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RADICAL APPROACHES TO COMPOSITION

The Writing Classroom as a Political and Public Sphere

When a teacher discovers that he or she is a politician, too, the teacher has to ask, What kind of politics am I doing in the classroom? That is, in favor of whom am I being a teacher? The teacher works in favor of something and against something. Because of that, he or she will have another great question, How to be consistent in my teaching practice with my political choice? I cannot proclaim my liberating dream and in the next day be authoritarian in my relationship with the students.

—PAULO FREIRE, *A Pedagogy for Liberation*

AS I NOTED in the first chapter, composition theory developed away from personal notions of how discourse is produced and toward theories suggesting that discourse is the product of its social context. Social constructionist perspectives—as advocated by Bruffee and others—led to new understandings of the nature of discourse, positing that knowledge is a social artifact communally created and maintained. These social notions of discourse shifted the focus from the individual to an understanding of facts, texts, and selves as social constructs. The impact of these theories cannot be emphasized enough. In fact, it might even be suggested that social theories dominate most compositionists' current conceptions of how discourse is generated. Social theories certainly appear to shape many of the conversations in composition's major journals and conferences. For example, in the program for the 2000 Annual Convention of the Conference on College Composition and Communication—the primary gathering for scholars in rhetoric and composition—"Theories of the Social and Composition" was one of the most prominent topic listings, with well over twenty concurrent sessions listed in the category. A glance at the list of works cited in the most important books and journal articles published in composition over the past decade reveals an

overwhelming number of references to social constructionist approaches. In short, social perspectives are the current dominant paradigm in rhetoric and composition.

This is not to say, however, that these social constructionist theories enjoy unquestioned and unchallenged support among compositionists today. Some of the most engaging and important scholarship in the 1990s has been done in attempts to clarify, elaborate on, and problematize early social constructionist theories of composition. Again, many of these critiques work from an inherently social constructionist perspective, and as such they hope to extend and elaborate upon early, rudimentary approaches to the subject without abandoning social constructionism altogether. These newer, more progressive approaches—commonly identified as *radical educationist* approaches to composition—attempted to more fully account for the relationship between power and discourse. Their impact has been profound. While the dominant theories in composition are still largely imbricated with social constructionist thought, these theories have been greatly influenced by newer radical approaches.

The radical educationists' critique of the traditional classroom and of traditional approaches to writing instruction that overlook the political and ideological ramifications of discourse have "contributed greatly to a new understanding of the teacher's authority in the classroom" (Gale 2). Radical educationists have attempted to change teachers from oppressive figures working for the maintenance of the status quo into critical intellectuals struggling to make society more equal and democratic. Like Bruffee, many early social constructionists seemed to ignore the politics underlying the eminent status of dominant and academic (very often the same thing) discourses. Early approaches to social construction often emphasized collaborative learning as the passport to learning the language of the academy, which is usually assumed to be the goal of college writing instruction. What they failed to acknowledge, however, is that this very discourse privileges certain language users (in this case, white, upper-class males) to the exclusion of others. The questioning of this dominant discourse—the teacher's discourse—is challenged by the so-called radicals in composition. Their inquiry into the role of the teacher's authority is not confined to discourse in the classroom but is associated with their interest in political equality and social justice in society. Xin Liu Gale offers this estimation of the radical educationists' position:

For radical scholars and teachers, the traditional teacher's oppressive authority in the classroom is rooted in the oppressive power of the dominant culture and class; the asymmetrical power relationship between the teacher's discourse and students' discourses reflect the asymmetrical power relations among different ideologies; and the hierarchical classroom structure reflects the injustice and inequality in society at large. Inquiring into the relationships among language,

ideology, and power, radical theorists and teachers contend that the teacher's authority is the product of the ideology of the dominant class's ideology and its power. (22–23)

As a result of this position, radical compositionists advocate significant changes in both theory and practice in writing instruction. They assert that the teacher's role should be to transform the unequal power relations in the classroom through student empowerment. That is, radical compositionists argue for new approaches to writing instruction that develop political consciousness and critical thinking in students through dialogic methods. Similarly, they also suggest that writing scholars and teachers should begin to examine discourse outside of the university to more fully understand how the composition classroom works as a microcosm of the prevailing discursive structure of a culture.

This chapter focuses on the growth and development of these radical theories, and it describes the recent move by some compositionists to examine discourse outside of the writing classroom. By examining two new and important facets of radical composition—the investigation of “public writing” and the related inquiry into service-learning in composition—this chapter will explore one of the most compelling lines of thought in composition studies today. It begins by examining some of the most important critiques of early social constructionist approaches to composition. Further, it considers the work of compositionists who incorporated Paulo Freire's notions of emancipatory learning and critical consciousness into their investigations of the political, social, and public functions of discourse. These “Freireistas,” as Victor Villanueva describes them, together with the critics of social constructionist thought and other so-called “radical” compositionists, created the necessary preconditions for the complex and sophisticated discussions of public writing that exist at present. That is, the current discussions of the writing classroom and public discourse are the progeny of radical composition. The chapter concludes with a thorough investigation of where this conversation on public writing stands today.

RADICAL COMPOSITION AS A CRITIQUE OF SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM

As Gary A. Olson notes in his Foreword to Xin Liu Gale's *Teachers, Discourses, and Authority in the Postmodern Composition Classroom*, the “most consistent and persistent effort to rearrange power hierarchies in the classroom derives from a group of Freire-inspired scholar-teachers whom we associate with the terms ‘radical pedagogy’ or ‘liberatory learning’” (viii). These scholars perceive the traditional classroom as a site

that is inherently implicated with the unequal power arrangements that permeate society at large. One of the most distinguishing features of the radical compositionist approach is its emphasis on *ideology*. Radical compositionists see discourse as deeply implicated with dominant ideology, and they see ideology as “transmitted through language practices that are always the center of conflict and contest” (Berlin, *Rhetoric and Ideology*, 478). Many radical compositionists might define the relationship between discourse and ideology as

ideology always carries with it strong social endorsement, so that what we take to exist, to have value, and to be possible seems necessary, normal, and inevitable—in the nature of things. Ideology also, as we have seen, always includes conceptions of how power should—again, in the nature of things—be distributed in a society. Power here means political force but covers as well social forces in everyday contacts. Power is an intrinsic part of ideology, defined and reinforced by it, determining, once again, who can act and what can be accomplished. These power relationships, furthermore, are inscribed in the discursive practices of daily experience—in the ways we use language and are used (interpellated) by it in ordinary parlance. (479)

This vision of discourse as ideological and political has led to new understandings regarding the role of academic discourse and the power of what happens in the writing classroom. Radical compositionist approaches have led many in the field to view both teaching and writing as “political acts” that privilege some forms of discourse and those who are members of particular discursive communities, while silencing those (very often, students) who are not members of the dominant discursive community.

Some of these radical compositionist approaches critiqued Bruffee and other early social constructionists directly, while some followed in their wake and offered more oblique commentaries on prevailing social theories. Greg Myers was among the first of those who clearly critiqued the rhetorical appeals of Bruffee and other early social constructionists. In his 1986 *College English* article, “Reality, Consensus, and Reform in the Rhetoric of Composition Teaching,” Myers criticized two significant aspects of the social constructionist argument for collaborative writing and group assignments: the appeal to the authority of consensus and the appeal to the authority of reality. Myers begins his argument by raising questions about two pedagogical moves that were (and still are) common in writing instruction: having “small groups of students collaborate on and critique each other's writing, and having case assignments based upon some actual writing situation, whether a technical proposal or an anthropology exam” (154). To explain why he finds these seemingly progressive appeals problematic,

he draws upon the Marxist conception of *ideology*. While Myers was not the first to suggest that language is ideological, his essay influenced a number of radical compositionists and has been frequently cited. Myers suggested that ideology—the thoughts that structure our thinking so deeply that we take them for granted—plays an important role in maintaining the power and authority of dominant groups. He argued that while it may seem perverse to argue against the seemingly progressive appeals to consensus—which are at the heart of early social constructionist perspectives—consensus necessarily means that some interests are being silenced. As Myers suggested, the “ideas of *consensus* and *reality*, though they seem so progressive, are part of the structure of ideology” (156).

Collaborative learning proponents suggested that, through consensus, students learn how to interact with and learn from their peers. While this consensus seems to be a progressive move, “consensus, within the system as it is, must mean that some interests have been suppressed or excluded” (156). Similarly, Myers warns against the inclination toward consensus and group cooperation because it forces students to view the teacher as the depositor of knowledge, the purveyor of wisdom. He suggests that the “danger is that the teacher has merely embodied his or her authority in the more effective guise of class consensus. . . . [and] any teacher who uses group discussions or projects has seen that they can, on occasion, be fierce enforcers of conformity” (159).

