writing about her hometown” (85-86). All of these instructors seemed bent on making a fairly direct connection between the socially-oriented content in their courses and an ability to produce students who will be better suited for citizenship in a difficult and dangerous world. In an important sense, a concern with the effect of these social conditions

authorizes instructors to include the social content that characterizes this approach to education and marks a departure from teachers who frame curricula from more traditional materials. Seen within Toulmin's logic, the difficult times gave these teachers all the warrant needed for their claim that composition instruction should be used to prepare students to live socially useful lives. Under less obviously challenging conditions, their pedagogies would have been more difficult to sell, that is, if they had even cared to make the effort.

Berlin's list of institutions represented by these teachers, which include an agricultural college in Oregon, a junior college in Michigan, and a women's college in Florida, reflects both the geographical coverage of the movement and the willingness of relatively utilitarian schools far from the theoretical centers of prestigious Eastern universities to incorporate an awareness of social conditions intended to foster an interest in participatory democracy in the core of their curricula. Their interest in the social realities around them may have echoed their vulnerability to the social forces at work around them. The traditionally wealthy patrons of Ivy League schools presumably could afford to pay less direct attention to the poverty and social dislocation affecting the less fortunate students training to pull themselves, along with the country as a whole, out of the Depression than the supporters of these less prestigious and economically institutions. In this case, the immediate social situation, the inconveniently brutal reality controlling the daily lives of the bulk of the population, may have been an important factor in leading teachers at these schools

to include elements of anti-foundationalism in their programs, whether they sought it or not. In such times, theory needs a strong component of pragmatically motivated attention to pressing social realities.

Along with the emphasis on socially responsive content, the creators of the writing instruction sponsored under the social rhetoric paid attention to the social process of generating ideas and framing them in written expression. Some instructors emphasized "small-group work with the teacher and peers in order to make freshman composition," in the words of Frank Earl Ward, "a course in the art of social life" (Berlin 82). H. W. Davis adopted a view which "was close to the epistemic," the school of contemporary rhetoric which focuses on the ways in which the writing process generates meaning as opposed to simply recording the results of prior perception or thought, a natural fit with the basic concept in social construction of the social and historical generation of ideas. Davis believed that "language is an activity that is a part of the entire range of the student's behavior" and that writing should be seen "as a social act in which the teacher must focus on 'the writing process rather than the finished product'" (82). She "emphasized writing as a process of discovery, viewing writing not as transcription but as invention, the writer working out meaning in the process of writing" (84). This recognition of the content added by the act of writing itself reminds us of social construction in that ideas change in response to the specific demands of writing assignments, in answer to social exigency. It echoes the meaning generated as we try to explain ourselves to our

peers, or simply to ourselves, and our recognition of the profound interdependence of thought and its communication. When writing is truly epistemic, students become their own authorities and gain a tacit knowledge of the subject through the process of communicating to an audience.

Most importantly for social construction, the academy of the nineteen-thirties made room for "an enlightened conception of the role of a social rhetoric." This social rhetoric would work not only to prepare students for full citizenship in the democratic state, but it also promised, when practiced conscientiously and universally, to change the nature of the state itself. As late as 1938, Warren Taylor could assert that if writing teachers, the rightful guardians of this "rhetoric for democracy," can only "ensure that colleges produce students who can 'realize the value of education in political action,' . . . rhetoric will then serve for us the same function as it did in ancient Greece: it will expose error, supply evidence, elucidate courses of action, and defend us from our enemies" (86). Taylor confronts questions that occupy social constructionists today and begins to approach the territory of social construction here in much the same way as Geertz's and Booth's socially responsible forms of relativism: all three would solve community problems through resort to the give and take of human conversation and ground their approaches in the pursuit of the public good. Rhetoric, in the respect it fosters in us for a clear-sighted grasp of the present situation and the faith it inspires in individual and incommensurable solutions that use

theory as a guide without worshiping it as revealed truth, offers us the best hope of somehow muddling through whatever may befall us.

The problems faced by the composition instructors that Berlin describes, like those problems encountered by the historical figures examined in the first chapter of this study, remind us that while social construction theory may be relatively new, similar ideas have been applied for some time. Not surprisingly, given the social slant of his history, we can see glimpses of social construction in the theories that Berlin describes, particularly in his account of social rhetoric. Moreover, Berlin himself seems to incorporate elements of social construction in his historical method. He carefully attends to the intellectual and institutional circumstances surrounding the theories he describes, and, just as importantly, keeps close track of the social dynamics underlying the flow of ideas as new theories come into prominence and writing instruction changes as a result. Furthermore, when we examine the approaches to composition that Berlin describes, we can easily interpret them as responses to the warrants served by the difficult social conditions that marked the times. In an important sense, these instructors derived the authority for their pedagogy from society as a whole.

Berlin describes attempts to tailor the teaching of writing to the needs of the society waiting outside the classroom in order to find a warrant for instruction in outside conditions. To a large extent, the pedagogy of many of the instructors that he describes derives its ultimate authority from their efforts to respond directly to

social and cultural circumstances. Gerald Graff would also have us ground our teaching in a larger context—in his case, the political and intellectual matrices of the academy itself, the domains of the tacitly held knowledge that pulls universities together. In *Professing Literature: An Institutional History*, Graff confesses to dealing “only in passing with the teaching of composition,” but his description of the social tensions built into the English departments of the large research universities where so much of the teaching of writing is done sheds light on the context most composition teachers work within and the lines of institutional authority that govern their efforts, including the questions they ask and their relationships with their colleagues and their students. Graff furnishes a description of the fundamental organizational template of departments in large universities: “the field-coverage model of departmental organization” (6). Graff devotes especially close attention to the effect that this field-coverage model has on the conversations within these departments and on the disinclination of representatives of narrowly-defined specialties to engage other specialists in dialogue, much less to question their central assumptions. Graff examines the roots of the field-coverage model by following the series of conflicts between researchers and critics that has persisted since the inception of the modern university. His treatment of the struggle between the philological investigators and the generalists who populated English departments from the turn of the century to the beginning of the First World War admirably illustrates tensions that continue to this day.

