POST-CO NTemporary Composition: Social Constructivism and Its Alternatives

Particularly since James Berlin's "Contemporary Composition," it is conventional in composition studies to assert that every pedagogy is implicitly connected to some epistemology—current-traditional rhetoric to a positivist epistemology, expressivism to some subject-centered epistemology, and the preferred pedagogy to some form of social constructivism. Despite articles like Thomas Kent's "On the Very Idea of a Discourse Community" or Reed Way Dasenbrock's "Truth and Methods," social constructivism remains hegemonic. Yet, there is something striking about the rhetoric of this hegemony; it is not so much that extraordinarily persuasive cases have been made for social constructivism as it is that advocates have engaged in powerful critiques of the apparent alternatives. Berlin's New Rhetoric is contrasted to current-traditional and expressivist pedagogies, each of which is linked to an obviously untenable epistemology. Erika Lindemann contrasts knowledge-making pedagogies to process pedagogies and the bellertristic tradition, each of which is identified as an earlier stage in the development of composition studies. Composition studies is not alone in setting up social constructivism as the only alternative to a dilemma presented by some form of positivism and some form of expressivism. Christopher Norris has described the same problem in theory: "The whole debate is thus skewed to make it appear an issue of choice between, on the one hand, naïve (subject-centered or 'foundationalist') epistemologies and, on the other, an approach that takes its bearings from language and finds no room for such obsolete items of faith" (Reclaiming 48).

Norris' quote is especially useful, as it points to what may seem counter-intuitive. Both subject-centered epistemologies, such as the neo-

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Platonism of expressivism, and foundationalist epistemologies, such as the direct realism of positivism, assume the same model of knowledge. Whether knowledge is in the heart (neo-Platonism) or in the world (positivism) the models assume that perception can be unmediated by such characteristics as race, class, and gender. That assumption is precisely what postmodern thought has attacked; hence, it appears that some form of social constructivism is the only plausible alternative. But it is worth considering more closely just how that argument is made, particularly in regard to two points: 1) exactly how the critiques of positivistic and subject-centered epistemologies apply to social constructivism itself; and 2) the thoroughness and accuracy of the recurrent expeditio at the center of the argument.

**Describing the Way the World Is**

Initially associated with Thomas Kuhn in philosophy of science, social constructivism is a response to the correspondence theory of truth, and autonomous self presumed by various traditions in Anglo-American philosophy, especially positivism. In Berlin’s germinal article, he uses the term *epistemology*, and scholars in composition studies have followed suit. While far from incorrect, this usage is slightly different from philosophers, for whom Kuhn is a philosopher of science and Richard Rorty a pragmatist (a tradition which tends to eschew the intradisciplinary subdivisions). The broader terms help to remind one that questions of philosophies of mind, language, and science are generally coextensive. And, as is appropriate for someone in the pragmatic tradition, Rorty discusses philosophical questions in terms of pragmatic consequences for culture (see especially the introductions to *Consequences of Pragmatism* and *Achieving our Country*), so that political philosophy is sometimes implicitly and sometimes explicitly interwoven. Rorty, drawing on Kuhn, is interested in arguing against philosophy’s impulse to metaphysics, the idea that the purpose of philosophical discourse is to establish first principles about which one can be certain, a project Rorty attributes to Plato. In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* he follows out the inherent incoherence and destructive consequence of that impulse for the discipline of philosophy; in *Achieving our Country*, he describes the political consequences and recommends that “the Left should put a moratorium on theory. It should try to kick the philosophy habit” (91). Attempts to get theory right unnecessarily paralyze us:

For purposes of thinking about how to achieve our country, we do not need to worry about the correspondence theory of truth,
the grounds of normativity, the impossibility of justice, or the infinite distance which separates us from the other. For those purposes, we can give both religion and philosophy a pass. (97)

When Kuhn published The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, the dominant explanation of science, typified by Alexander Koyre, was that the history of science is teleological, that each generation of scientists builds on the previous one toward increasingly accurate and objective descriptions of reality. This fit neatly with the positivist idea that the scientific way of knowing is the best, and that objectivity is both possible and desirable. The crudest versions of positivism assert that the mind can mirror nature, and language can mirror the mind, especially if an individual rejects tradition, prejudice, and authority to think for himself. This positivism was especially popular as a model of science, one which described a good scientist as someone who approached the facts without any prejudice. This notion entered the popular culture in forms like Sherlock Holmes or D. F. X. Van Dusen’s “Thinking Machine.”

While Kuhn’s brief is mainly against positivism, the basic notion that one should never rely on the perceptions of others, but should try to think for oneself is shared with other traditions. In American culture, what has been known as the Antinomian strain also assumes that the ethical individual stands alone against society and social pressure (for more see Amy Lang). Knowledge of what is good and right comes directly to the individual from God (or Nature). The same argument is promoted in “foundationalist” philosophy; Norris usefully defines a foundationalist as “a thinker whose ultimate appeal is to the subject construed as an absolute, transcendent, indubitable source of knowledge and truth” (Reclaiming 33). In social theory, this same concept has been described as “the mythic heroism of the social actor” with its assumption that

the freedom of the self was conditional upon an antagonistic differentiation of the individual from his/her cultural and institutional webbing. Social relations and “traditions” became the “object”—the domain of constraint—in a subject-object duality. . . . It was the object in a subject-object, individual-against-society, antagonism from which the actor was impelled to be free (Somers and Gibson 64).

