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Poststructuralism, Cultural Studies, and the Composition Classroom: Postmodern Theory in Practice

The uses of postmodern theory in rhetoric and composition studies have been the object of considerable abuse of late. Figures of some repute in the field—the likes of Maxine Hairston and Peter Elbow—as well as anonymous voices from the Burkean Parlor section of *Rhetoric Review*—most recently, TS, a graduate student, and KF, a voice speaking for “a general English teacher audience” (192)—have joined the chorus of protest. The charges have included willful ob̄curity, self-indulgence, elitism, pomposity, intellectual impoverishment, and a host of related offenses. Although my name usually appears among the accused, I am sympathetic with those undergoing the difficulties of the first encounter with this discussion. (I exclude Professor Hairston in her irresponsible charge that its recent contributors in *College English* are “low-risk Marxists who write very badly” [695] and who should be banned from NCTE publications.) I experienced the same frustration when I first encountered the different but closely related language of rhetoric and composition studies some fifteen years ago. I wondered, for example, if I would ever grasp the complexities of Aristotle or Quintilian or Kenneth Burke or I. A. Richards, not to mention the new language of the writing process. A bit later I was introduced to French poststructuralism, and once again I found myself wandering in strange seas, and this time alone. In reading rhetoric, after all, I had the benefit of numerous commentators to help me along—the work of Kinneavy and Lauer and Corbett and Emig, for example. In reading Foucault and Derrida in the late seventies, on the other hand, I was largely on my own since the commentaries were as difficult as the originals, and those few that were readable were often (as even I could see) wrong. Nonetheless, with the help of informal reading groups made up of colleagues and students, I persisted in my efforts to come to terms with this difficult body of thought. I was then, as now, convinced that both rhetorical studies and postmodern speculation offered strikingly convergent and remarkably compelling visions for conducting my life as a teacher and a citizen. It is clear to me that rhetoric and composition studies has arrived as a serious field of study because it has taken into account the best that has been thought and said about its concerns from the past and the present, and I have found that postmodern work in historical and contemporary rhetorical theory has done much to further this effort.

I will readily admit that discussants in postmodern theories of rhetoric have been more concerned with advancing this immensely rich vein of speculation than they have with communicating with the novice. But I think it is a mistake to condemn them for this. Contrary to what KF, the hard-working general English teacher, has asserted, teaching writing is not a “relatively simple and straightforward task” (192). As the intense effort that has been given this activity in the 2500-year history of Western education indicates, communication is at once extremely important in the life of a society and extremely complex (see the histories of Kennedy or Corbett or Vickers, for example). Those who wish to come to grips with this complexity cannot be expected to write exclusively for the uninitiated, a move that would hopelessly retard the development of any discussion. A new rhetoric requires a new language if we are to develop devices for producing and interpreting discourse that are adequate to our historical moment. I would argue that those working today at the intersections of rhetoric and postmodern theory are beginning to generate rhetorics that in conception and pedagogical application promise to be counterparts to the greatest accomplishments of the past—of an Aristotle (who once sounded strange next to Plato) or an Isocrates (who sounded strange next to Gorgias) or to Campbell (who sounded strange next to Ward). Eventually (and sooner than we might imagine, I expect), those interested in rhetoric will be talking and thinking in the new terminologies emerging today, finding them just as comfortable as the language of cognitive rhetoric or expressionist rhetoric. Still, this does not help the overworked composition teacher or the new graduate student who is eager to explore the significance of this new speculation for theory and the classroom but is not sure where to start.

In this essay I want to present as clearly as I know how some of the central features of postmodern theory that workers in rhetoric have found especially relevant to their efforts. Since covering the field as whole would require more space than I have here, however, I want to restrict myself to considering the ways these postmodern conceptions are counterparts to discussions in social-epistemic rhetoric. I will also include a description of a freshman course I have designed that is the result of my theoretical studies, a course that combines methods of cultural studies (itself a product of postmodern thought coupled with a progressive politics) with the methods of social-epistemic rhetoric in a beginning composition class. My intent is to demonstrate that the complexities of theory have immediate pedagogical applications, and that one of the efforts of composition teachers must be to discover these. Indeed, I will argue that the merger of theory and classroom practice in a uniquely new relation is one of the results of (what I should perhaps now call) postmodern rhetorical theory.

The Postmodern

John Schilb has explained that postmodernism “can designate a critique of traditional epistemology, a set of artistic practices, and an ensemble of larger social

conditions” (174). Here the focus will be on the first, particularly on that body of thought that has emerged in what is loosely called structuralist and poststructuralist theory (sometimes called the “language division” of postmodern speculation). In “Rhetoric Programs after World War II: Ideology, Power, and Conflict,” I attempt to outline the ways certain branches of rhetorical studies in the US, particularly of the epistemic variety, have paralleled the trajectory of structuralist and poststructuralist developments both at home and abroad. In this section I would like to explore the important features of postmodernism in which this is most apparent; in the next I will trace their uses in social-epistemic rhetoric. The significant postmodern developments fall into three general categories: the status of the subject; the characteristics of signifying practices; the role of master theories in explaining human affairs.