Graff introduces the investigators as an “advance guard” of the “professionalism by which the old ‘college’ became the new ‘university’” which consisted of “a German-trained cadre of scholarly ‘investigators,’ who promoted the idea of scientific research and the philological study of the modern languages,” though their actual efforts seldom reached past the Renaissance. Although contemporary critics reviled this approach as “narrow, positive science” bent on usurping the place of the “broad, humanistic generality” typical of earlier colleges, it transformed the university (55, 68). These investigators, however, have had more influence on English departments as social units than on the subject matter of the discipline: it is easier to find traces of their professional orientation than of the subject of philology in most contemporary departments.

With the new professionalism ushered in by the investigators, “bureaucratic administration took the place of traditional ideology as the bond holding the institution,” the new university, “together.” This new bureaucracy marks the infancy of the field-coverage model at the center of Graff’s argument. Graff quotes Laurence R. Veysey on the establishment of an institutionally-sanctioned “pattern of isolation” that “imposed a positive ‘need to fail to communicate,’ in which ‘each academic group normally refrained from too rude or brutal an unmasking of the rest’” and the presumption of expertise granted specialists made them resistant to criticism from outside the field. Veysey’s assertion that “the university thrived, as it were, on

ignorance" finds an echo in Graff's critique of the departmental system much later in the century (60).

The investigators had no need to wait for Graff's opposition. The generalists of the early American university defined professionalism differently than the investigators, preferring that "professional research" be used as "a vehicle of general humanistic culture" and the promotion of "cultural 'leadership'" (81). These generalists stood for what many, even Graff at the outset of his investigation, have considered the central, if not the official, rationale for English and other humanistic studies: "concepts like 'humanism' and 'cultural tradition,' more or less in the sense associated with the name of Matthew Arnold." As representatives "of an earlier era, when literary men could still act as if reflection was beneath the dignity of the gentleman, whose culture was tacitly presupposed," generalists could uphold the cause of high literary art (2). They could rely upon a largely unspoken argument about what constitutes liberal education to protect them from even needing to justify their methods. Thus, the warrants for their pedagogy are derived from a much narrower set of social contexts than those held by the professors of the nineteen-thirties that Berlin describes.

In line with their reverence for literary art, those that Graff characterizes as generalists act as "spokesmen for the missionary view of literature they inherited from Arnold, Ruskin, and other Victorian apostles of culture" (81). This messianic impulse marked their work, as they channeled into literature emotions that, a

half-century earlier, would have likely been expressed in evangelical Christianity, Unitarianism, or Transcendentalism, investing the experience of literature with the redemptive influence their ministerial ancestors had attributed to the conversion experience (85). These generalists “tended to dispense with elaborate pedagogical theories and methods in the effort, as they saw it, to let the great masterpieces of literature teach themselves” (86). They were bent on experiencing the personal, intuitive, and aesthetic dimensions of literature before beginning consideration of its scientific and professional potential.

In his treatment of the investigators and the generalists, Graff emphasizes the open and often very vocal disagreement at the heart of early English departments. The field-coverage model handed down to modern departments through the specialization established by the investigators, conversely, works to dampen conflict and to force theoretical and professional arguments into the background. We have seen from Veysey’s statement on the “pattern of isolation” that marked the new university bureaucracy how members of the earlier department respected the sanctity of the specialties among them, but their reticence seems more a matter of courtesy than one of institutional conviction. According to Graff’s assessment of English departments since 1965, common courtesy has all-too-often evolved into a full-blown conspiracy of mutually-advantageous silence.

Graff grants the field-coverage model two real advantages. First, it makes “the department and the curriculum virtually self-regulating” and creates “a system in

which the job of instruction could proceed as if on automatic pilot, without the need for instructors to debate aims and methods" (7). This real gain in efficiency reminds us of the model's scientific origin through the resemblance of its tacit structure to the paradigmatic form of Thomas Kuhn's normal science, another intellectual enterprise that streamlines scholarly work by treating current ideas as foundational and generally not open to dispute from those working outside of the field. Although conflict can occur within individual fields, the field-coverage model normally confers immunity from external scrutiny, thus limiting the scope of conversation in most English departments.

The second advantage associated with the field-coverage model gives departments "enormous flexibility in assimilating new ideas, subjects, and methods," since "innovation even of a threatening kind" can "be welcomed by simply adding another unit to the aggregate of fields to be covered" (7). The parallel to Kuhn's view of science noted above breaks down at this point, since a paradigm shift marks the point when no amount of tinkering-with and adding-to existing theory can explain adequately the anomalies that prompt the introduction of new ideas. This additive method of conflict resolution has no need of an abnormal academy to match the abnormal science that Kuhn insists lies behind scientific revolutions. As described by Graff, the field-coverage model allows departments to operate so smoothly precisely because it short-circuits the crises that normally arise in the course of intellectual pursuits.

As the example of Kuhn suggests, Graff's critique of the reliance of most large English departments on the field-coverage system seems to be a response to the same sort of questions that interest those attracted to social construction. Graff never professes overt allegiance to social construction in *Professing Literature*, but his attack on the complacency that he believes is built into the current structural principle of academic departments demonstrates how much attention he pays to the social interaction that those influenced by social construction insist plays an essential role in the process of our thought and expression; the lack of social interaction and intellectual interchange across narrowly defined fields seems to be precisely what troubles Graff most about contemporary English departments. Although Graff gives advocates of the field-coverage model credit for avoiding "the chronic stagnation that resulted from merely rejecting innovation" that plagued "the nineteenth-century college," he notes that "whenever cross-factional conflict threatens to break out" in modern departments, "it tends to be muffled by the expedient of adding another unit to an aggregate that remains unchanged or silently adapts." This ability to simply and painlessly append ideas to an ever-expanding conceptual corpus "turns the university into a center of immense intellectual resources" and "confers upon scholars a bracing degree of independence that is good in the short run for professional productivity" but only at a dear price (250).