Bruffee suggested that writing is a communal activity, not just an “essence of meaning given by the individual to the community” (Myers, *Reality, Consensus* 166). He argued that collaborative writing and peer criticism enable students to gain a stronger sense of the degree to which the social context permeates what we know and how we know it. For Bruffee, the role of consensus in the production of knowledge is a given: it is not good or bad; it just “is.” Myers, on the other hand, suggests that knowledge is defined and regulated by those who control the discourse. He critiqued Bruffee and other early social constructionists for their assumption that knowledge is outside the realm of people’s social differences. Myers argues that to understand how power and ideology are implicated in the production of knowledge—particularly in educational institutions—compositionists should

look over the list and ask who is most likely to be in a course on ethnography or elementary Chinese? Who, on the other hand, is likely to be in a course on English as a second language or on basic office skills? Who is likely to be in a basic writing course at the City University? To ask such questions is to realize that knowledge is not uniformly distributed in our society, and that it is not all of a piece. If we turn a blind eye to social factors we are likely merely to perpetuate the provision of different kinds of knowledge for the rich and poor. (167)

Myers goes on to suggest that social and economic factors shape and define how discourse communities are produced and maintained. He suggests that Bruffee saw these factors as unfortunate limitations to our thought and conversation that must be avoided as often as possible. Myers argues that he would

see such limitations as giving structure to our thought. Ethnocentrism and economic interests are not just unfortunate habits, they are whole systems of ideas that people take for granted and use to make sense of the world. One cannot escape from one’s economic interests and ethnic background, but one can try to understand how they shape one’s thinking and social actions. (168)

Myers does not suggest any particularly innovative assignments to use in teaching writing. Rather, his goal is to encourage not a method but a more skeptical stance toward what happens in the composition classroom. This stance argues that compositionists must recognize the degree to which their classroom and discursive practices are part of an ideological structure that keeps people from thinking about their situation. However, Myers also asserts that writing instructors can resist this structure to some degree and can help students to criticize it as well. He argues not for a new kind of assignment, but for more skepticism about what assignments do to reproduce the structures of our society. He suggests that he has no “specific new ideas for what we should do Monday morning, but [he] follows with interest those of other radical teachers” (170). Also, Myers suggests that the kinds of authority embodied in the school are present in the rest of culture as well. The writer of an “engineering proposal, a magazine article, or even a poem, is constrained by structures as powerful as those defining the freshman composition theme” (169). While Myers suggests that though the trend toward viewing writing as a social process is a welcome corrective to the individualism of cognitivism and expressivism, we should not let our enthusiasm for this social view lead us to accept social construction as something good in itself.

John Trimbur’s “Consensus, and Difference in Collaborative Learning” extends the left critique of early social constructionist thought and builds upon Myers’s investigation of the wider social forces that structure the production of knowledge. Trimbur examines two important criticisms of the politics of collaborative learning in order to explore one of the key terms in collaborative learning, consensus. One line of reasoning suggests that the desire for consensus, as manifested in collaborative writing and learning, is an inherently “dangerous and potentially totalitarian practice that stifles individual voice and creativity, suppresses differences, and enforces conformity” (602). Trimbur cites several proponents of this stance who suggest that consensus is another word for “group think,” that consensus can be used to justify the practices of a “crazy,

totalitarian state," and that collaborative learning is another name for "peer indoctrination classes" (602). A second line of criticism, one that Trimbur obviously agrees with and hopes to expand, suggests that while things like selves, texts, knowledge, etc. are indeed socially constructed, social constructionist pedagogy runs the risk of limiting its focus to the internal workings of discourse and of overlooking the wider social forces that structure the production of knowledge. Echoing Myers, Trimbur suggests that to understand the production and validation of knowledge, we "need to know not just how knowledge communities operate consensually but how knowledge and its means of production are distributed in an unequal, exclusionary social order and embedded in hierarchical relations of power" (603).

Trimbur begins by addressing the fear of conformity that is so emphatically voiced by the first line of criticism—the fear that collaborative learning denies differences and threatens individuality. In opposition to these critics, who feel that consensus is inherently dangerous, Trimbur suggests that consensus can be seen as representing the potentiality of social agency in group life—the capacity for self-organization, cooperation, and shared decision making. That is, Trimbur sees consensus as a generative category that has the potential to enable individuals to participate actively and meaningfully in group life. Trimbur suggests that the fear of consensus often belies individualist notions of self as the inviolate starting point of education. The fear of consensus often betrays a fear of peer group influence—a fear that students will transform themselves from an aggregate of individuals (who are at the control of the authoritarian teacher) into a participatory learning community. "In short," as Trimbur notes, "the critique of consensus in the name of individualism is baseless. Consensus does not necessarily violate the individual but instead can enable individuals to empower each other through social activity" (604).

Trimbur goes on to extend the left wing critique of early social constructionism, arguing that the issue here is not the status of the individual but the status of *exchange* between individuals. He notes that "Bruffee and his left-wing critics occupy a good deal of common ground concerning the social relationships of intellectual exchange as they are played out in the classroom" (604). For radical educators, Bruffee's work has been important because it recognizes that the classroom and the culture of teaching and learning are social texts. Both strict social constructionists and the radical left-wing critics who followed them viewed writing classrooms as part of a wider movement for participatory democracy, shared decision making, and nonauthoritarian styles of leadership and group life. However, these approaches differ in how they view discourse that doesn't affirm consensus. Following Richard Rorty, many social constructionists suggest that abnormal discourse, or as Rorty describes it, "what happens when someone joins in the discourse who is ignorant of . . . conventions or who sets them aside,"

merely keeps the conversation going by adding new insights (609). According to Trimbur, this view of abnormal discourse, as defined by Rorty and perpetuated by Bruffee and other social constructionists, turns "crisis, conflict, and contradiction into homeostatic gestures whose very expression restabilizes the conversation" (Trimbur 608). That is, the social constructionist view of abnormal discourse merely reaffirms our commitment to the dominant conversation.

Trimbur argues, in accord with Myers and other radical critics of social constructionism, that a more productive stance on consensus is to look at it in terms of conflict rather than accord. They both want to interrupt the conversation to talk about the way consensus perpetuates itself, redefining it within the prevailing balance of power. Trimbur sees consensus in terms of differences and not just agreements. He argues that redefining consensus "as a matter of conflict suggests, moreover, that consensus does not so much reconcile differences through rational negotiation. Instead, such a redefinition represents consensus as a strategy that structures differences by organizing them in relation to each other" (608). In this light, abnormal discourse is not seen as a complement of normal discourse, but instead as the result of the set of power relations that organizes normal discourse: the acts of inclusion and exclusion that structure the practices of discourse communities. Trimbur suggests that abnormal discourse "refers to the relations of power that determine what falls within the current consensus and what is assigned the status of dissent" (608).

Trimbur suggests a more critical version of collaborative learning, one that distinguishes between consensus as a depoliticized, power-free practice that reproduces "business as usual" and consensus as an oppositional practice that challenges the prevailing conditions of production. He draws on Habermas's theory of *communicative action* to distinguish between the social constructionist perspective of consensus as a real world practice—"spurious" consensus—and the radical perspective of consensus as a "utopian" practice—"genuine" consensus—that intends to change the productive apparatus. According to Trimbur, Habermas defines genuine consensus not as something that actually happens, but instead as the counterfactual anticipation that agreement can be reached without coercion or systematic distortion. That is, genuine consensus, in Habermasian terms, describes the necessary precondition of the *belief* that communication can occur. As Trimbur describes it,

consensus, for Habermas, is not, as it is for social constructionists like Bruffee, an empirical account of how discourse communities operate but a critical and normative representation of the conditions necessary for fully realized communication to occur. In Habermas's view, we should represent consensus not as the result at any given time of the prevailing conversation but rather as an

aspiration to organize the conversation according to relations to non-dominance. The anticipation of consensus, that is, projects what Habermas calls an "ideal speech situation," a utopian discursive space that distributes symmetrically the opportunity speak, to initiate discourse, to question, to give reasons, to do all those other things necessary to justify knowledge socially. (612)

From this perspective, consensus becomes the dream of conversation as a perfect dialogue, a necessary fiction of mutual recognition, and a utopian vision of the ideal discursive situation. According to Trimbur, consensus, when viewed in this way, does not appear as the end of the conversation but instead as a means for extending and transforming it.