The unified, coherent, autonomous, self-present subject of the Enlightenment has been the centerpiece of liberal humanism. From this perspective the subject is a transcendent consciousness that functions unencumbered by social and material conditions of experience, acting as a free and rational agent who adjudicates competing claims for action. In other words, the individual is regarded as the author of all her actions, moving in complete freedom in deciding how she will live. This perception has been challenged by the postmodern conception of the subject as the product of social and material conditions. Here the subject is considered the construction of the various signifying practices, the uses of language, of a given historical moment (see, for example, Benveniste, Barthes, Foucault). This means that each person is formed by the various discourses, sign systems, that surround her. These include both everyday uses of language in the home, school, the media, and other institutions, as well as the material conditions that are arranged in the manner of languages—that is, semiotically (like a sign system), such as the clothes we wear, the way we carry our bodies, the way our school and home environments are arranged. These signifying practices then are languages that tell us who we are and how we should behave in terms of such categories as gender, race, class, age, ethnicity, and the like. The result is that each of us is heterogeneously made up of various competing discourses, conflicted and contradictory scripts, that make our consciousness anything but unified, coherent, and autonomous. At the most everyday level, for example, the discourses of the school and the home about appropriate gender behavior (“Just say ‘No’”) are frequently at odds with the discourse provided by peers and the media (“Go for it”). The result is that we are made up of subject formations or subject positions that do not always square with each other.

Signifying practices then are at the center of the formation of the “subject” and of “subjectivities”—terms made necessary to avoid all the liberal humanist implications of talking about the “individual.” But the conception of signifying practices, of language, is itself radically altered in this scheme. A given language is no longer taken to be a transparent medium that records an externally present

thing-in-itself, that is, it is not a simple signaling device that stands for and corresponds to the separate realities that lend it meaning. Language is instead taken to be a pluralistic and complex system of signifying practices that construct realities rather than simply presenting or re-presenting them. Our conception of material and social phenomena then are fabrications of signifying, the products of culturally coded signs. Saussure, the prime originator of structuralism in Europe, first demonstrated the ways language functions as a set of differences: Signifiers derive meaning not in relation to signifieds, to external referents, but in relation to other signifiers, the semiotic systems in which they are functioning. For example, just as the sound “t” is significant in English because it contrasts with “d”—making for a difference in meaning between “to” and “do”—a term, such as “man,” has significance in a given discourse because it contrasts with another term, such as “woman” or “boy” or “ape.” And just as the sounds of a language are culturally variable, so are its terms and their structural relations. A sign thus has meaning by virtue of its position relative to another sign or signs within a given system, not to externally verifiable certainties. Most important, these signs are arranged in a hierarchy so that one is “privileged,” that is, considered more important than its related term. For example, Alleen Pace Nilsen has shown that terms in English that are gender specific almost invariably involve positive connotations in the case of males and negative connotation in the case of females (master/mistress, sir/madam, chef/cook, for example). Such hierarchies, once again, are not universal but are culturally specific.

Roland Barthes has shown the ways that signs form systems (semiotic systems) that extend beyond natural language to all realms of a culture, for example, film, television, photography, food, fashion, automobiles, and on and on (see *Mythologies*). He presents a method for analyzing and discussing the semiosis (sign production) of texts as they appear in virtually all features of human behavior. Michel Foucault has indicated the manner in which different “discursive regimes,” elaborate systems of signifying systems, forge knowledge/power formations that govern action during successive stages of history. (He does so, furthermore, while denying any master regime or narrative unfolding over time, a matter to be considered shortly.) Finally, Jacques Derrida has shown the attempt of philosophy to establish a foundation, an essential presence, for its systems in a realm outside of language, an effort to avoid the role of signification, of discourse, in all human undertakings. From the postmodern perspective, then, signifying practices shape the subject, the social, and the material—the perceiver and the perceived.

These antifoundational, antiessentialist assaults on Enlightenment conceptions of the subjects and objects of experience are extended to postulates of grand narratives of the past or present—that is, the stories we tell about our experiences that attempt to account for all features of it (its totality) in a comprehensive way. Jean-François Lyotard has been the central figure in denying the possibility of any grand metanarrative that might exhaustively account for human conditions in the

past or present. Like Foucault, he renounces the totalizing discourse of such schemes as Hegelianism or Marxism or the faith in scientific progress or the invisible hand of economic law. All are declared language games that are inherently partial and interested, intended to endorse particular relations of power and to privilege certain groups in historical struggles. Against this totalizing move, Lyotard argues for a plurality of particular narratives, limited and localized accounts that attempt to explain features of experience that grand narratives exclude. The structuralist and poststructuralist analyses of sign systems look for the binary opposites of key terms, the marginalized terms that often go unmentioned. (This is why they use the term *foreground*: it refers to putting the concealed and unacknowledged term in a binary structure forward so that the *complete* significance of the term can be examined in a given discourse.) Similarly, postmodern studies of cultures of the past and present look for what is left out, what exists on the unspoken margins of the culture. This moves attention to such categories as class, race, gender, and ethnicity in the unfolding of historical events. This is often history from the bottom up, telling the stories of the people and events normally excluded from totalizing accounts.