Besides exacting a "high cost in intellectual community, educational effectiveness, and professional morale," this accumulative pattern robs departments of the social

exchange needed to foster a sense of community or of corporate purpose (250). Leaving each field within the department to its own devices seems to promote an agreeable sense of the implicit incommensurability of the various studies represented in departments, a tolerance of different ways of doing things. This is a natural development in an amalgam of so many interests. A good example of this tolerance is Wayne Booth's description of the effects of the pluralism at the heart of the Chicago school of literary criticism on its adherents who habitually "qualify" their statements with the

usually unspoken phrase, "If you choose to begin with my principles, my selection of data, and my choice of method, then . . . [and] "This is at most what is revealed in only one of many valid perspectives. Put it all in quotations marks." ("Profession" 22)

However, the general unwillingness of department members to interest themselves in the work of colleagues and form opinions on the issues they face that Graff identifies in the discipline as it stands today leaves the typical English department ill-equipped to appreciate and profit from the diversity of its members and their interests.

No matter how passionate scholars in Graff's large university department may be about their own small corners of content and theory, they will, if Graff's indictment is fair, see all other academic specialties as a frozen bodies of knowledge to be "absorbed rather than as social products with a history that they might have a personal and critical stake in" (258). Unless beneficially subverted by

interdisciplinary conflicts that weaken the hold of the field-coverage model, these basic institutional arrangements that structure departments actively suppress the process of social construction at work within all intellectual enterprises. By encouraging narrow academic specialization and discouraging specialists in one field from interesting themselves in, much less arguing with, the tacit claims to authority made within the domains of other academics, supporters of a rigidly enforced field-coverage create an image of the university department as a home to any number of scholars who efficiently follow their own academic interests but who, through lack of productive conflict and discussion, fail to come together as a community with common goals tempered by respect for individual insight. We can take Graff to imply that the tacit qualities of the paradigms that all-too-often bind English departments weaken the warrants that these paradigms hold for the discipline. Perhaps the social locus of our practice is too poorly defined to give us a secure sense of purpose or commitment in the face of the academic fragmentation that surrounds us.

The sensitivity to the anti-foundational quality of ideas that characterizes social constructionists warns us to take theories like Graff's vision of the implications of the field coverage model instrumentally rather than absolutely: we should accept them as insights into a complex of social systems rather than as exhaustive descriptions of directly perceivable reality. Moreover, anti-foundationalist social constructionists should be able to realize, even more than others, the danger in mistaking theories

about the institutional characteristics of the academy for precise descriptions of the behavior of all of its members. The general validity of the field-coverage model and Graff's description of its implications for English studies should not be taken to mean that individual members of the profession forfeit their intellectual curiosity into matters that fall outside their professional purview. Even so, social constructionists, with their interest in the intellectual dynamics of ideas in the groups that hold them, will likely find Graff's general portrait of the discipline more persuasive than not.

Stephen North also comments on composition studies and the English departments that house them, but his work focuses even more on the institutional constraints that affect the theory and practice of writing instruction. Unlike Graff and Berlin, who offer historical studies covering roughly the past century, North's *The Making of Knowledge in Composition: Portrait of an Emerging Field* reflects its title by focusing on contemporary composition and speculating on the form it might take in the future. The critical question in considering such a work in the light of social construction lies in determining where North finds knowledge being created in the discipline. In his "Preface," North defines composition in the terms he inherited when he entered the profession in the middle nineteen-seventies as "the study of the doing, learning, and teaching of writing," but he found the need for a more sophisticated scheme by the time he wrote *The Making of Knowledge* in the middle nineteen-eighties.

In a stratagem typical of composition's eclecticism, North seizes on the concept of the methodological community, a concept borrowed from sociology. As North quotes its originator, Paul Diesing, such

a community is located by finding people who interact regularly with one another in their work. They read and use each other's ideas, discuss each other's work, and sometimes collaborate . . . Their interaction is facilitated by shared beliefs and values—goals, myths, terminology, self-concepts—which make their work mutually intelligible and valuable. Although they do not all use exactly the same procedure in their work, there is a great deal of similarity, and the differences are accepted as variant realizations of the same values. (North 2)

According to North, the emphasis here on shared problems and shared values is enhanced by a willingness to leave "room for individuals to belong to—to be fluent knowledge-makers in—more than one such community" (2). Like Graff, then, North holds communication across field lines to be a virtue, indeed the cardinal virtue, in promoting the health of a discipline.

North, then, describes composition by cataloging the various processes, or modes, of creating knowledge in composition and by attempting to reconstruct the political hierarchies that determine the balance of power within the discipline. North cannot remain satisfied with his descriptions of the characteristic activities of the

Practitioners, Historians, Philosophers, Critics, Experimentalists, Clinicians, Formalists, and Ethnographers [North's capitals] that make up the most important methodological communities that he can find in composition studies. Nor can he rest easily with his qualification that many members of the field hold membership in more than one community, though "most members of the field do give their primary allegiance to one community or another" (2). Such a static picture of the smaller fields within the larger discipline gains an artificial clarity only at the cost of obscuring the tensions among the constituent communities that determine how resources are allocated and questions are selected for further study.

Much of North's deepest interest and most careful attention is directed to the relationships between methodological communities and particularly to the forces that favor some styles while frowning on others. For example, he remarks on the tendency of most commentators on composition "to trample roughshod over the claims of previous inquirers, especially the 'indigenous' population that" he "will call Practitioners." At the same time, he protests that

much of what teachers, and to a lesser extent writers, have claimed to know about writing has been ignored, discounted, or ridiculed—so that despite their overwhelming majority, they have been effectively disenfranchised as knowledge-makers in their own field. (3)

Clearly, North is concerned, as are the teachers of most composition classes, with the impacts of institutional structures and the social arrangements often associated with

university departments. He shows a keen interest in the effect that the lines of power have on the possible areas of study in composition—on the paradigms successful compositionists can afford to take seriously.

Some of the methodological communities that North identifies within composition fall into traditional academic categories. According to North's description of composition studies, Experimentalists, including James Britton and the other authors of *The Development of Writing Abilities* (11-18), accept a number of "fundamental positivist assumptions" central to the hard sciences: "that the world is an orderly place, a place of non-random causes and effects; that order exists quite apart from our experience of it; and that the principles of that order are accessible to human inquiry" (146). The eager embrace of positivism that North attributes to the Experimentalists seems antithetical to social construction to the extent that it denies social forces any substantive role in shaping the discipline and its central assumptions and determining which questions its members will accept as interesting and valid. Experimentalists, however, enhance the institutional prestige of composition studies by tying the field to the well-established legitimacy accorded the sciences within the academic establishment of large universities that measure success predominantly in terms of research grants and quantifiable results.