To view consensus as a utopian practice, one to strive for but that can never be realized, has significant implications for collaborative learning in the writing classroom. A utopian view of consensus allows students to be more critical of the conversation. It encourages them to interrupt the discussion, to investigate the forces that determine who gets to speak and what they may say, and what makes communication possible or impossible. Trimbur believes that the utopian view of consensus abandons the expert-novice model of teaching and learning in favor of one that encourages students to identify the "relations of power in the formation of expert judgment" (613).

Trimbur suggests that he is less interested in achieving consensus in the classroom than he is in having students use "consensus as a critical instrument to open gaps in the conversation through which differences may emerge" (614). Most importantly, he wants to encourage a view of consensus as a critical tool to identify the structures of power that determine who may speak. This, he hopes, might ultimately offer students the utopian aspirations necessary to transform the conversation into one that is (relatively) free of the manipulations and constraints that are placed on participants.

Trimbur argues for a "rhetoric of dissensus" where students can learn to agree to disagree, not "because 'everyone has their own opinion,' but because justice demands that we recognize the inexhaustibility of difference and that we organize the conditions in which we live and work accordingly" (615). Trimbur's careful analysis is significant in a number of ways. He extends the radical critique of social constructionism in more complex and sophisticated ways, showing the importance of the work of early social constructionists in composition studies while advancing a more nuanced view of collaboration and consensus. Also, he draws on the work of Jürgen Habermas—a social theorist who, as I will show, has become more and more important as the conversations in rhetoric and composition have turned toward more direct investigations of the political, social, and public uses of discourse. Additionally, Trimbur's notions

of dissensus and his extension of the left critique of social constructionist perspectives have been instrumental for many compositionists over the past ten years.

More recently, Evelyn Ashton-Jones extended this critique of early social constructionist theories by examining the role of gender in collaboration and group conversations. Ashton-Jones's "Conversation, Collaboration, and the Politics of Gender" is part of the radical compositionists' investigation of the ways in which political and social factors—most notably, race, class, and gender—affect discursive situations. In her investigation of gender differences and their influence on discourse, Ashton-Jones suggests that women and men are consigned, by virtue of gender, to gender-specific interactive styles, their option foreclosed in advance of any conversational encounter.

Echoing Trimbur's earlier critique of social constructionist theory, Ashton-Jones notes the wide-ranging views on the issue of consensus in collaborative learning. Despite the fact that she agrees with his leftist perspective on consensus, Ashton-Jones notes that Trimbur has not fully acknowledged the degree to which some voices are marginalized or excluded from discursive situations. She argues that while Trimbur's emphasis on power, on difference, and on a transformable reality goes far toward answering leftist objections to Bruffee's notion of consensus, Trimbur assumes that those speaking from marginalized perspectives will still have *access* to the conversation. She suggests that

this revised notion of consensus works from a fundamental assumption that Trimbur doesn't directly address: that those speaking from marginalized and "different" perspectives—be they of race, ethnicity, gender, class, age, sexual orientation, or occupation—will, in fact, have access to the conversation, and, further, that the dynamics of the conversation itself will remain unaffected by a given participant's "difference." (6)

Ashton-Jones goes on to assert that this assumption is a false one, that many perspectives and voices often go unheard, and that, in fact, within the classroom, many perspectives will not be heard simply because the students who would or could voice them are not present.

Ashton-Jones notes that social factors—and she uses gender differences as just one example—often radically influence the dynamics of the conversation itself, determining whether and how a given "voice" is heard and interpreted. Prior to this article, most feminist work in composition that focused on collaboration did so in order to show its compatibility and affinity to feminist principles. Ashton-Jones argues that most feminist commentary, particularly in composition, had not subjected collaborative learn-

ing to the kind of scrutiny that would show it to be as problematic to women students as other more traditional pedagogies. To make her point, she briefly surveys the perspectives of feminist collaborative learning advocates and challenges them in light of several important studies of conversational dynamics between women and men.

She notes several scholars—including Cynthia L. Caywood, Gillian R. Overing, and Pamela J. Annas—who argue that there are integral and fundamental relations between feminism and collaborative writing. Ashton-Jones suggests why this connection seems to exist:

Although some might question such fundamental links between collaborative learning and early feminism, the impetus behind the correlation is clear. Claiming for feminism such values as cooperation, connection, and validation and linking these values to collaborative pedagogies effectively establishes a binary opposition that frames feminism and collaborative learning in contradistinction to “patriarchal” values: competition, specialization, hierarchy, and more traditional, presentational pedagogies. (8)

The point she makes here is that collaborative learning has been seen as a boon to female students, who have struggled in the traditional androcentric teaching environments that pervaded (and still do, to some extent) the academy. Unfortunately, this belief, which assumes an absence of patriarchal authority in groups, fails to recognize one obvious point: even if “one construes the teacher-student hierarchy as essentially patriarchal, there is nothing here to suggest that other classroom structures are not” (10). That is, removing the traditional male-centered pedagogy from the classroom does not effectively remove all traces of patriarchy. The feminist valorization of collaborative learning, then, does not acknowledge the role gender plays in conversational dynamics.

Ashton-Jones notes a number of studies that show that gender is a powerfully operative variable in the dynamics of conversation and that inequality is indeed present in collaborative learning pedagogies—contrary to what many of its proponents would like to think. For example, Pamela Fishman observes that conversation does not just happen but is a complex, rule-bound activity that requires “interactional work” on the part of all participants. According to Ashton-Jones, Fishman’s study notes that women “ask more questions (including more tag questions) and more often use hedges and ‘attention beginnings’” (11). Similarly, Don H. Zimmerman and Candace West found that participants in same-sex conversations interrupted each other equally, whereas nearly all of the interruptions in mixed-sex conversations were initiated by males (14). Ashton-Jones also notes a study of mixed-sex conversations conducted by Helena Leet-

Pellegrini that shows that, even when women hold a position of power over men, women are still interrupted more often. Ashton-Jones suggests that these studies prove that conversational dynamics are largely controlled by the ideology of gender, and these conversational events are no less distinct in group writing situations. “On the contrary,” she notes, “it is more likely that in writing groups women’s and men’s behavior will parallel the conversational events described in these studies, men interacting as the individualists pressing to get across their point of view—thus controlling the realities produced in these writing communities—and women shouldering the major share of the necessary interactional work” (16).

Why are these studies significant? They prove that gender-linked behavioral patterns in conversation will severely curtail for women the possibilities for intellectual and social development. Despite their efforts to join the conversation, women will not receive the full benefit of support from all participants. Collaborative learning groups provide simply one more example of a site where “gender-based patterns of dominance and subordination are reproduced, yet another stage on which the ideology of gender is played out in an almost ritualistic series of gender performances, males acting out what it means to be male in relation to females, and females acting out their supporting role” (17). For communicative situations such as the conversation of writing groups, this means that gender-specific power differences cannot be disregarded. Ashton-Jones’s point is to raise the awareness of compositionists who endorse collaborative learning approaches to writing. Collaborative writing proponents ought not assume that in writing-group conversations men and women interact in identical or equal ways. Ashton-Jones concludes with an important reflection: although her article focuses exclusively on gender, compositionists must recognize the degree to which a number of other social factors—among them race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, occupation, class—influence the idealized conversational space envisioned by collaborative learning proponents.

This recognition of the effects of various social and political factors on communicative interaction has important ramifications for scholars today who are interested in exploring the discursive situations that transpire in various locations of “public” writing. Ashton-Jones notes that the sort of “participatory and democratic practices” that are examined by Trimbur in his critique of Habermas may be “neither participatory nor democratic for women” (19). She mentions a social theorist whose work will become more and more important as the conversation in composition turns more directly toward public writing: Nancy Fraser. According to Ashton-Jones, the “centrality of democratic practices to Trimbur’s argument and his close attention to Jürgen Habermas both call for closer examination, an effort facilitated by Nancy Fraser’s critique of Habermas” (19). Fraser reconstructs Habermas’s critical social theory, noting

that his model of communicative interaction reinforces a patriarchal division between public and private spheres because it conceals the fact that women are oppressed in both. Perhaps most importantly, Ashton-Jones notes Fraser's criticism of the Habermasian definition of the "citizen" as one who "not only has free access to public discourse but also participates in and helps shape it" (19). This definition fails to recognize the degree to which gender structures the roles of the participants in any communicative situation. It depends upon the ability to participate on par with others in a dialogue—an ability that is often withheld from women.

Ashton-Jones also notes Fraser's criticism of Habermas on the grounds that while he connects the role of the citizen to state and public spheres, he does not recognize how the concept of the citizen is a masculine concept. She cites an important passage in Fraser's *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse, and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory*, a passage that elaborates on the connections that Habermas makes among his spheres:

And in every case the links are forged in the medium of masculine gender identity rather than, as Habermas has it, in the medium of gender-neutral power. Or if the medium of exchange here is power, then the power in question is masculine power: it is power as the expression of masculinity.