Social-Epistemic Rhetoric

Those familiar with social-epistemic rhetoric can readily see its convergence with postmodern conclusions about language and culture. I have discussed this rhetoric at length in *Rhetoric and Reality*, “Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class,” and elsewhere. Here I wish to offer a look at the ways in which it converges with postmodern speculation in providing a mutually enriching theoretical synthesis. To say this differently, poststructuralism provides a way of more fully discussing elements of social-epistemic rhetoric that are fully operative within it; at the same time, social-epistemic rhetoric provides poststructuralism with methods for discussing the production and reception of texts—and especially the former—that have been a part of its effort. I will show these convergences in discussing the elements of the rhetorical situation—interlocutor, conceptions of the real, audience, and language—as they are being conceived in social-epistemic rhetoric informed by poststructuralism. I should also mention that this development is bringing social-epistemic rhetoric, particularly, as I will show, in the classroom, very close to the work of cultural studies as it has been discussed by the Birmingham Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies.

We have already seen that the subject of the rhetorical act cannot be regarded as the unified, coherent, autonomous, transcendent subject of liberal humanism. The subject is instead multiple and conflicted, composed of numerous subject formations or positions. From one perspective this is a standard feature of many historical rhetorics in their concern with the *ethos* of the speaker, her presentation of the appropriate image of her character through language, voice, bearing, and the like. For a contemporary rhetoric, the writer and reader, the speaker and listener

(and more of their commutability of function shortly), must likewise be aware that the subject (the producer) of discourse is a construction, a fabrication, established through the devices of signifying practices. This means that great care must be taken in choosing the subject position that the interlocutor wishes to present, and equally great care must be taken in teaching students the way this is done. In other words, it will not do to say, "Be yourself," since all of us possess multiple selves, not all of which are appropriate for the particular discourse situation. This is not, it should be noted, to deny that all of us display a measure of singularity. As Paul Smith argues, the unique place of each of us in the network of intersecting discourses assures differences among us as well as possibilities for originality and political agency. This does not mean, however, that anyone can totally escape the discursive regimes, the power/knowledge formations, of the historical moment. Political agency but never complete autonomy is the guiding formulation here.

But if the subject, the sender, is a construct of signifying practices in social-epistemic rhetoric, so are the material conditions to which the subject responds, the prime constituents of the message of discourse. (I am of course relying on Burke's formulation of language as symbolic action to be distinguished from the sheer motion of the material, as well as on the work of Barthes and Foucault). This is not to deny the force of the material in human affairs: people do need to provide for physiological needs, to arrange refuge from the elements, and to deal with eventual physical extinction. However, all of these material experiences are mediated through signifying practices. Only through language do we know and act upon the conditions of our experience. Ways of living and dying are finally negotiated through discourse, the cultural codes that are part of our historical conditions. These conditions are of an economic, social, and political nature, and they change over time. But they too can only be known and acted upon through the discourses available at any historical moment. Thus the subject who experiences and the material and social conditions experienced are discursively constituted in historically specific terms.

The mediation of signifying practices in the relations of subjects to material conditions is especially crucial. From the perspective offered here, signifying practices are always at the center of conflict and contention. In the effort to name experience, different groups are constantly vying for supremacy, for ownership and control of terms and their meanings in any discourse situation. As Stuart Hall, a past director of the Birmingham Center, has pointed out, a given language or discourse does not automatically belong to any class, race, or gender. Following Volosinov and Gramsci, he argues that language is always an arena of struggle to make certain meanings—certain ideological formulations—prevail. Cultural codes thus are constantly in conflict: they contend for hegemony in defining and directing the material conditions of experience as well as consciousness itself. The signifying practices of different groups thus compete in forwarding different agendas for the ways people are to regard their historical conditions and their

modes of responding to them, and these signifying practices are thus always a scene of battle (Hall, “The Rediscovery of ‘Ideology’”).

