Book Reviews


Most of us in the field of composition are aware of the logistical complexities and pedagogical challenges presented to writing teachers by a supposed or real “literacy crisis” and an increasingly diverse student population. Early theorists who posited homogenous and “safe” classrooms have in many instances been replaced by theorists who account for diversity among students, and who recognize that the power dynamics students find outside of the university are often reproduced in the classroom. Contemporary composition theories attempt both to engage students in the learning process without discounting that diversity and to account for the shift from structuralist to poststructuralist views of language. The concept of a dialogic pedagogy, however, appears in the work of many scholars speaking from quite disparate epistemological and pedagogical positions. Irene Ward in _Literacy, Ideology, and Dialogue: Towards a Dialogic Pedagogy_, through careful analysis, links such diverse works through a close examination of the theorists’ uses of dialogue in their respective pedagogies, and proposes a functional theory of dialogic pedagogy for composition.

Ward begins by analyzing the expressivist movement in composition theory and how its proponents conceive of dialogic pedagogy. She focuses primarily on Donald Murray and Peter Elbow, discussing various classroom practices such as “helping circles” and “truth-telling” which rely on the outmoded notion of an autonomous and unified self that can be encouraged and guided to produce “clearer, more lively prose that actually reflects the true, honest experience of the writer.” Such Romantic views of writing seek self-discovery rather than communication. In rereading Elbow, however, Ward finds that while “Elbow himself resists the idea that all private writing is social and therefore dialogic,” private writing in fact is social dialogue with an “audience of self.”

In her chapter on social constructionism, Ward draws on the works of Richard Rorty and Thomas Kuhn to explain the notion that knowledge is a “temporary and contingent construct: bound in particular times and places, something that helps us cope with the world for the time being—until we replace this knowledge with a more ‘useful’ construct.” Such an anti-
foundational approach to knowledge as constructed through consensus means that “both discourse and dialogue take on primary importance.” In order to support the notion of internal dialogue as a social act, Ward cites Marilyn Cooper’s ecological model of interacting systems, and Karen Burke LeFevre’s *Invention as a Social Act*, which relies heavily upon the work of Lev Vygotsky. In this section, the work of Kenneth Bruffee is heralded as a cornerstone of modern composition pedagogy: contemporary writing group theory was practically invented by Bruffee, and collaborative learning offers students proximity to audiences, and to dialogue.

Ward notes however that Bruffee does not focus on the possibilities of oppression within, and exclusion from knowledge communities. Paulo Friere does, though, and Ward turns to examine dialogism and radical pedagogy. Freirian liberatory learning insists upon students’ participation in their own education, and eventually upon material action by students to bring about positive social change and an end to oppression. Through dialogue students come to political and personal consciousness—*conscientização*—enabling them to become subjects, and to “act in the world on their own behalf.” While promising in theory, Freire’s pedagogy—as he himself warns—often cannot be successfully exported. Liberatory pedagogies must be developed contextually, through dialogue. Ward cites such difficulties in the work of Ira Shor and C.H. Knoblauch among others.

Chapter Four moves away from the “process paradigm” and introduces the recent move in composition toward a postprocess, postmodern pedagogy. Such models are still being formulated, but clearly a postmodern pedagogy is primarily concerned with “power relations within the classroom and within any discourse situation.” Epistemologically, a postmodern pedagogy resembles the social construtionalist view: truth and knowledge are provisional and open-ended, inviting further dialogue. The works of Gregory Ulmer, William Covino, and Thomas Kent reflect a move in composition away from traditional Caresonian and Hegelian thinking. But while all three succeed to some extent in engaging students in dialogic activity, Ward notes the failure of both Ulmer and Covino to alleviate the teacher-as-audience, and the students as “not-yets.” Similarly, Kent’s broadly-sketched pedagogical implications still do not account for individual differences among students or for social inequities that are reproduced in the classroom.

Finally, Ward attempts to “synthesize the various uses of dialogism and to provide some additional methodological and theoretical frames.” She
includes public writing and various forms of dialogic interaction as necessary components of a functional dialogism for composition studies. She suggests that Bakhtin's concept of "ideological becoming" may be the key to students' understanding of their own situatedness, and thus the positionings of others in relation to knowledge. Peer criticism, the teacher-as-facilitator/editor, the incorporation of conflict and difference into classroom discussions, and the valorization of subjective knowledge are also integral parts of Ward's dialogic pedagogy.

While much of the first few chapters rely on summations of various schools of thought within composition, Ward has made a thorough examination of the many theoretical uses of dialogism. The breadth of her research suggests a new direction for the field, and is in fact an impressive beginning. Graduate students will find Literacy, Ideology, and Dialogue: Towards a Dialogic Pedagogy a valuable reference, and composition theorists working toward a synthetic, functional dialogism will undoubtedly build upon this work.

Julie Drew
University of South Florida
Tampa, Florida

Pedagogy in the Age of Politics: Writing and Reading (in) the Academy — Ed. Patricia A. Sullivan and Donna J. Qualley; NCTE; 1994; 256 pp. ISBN 0-8141-5890-0.

I admit up front the inclination I had to judge this book by its cover—or, rather, by its title: Pedagogy in the Age of Politics: Writing and Reading (in) the Academy. This book needed to convince me that it wasn't just a collection of essays claiming something I already strongly believed: that the teaching of writing is a political act. Like many, I agree with those theorists in rhetoric and composition who have for some time been arguing that writing instruction can never really be separated from the political bearings of teachers and students, from the evolving awareness of how the social forces of race, gender, and class shape our identities and our learning processes. So I read this book, skeptically, challenging it to tell me something new.

The strength of this sixteen-essay collection, I discovered (like other politically overt collections before it: Composition and Resistance, Contending with Words, Cultural Studies in the English Classroom, for