. . . Because his model is blind to the significance and operation of gender, it is bound to miss important features of the arrangements he wants to understand. By omitting any mention of the childrearer role and by failing to thematize the gender subtext underlying the roles of worker [masculine] and consumer [feminine], Habermas fails to understand precisely how the capitalist workplace is linked to the modern restricted male-headed nuclear family. Similarly, by failing to thematize the masculine subtext of the citizen role, he misses the full meaning of the way the state is linked to the public sphere of political speech. . . . He misses, too, the way the masculine citizen-speaker role links the state and the public sphere not only to each other but also to the family and the official economy—that is, the way the assumptions of man's capacity to speak and consent and woman's comparative incapacity run through all of them. (20)

Ashton-Jones obviously sees the importance of social theorists for composition. Her article extends the conversations on consensus in more complex and insightful directions than those of earlier critics of social construction. When viewed as part of an ongoing conversation, the work of Myers, Trimbur, Ashton-Jones, and other critics of social construction paved the way for the current focus on the public and political uses of discourse. Myers's work was among the first to see the ideas of consensus and re-

ality as part of the structure of ideology. By investigating the role of consensus in the production of knowledge, he raised our awareness of the ways that ideology is reproduced in collaborative situations, urging compositionists to recognize that while our courses are a part of an ideological structure, we can also resist this structure and help students to criticize it. Trimbur, in turn, extended Myers's leftist critique, revising the notion of consensus as a step toward developing a more critical practice of collaborative learning. He argued that consensus need not result in accommodation and can be a powerful instrument for students to explore differences, to identify the systems of authority that organize these differences, and to transform the relations of power that determine who may speak. Ashton-Jones's critique of social constructionist perspectives built upon Trimbur's revised notion of consensus, arguing that the preexisting social factors of the various participants plays an important role in determining who has access to the conversation. Taken together, these contributions to the "radical" conversation in composition studies provided much of the necessary theoretical framework for the investigations of "public" discourse that are so prevalent today.

THE FREIREISTAS

According to Xin Liu Gale, radical pedagogy in composition studies "owes its greatest debt to Paulo Freire, whose education theory and pedagogic practice have continuously inspired the radical scholars and teachers in the past three decades" (24). In fact, it could be argued that his work—most notably in *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) and *Education for Critical Consciousness* (1973)—is directly responsible for the discipline's current focus upon public writing. Freire envisioned education as an integral part of a democracy, and he suggested that a society cannot be truly egalitarian until education becomes a practice of freedom. In other words, the connections between public discourse, civic action, and the educational systems of a society are inextricably bound up in each other. He suggested that classrooms usually model the power relations currently in force in a society. While he was describing the political and educational systems in his own country (Brazil) in much of his work, Freire's message was readily applied to the educational and political structures in the United States. The situation that pertains in the traditional classroom, according to Freire, can best be understood through the analogy of banking. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* he writes:

In the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing. . . . Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of

communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat. (58)

Such a system entails oppression, Freire argues, because it projects an “absolute ignorance onto others, a characteristic of the ideology of oppression,” it “negates education and knowledge as processes of inquiry,” and it assumes the teacher’s authority over the student is natural and justifiable (58).

As a counter to the banking method of education, Freire advocated dialogic methods in education as a means to critical consciousness because they require a mutual relationship between persons. In the classroom, this means that teachers and students should be engaged with a subject in a joint search where both act as equal participants in the quest for knowledge. Mutual dialogue—as opposed to the teacher’s monologue—is the means to both a more egalitarian relationship between the teacher and the student and to a more democratic and emancipatory education. Only dialogue, which requires critical thinking, is capable of generating critical thinkers. Without dialogue, there can be no communication, and without communication, real education cannot take place. This pedagogy requires a new type of thinking on the part of the teacher, a pedagogical stance wherein the teacher strives to work *with* the students—not *for* or *about* them. Freire explains:

For the dialogical, problem-posing teacher-student, the program content of education is neither a gift nor an imposition—a bit of information to be deposited in the students—but rather the organized, systemized, and developed “re-presentation” to individuals of the things about which they want to know more. (82)

What makes the dialogic relationship possible in the interaction between teacher and student is the “reality to be transformed by them together with other men—not other men themselves” (83). In other words, the teacher and student work together, through discourse, to recognize and change the social conditions that prevent people from realizing their full humanity. The teacher’s object of action should not be the student; rather, the teacher should work *with* the student *upon* the inequalities of society. As Gale argues, Freire is “never tired of emphasizing that, only when education is committed to transforming reality through investigation, only when the teacher is committed to working with students through dialogue, will education become authentically liberating and the teacher authentically humanistic and revolutionary” (25).

Perhaps the most significant aspect of Freire’s educational philosophy to the cur-

rent discussion of public writing is his notion of *critical consciousness* as a force for social change. Perhaps more than any other approach or perspective, critical consciousness, which Freire defines as “the capacity to adapt oneself to reality *plus* the critical capacity to make choices and to transform that reality,” is the core of pedagogy and theory about public writing (*Education* 5). Most educators who involve their students in public writing assignments and courses do so with the hope that students will emerge from the semester’s work with the ability to participate in critical and reformative public discourse. In other words, the goal of most courses in public writing is not just to facilitate students interactions with a specific sphere or issue, but to help students *transform* themselves into active, critical participants in democratic society.

Freire’s view of education as a site of political and social struggle has certainly won the support of many scholars and teachers in the United States—including a number of scholars in English and composition studies. C. H. Knoblauch argues that *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* has attained, by “the standards of academic publishing, an iconic stature—cited everywhere, whether read or not, because hearsay knowledge alone authorizes reference to it as a germinal argument for ‘critical’ literacy” (50). Knoblauch emphasizes the features Freire has found in the classrooms of Brazil:

- The teacher teaches and the students are taught.
- The teacher knows everything and the students know nothing.
- The teacher thinks and the students are thought about.
- The teacher talks and the students listen.
- The teacher disciplines and the students are disciplined.
- The teacher chooses and enforces his choice, and the students comply.
- The teacher acts and the students have the illusion of acting through the action of the teacher.
- The teacher chooses the program content, and the students (who were not consulted) adapt to it.
- The teacher confuses the authority of knowledge with his own professional authority, which he sets in opposition to the freedom of the students.
- The teacher is the subject of the learning process, while the pupils are mere objects. (46–47)

Knoblauch stresses that this agenda offers everything we ought to fear in a country that claims to venerate freedom—and many of these qualities are found in the educational establishment here in the United States. He asserts that Freire’s views on education have much to offer to composition studies. Knoblauch argues that a Freirean

approach is unique in that it contains at its center “an enduring faith in the power of the word—as differentiated, active meaning—to transform speaking subjects and the worlds they speak” (54).

One of the most influential proponents of Freirean theory over the past twenty years has been Ira Shor. Shor underscores the importance of the dialogic method and liberatory learning in the United States in *Critical Teaching and Everyday Life*. He argues for a new approach to liberatory learning by proposing the “withering away of the teacher.” Shor suggests that the teacher is expendable and should, after working as a “change agent” in the classroom, dissolve his or her authority in order to allow students to emerge with a “critical consciousness” (98). Shor views the classroom as a site where students can reflect on issues and ideas that transpire in the political and social spheres they come in contact with in daily life. He suggests that in a classroom in which the teacher has “withered away,” students are able to form a critical dialogue about the “structure of social relations inside and outside their minds” (99). As students become more critical and liberated, the teacher’s role changes accordingly from the “teacher/initiator” to a “peer discussant, a member of the dialogue on equal terms with all the others in the class” (101). For Shor, the “withering away of the teacher” aims to empower students by gradually strengthening their subject position and weakening the teacher’s authority in the teaching process. Shor suggests that the classroom can be a powerful site in the formation of democratic practices, through both the subject matter—the student’s lived experiences—and the pedagogical stance the teacher assumes.

In “What Is the ‘Dialogical Method’ of Teaching?” (coauthored with Shor) Freire argues that educators must not assume liberating dialogue as a mere technique to improve student outcomes. Instead, he argues, we must see the dialogic method as a means for allowing students to more fully realize their own humanity. Freire suggests that “dialogue is a kind of necessary posture to the extent that humans have become more and more critically communicative beings” (13). He feels that dialogue is a moment during which humans meet to reflect on their own reality—both inside and outside of the classroom—as they make and remake it. To the extent that we are “communicative beings who communicate to each other . . . we become more able to transform our reality” (13). Seen in this light, dialogue becomes more than just a tool for expressing thoughts and ideas about the social and political worlds we live in; it becomes, in fact, a conduit through which political and social realities are shaped and transformed. Freire suggests that this sort of critical development in students is a step toward a greater change in society, a transformation that is “absolutely fundamental for the radical transformation of society” (23). Obviously, Freire viewed education as an act through which students become more politically and socially empowered.