The receiver of messages, the audience of discourse, obviously cannot escape the consequences of signifying practices. The audience’s possible responses to texts are in part a function of its discursively constituted social roles. These roles are often constructed with some measure of specificity as membership in a specific discourse community—in a particular union or profession, for example. But these roles are never discretely separate from other subject positions the members of an audience may share or, on the other hand, occupy independent of each other. In other words, members of an audience cannot simply activate one subject position and switch off all others. Thus, audiences must be considered both as members of communities and as separate subject formations. The result is that the responses of the audience as a collective and as separate subjects are never totally predictable, never completely in the control of the sender of a coded message or of the coded message itself. As Stuart Hall has demonstrated, audiences are capable of a range of possible responses to any message. They can simply accommodate the message, sharing in the codes of the sender and assenting to them. The audience can completely resist the message, rejecting its codes and purposes and turning them to other ends. Finally, the receiver can engage in a process of negotiation, neither accommodating alone nor resisting alone, instead engaging in a measure of both (Hall, “Encoding/Decoding”).

The work of rhetoric, then, is to study the production and reception of these historically specific signifying practices. In other words, social-epistemic rhetoric will enable senders and receivers to arrive at a formulation of the conception of the entire rhetorical context in any given discourse situation, and this will be done through an analysis of the signifying practices operating within it. Thus in composing a text, a writer will engage in an analysis of the cultural codes operating in defining her role, the roles of the audience, and the constructions of the matter to be considered. These function in a dialectical relation to each other so that the writer must engage in complex decision-making in shaping the text to be presented. By dialectic I mean they change in response to each other in ways that are not mechanically predictable—not presenting, for example, simply a cause-effect relation but a shifting affiliation in which causes and effects are mutually interactive, with effects becoming causes and causes effects simultaneously. The reader of the text must also engage in a dialectical process involving coded conceptions of the writer, the matter under consideration, and the role of the receiver of the text in arriving at an interpretation of the text. Writing and reading are thus both acts of textual interpretation and construction, and both are central to social-epistemic rhetoric. More of this reading/writing relationship will be taken up later. First I would like to consider the role of ideology in rhetoric.

As I have indicated throughout, signifying practices are never innocent: they are always involved in ideological designations, conceptions of economic, social,

political, and cultural arrangements and their relations to the subjects of history within concrete power relations. Ideology is not here declared a mystification to be placed in binary opposition to truth or science. The formulation invoked is instead derived from Louis Althusser as elaborated in Goran Therborn's *The Ideology of Power and the Power of Ideology*. This conception places ideology within the category of discourse, describing it as an inevitable feature of all signifying practices. Ideology then becomes closely imbricated with rhetoric, the two inseparably overlapped however distinguished for purposes of discussion. From this perspective, no claims can be offered as absolute, timeless truths since all are historically specific, arising in response to the conditions of a particular time and place. Choices in the economic, social, political, and cultural are thus based on discursive practices that are interpretations—not mere transcriptions of some external, verifiable certainty. Thus the choice is never between ideology and absolute truth, but between different ideologies. Some are finally judged better (“truer”) than others on the basis of their ability to fulfill the promises of democracy at all levels of experience—the economic, social, political, and cultural—providing an equal share of authority in decision-making and a tolerance for difference.

Ideology addresses or interpellates human beings. It provides the language to define the subject, other subjects, the material and social, and the relation of all of these to each other. Ideology addresses three questions: what exists, what is good, what is possible? The first, explains Therborn, tells us “who we are, what the world is, what nature, society, men and women are like. In this way we acquire a sense of identity, becoming conscious of what is real and true.” Ideology also provides the subject with standards for making ethical and aesthetic decisions: “*what is good, right, just, beautiful, attractive, enjoyable, and its opposites*. In this way our desires become structured and normalized.” The very configurations of our desires, what we will long for and pursue, are thus shaped by ideology. Finally, ideology defines the elements of expectation: “*what is possible and impossible*: our sense of the mutability of our being-in-the-world and the consequences of change are hereby patterned, and our hopes, ambitions, and fears given shape.” (18). This is especially important since the recognition of the existence of a condition (homelessness, for example) and the desire for its change will go for nothing if ideology indicates that a change is simply not possible (the homeless freely choose to live in the street and cannot be forced to come inside). All three are further implicated in power relations in groups and in society, in deciding who has power and in determining what power can be expected to achieve.

Finally, ideology always brings with it strong social and cultural reinforcement, so that what we take to exist, to have value, and to be possible seems necessary, normal, and inevitable—in the nature of things. And this goes for power as well since ideology naturalizes certain authority regimes—those of class, race, and gender, for example—and renders alternatives unthinkable, in this way deter-

mining who can act and what can be accomplished. Finally, ideology is always inscribed in the discourses of daily practice and is pluralistic and conflicted. Any historical moment displays a wide variety of competing ideologies and each subject displays permutations of these conflicts, although the overall effect is to support the hegemony of dominant groups.