I should note here that, while this naively realistic epistemology and the model of the autonomous self are often historically connected, there is no reason that they must be logically connected; one does not necessarily imply the other, so that one might have a model of the autonomous self without the direct epistemology, as with John Rawls or Hannah Arendt.
Typically, expressivism (the term usually used in composition studies for subject-centered epistemologies) and positivism are critiqued on three grounds. First, it is argued that they are not accurate descriptions of how people genuinely think (Kuhn’s *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*); second, it is argued that they are internally contradictory (Rorty’s *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*); third, they are criticized on pragmatic grounds, as pedagogically or politically damaging (Berlin’s “Contemporary Composition,” Rorty’s *Achieving our Country*).

These three lines of argument lead to very powerful critiques; typically, one argues for a philosophy by showing that it is an accurate description of reality, is internally logical, and/or has attractive consequences. A central problem with social constructivism is that, by its own argument, it cannot argue that it is more true than other philosophies, or else it lands itself in an important contradiction: “Like any brand of epistemological anti-realism, it consistently denies the possibility of describing the way the world is, and just as consistently finds itself doing so” (Eagleton 28). Something about social constructivism does seem right—it does provide apt critiques of both positivism and expressivism. Yet, the very fact that it does so is the evidence that it is wrong. That is, the postmodern critiques of positivism and expressivism may well be right, but the affirmative case—its own epistemology and model of the self—is self-consuming. Dasenbrock has discussed this irony in regard to Kuhn’s own assertion that theorists cannot claim to appeal directly to evidence; after all, that is exactly the stance that Kuhn himself takes:

Kuhn does not present his observations of the history of science as ineluctably determined by his theories concerning scientific development; instead, he acts as if historical evidence is independently available and can be brought into the discussion in order to support his historical interpretations....If Kuhn is right, he shouldn’t be able to see and say the things he does. (555)

Even Rorty cannot help from making assertions about reality; in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* he argues that his readings of certain texts are more accurate than others; in *Achieving our Country* he writes about what our political situation “really is.” His most common criticism of philosophies is that they cannot be true because they are internally inconsistent; while he does not ascribe to the correspondence theory of truth (although one might argue that something along those lines is implicit in *Achieving our Country*), this does suggests something along the lines of a consistency theory of truth.
If social constructivism is preferable because it is more true, then especially the more extreme claims made on its behalf cannot be true. Even its claim to be more accurate than other philosophies of mind is problematic—how can one make that claim without appealing to some foundational, immanent, transcendent, or objective criteria for “true”? This paradox is not a fatal flaw for social constructivism (although it is for the crudest forms—the kind that Terry Eagleton attacks in *Illusions of Postmodernism*), but it does mean that social constructivism, like positivism and expressivism, has its own problems with accuracy and internal consistency. Thus, the pragmatic argument becomes even more important.

In composition studies, social constructivism presents an intelligent alternative to the incipient positivism of current-traditional rhetoric and the neo-Platonism of expressivism. As Berlin has argued, expressivism assumes that Truth is perceived individually and confirmed through writing. Within composition studies, expressivism has been criticized for its privileging of authenticity in writing, its assumption of learning as a private experience, and its epistemology. Perhaps one of the strongest criticisms has been on pragmatic grounds. That is, if one assumes the traditional defense of public education—that it prepares citizens for active and effective participation in public discourse—then the role of expressivism in this education is somewhat obscure. The topics preferred by expressivist pedagogies evade disagreement in favor of exploration. The main criticism is that such a pedagogy does little to prepare students to deliberate *with* people who have fundamentally different arguments (as opposed to expressing their own point of view in front of such people).

The criticism is potentially unfair, at least when leveled from the perspective of the social construction of knowledge, because it is not clear that the latter epistemology is necessarily any more conducive to imagining communities in productive conflict. After all, Kenneth Bruffee speaks of “an *assenting* community of peers with whom we speak and to whom we listen in our heads” (emphasis added, 573). And, as will be mentioned later, one of the main problems with social constructivism is that, while it claims to describe how people think, it cannot describe why people change their thinking; if knowledge is constructed by one’s culture, then it is unclear how or why a culture would ever change.

Foundationalist epistemologies are as inaccurate and politically unattractive as expressivist ones. Underlying foundationalism is some version of the correspondence theory of truth, the idea that a proposition is true when it corresponds to reality. The obvious criticism of this theory is
that it is not clear whether this is a claim that truth is an ontological quality, a perceptual one, or a discursive one. Is a sentence true whether or not we perceive it to be such? Can we always perceive the correspondence? Does a “true” sentence have more rhetorical power than one which does not? Is the degree or kind of assent given a proposition an indication of its correspondence to reality?