The presence of some Experimentalist work in composition studies, even work that has little lasting influence on the field, thus is important to the social franchise composition can hold within the departments that house it and within the academy

as a whole. According to North's taxonomy, even researchers who would tend to actively deny that social forces play any important part in formulating knowledge within the discipline make it possible for others in composition studies to find the necessary freedom to move ahead in more socially-oriented directions. A certain amount of traditional experimental work allows the efforts of those more sympathetic to social construction to be taken seriously in an academic setting because it shows members of the composition community using methods that closely resemble research elsewhere in the academy. In effect, experimental work serves as warrant for the claims of composition research in general in the minds of many who are hostile towards the discipline's inclusion in the university. The Experimentalists' theoretical opposition to social construction is effectively counterbalanced by the social legitimacy and the freedom of inquiry their presence gives composition studies.

Other methodological communities that North describes offer more straightforward support to the agenda of social construction. The Critics, represented by James Kinneavy and his *A Theory of Discourse*, are identified by their allegiance to hermeneutics, which North defines as "knowledge about the meaning of texts, derived from the act of reading, articulated as critical analysis, and refined by dialectic" and which figures in Richard Rorty's version of anti-foundationalism that places a premium on interpretation rather than on any investigator's positivistic certainty. The work of Ethnographers, which includes "Research in Context: Ethnographic Studies in English Education" by Kenneth Kantor, Dan Kirby, and

Judith Goetz, embodies “phenomenologically-based knowledge” in which “the making of knowledge is a public, communal enterprise” and “the performance of individual investigators is subject to the review of those whose sanction they seek” (276). In addition to the obvious premium placed upon social interaction, Ethnographers rely on intrinsically incommensurable sources, since their inquiry “produces stories, fictions” unique to the communities that spawn them and, once “gone, will not occur again, and therefore cannot be investigated again” (277). Their emphasis on the public interpretation of singular events probably makes the Ethnographers the most sympathetic to social construction theory of those groups allotted a position within the institutional bounds of the university.

Unlike the other groups that North describes, Practitioners have no standard recourse to preexisting paradigms for generating and communicating knowledge. While other methodological communities are institutionally encouraged to pursue inquiry through a system of tenure and promotion tied to publication in the recognized journals of their fields, Practitioners, even those as well known in composition circles as Peter Elbow, Donald Murray, and Ken Macrorie, are portrayed as the pragmatists of composition, the members who judge strategy purely by results. As North puts it, “Practitioners need to know what to do, not necessarily—other than ‘It works’—why” (40).

In contrast to North’s other methodological communities, which exist explicitly in order to conduct inquiry, inquiry represents an extraordinary mode of experience

for Practitioners. In North's framework for composition, practice becomes inquiry only

- (a) when the situation cannot be framed in familiar terms, so that any familiar strategies will have to be adapted for use;
- (b) when, although the situation is perceived as familiar, standard approaches are no longer satisfactory, and so new approaches are created for it; or
- (c) when both situation and approach are non-standard. (33)

The inquiry practiced by Practitioners, therefore, can best be seen as an expedient means of escape when tried-and-true methods fail and as a functional equivalent to Kuhn's abnormal science and Rorty's abnormal discourse. If their work could find formal expression and come to define new problems for composition as a discipline, it would be tempting to see Practitioners as the harbingers of Kuhnian abnormal science in composition studies. Unfortunately, their marginal position in the academy makes it difficult for new paradigms to arise in such humble precincts.

Although Practitioners typically work for the university, they lack professional recognition and access to the usual media of academic discourse. North describes the knowledge that they create as the lore consisting of "methods courses, practica, in-service training, staffroom talk, articles, books, required texts, uniform syllabi, and so on" (29). The common element binding most of this varied list together is its connection to a concrete situation, an anti-foundational relevance to particular

classroom situations and a general reluctance, at least until lore finds its way into theoretical argument, to make one classroom stand for all. Like the pedagogical surprises and disruptions that conjure it into being, Practitioner lore, in the pure form North describes, represents social construction in an unusually pristine state: the dynamics of meaning, even if it is generally local and ephemeral meaning, arise through the social interaction between specific teachers and specific students. Although we may wonder if many of us share the life of the pure Practitioner, since even the most naive graduate student or the least professionally-ambitious adjunct instructor is likely to be aware of the existence of composition journals and the practical benefits of publication to one's teaching and to one's career, we need to concede an important element of truth to North's portrait of the institutionally disenfranchised instructor. At the least, North's account illustrates how Practitioners incorporate social construction as a matter of pedagogical necessity. In this, as in all of North's categories, the social expectations, both tacit and explicit, can be adduced as warrants or claims about how best to serve the discipline. Thus, the general locus of authority for the theory and practice North describes seems to be composition studies itself. Furthermore, each of North's categories—with its specific interpretation of the state of writing and the needs of students and its own claims about how best to meet those needs—has its own locus and its own warrant. These approaches come together to constitute composition as a discipline, but their advocates hardly march in lock step.

SOCIAL CONTEXT PEDAGOGY

Along with these rather general overviews of the state of English and composition, there are two main approaches to teaching composition that either address the same questions as social construction or are directly influenced by the theories that make up social construction itself. One group of instructors focuses directly on the social contexts commonly faced by writers as they write and the voices available for them to assume as they enter these contexts. In this group, the locus of authority for writing is derived from social expectations placed on writing in the world outside of the classroom. The other works to pull students into a group of writers that mirrors the collaborative contexts for writing so often found outside of the classroom. In these approaches, instructors seek to develop a social unit that serves as its own locus of authority.