All of this has great consequences for the writing classroom. Given the ubiquitous role of discourse in human affairs, instructors cannot be content to focus exclusively on teaching the production of academic texts. Our business must be to instruct students in signifying practices broadly conceived—to see not only the rhetoric of the college essay but the rhetoric of the institution of schooling, of the work place, and of the media. We must take as our province the production and reception of semiotic codes broadly conceived, providing students with the heuristics to penetrate these codes and their ideological designs on our formation as the subjects of our experience. Students must come to see that the languages they are expected to speak, write, and embrace as ways of thinking and acting are never disinterested, always bringing with them strictures on the existent, the good, the possible, and regimes of power.

If rhetoric is to be a consideration of signifying practices and their ideological involvement—that is, their imbrication in economic, social, political, and cultural conditions and subject formation—then the study of signs will of course be central. A large part of the business of this rhetoric will be to provide methods for describing and analyzing the operations of signification. Just as successive rhetorics for centuries furnished the terms to name the elements involved in text production and interpretation for the past (inventional devices, arrangement schemes, stylistic labels for tropes and figures), social-epistemic rhetoric will offer a terminology to discuss these activities for contemporary conditions and conceptual formulations. Structuralism, poststructuralism, and rhetoric have all begun this effort, and workers in semiotics have profited from them. It is composition teachers, however, who are best situated to develop ways of analyzing and discussing discourse to enable students to become better writers and readers. (After all, most of the important rhetorics of the past were written by teachers: Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle all taught the counterpart of freshman composition.) This leads to a consideration of the relation of reading and writing, of text production and text interpretation.

As I have already indicated, social-epistemic rhetoric demands revised models of reading and writing. Both composing and interpreting texts become instances of discourse analysis and, significantly, negotiation. Indeed, the very acts of writing and reading are themselves verbally coded discursive procedures which guide the production and interpretation of meanings, making a certain range more likely to appear and others more improbable. This exclusionary coding is apparent, for example, in reflecting on the directives for text production and reception provided in certain expressionist rhetorics. For these, only personal and meta-

phoric accounts can be regarded as authentic discourse, and, unlike current-traditional rhetoric, any attempt to be rational, objective, and dispassionate is considered a violation of the self and of genuine writing. In addition, for social-epistemic rhetoric, writing and reading become acts of discourse analysis as both the sender and receiver attempt to negotiate the semiotic codes in which each is situated—that is, the signifying practices that make up the entire rhetorical context. Composing and reception are thus interactive since both are performances of production, requiring the active construction of meaning according to one or another coded procedure. The opposition between the active writer and the passive reader is displaced since both reading and writing are considered constructive. It will be the work of rhetoric and composition teachers, then, to develop lexicons to articulate the complex coding activity involved in writing and reading, and this leads us to the classroom.

The Classroom

The recommendations of the new rhetoric proposed here become clearest in considering pedagogy. For social-epistemic rhetoric, teaching is central, not an afterthought through which practice is made to conform with the more important work of theory. Instead, the classroom becomes the point at which theory and practice engage in a dialectical interaction, working out a rhetoric more adequate to the historical moment and the actual conditions of teacher and students. From this perspective, all teachers of rhetoric and composition are regarded as intellectuals engaging in theoretical and empirical research, the two coming to fruition in their interaction within the classroom. Indeed, as Patricia Donahue and Ellen Quandahl have argued, composition teachers are through this interaction striving to create a new variety of academic discourse. The teacher's duty here is to bring to bear rhetorical theory as broadly defined in this essay within the conditions of her students' lives. The teacher will in this act develop methods for producing and receiving texts, including strategies for negotiating and resisting signifying practices, that are best suited for the situations of her students. These of course will be recommended to other teachers, but only as example and guideline, not pronouncements from on (theoretical) high. The uses of postmodern theory in rhetoric will then be in the hands of teachers, not prescribed in advance by "outside experts."

This role as intellectual, furthermore, has an important political dimension, involving the transformation and improvement of present social and political arrangements. As I have emphasized elsewhere, social-epistemic rhetoric grows out of the experience of democracy in the US, carrying with it a strong antifoundational impulse (*Rhetoric and Reality*, "Rhetoric and Ideology"). Knowledge/power relationships are regarded as human constructions, not natural and inevitable facts of life. All institutional arrangements are humanly made and so can be unmade, and the core of this productive act is found in democracy and open discussion.