In a related *College English* article, Jane Tompkins emphasizes the degree to which the Freirean model of education has become an important focal point for teachers and scholars in English and composition studies. While this piece is neither long nor theoretically groundbreaking, it has nonetheless been discussed and cited often in the ten years since its publication. She asserts the need for writing and literature teachers to adopt the dialogic method of teaching advocated by Freire, suggesting that professors of English often argue for political and social change, in one way or another, but rarely institute these values in the classroom. She suggests that “our practice in the classroom doesn’t often come very close to instantiating the values we preach” (653). Tompkins cites Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* as the impetus for her recognition of the distance between what we do as teachers and what we say we believe in. She argues that we need to follow Freire’s advice in the book, whose “great theme is that you cannot have a revolution unless education becomes a practice of freedom” (653).

Tompkins suggests that traditional methods of instruction, which she had, until recently, mimicked without interrogation, fail to address what students might want or need in an education; instead, the old methods often focus on three things: (a) showing students how smart the instructor is, (b) showing them how knowledgeable the instructor is, and (c) showing them how well-prepared the instructor is for class. Tompkins argues that part of the reason for this unproductive approach to teaching is that pedagogy is rarely talked about by English professors, and, when it is, it is described as “the lowest of the low” and “beyond the pale.” But Tompkins sees a ray of hope in this otherwise dismal pedagogical setting, for more and more educators are adopting liberatory approaches to teaching. She writes:

But there is one thing people do sometimes talk about in relation to teaching, and they do this now more frequently than in the past. They talk about using teaching as a vehicle for social change. We tell ourselves that we need to teach our students to think critically so that they can detect the manipulations of advertising, analyze the fallacious rhetoric of politicians, expose the ideology of popular TV shows, resist the stereotypes of class, race, and gender; or depending on where you’re coming from, hold the line against secular humanism and stop cannon-busting before it goes too far. (656)

Tompkins, in effect, is arguing for this new perspective of the classroom as a site for political and social change. We must, she suggests, make sure that the way we teach is in accord with *what* we want our students to learn. Tompkins seems to be arguing for a conception of the classroom as a training ground for the intellectual engagements students will soon face in society. Indeed, she mentions that she has “come to realize

that the classroom is a microcosm of the world; it is the chance we have to practice whatever ideals we may cherish" (656). She goes on to argue that "what we do in the classroom is our politics" and that "the politics of the classroom begins with the teacher's treatment of and regard for him or her self" (660).

WRITING IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

As I have suggested, the history of composition studies is one that has been filled with a multitude of voices, each one extending, analyzing, or critiquing those that came before it. Most of the important contributions to composition studies have built upon what has come before and contributed in some way to what has come after. That is, far from being the result of a few unique and original perspectives on writing theory and pedagogy, composition studies can be more accurately described as an ongoing conversation. Scholars add to the conversation and often steer it in new directions, but rarely do they change the framework of the discussion or the questions that the conversation seeks to answer. The participants in this conversation often have dissenting views and perspectives on particular issues, but the topics they address usually have a similar goal in mind. While it would be inaccurate to describe this ongoing conversation as consisting of distinct "schools of thought" or "camps" as some have characterized them, particular shared perspectives have affected the direction the discussion takes.

As I've suggested, since its growth and development as an academic discipline in the 1960s and 1970s, composition gradually expanded its focus from the individual writer, to social notions of how knowledge is generated, to more political—and public—investigations of discourse. Radical scholars and teachers in the field of composition have changed our conceptions of the role of discourse in shaping society. Viewing the work of composition as a democratic enterprise, some scholars have recently expanded the focus of radical investigations to explore the political role of discourse outside of the classroom. That is, while radical theories enabled many compositionists to envision discourse as a political act, more and more scholars today are broadening this notion to investigate sites outside of the classroom in which this discourse is generated and used. This investigation, which seems to fall into several related categories, including "public writing" and "service-learning in composition," might very well become the next dominant focal point around which the teaching of college writing is theorized and imagined. The proliferation of articles, chapters, and books regarding this subject seems to suggest that more and more scholars are looking beyond the classroom in their investigations of discourse.

In *A Teaching Subject*, Joseph Harris suggests that composition studies, which he describes as a "loose set of practices, concerns, issues, and problems having to do with

how writing gets taught," can be traced by looking at a series of key words that have figured in the conversation (x). Harris believes that in tracking the meanings of these key words, which he defines as *growth, voice, process, error, and community*, he can make a case for composition as a *teaching subject*, as that part of English studies that defines itself through an interest in the work students and teachers do together. I'd like to suggest that we might extend this investigation to examine a new key word in the teaching of college writing: *public*. For many compositionists, the classroom—or, more specifically, the writing course—has emerged as a microcosm of the public sphere, as our point of contact with the "real" world out there somewhere. This point of contact is something that distinguishes composition from many other academic disciplines; our close and personal connections with students differentiates our work from the "merely academic" pursuits of our colleagues down the hall. If we believe that power is entrenched in discourse and that language is an instrumental tool in shaping knowledge and reality, we could, by extension, assume that the work that we do can have real implications in the world. While the question of what "public discourse" might entail has interested many, there has been little consensus on how we might answer it. Some scholars use the term "public" as a metaphor for how we might envision what takes place in the classroom. A few compositionists use the term more literally, suggesting that discourse as it exists outside of the classroom is an important area of investigation. Some have explored ways to facilitate the transitions for students from academic discourse to the type of discourse they might use in the "real world," while others have attempted to incorporate writing assignments that rely upon negotiation and contact with others in the public sphere. Regardless of their particular perspectives on what this term might mean to them and their students, public notions of discourse have become increasingly significant and compelling for a number of theorists, scholars, and teachers working in composition studies today.

While investigations of public discourse in composition studies have emerged only within the past few years, there have been rumblings in this direction for some time. One important early example of work in composition that investigates the idea of the public is S. Michael Halloran's "Rhetoric in the American College Curriculum: The Decline of Public Discourse." In keeping with other critics of current-traditional rhetoric, Halloran suggests that there is an important deficiency in the product-oriented, teacher-centered approach to discourse that had until recently dominated college writing courses. Unlike others, however, Halloran suggests that the recent revival of rhetoric has failed to adequately address this shortcoming. As the title of his article suggests, this deficiency "has to do with something [Halloran] calls public discourse" (245).

Halloran suggests that in order to arrive at a better understanding of what we mean by rhetoric, we must first distinguish between current-traditional rhetoric and the

rhetorical tradition. Halloran notes that when writing teachers adopted current-traditional notions of rhetoric, which eclipsed the rhetorical tradition in the nineteenth century, they lost something of real value in the process: the focus on public discourse. He describes the rhetorical tradition as portraying

the orator as a person who embodies all that is best in a culture and brings it to bear on public problems through eloquent discourse. Quintilian wrote of the good man speaking; Cicero of the *doctus orator*, the learned speaker. Both of them referred to a civic leader who understood all the values of his culture and used artful speech to make those values effective in the arena of public affairs. The purpose of education in the rhetorical tradition was to prepare such leaders. (246)

He suggests that the rhetorical tradition, then, gives primary emphasis to communication on public problems, problems that “arise from our life in political communities” (246). Rhetoric in the sense of an art of public discourse flourished in American colleges of the eighteenth century, but it died out during the nineteenth century. Halloran goes on to argue that the revival of rhetoric in the field of composition has failed to address the need for a revival of public discourse.

He goes on further to call attention to the history of rhetoric in American colleges, postulating that in the eighteenth century, the full classical idea of rhetoric was central to the college curriculum at universities such as Harvard, Yale, and Princeton. He suggests that there are two reasons for this emphasis: first, rhetoric was understood as the art through which all other arts could become more effective; second, oral communication was a primary pedagogical component in universities at this time. The oral component of the curriculum was public in two senses. First, it dealt with political and social problems; rarely were the topics of discussion limited to subjective or local matters. The second sense in which oration in eighteenth century colleges was public had to do with audience; as a student advanced through his four years of college, he was required to deliver public addresses to larger and larger gatherings of peers and teachers.