The first group, social context theorists, works descriptively. James Kinneavy, for example, attempts to bring order to “the present anarchy of the discipline of what is commonly categorized as ‘composition’ both in high school and colleges” by examining the social and personal needs that writers are called on to fulfill (*Theory* 1). In the process, he distinguishes between reference discourse, persuasive discourse, literary discourse, and expressive discourse. Throughout this analysis, Kinneavy describes the most important features of the social needs and pressures that call forth discourse. An understanding of these features helps writers better understand their

potential audiences in order to satisfy them more efficiently. To the extent that his description of these aims of discourse is accurate, it works as a warrant for using these aims to classify the tasks writers face in academic, professional, and personal contexts.

The first of Kinneavy's four types of discourse, reference, includes "scientific information and exploratory discourse" and generally seeks to avoid subjective elements such as emotion, opinion, and a distinctly personal point of view (77). Persuasive discourse, conversely, "is primarily focused on the decoder and attempts to elicit from him a specific emotion of conviction," a goal that depends heavily on the subjective uses of language proscribed in reference discourse (210). Kinneavy's rather specialized literary discourse "is the one with which every college student is most acquainted" and is more often concerned with the criticism and analysis of existing literature than with the production of new literary works. Finally, expressive discourse includes

diaries, journals, much ordinary conversation, especially of the type labeled "I just had to get it off my mind," cathartic interviews in psychoanalysis ("blowing off steam"), spontaneous eulogies or condemnations of someone or something, cursing, a good deal of prayer, gripe sessions, suicide notes, some book reviews, some confessions, apologias, autobiographies. (393)

In social constructionist terms, Kinneavy's work and its instructional implications share with anti-foundational thought an emphasis on specific occasions and expectations; his descriptive method in introducing each of the aims of discourse immerses students in the details of writing occasions, in the situations that will elicit future writing, despite the fact that Kinneavy's scheme potentially could be misread to justify teaching the modes of discourse from the old current-traditional theory. A better understanding of the social expectations that shape rhetorical situations justifies the use of Kinneavy's taxonomy in composition classrooms.

More than most pursuits, the teaching of technical and professional writing depends on placing students into the social context that awaits them after they leave the classroom. To this end, technical writing texts rely heavily on samples drawn from scientific and business enterprises and on assignments that place students in actual writing situations and ask them to respond appropriately. Poorly presented, this emphasis on professional contexts and standardized formats can obscure the social functions writers perform as they do their jobs. Properly framed, however, a case study approach can draw students thoroughly into the process of responding to an audience's needs and into an understanding of the functional significance of the conventions so prevalent in business and technical writing. Technical communication instructors often claim to model their teaching on conditions found in scientific and professional contexts. They find warrant for their methods in their fidelity to the contours of work within these arenas.

Two texts that use case studies effectively are Michael L. Keene's *Effective Professional and Technical Writing* and John M. Lannon's *Technical Writing*. Keene's book seeks to address "the kinds of writing tasks and problems professionals in all fields may encounter" (iii). While Keene describes the formal expectations conventionally attached to professional writing—matters of spacing, diction, tone, and the like—he takes care to explain the functions these required elements perform for an audience. For example, the chapter on letters and memos interlaces samples of letters and memos that illustrate the conventional formats that audiences expect with paragraphs describing the rationale behind each feature. In an outline for simple request letters, the description of each paragraph in a successful letter is followed by an explanation of how the paragraph enhances the letter as a whole. The "'goodwill' closing and statement of reader benefits (if there are any)," Keene tells his readers, "are especially important in this kind of letter or memo, because the rest of it concentrates on what the reader can do for you than on what you can do for the reader" (121). Keene's book prepares students to deliver an accurate and usable product once they go to work, but it also initiates them into the social processes surrounding this kind of writing. Keene, then, assumes that most students know relatively little about the writing expectations in business and technical contexts. The warrant for his approach is based on the supposition that introducing students to these contexts will promote the development of important technical communications skills.

Lannon also supplements his account of the distinguishing features of technical discourse with a description of the social exigencies of writing. Where Keene addresses the social rationale behind each conventional characteristic of technical writing point by point, Lannon structures his book around a problem-solving scheme in which each writing situation forces students to confront three inter-related problems: the information problem, the persuasion problem, and the ethics problem. In composing instructions, for example, writers must simultaneously consider the information problem of thoroughly understanding and explaining the process under consideration, the persuasion problem of presenting the instructions in an accessible and striking format, and the ethical and legal problem of including sufficient warnings and cautions to eliminate any reasonable possibility of user injury (325-354).

Lannon undercuts the usual emphasis on the uniqueness of technical and professional discourse by paying attention to the features it has in common with writing in general. The importance of clearly and objectively transmitting information to an audience is traditionally included in technical and professional writing texts, but the attention Lannon pays to persuasion and ethics is relatively unusual. Rather than isolate technical writing into its own wing of the academy of rhetoric, Lannon draws attention to the elements that are common to all writing and then describes the social dynamics found in science and business that combine them in a unique way. Technical and professional writing is itself seen as a social construction: audience expectations and workplace pressures mold the familiar elements of writing into a

distinct genre. Lannon's warrant for this approach is that a clearer understanding of the tacit problems faced in technical settings will help students function more effectively within the corporate and scientific cultures they will eventually adopt.

In an important variation of this theory in which the needs of a wider social context are considered in developing and justifying an instructional approach, teachers concentrate on the voices available for writers to assume in their work. We have already considered the work of academic English theorists like David Bartholomae and Patricia Bizzell in teaching students to assume the language and thought patterns of the academy and to become, in effect, intellectually bilingual, able to use the discourse of the academy and workplace without losing command of the language they bring into class. Academic English can be seen as a specialized application of Kinneavy's work in categorizing the purposes of writing in its attempt to understand and codify the characteristic patterns of academic discourses in order to make them more accessible to students. Most students, however, have no intention of taking up permanent residence in the academy. They see it, instead, as a means to an end and as an avenue to garnering the credentials they need in order to follow other, more prosperous, pursuits. A facility in academic English may help these relative novices gather the knowledge and experience that will help them reach their goals, but it is unlikely to be as useful in their careers.