The social-epistemic classroom thus offers a lesson in democracy intended to prepare students for critical participation in public life. It is dedicated to making schools places for individual and social empowerment. Schools after all are places, as Aronowitz and Giroux remind us, “of struggle over what forms of authority, orders of representation, forms of moral regulation, and versions of the past should be legitimated, passed on, and debated” (32). The teacher must then recognize and resist inequities in our society—the economic and social injustices inscribed in race, ethnic, and gender relations, relations that privilege the few and discriminate against the many. This classroom is dialogic, situating learning within the realities of the students’ own experience, particularly their political experience. The dialogic classroom is designed to encourage students to become transformative intellectuals in their own right. Studying signifying practices will require a “critical literacy.” As Ira Shor explains: “Critical literacy invites teachers and students to *problematize* all subjects of study, that is, to understand existing knowledge as historical products deeply invested with the value of those who developed such knowledge.” For this teacher, all learning is based in ideology, and signifying practices—the production and reception of texts—must challenge dominant ideological formations. In Shor’s terms, the study of discourse must go “beneath the surface to understand the origin, structure, and consequences of any body of knowledge, technical process, or object under study” (24). Students thus research their own language, their own society, their own learning, examining the values inscribed in them and the ways these values are shaping their subjectivities and their conceptions of their material and social conditions.

The Course

I would now like to turn to a course in freshman composition that will demonstrate the operations of the social-epistemic rhetoric described here. This effort locates the composing process within its social context, combining the methods of semiotic analysis in considering cultural codes with the recommendations of the rhetoric I have outlined. As will be apparent, it is allied with attempts to refigure English studies along the lines of cultural studies, a matter I have discussed in “Composition Studies and Cultural Studies” and “Composition and Cultural Studies: Collapsing the Boundaries.” Since I devised the syllabus for this course to be shared with teaching assistants in my mentor group at Purdue and since my report here is based on our shared experience over the past three years, I will use the plural pronoun in referring to the effort. (I would also like to thank them for their cooperation throughout.)

The course is organized around an examination of the cultural codes—the social semiotics—that are working themselves out in shaping consciousness in our students and ourselves. We start with the personal experience of the students, but the emphasis is on the position of this experience within its formative context. Our main concern is the relation of current signifying practices to the structuring of

subjectivities—of race, class, and gender formations, for example—in our students and ourselves. The effort is to make students aware of cultural codes, the competing discourses that are influencing their formations as the subjects of experience. Our larger purpose is to encourage students to resist and to negotiate these codes—these hegemonic discourses—in order to bring about more democratic and personally humane economic, social, and political arrangements. From our perspective, only in this way can they become genuinely competent writers and readers.

We thus guide students to locate in their experience the points at which they are now engaging in resistance and negotiation with the cultural codes they daily encounter. These are then used as avenues of departure for a dialogue. It is our hope that students who can demystify the subtle devices of persuasion in these cultural codes will be motivated to begin the re-forming of subjectivities and social arrangements, a re-forming which is a normal part of democratic political arrangements. We also want to explore the wide range of codes that students confront daily—print, film, television—in order to prepare them to critique their experiences with these codes. As Donald Morton and Mas'ud Zavarzadeh explain, this “critique (not to be confused with criticism) is an investigation of the enabling conditions of discursive practices” (7). Its purpose is to locate the ideological predispositions of the semiotic codes that we encounter and enact in our lives, seeing their commitment to certain conceptions of the existent, the good, and the possible. The course then explores these coded discourses in the institutional forms—the family, the school, the work place, the media—that make them seem natural and timeless rather than historically situated social constructions.

The course consists of six units: advertising, work, play, education, gender, and individuality. Each unit begins with a reading of essays dealing with competing versions of the significance of the topic of the unit. For example, the unit on education includes an analysis of US schools by a diverse range of observers: William Bennett, Jonathon Kozol, John Dewey, and James Thurber. These essays are often followed with a film dealing with school experiences—for example, *Risky Business* or *Sixteen Candles* or *The Breakfast Club*. A videotape of a current television program about schools—for example, *Beverly Hills, 90210*—is also often included. The important consideration is not the texts in themselves but the texts in relation to certain methods of interpreting them.

Students are provided a set of heuristics (invention strategies) that grow out of the interaction of rhetoric, structuralism, poststructuralism, semiotics, and cultural studies (again, especially of the Birmingham Center variety). While those outlined here have been developed as a result of reading in Saussure, Peirce, Lévi-Strauss, Barthes, Gramsci, Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, and others, an excellent introduction to them for teachers and students can be found in John Fiske's *Introduction to Communication Studies*. (Diana George and John Trimbur's *Reading Culture* will perform a similar function for composition class-

rooms.) In examining any text—print, film, television—students are asked to locate the key terms in the discourse and to situate these within the structure of meaning of which they form a part. These terms of course are made up of the central preoccupations of the text, but to determine how they are working to constitute experience their functions as parts of coded structures—a semiotic system—must be examined. The terms are first set in relation to their binary opposites as suggested by the text itself. (This of course follows Saussure's description of the central place of contrast in signification and Lévi-Strauss's application of it.) Sometimes this opposition is indicated explicitly, but often it is not. It is also important to note that a term commonly occupies a position in opposition to more than one other term.