The point Halloran makes through this history is that rhetoric at American colleges in the eighteenth century consisted almost primarily of oral public discourse. It “stood very near if not precisely at the center of pedagogical concern” (257). It provided students with experience in public discourse and with a “tacit set of values bearing directly on the use of language in managing public affairs” (257). However, early into the nineteenth century, rhetoric in American colleges adopted many of the concerns we characterize as current-traditional—the emphasis on the written product rather than the process of composition or of communication; classification of discourse into

at least four “modes” (description, narration, exposition, argumentation); concentration on correctness of usage and certain stylistic qualities—without much reference to the invention or substance of discourse.

While research into the composing process, according to Halloran, has recovered the “ancient idea of rhetoric as an art, an imprecise but still enormously helpful methodizing of a task,” this new research has failed to recover the rhetorical focus on public discourse (263). Rhetoric, then, is defined not just by its theory, but by the sorts of rhetorical problems it gives rise to. The rhetorical tradition gave primary emphasis to public discourse; it was in essence a rhetoric of citizenship. Newer rhetorical forms address the role of student discourse in two primary ways: as either academic or personal. These new rhetorical forms do not, as Halloran suggests, address students as political beings, as “members of a body politic in which they have a responsibility to form judgments and influence the judgments of others on public issues” (263). Noting the relative lack of public discourse in society in the 1980s, Halloran suggests a direct link between this deficit and the lack of attention to public discourse in American colleges and universities at the time. He concludes by urging compositionists to explore the rhetorical tradition as an avenue to more public discourse. Halloran writes that as rhetorical studies begin to regain some of their “antique vitality and prominence, we might well turn some of our attention to the discourse of public life” (264).

In *Fragments of Rationality: Postmodernity and the Subject of Composition*, Lester Faigley convincingly argues for a reorientation to public discourse. He suggests that the emancipatory impulses that were prevalent at the beginning of the process movement in the 1960s and early 1970s have waned, but the new political awareness in composition studies has the potential to “recover a lost tradition of rhetoric in public life” (71). Faigley joins Halloran in his call to “reintroduce rhetoric as a means of fostering public discourse,” arguing that rhetoric in the classical tradition occupied a central place in the American college curriculum in earlier ages. However, Faigley notes, we should not hope to go back to a “golden age of rhetoric,” as American colleges in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries educated only the male ruling elite. Today over 60 percent of high school graduates undertake some form of postsecondary education. This ever-increasing number of students should make us realize the possibilities available for initiating public discourse. Faigley proposes a cultural studies approach to investigating the structures of the classroom, an inquiry he feels is necessary before we can truly examine discourse outside of the classroom. Faigley suggests that

proponents of a cultural studies curriculum . . . argue that it challenges the trend toward making exclusion the basis of education and defining higher education as the acquisition of narrowly specialized knowledge. They maintain

that rather than setting out a content to be learned, a cultural studies curriculum explores the relations among cultural practices and the political interests of discourses. At the same time, however, the goal of reintroducing possibilities of public discourse through questioning the status quo makes the implementation of such a curriculum often difficult. (73)

Faigley advocates the interrogation of our current educational system as a necessary precursor for an effective pedagogy of public discourse. While recognizing the difficulty of instituting public discursive practices in an educational system that seems to deny difference and suppress meaningful discursive interaction, Faigley nonetheless asserts that public discourse is possible and worth striving for in a writing course. Unfortunately, his argument stops there and does not theorize as to how we might enter or construct public discursive spaces.

Both Halloran's article and Faigley's book have been cited often in more recent discussions of public discourse, and their charge to turn our attention to public discourse has been taken up with enthusiasm by a number of influential scholars and theorists in composition. Perhaps the most substantial and notable investigation to follow has been Susan Wells's "Rogue Cops and Health Care: What Do We Want from Public Writing?" Wells uses an example of police brutality on her campus—and a student's written response to it—to begin to address the question in her title. She describes how Arthur Colbert, a Temple University student, was stopped by two police officers late one evening, questioned, beaten, and imprisoned for allegedly running a crack house. After being released the next morning, the student returned to headquarters and filled out a "Citizen's Complaint" form, writing three pages. The subsequent investigation led to charges, suspensions, transfers, and other reforms. Wells writes:

As a teacher, I was upset that a student had been brutalized. But as a writing teacher, I was triumphant. Colbert had probably learned to write strong narrative in *our* program; his complaint sounded like a successful basic writing assignment—good sequential order, lots of detail and elaboration, a clear, supportable conclusion. Someone had done good work with this student. And his text had been efficacious: it had turned around a whole police department, delivered innocent grandmothers from unjust imprisonment, and set aside scores of false convictions. (326)

This incident led Wells to examine our discipline's desire for efficacious public writing—especially as it is invested in our students. Wells notes that many compositionists want to help their students to use discourse in more public ways, suggesting

that this desire imagines them in "a public role, imagining a public space they could enter" (326). Such a space, she argues, needs to be built, in part, by compositionists, for "the public sphere is always constructed, and it cannot in our society, be unitary" (326). Wells seems to be arguing for a notion of the public sphere as a temporary and unstable meeting of conversants who come together to discuss some topic of mutual interest. She suggests that it is far from the specific, fixed location that is always available, with secure and discernable borders—as we might imagine it. But, she points out, "public space is not available, at least not as we have imagined it" (327). To explain her argument, Wells, like Trimbur before her (and Ward and others, as we shall see, after her) relies heavily on Habermas's critical theory, particularly his treatment of the public sphere, as modified by Oscar Negt and Alexander Kluge.

According to Wells's summary, Habermas posits the public sphere as a discursive domain where private individuals debate social and political issues in an environment free of official or legislative control. The public sphere projects an atmosphere of rational discussion, with no holds barred, no topic off limits. It promises equality of access free of rank and station, with each constituent judged by his (sexist usage appropriate) ability to reason. However, the public sphere, similar to the sites of representative democracy, emerges as a "richly determined practice that produces both knowledge and ignorance, both domination and a diffusion of power" (327). That is, the public sphere is both egalitarian and discordant in the ways discursive interaction occurs. In the public sphere there exists the potential for emancipated participation; in that way, Habermas's conception of it is utopian. But Habermas also recognizes that "the public" implies exclusion and domination as well as openness and reason, since the concept of the private citizen is abstracted from ideas of wealth, property, and privilege. Public discourse, then, is "a complex array of discursive practices, including forms of writing, speech, and media performance, historically situated and contested" (328). Speakers and writers come to the public sphere with both a wealth and a weight of experience; no two constituents can ever be entirely equal. Even the various locations of public discourse, though always shifting and transient, nonetheless have their own histories and possibilities.

Wells suggests that writing projects that are haphazardly assigned as public writing, such as essays on gun control or letters to nonexistent editors, do not "do justice to this history, this set of possibilities" (328). These assignments, no matter how well-written or personally meaningful, are written to no audience whatsoever; they appeal to no particular public sphere. Compositionists, then, must work to create spaces where audiences do exist and where student writing has importance and potential consequences. Creating such spaces is always difficult, and Wells points to the failure of President Clinton's Health Care Address (September 22, 1993) as an example of the

difficulties of constructing a public sphere. She suggests that the passion of his speech was “directed, not at health care reform, but at the debate that would make reform possible” (329). Clinton hoped to establish something like a Habermasian public sphere: a space where an issue of public interest could be debated on evidence and reason. Clinton cited the importance of such a debate for the common American, the silent majority. In fact, he mentioned several individuals—a small-businessman and a nurse, among others—as representative citizens. However, Clinton’s proposed public sphere was never constructed—suggesting perhaps that the “silent majority” he hoped to appeal to felt that they were unable to free themselves of their silence.

The public sphere, then, is best seen as “contradictory, overdetermined, insoluble, and peremptory—and so it is very close to the experience of the classroom” (332). The public sphere does not adequately represent the experiences of subaltern classes. In fact, it does not even represent all the significant experiences of the ruling classes. It does, though, exist at specific, historical locations. Seen in this light, it is easy to understand why such a site is difficult for students to enter. However, as Wells notes, we are compelled to enter and transform such sites. She writes:

I have never known a writer, student or teacher, who wanted a smaller audience, or a narrower readership; I have never known a writer who felt unproblematically at home in the discursive forms of broad political or social address. (333)

Given the “intractable fragmentation” of any public sphere, it is likely that the conceptions of the public we offer students beyond the classroom will be provisional and historically situated. Wells, drawing on Negt and Kluge, suggests that we must seek out alternative publics and counter publics that our students might enter. She offers several potential opportunities for public writing, including paired writing assignments with other universities, the collection of oral histories, the establishment of computer networked classes, and community literacy programs.