It might be productive to look back to Kinneavy's categories of writing—reference, persuasion, and expression—and prepare composition students to

adopt the voices appropriate to each whenever the occasion demands it. Assignments could be framed that would ask students to act as reporters covering a question of interest to their college communities, scholars coming to grips with questions drawn from their academic fields, or advocates addressing an issue of public controversy. By trying out a series of the roles authors are often asked to assume in many professions, students can acclimate themselves to voices they will use later in the relatively safe confines of a composition class. This broader focus should better motivate students to develop a working command of academic language and root the academic English movement more firmly in the social settings that could give it practical meaning to the bulk of its intended audience. In this way, students can begin to assume a sense of authorship and personal responsibility for their ideas and for the choices they make in framing and communicating them.

COLLABORATIVE PEDAGOGY

A second set of composition theorists sympathetic to the central principles of social construction advocates the cultivation of a collaborative atmosphere in the writing classroom so that students could serve as a genuine audience for one another. During the resurgence of rhetoric that took shape in the nineteen-sixties and found publication a few years later, one group of instructors sought to cultivate the

individual voices of students by establishing a strong community of writers within each composition classroom, a strategy warranted by faith that small group dynamics can encourage novice writers to develop a sense of voice that will serve them well in less sheltered contexts. In his book *Writing Without Teachers*, Peter Elbow proposes a teacherless writing class that he describes as follows:

It is a class of seven to twelve people. It meets at least once a week. Everyone reads everyone else's writing. Everyone tries to give each writer a sense of how his words were experienced. The goal is for the writer to come as close as possible to being able to see and experience his own words through seven or more people.

(77)

The emphasis on constant feedback from a closely knit group of writers ensures a strong collaborative current in the class, but the attention devoted to the individual writer's enhanced perception holds Elbow's focus on the expressive needs of each writer. Elbow gambles that the model constructed in the social interaction found in a given classroom accurately reflects the dynamics of writing outside of the class.

The group in the teacherless class serves as an extension of all its members. Elbow reflects the individualism we associate with the sixties in characterizing writing as "a transaction with yourself" (76). He advocates group work for pragmatic reasons, not as a statement of theoretical conviction. Collaborative work is useful as a recognition that "writing is also a transaction with other people. Writing is not just

getting things down on paper, it is getting things inside someone else's head. If you wish to improve your writing, you must also learn to do more business with other people" (76). Writing, then, acquires a social dimension when we consider the inevitability of audience in nearly everything that we write. A strongly collaborative class in which "you can feel people sticking up for themselves; making genuine demands and expectations of others that their time not be wasted, that they learn something" mimics, even intensifies, the social dynamics of writing for an audience (115).

Although Elbow incorporates group interaction into the writing classroom in order to help individual writers express themselves more effectively, it is possible to introduce collaboration as a critical element of the writing process itself. In the 1973 article "Collaborative Learning: Some Practical Models," Kenneth Bruffee leans heavily on concepts drawn from social construction in the course of establishing the need for a more collaborative pedagogy and describing how it would work. Bruffee draws a contrast between the world outside of the classroom where people "are challenging and revising many social and political traditions which have heretofore gone unchallenged" and "making this challenge not as individuals alone, but as individuals working together in collaborative ways" and an academic world in which "collaboration is considered irresponsible" and is not ordinarily recognized as "a valid form of learning" (634, 636). Writing in the wake of the student activism that marked the late nineteen-sixties and early nineteen-seventies, Bruffee is struck by the

realization, born largely of the turbulence of the times, that “classrooms remain today one of the few places where people do not organize themselves for collaborative activity” (634). Bruffee sought to employ the collectivist atmosphere of the campus of the period as a warrant for his collaborative approach: he hoped to harness the tacit sense of change that he detected all around him. We have already seen the disdain that the pace of academic and cultural change during that period elicited from conservative thinkers like Allan Bloom, but Bruffee reacts quite differently: he regrets that so little really changed.

In addition to this general critique of the depth of student activism and its fruit on American campuses, Bruffee argues that the interactive nature of writing makes the composition classroom a particularly important place to apply collaborative principles in instruction. Although Bruffee describes collaborative approaches to teaching literature, the benefits seemed primarily logistical, as in the large class in Romantic poetry in which small group work helped soften the impersonality built into such settings and helped students in what continued to be largely individual encounters with the texts under consideration. While social interaction enhanced the learning experience in the class, the presence of canonical texts as subject matter diluted the emphasis of social interaction and the importance of collectively generating a response to the literature. Small group discussion of something someone else wrote, while valuable, is not quite the same thing as students working together to create, critique, and interpret their own discourse. The analytical

processes may be nearly identical, but the sense of commitment to a group project and the growing awareness of personal responsibility for the content and form of one's work that Bruffee believes collaborative learning promotes would be missing. These benefits, of course, can be transferred to any discipline, so long as the focus is placed on collaboration, on students making meaning together, especially through writing.

For Bruffee, "in learning to write, we learn to do something, as we learn tennis, carpentry, or the violin" (640). Bruffee goes out of his way to deemphasize the cognitive components of writing in this comparison—tennis implies an opponent, carpentry, admirers for our handiwork, and music, an appreciative audience. In addition to these social contexts, all require manual skill, a level of craftsmanship analogous to the subtleties of careful composition. None, however, come so naturally to so many of us as writing. Athletics, crafts, and music are cultural inventions, but "unlike learning these activities, in learning to write we do not start from scratch," at least in the sense that our students have been using language for years, though they do enter as neophytes in academic discourse (640). Language is part of the central and common heritage of being human, although, of course, the language found in academic discourse must be learned. Bruffee proposes a collaborative setting as the best environment for such learning to take place, the most effective locus from which writing can gain authority and depth.

Bruffee also views writing as a process of self-exploration. He insists that “for adults or near-adults—that is, for college students—learning to write is in great measure a process of gaining awareness.” Collaboration provides developing writers with the built-in support of belonging to a group of peers facing a common set of obstacles, in this case the difficulties of using the language that we have all taken for granted in a more self-conscious way. As Bruffee puts it, “a good deal of learning to write, then, requires us to become actively aware of what as native speakers we already know” and to “overcome the resistances which seem inherent in writing because we are working consciously with something we would ordinarily prefer to be as little aware of as possible” (640). Because this new awareness and the natural resistance to it can be traumatic to composition students at the very time that they need to concentrate on the skills they need to learn, the support a small group can offer can help reduce the stress when such relief is needed most. Bruffee would harness the natural impulse of students to collect together outside of the classroom—for example, speaking during meals and between classes and enjoying college athletics and weekend parties—to aid in the transition toward facility in an academic setting.