For example, we sometimes begin with a 1981 essay from *The Wall Street Journal*, "The Days of a Cowboy are Marked by Danger, Drudgery, and Low Pay," by William Blundell. (This essay is most appropriate for the unit on work, but its codes are at once so varied and so accessible to students that it is a useful introduction to any unit.) We first consider the context of the piece, exploring the characteristics of the readership of the newspaper and the historical events surrounding the essay's production, particularly as indicated within the text. The purpose of this is to decide what probably acted as key terms for the original readers. The essay focuses on the cowboss, the ranch foreman who runs the cattle operation. The meaning of "cowboss" is established by seeing it in binary opposition to the cowboys who work for him as well as the owners who work away from the ranch in cities. At other times in the essay, the cowboss is grouped together with the cowboys in opposition to office workers. Through the description of labor relations on the ranch, the cowboys are also situated in contrast to urban union workers, but the latter are never explicitly mentioned. Finally, the exclusively masculine nature of ranching is suggested only at the end of the essay when the cowboss's wife is described in passing as living apart from the ranch on the cowboss's own small spread, creating male/female domain binary. All of these binaries suggest others, such as the opposition of nature/civilization, country/city, cowboy/urban cowboy, and the like. Students begin to see that these binaries are arranged hierarchically, with one term privileged over the other. They also see how unstable these hierarchies can be, however, with a term frequently shifting valences as it moves from one binary to another—for example, cowboy/union worker but cowboss/cowboy. It is also important to point out that this location of binaries is of course not an exact operation and that great diversity appears as students negotiate the text differently. Their reasons for doing so become clear at the next level of analysis.

These terms are then placed within the narrative structural forms suggested by the text, the culturally coded stories about patterns of behavior appropriate for people within certain situations. These codes deal with such social designations as race, class, gender, age, ethnicity, and the like. The position of the key terms within

these socially constructed narrative codes are analyzed, discussed, and written about. It is not too difficult to imagine how these are at work in the binaries indicated above. The narratives that cluster around the figure of the cowboy in our culture are quickly detected in this essay—for example, patterns of behavior involving individuality, freedom, and independence. These, however, are simultaneously coupled with self-discipline, respect for authority (good cowboys never complain), and submission to the will of the cowboss. Students have little difficulty in pointing out the ways these narratives are conflicted while concurrently reinforcing differences in class and gender role expectations. Of particular value is to see the way the essay employs narratives that at once disparage the *Wall Street Journal* readers because they are urban office workers while enabling them to identify with the rugged freedom and adventure of the cowboys, seeing themselves as metaphorically enacting the masculine narrative of the cowboss in their separate domains. In other words, students discover that the essay attempts to position the reader in the role of a certain kind of masculine subject.

These narrative patterns at the level of the social role are then situated within larger narrative structures that have to do with economic, political, and cultural formulations. Here students examine capitalist economic narratives as demonstrated in this essay and their consequences for class, gender, and race relations and roles both in the work place and elsewhere. They look, for example, at the distribution of work in beef production with its divisions between managers and workers, thinkers and doers, producers and consumers. They also consider the place of narratives of democracy in the essay, discussing the nature of the political relations that are implied in the hierarchies of terms and social relations presented. It should be clear that at these two narrative levels considerable debate results as students disagree about the narratives that ought to be invoked in interpreting the text, their relative worth as models for emulation, and the degree to which these narratives are conflicted. In other words, the discussion emerging from the use of these heuristics is itself conflicted and unpredictable.

Thus, the term as it is designated within a hierarchical binary is situated within narratives of social roles, and these roles are located within more comprehensive narratives of economic and political formations in the larger society. The point of the interpretation is to see that texts—whether rhetorical or poetic—are ideologically invested in the construction of subjectivities within recommended economic, social, and political arrangements. Finally, as should now be clear, this hermeneutic process is open-ended, leading in diverse and unpredictable directions in the classroom. And this is one of its strengths as it encourages open debate and wide-ranging speculation.

After some experience with written and video texts, students apply these heuristics to their personal experiences in order to analyze in essay form the effect of an important cultural code on their lives. The students select the topic and content of the essay, but they must do so within the context of the larger theme of

each unit. Thus, in the unit on education, students must choose some feature of their school experience from the past or present that has been of particular personal significance. The students must then locate points of conflict and dissonance in the cultural codes discovered, although they are not expected to resolve them. For example, students often choose to write about their experiences in high school athletics in order to discuss the conflicted codes involved in the emphasis on personal versus team success, winning versus learning to accept defeat, discipline versus play, and the like. The roles the students learn to assume in sports are examined in terms of such categories as gender, age, race, and group membership. Some students have explored the differences in the experiences of male and female athletes. Here they commonly examine the narratives appropriate to the behavior of each as recommended by dominant cultural codes about sports. These role definitions and performances are then placed within larger narratives having to do with life experiences, such as vocational aspirations, career objectives, marriage plans, and the like. Students at this point often discover the parallels between the contrasting experiences of males and females in high school sports and the contrasting experiences of males and females in career tracks. Once again, the various levels of conflict are explored, both within the expectations for each gender and across the genders, although, once again, students are not expected to resolve them. It should also be noted that conflicts also appear as students disagree in discussions about the codes that are being recommended within these sports activities. These incidents reinforce the point that cultural codes are always negotiated so that students produce them as well as simply re-produce them; that is, students do not always simply submit to these codes, often reshaping them to serve their own agendas. And of course incidents of resistance are frequently discussed as students report their defiance of required roles—for example, refusing to engage in some humiliating hazing ritual against those declared “losers.”