Unlike Faigley, who has no suggestions for how we might initiate public writing, Wells concludes by suggesting that public writing in a composition course—seen as a relation between readers, texts, and actions—can be organized in (at least) four ways. First, the classroom itself can be seen as a microcosm for public investigation and debate. If the work of the class is seen as reading culture—through critical teaching in cultural studies—this in itself becomes a form of cultural appropriation. The analysis of public texts is a second strategy for teaching public writing. Attention to rhetorical devices and performance inside and outside of texts locates the composition class

within the rhetorical tradition. Also, student writing might be generated for real public audiences. Forms of service-learning and discursive activism are powerful kinds of hands-on learning and interaction. Finally, investigations of various discourse communities in academic disciplines, and how they intervene in the public, allows students to recognize the many perspectives that might intersect in the public sphere. Wells offers these pedagogical suggestions in order to help frame a discussion of public writing. While the investigation of the public sphere she offers is far from complete, it has elicited a tremendous response from a number of compositionists. Her article delves into an issue of interest to many compositionists: What *do* we want from public writing? In asking this question, she extends the radical investigation of the political nature of discourse in new directions.

As Wells suggests, the rapid development of computer technology has the potential to open new sites of public discourse. While she mentions the Internet and computer networked classes only briefly, others have explored electronic communication and its possibilities for participatory democratic discourse in more depth. Perhaps the most insightful and lucid investigation of the Internet as a site for meaningful public discourse is Irene Ward’s “How Democratic Can We Get? The Internet, the Public Sphere, and Public Discourse.” Ward investigates many of the same issues Wells addressed, and she examines some recent claims that the Internet is the new “participatory cyberdemocracy.” Ward critiques these claims through the lens of Habermas’s account of the public sphere. She makes the point that while the Internet exhibits some organizational features that may facilitate or enhance democratic interaction, we must also remember that “any technology has physical and economic limits, that historical context plays a great role in shaping how technology is used” (365). Ward rightly argues that connecting people through electronic networks does not necessarily lead to a more democratic society, and in fact, the technology itself has the potential to become another tool of dominance and oppression.

To explain her argument, Ward begins with a useful definition of the Habermasian public sphere as a “public institution or place or arena in which private citizens can engage in discussion that is free from any coercive constraints or forms of domination so that by such discussions they can determine matters of general interest or common good” (366). The public sphere brings individuals with different perspectives together for a common goal. Through their interactions, the various constituents in a public sphere have their assumptions challenged; they, in turn, challenge others’ assumptions. These constituents, if the public sphere is successful, arrive at some agreement or consensus—what Habermas calls “public opinion.” This public opinion, according to Ward, is “more likely to represent true consensus when it is formed in such

a public sphere—because it has been subjected to the challenges and questions of a community—than would the aggregate of individual opinions” (367). If the Internet is, or is able to become, a public sphere according to this Habermasian model, it would have to offer an arena for individuals to interact free of constraints. These interactions must have the potential to influence civil society and the state, and the public discourse that is generated in this site must be “legitimized” by the scrutiny and challenge of other citizens and stake holders in the debate.

Does the Internet have the potential to become a true public sphere? Habermas puts forth three institutional criteria that must be met in the establishment of a public sphere. First, it must be a site where little attention is paid to the status of participants. While Habermas fails to acknowledge that this equality has been historically limited to white, male, propertied citizens (more on this critique of Habermas later), his point is that a person, whether he be a merchant or an aristocrat, has an equal right to be heard in the public sphere. Second, the topics debated in the public sphere must be considered of “common concern” to the general public. The conversation could focus on any issue that affects more than one small class in a society. Third, the public sphere must be, at least in principle, inclusive and open to all participants. These participants must be able to think of their conversations as part of a larger public conversation of which they are a small part. Ward suggests that by examining these three criteria in reference to the Internet, we can arrive at a better understanding of the limits and potential of these new sites of “cyberdemocracy.”

To what degree does the Internet disregard the status of participants? Since publishing on the Internet is not limited in the same ways as publishing in traditional print media, it seems that cyberspace does disregard the status of the participants. The anonymity of the World Wide Web “can work to focus attention on what is being said over who is saying it” (369). However, access to technology is often limited to the same types of people that had access to public spheres in earlier ages: wealthy white men. While in the past, these constituents were property owners, they have become *technology* owners—people who own or have access to computers.

Is the information found on the Internet of common concern? The Internet might serve as a space where nonspecialists can come together to discuss and interpret cultural artifacts. Due to the relative ease of creating web pages, more and more people are able to create their own cultural products. This seems to promise increased democratization of education: text and materials can be placed on the web with relative ease, for the benefit of institutions and users across the world. However, such projects require budgets of their own, and institutions that produce such materials may not be willing to share their resources with others. It seems reasonable to speculate that wealthy institutions, and the state and local legislatures that fund them, would be better

able to compete in this new market and “could end up reestablishing the ‘monopoly of interpretation’ that the Internet seems to undermine” (372).

Is the Internet generally inclusive? Currently in the United States, there are no institutional or legislative barriers to the Internet for any group or individual. That is, classes of people are not legally or by any set of institutional procedures limited in their use of the World Wide Web. The “cultural lore of the Internet claims that it is and shall remain a domination-free zone for the exchange of ideas and that no amount of encryption software, passwords, government regulation or censorship will be able to obstruct its essentially democratic nature” (373). However, the kinds of access issues I’ve already described are largely cultural and economic, and they are perhaps more difficult to recognize and eliminate. Those who can afford access—and pay the most for it—will receive the most exposure for their ideas, views, and products. The same social and economic influences that allow for unequal access to education in this country will “operate to make the issue of access a severe limitation to the ultimate democratic potential of the Internet” (375).

Ward rightly points out a number of social, economic, and cultural forces that undermine the possibility of the Internet becoming a democratic sphere. She suggests that some important material circumstances that might lead to the growth of the Internet as a public sphere are not in place. Specifically, the numbers of people who have access to such tools of democracy are not growing as they did in the past. The technology of the Internet does not lend itself to extended interchanges between constituents; rather, it is still “sound-byte technology” suited well to brief, fast exchanges. Computerized telecommunications such as the Internet seem to pose both a potential threat as well as an opportunity for creating public spheres. As writing teachers whose environments are likely to change drastically in the next decades, we will, as Ward notes, have “some exciting and difficult years ahead” (377).

While Ward examines the Internet as a literal site of public writing, other scholars have suggested more figurative uses for the public in composition studies. Joseph Harris offers an interesting perspective on the usefulness of the term “public” for the work we do in the writing classroom. Running through the last thirty or so pages of *A Teaching Subject: Composition Since 1966* is a critique of another metaphor that has been particularly influential in recent discussions of discourse: the *contact zone*. While Mary Louise Pratt’s conception of the contact zone as a site where cultures “meet, clash, and grapple with each other” has been a welcome corrective to the relatively unproblematic notion of “community” that dominated social constructionist theories in composition for some time, Harris worries that too many treatments of the contact zone construe it as a “multicultural bazaar” where students are “not so much brought into conflict with opposing views as placed in a kind of harmless connection

with a series of exotic others" (119). He proposes the idea of the public as a "more urban and less utopian view of social life [that] might help us rethink the kinds of work that goes on in our classrooms" (108).

Harris suggests that what is most interesting and useful about the term "the public" is that it refers to a space or a location rather than to a particular group (or community) of people. In keeping with Wells, Harris argues that what is most constructive in viewing the classroom as a public space is that it alludes to "a point of contact that needs both to be created and continuously maintained" (109). Harris draws on the work of the social theorist Richard Sennett—another critic of Habermas—who suggests that a public space is one where the members of various communities can meet to negotiate their differences. The metaphor of "public space" implies that it is a site of conflict rather than consensus, a place where constituents come together and bargain out of necessity instead of choice. Harris gives a particularly useful example of how we might imagine such a site:

The classic example would be a thriving square or market in a cosmopolitan city. It makes little sense to talk of New York, for instance, as a community; it is too sprawling, diverse, heterogeneous. But there is some sense to speaking of it as a kind of public space where the representatives of various boroughs or neighborhoods, the advocates of competing interests or constituencies, can come to argue out their needs or differences. I don't mean here to argue for some idealized version of a public sphere, some free market of viewpoints and ideas. Not all communities or interests are allowed anything near a fair or equal hearing in most public debates, and some are not allowed access to them at all. I am instead thinking of a public space where differences are made visible, and thus where the threat of conflict or even violence is always present. (109)

Harris suggests that thinking of the classroom as a public space rather than a community allows us to imagine it as a site where people negotiate across differences rather than through them. It implies a kind of civility rather than harmonious, serene interaction. Harris imagines a class where students work not to resolve their differences but to highlight them, emphasizing what might be involved in various ways of understanding a text. That is, Harris's notion of the classroom as a public space urges students to see how and why various readers, writers, or speakers might disagree on an issue. Harris calls for a "forum in which issues and concerns that go beyond the borders of particular communities or interest groups can be worked through collectively, debated, negotiated" (123). The constituents in such a public space—be they citizens in a city or students in a classroom—need to be willing to come into contact with each

other, and they must have some real reason for doing so. They need, as Harris suggests, to feel that they are indeed "citizens of a city and not simply residents of a neighborhood" (123).