In 1973, Bruffee sought to demonstrate his theory that the sense of audience fostered by collaborative work reinforces these emotional benefits through analogy to the development of language in children. According to his argument in the “Collaborative Learning” article, students “can help each other learn to write”

because each "person is, or can learn to be, an astute and demanding audience before he becomes a clear, effective writer, just as a small child becomes an astute and discriminating listener before he can speak" with equal facility (640). Group interaction gives beginning writers the developmental space needed to grow into an effective writing persona. Working as an audience for other writers can help develop an internal sense of audience for one's own work. As listeners, writers "become increasingly capable of detecting clarity, organization, logic, and substance, a development which leads eventually to the ability to write clearly, coherently, and logically themselves" (641). By helping others improve their writing, students of collaborative experiences writing learn to work more effectively themselves.

Bruffee's plan for collaborative learning involves teachers as well as students. Teachers, like students, must cast off traditional preconceptions about education: "in being asked to learn," or teach, collaboratively, teachers and students alike "are being asked to do something that their whole education has not only left them unequipped to do, but has actually militated against" (642). As conspirators in intentionally undermining "the traditional patterns of dominance and passivity" that generally held in the classrooms that Bruffee observed and worked in, students are asked to "gain an active knowledge of what they had before known only passively" and "become aware of their ignorance in a practical way, which is the necessary first step to learning more" (641, 642). Students, in Bruffee's view, are led to take a more active hand in their education when they enter into a collaborative framework.

At the same time, teachers find themselves in the paradoxical position of actively seeking a less obtrusive, if not a more passive, role in the classroom. Bruffee emphasizes the importance of instructors “progressively ‘demythologizing’” themselves “as The Teacher in the traditional sense” (642). Each teacher “must become an organizer of people into communities for a specific purpose—learning” by reapportioning “freedom and discipline within the class, thereby establishing a ‘poly-centralized’ collaborative learning community in which the teacher moves to the perimeter of the action, once the scene is set” (637).

This organizing function is critical in understanding the implications of collaborative learning for social construction. Teachers create an environment conducive to student conversation and then get far enough out of the way to allow it to proceed. In this way, they can give students room to introduce multiple perspectives on the issues under discussion and to compare a variety of ways to get things done. Often without knowing the theory behind their actions, participants in collaborative learning consider ideas anti-foundationally and grant each other’s work the respect that comes from an appreciation for the incommensurable diversity of valid forms of discourse. Bruffee’s most important contribution to social construction, therefore, lies in the practice implicit in his version of collaborative learning rather than in the explicit terms of his theory.

In a book published twenty years after the article that we have been examining entitled *Collaborative Learning: Higher Education, Interdependence, and the Authority*

of Knowledge, Bruffee widens his focus to consider more thoroughly the institutional implications of collaborative learning. Bruffee disputes the “foundational (or cognitive) assumptions about knowledge” at the root of “traditional teaching” and insists that “collaborative learning makes nonfoundational (or social constructionist) assumptions” (98). Under these “nonfoundational” assumptions, instructors need to reach an “understanding of community life” and know

something about traits that all academic and disciplinary communities share and do not share, not only among themselves but also with the communities that their students already belong to: their families, religious and ethnic groups, clubs, gangs, and cliques. They need this knowledge in order to engage and guide students’ negotiations . . . as they reacclurate themselves from the set of knowledge communities they belong to into the set of communities they hope to join. (140)

Bruffee’s acceptance of a nonfoundational epistemology clearly leads him to an emphasis on initiating students into academic culture that we have already seen advanced by proponents of academic English, who may or may not share his advocacy of collaborative methods for reaching this goal.

In shifting the locus of authority, the set of social circumstances we appeal to in finding warrant for our pedagogy, from the traditional standards of the academy to the cultural capital that students bring to our classes, Bruffee wishes to “create

conditions in which students learn to converse with one another about writing as writers do” and to “create conditions in which students learn to write to each other as do the members of the community of literate people” (73). He would have students reject the “Western liberal humanist” striving for “empathy,” or “imaginative engagement with other people, trying to ‘see the world as they see it,’” in favor of a more independent and less positivistic approach to new ideas in which students “learn to represent and speak for the communities they come from without immediate access to a familiar cultural critical mass for support” (194). Bruffee, thus, presents his collaborative pedagogy as a means of fostering individual development, but within the social context that he believes underlies most of our thought under any circumstances.

Yet another version of collaborative theory seeks to give renewed currency to classical rhetoric. In his article “Why Write,” John Gage draws a contrast between the sophists, who viewed writing as “a source of power,” Socrates, “who thought of writing as an obstacle to knowledge of the truth,” and Aristotle, “who, in reaction to both the sophists and to Socrates, viewed writing itself as a means of discovering knowledge” in which

the practice of persuasion, when it involved the search for the best available means of reaching a conclusion, led the writer through a process that enabled the discovery of adequate, sharable grounds for belief. (12)

The key element that distinguishes Aristotle in Gage's view is his social sense of epistemology, his feeling that any adequate grounds for the "contingent, changing truths" that "could be known through reason, but not without taking human motives, passions, egos into account" need to be sharable and must arise in a social context (12). Throughout this discussion, Gage works to ground his conclusions about writing from classical sources that still apply today.

Gage continues by linking this Aristotelian social rhetoric to the way that writing should be taught today. Students think and write best as a result of social experience. He would put students "into situations that require thinking from them" and are typically "created for us by our presence in an audience," since "it is when confronted by the ideas of others that we look for our own" (21). This confrontation is best effected through "an encounter with ideas that demand attention but do not necessarily lend themselves to permanent answers or to ultimate conviction." This process enables us to "teach ourselves to reason better, because in any genuine exchange of ideas our reasons will encounter resistance, calling for equivocation, qualification, and improvement." For Gage,

this is the responsible exercise of rhetoric as Aristotle conceived it: inquiry and honest argumentation practiced for the purpose of achieving cooperation among members of an audience who must continually struggle to come up with adequate, though not final, answers. (21)

The social process Gage attaches to rhetoric keeps it honest. A writing pedagogy that recognizes the importance of audience and a serious exchange of views empowers students to think their way into arguments worthy of public scrutiny, to move beyond simply memorizing and repeating an instructor's lectures. It would help introduce them to the conversations that social constructionists tell us play a large role in formulating the ideas that we accept as knowledge.