As students develop material through the use of the heuristic and begin to write initial drafts of their essays, they discover the culturally coded character of all parts of composing. Students must learn to arrange their materials to conform to the genre codes of the form of the essay they are writing—the personal essay, the academic essay, the newspaper essay, for example. (Students could also be asked to create other kinds of texts—short stories, poems, videos—although we have not done so in our composition course. Here the genre codes of each would again be foregrounded.) These essay genres conform to socially indicated formal codes that students must identify and enact, and they, of course, carry great consequences for meaning. A given genre encourages certain kinds of messages while discouraging others. Next, at the level of the sentence, stylistic form comes into play, and the student must again learn to generate sentence structures and patterns of diction that are expected of the genre employed. It is important that students be made aware of the purposes of these codes, both practical and ideological. In other words, expecting certain formal and stylistic patterns is not always

a matter of securing “clear and effective communication.” As all writing teachers know, most errors in grammar and spelling do not in themselves interfere with the reader’s understanding. The use of “who” for “whom,” for example, seldom creates any confusion in reference. These errors instead create interferences of a social and political nature.

Finally, I would like to restate a point on the interchangeability of reading and writing made earlier. In enacting the composing process, students are learning that all experience is situated within signifying practices, and that learning to understand personal and social experience involves acts of discourse production and interpretation, the two acting reciprocally in reading and writing codes. Students in the class come to see that interpretation involves production as well as reproduction, and is as constructive as composing itself. At the same time, they discover that the more one knows about a text—its author, place of publication, audience, historical context—the less indeterminate it becomes and the more confident the reader can be in interpreting and negotiating its intentions. Similarly, the more the writer understands the entire semiotic context in which she is functioning, the greater will be the likelihood that her text will serve as a successful intervention in an ongoing discussion. After all, despite the inevitable slippages that appear in the production and interpretation of codes, people do in fact communicate with each other daily to get all sorts of work done effectively. At the same time, even these “effective” exchanges can be seen to harbor contradictions that are concealed or ignored. These contradictions are important to discover for the reader and writer because they foreground the political unconscious of decision making, a level of unspoken assumptions that are often repressed in ordinary discourse. It is here that the betrayals of democracy and the value of the individual are discovered despite the more obvious claims to the contrary.

The purpose of social-epistemic rhetoric is finally political, an effort to prepare students for critical citizenship in a democracy. We want students to begin to understand that language is never innocent, instead constituting a terrain of ideological battle. Language—textuality—is thus the terrain on which different conceptions of economic, social, and political conditions are contested with consequences for the formation of the subjects of history, the very consciousness of the historical agent. We are thus committed to teaching writing as an inescapably political act, the working out of contested cultural codes that affect every feature of experience. This involves teachers in an effort to problematize students’ experiences, requiring them to challenge the ideological codes they bring to college by placing their signifying practices against alternatives. Sometimes this is done in a cooperative effort with teachers and students agreeing about the conflicts that are apparent in considering a particular cultural formation—for example, the elitist and often ruthlessly competitive organization of varsity sports in high schools. Students are able to locate points of personal resistance and negotiation in dealing with the injustices of this common social practice. At other times, students and

teachers are at odds with each other or, just as often, the students are themselves divided about the operation and effects of conflicting codes. This often results in spirited exchange. The role of the teacher is to act as a mediator while ensuring that no code, including her own, goes unchallenged.

This has been a lengthy introduction to the intersections of postmodern discourse theory and rhetoric. Even so, it only begins to explore the possibilities, as can be seen, for example, in the excellent new collection, *Contending with Words: Composition and Rhetoric in a Postmodern Age*, edited by Patricia Harkin and John Schilb. (This volume arrived while I was putting the finishing touches on this piece.) These essays share with mine the confidence that postmodern speculation has much to offer writing teachers. None, furthermore, suggests that it is a savior come to redeem us from our fallen ways. All see rhetoric and composition as engaged in a dialectic with the new speculation, the result being the enrichment of both. Indeed, these essays confirm what I have long maintained: The postmodern turn in recent discussions in the academy is an attempt to restore the place of rhetoric in the human sciences. In it we find an ally in our work of creating a critically literate citizenry, and we ought not to reject it just because it speaks a nonstandard dialect.

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