SERVICE LEARNING

Recently, a number of scholars in composition and English have foregone questions about what we want from public writing and how we might use the term "public" as a new metaphor for the classroom. These educators have attempted to introduce a form of public writing into their courses through a relatively new approach to teaching: *service learning*. Service learning has moved freely throughout the academy for a number of years, unencumbered by disciplinary identity, moving through education, sociology, psychology, and, most recently, English. Similar to volunteerism, service learning distinguishes itself through its commitment to discourse—particularly its emphasis on reflection. On many campuses, service learning emerged from "student-developed community service programs, while university faculty and staff involvement came later" (Schutz and Gere 129). Service learning combines the sort of democratic action espoused by Freireans, combined with cultural studies approaches that question the nature of the academy to those who surround and support it. Consequently, it asserts that being political in the classroom cannot substitute for the kind of civic participation that is necessary to enact real social and political change in a society. Discussion and reflection of public issues is not enough; action is a necessary component of service learning. As Paul Heilker writes in "Rhetoric Made Real: Civic Discourse and Writing Beyond the Curriculum," writing teachers "need to relocate the where of composition instruction outside the academic classroom because the classroom does not and cannot offer students real rhetorical situations in which to understand writing as social action" (71). Service learning approaches to composition attempt to generate situations where writing can be seen as deeply connected to social action and democratic practices.

While many of the articles and books on service learning in English studies have focused on pedagogical, anecdotal tales of how to enact and guide service learning projects, the few that have examined service learning from a theoretical perspective seem to imply a four-step learning cycle for students involved in the project. This model consists of abstract conceptualization, followed by active experimentation, followed by concrete experience, culminating in reflective observation (Adler-Kassner, Crooks, and Waters). Service learning is different from traditional classroom methods in that it has actual, concrete goals that include contact with sites outside of the classroom. Such projects attempt to answer questions about the relevance of postsecondary edu-

cation through "real world" applications. As such, they work toward easing the identity crisis in English and other disciplines, moving beyond academic discourse and the "ivory tower." As our constituencies—students, taxpayers, legislators—demand greater accountability, service learning projects might increase in size, number, and exposure.

There are a number of benefits touted as part of the service learning model. Students gain academic credit, real-world applications for classroom concepts, real-world work experience for résumés, and a personal investment in the community outside the university. Students are also supposed to develop skills in problem solving and critical thinking. In the process, they develop a more sophisticated analysis of society and their roles in it. The recipients are supposed to benefit through improved literacy or communication skills, new work capabilities, and multicultural awareness. While there are significant obstacles that must be overcome in service learning courses, which some scholars have begun to address, such approaches to public writing seem to be growing exponentially.

According to Bruce Herzberg, service learning helps "put a human face on the students' education" (307). In performing "real and needed services," he says, students discover both "real applications [for] their knowledge in the organizations they serve" and "that they can use their knowledge not only to get jobs for themselves but also to help others" (308). However, he notes, students often see those they are helping, such as the homeless, as "people just like themselves." As a result, they often regard social problems as only personal and fail to address systemic explanations for problems in society. Questions about social structures, ideology, and social justice are not automatically raised by service learning projects; in fact, as Herzberg writes, he is "quite sure they are not" (309). If a service learning course is not structured to raise the questions that result in critical analysis of the issues, that course often becomes an exercise in charity rather than education and social change.

Ellen Cushman raises similar questions in her excellent article, "The Rhetorician as an Agent of Social Change." Agreeing with Halloran's desire to reinstitute the rhetorical tradition in composition and English studies, Cushman suggests that we can increase our participation in public discourse by "bridging the university and community through activism" (7). However, she is quick to note that assuming that people will be receptive to activism might very well be a form of "leftist posing disguised as philanthropy" (22). Obviously, service learning projects require negotiation of the sociological distances that need to be crossed. In a related article, Cushman notes the tendency for students to paint themselves as great "liberators of oppressed masses." She writes that one "limitation of service learning courses can be students' perception of themselves as imparting to the poor and undereducated their greater knowl-

edge and skills" (Opinion 332). If the university representatives see themselves as coming to the rescue of community residents, students will enact these same tendencies in their tutoring.

Instructors in the service learning course that Aaron Schutz and Anne Ruggles Gere developed noted that their "students often entered seeing themselves as 'liberal saviors,' and that the structure of tutoring had the potential to enhance the students' vision of this 'savior' role" (133). However, Schutz and Gere are quick to note the benefits of these public projects, particularly when they are rooted in cultural criticism. Echoing Nancy Fraser's criticism of Habermas's public sphere, they suggest that the term "public," when applied to service learning, carries multiple and often conflicting meanings that are always arbitrary and determined by power relations (142). Service learning, like other public writing approaches, requires that we recognize how such practices cannot be disconnected from the issues of power, oppression, and exclusion. Done effectively, service learning could perhaps bring into the curriculum discourses and activities from the world outside of the academy. How service learning proponents negotiate the ideological and sociological obstacles that face such projects will be instrumental in determining the success and endurance of service learning in composition.

Clearly, the idea of the public is currently of great interest to scholars in composition and English studies. What "public writing" might be, however, is uncertain. To some, the public is a useful metaphor for how we might envision the writing classroom. For others, the public is something "out there" that we and our students might attempt to enter through discourse. Some have already attempted to use public writing as a means for bringing about social change. The interest in public writing can be seen as an extension of radical composition, for both examine language use as it enables and inhibits participants in their struggles for public democracy and social justice. As I have noted, discourse specialists have begun to turn to scholarship outside of composition and English studies—most notably the work of cultural theorists such as Jürgen Habermas, Richard Sennett, and Nancy Fraser—to inform their discussions of the public. In composition, scholars including Susan Wells, Irene Ward, Joseph Harris, and Anne Ruggles Gere have recognized the importance of these discussions, and these scholars have incorporated some of this theoretical work into their own examinations of public writing. While many theorists, scholars, and educators have recognized the significance of cultural and social theory to the current conversations in composition and English studies, no scholar has yet put forth a careful and thorough examination of the possibilities of the work of Habermas and others to scholarship on public discourse in English-related fields. The next chapter presents an analy-

sis of cultural theories that inquire into the make-up of public spheres. It also examines the possibilities that educators and intellectuals might have for creating spaces where public discourse can be voiced and heard. By doing so, it provides a fuller understanding of what public writing can or might mean. In the process, it attempts to define what discourse in the public sphere might entail for compositionists in the future.

3

SOCIAL THEORY, DISCOURSE, AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

New Perspectives on Civic Space

If we attend to the course of conversation in mixed companies consisting not merely of scholars and subtle reasoners but also of business people and women, we notice that besides storytelling and jesting they have another entertainment, namely, arguing.

—IMMANUEL KANT, *Critique of Practical Reason*

AS I ILLUSTRATED in the second chapter, theories concerning public writing and public spheres are currently of great interest to many scholars in composition in particular and English studies in general. This interest in “the public” as an important concept in writing instruction can be fairly easily traced to more progressive, critical approaches to composition—commonly identified as *radical educationist* perspectives. In the 1990s, radical, critical approaches to composition became more influential and diverse, and one of their most important contributions to composition theory was their problematization of social constructionist theories of composition. These radical approaches were among the first to implicitly critique traditional, teacher-centered methods of writing instruction. Drawing on the work of Paulo Freire and others, the so-called “radicals” in composition have led most composition theorists, researchers, and educators to better understandings of the relationships between power, discourse, and ideology. The interest in public writing has been heavily influenced by radical composition, for both examine language use as it enables and inhibits participants in their struggles for public democracy and social justice. More and more compositionists have recently become interested in moving beyond traditional methods of writing instruction and, consequently, many of the current discussions of writing instruction have begun to theorize pedagogies that move beyond the college or university classroom. That is, many writing instructors today are interested in both theories and practices that allow student writing to have real political and social ramifications, and a few of these educators have made some potentially important and meaningful contributions to discussions of public writing.

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