Gage looks more closely at the social interactions that take place in this conversation in an article taken from *Essays on Classical Rhetoric and Modern Discourse* entitled "An Adequate Epistemology for Composition: Classical and Modern Perspectives." As the title indicates, Gage examines the effect that the "attitude toward knowledge" has on the ability to think and to communicate. Treating rhetoric as a form of dialectic

implies that knowledge can be created in the activity of discourse, because it is potentially changed by that activity, either as discourse gets closer to it or as it emerges in the interaction of conflicting ideas.

Moreover, it registers "as something that people do together, rather than as something which any one person has" and as

an activity, carried out in relation to the intentions and reasons of others and necessarily relative to the capacities and limits of human

discourse, rather than as a commodity which is contained in one mind and transferred to another. (156)

By rejecting the positivist hope that certain knowledge can depend solely on accurate perception and clear and unbiased reporting, a dialectical attitude toward knowledge leads to the social exchange of ideas as the most likely source for useful knowledge.

As Gage points out a bit later, once we accept that “rhetoric arrives at knowledge rather than operates on it, there can be no purpose without an audience which contributes centrally to making it one” (162). His insistence on a pluralistic system for creating knowledge that depends more critically on the input of many than on the perception of one transforms rhetoric from a system for disseminating knowledge into the most important way in which it can be formed. Gage’s dialectical knowledge certainly meets the social constructionist tests of anti-foundationalism and incommensurability, but, more importantly, it invokes the paradigmatic dynamics that bring new ideas to a larger audience. Like Aristotle, Gage believes that when advocates of all sides of a question are given a fair opportunity to have their say, the truth will tend to come out on top; thus, the best guarantee of social health is a free and open rhetorical climate. Most importantly, the warrant for effective instruction in such a climate requires us to fully factor social interaction into our pedagogy.

In her text *Rhetoric for Academic Reasoning*, Linda Bense-Meyers also employs a classical perspective in teaching writing as a socially informed process. In her preface, she identifies her goal as “creating a responsible citizen-orator for modern

times” and expresses a concern with our ability to “prepare our students . . . to recognize both how the written word shapes their learning and how they can master its power to communicate responsibly.” Her pedagogical method “is predicated on how the new rhetoricians have adapted Aristotle’s enthymeme as a way to lead students to see how writers make knowledge in collaboration with their readers” (xiii). Her attempt to bring classically-derived reasoning strategies to bear on leading students to venturing interpretations of contemporary social realities can be seen in her section on argumentation, which begins “all knowledge is a product of social interaction: you learn by listening to what others are saying, by making sense out of their interpretation of the facts, and by using their knowledge to develop your own informed perspective on the subject” and by “becoming acquainted with a social community that will help you discover the argument you will want to make in your writing” (63). Bensel-Meyers pulls her students into social context with essays from Machiavelli, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Supreme Court Associate Justice Lewis Powell, Jr., and provides a structure for writing derived from classical theory in a series of content-oriented questions and revision checklists designed to guide students in restructuring their reactions to the readings into coherent and intelligible arguments. Bensel-Meyers hopes to introduce students to the conversations that different academic communities engage in as they “make knowledge.” The unusual depth of theory that she pulls into her writing text is justified by the use to which Bensel-Meyers puts it—the development of an informed community of writers. Her

warrant rests on the assumption that classical rhetoric arose from social origins and that its insights can be applied validly to a contemporary social context. She would grant students access to a classical structure as a locus of authority, a point of departure for entering into contemporary dialogues.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

The ideas promoted by social constructionists and those interested in similar questions remind us that most of the concepts that we recognize as knowledge within our academic disciplines arise out of a social process. While individual contributions are essential to the content and the vitality of the process of generating knowledge, the social conversations that are so central to social construction shape the form that these personal insights eventually take. This dynamic, whether we see it as Rorty's conversation or Kuhn's paradigm, has consequences for composition. We can no longer hold the purely individualistic view of thinking and learning that ignores the importance of the audience as an active participant in communication. Instead, we should insist on using the process of writing for others as an important tool for creating, as opposed to simply recording, ideas that matter. Social construction offers the chance to compose, not simply transcribe, a reality we can live with.

At the conclusion of this study, I can think of no better course than to insist once more on the instrumentality of social construction. The more carefully we consider the constituent forces that animate the concept, the more clearly we see how inappropriate and misleading any attempt to inflate social construction into a systematic answer for all questions on all occasions quickly becomes. The more, in fact, that we look at any issue, whether in composition studies or any field of inquiry, the more likely we are to turn away from systematic and exclusive answers. The anti-foundationalism and respect for the incommensurability of ideas that I have argued are native to social construction lead us to this pluralistic position, but the search for a cooperative framework for rhetoric and the recognition of the paradigmatic quality of important intellectual change that I also find to be implicit in the concept give social construction an even more public dimension.

We need to complement our reluctance to settle for any single perspective in deciding important questions with a willingness to recognize and find comfort in the social process through which we see important ideas arise and gradually find currency. The work of those thinkers whose ideas have guided us in acknowledging and appreciating the import of social construction—especially that of Kuhn, Rorty, and Booth—requires a further commitment. We must go beyond merely tolerating the diversity about us—the classicists; the partisans of academic English; North's Critics, Experimentalists, Practitioners, Ethnographers and the like; Graff's arguing academics; all the voices at work within the discipline—we must grow to appreciate

them, to look forward to hearing where they will take the conversation next. This sense of tolerance, of enhanced perspective and possibility, can only help us as we encounter the matters examined in this dissertation—the history of rhetoric, relativism, consensus, and authority—and any other topics that find their way into the conversations that provide a framework for composition studies.

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