When the answers to these questions assert or assume a universal experience of truth, then the implicit epistemology is obviously false—the notion that somehow all people experience truth in the same way is quite obviously not true. Charles Lemert, who calls foundationalism the “strong-we” position (because it tends to include talk about what “we” believe) points out that the claims of such foundationalism “cannot be strongly asserted outside an enduring culture in which rival moral claims are incapable of compelling adherents of the strong-we position to doubt the universality of their convictions,” and no such culture has ever existed. As he says, “While there are historical instances in which proponents of the strong-we position have enjoyed a virtual hegemony over legitimate moral claims in the realm, there are few instances where that hegemony was ever thorough enough to eliminate active, if ineffective, counter-claims” (106). Michael Bernard-Donals claims in even stronger terms: “foundational notions of the human and natural sciences have been so discredited as to force us to consider what kind of antifoundationalism gives us the most productive and perhaps emancipatory knowledge” (*The Role of Rhetoric* 437).

Because of these pragmatic problems with expressivism and foundationalism, social constructivism may seem a better alternative in that, as Craig Calhoun has said, “it challenges at once the idea that identity is given naturally and the idea that it is produced purely by acts of individual will” (13). It acknowledges the role of the social in the construction of thought, problematizes the assumption of easy universality, and points to the margins, but it too has its unhappy ethical and political consequences. Norris has summarized one of the most pressing: “What is most to be feared is a wholesale levelling of the faculties which would deprive reason of its moderating role and thereby reduce history, philosophy and politics to a mere force-field of contending interests or rhetorical strategies” (*What’s Wrong* 72). Rhetoric has long been defended as the alternative to force—if strong social constructivism is right, however, it is force all the way down.

A world in which history, philosophy, and politics are simply arenas of conflict where the most powerful win is a world in which dissent is
nearly impossible. Martha Nussbaum, after watching Stanley Fish give a
talk in which he asserted a necessary connection between leftist politics
and a rejection of traditional notions of rationality, and an equally
necessary connection between a respect for rationality and reactionary
politics, acidly remarked, "I am not sure what political position in America
does have a deep commitment to open public dialectic governed by
traditional norms of rational argument and fair procedure, but I believe it
is not the right" (220-221). A recurrent argument against foundationalist
epistemologies is that they are too closely allied with structural injustices.
While one can point to such injustices, one can also point to liberating uses
of foundationalism—the NAACP, the Declaration of Universal Human
Rights, Amnesty International, the SNCC are groups that have made real
changes via foundationalist rhetoric. Can one point to similar moments for
the social construction of knowledge? One can, oddly enough (given its
implicit hostility to pragmatism), make a pragmatic argument for the
Enlightenment model of self and politics—can one make a pragmatic
argument for social construction of knowledge? As unattractive as many
of the pragmatic consequences of foundationalism are, there are some
positive ones; it becomes difficult, then, to argue that social
constructivism is preferable to foundationalism on pragmatic grounds.

Proponents of the Enlightenment model are often accused of
political naivete, ignoring the deeply engrained structural inequalities and
institutional forms of oppression, but the accusation applies even more
strongly to proponents of the social construction of knowledge. Eagleton’s
*Illusions of Postmodernism* emphasizes this point, saying that “in seeking
to cut the ground from under its opponents’ feet, postmodernism finds
itself unavoidably pulling the rug out from under itself, leaving itself with
no more reason why we should resist fascism than the feebly pragmatic
plea that fascism is not the way we do things in Sussex or Sacramento”
(28). As Lester Faigley has written, theorists have found it “extremely
difficult . . . to find space for political agency in light of postmodern
theory” (20). Its very strength is a weakness; postmodern theory’s “power
to fold language back on itself makes postmodern theory at once an
extremely powerful means for exposing the political investments of
foundational concepts, but the same power prevents postmodern theorists
from making claims of truth or emancipatory value for this activity” (43-
44). Faigley here paraphrases a common (and ultimately unanswered)
criticism of the social construction of knowledge—that the pragmatic
consequences are not very good. It may well be that social constructivism
is not necessarily linked to political quietism, but one can hardly imagine
it motivating political activism, especially on behalf of the rights of other people. Social change, such as ending slavery, extending the vote, changing working conditions and improving prison conditions, involves more than those directly interested; it requires getting people interested who could easily see themselves as unaffected. I fail to see how social constructivism could motivate people to engage in political action on behalf of others. In fact, it seems to me that it is most likely to do the opposite—how would a social constructivist defend King’s behavior in Birmingham? He was from outside the community, he was rejecting the dominant and socially constructed values of segregation, as well as community standards regarding civility, and he was greatly disrupting communities. What is the social constructivist argument for Amnesty International? For sympathy strikes?

In short, there is a very strong pragmatic argument against social constructivism—it cannot make the world a better place; it cannot protect minority rights. While others have voiced this concern, and some postmodern thinkers have tried to respond (especially Jean-François Lyotard and Rorty) the aptness of the criticism is sometimes lost. It is the central criticism of social constructivism, as it means that there are serious problems with the only internally consistent argument for social constructivism—pragmatic consequences.

Thus, if one applies the three recurrent lines of criticism (accuracy, internal consistency, pragmatic consequences) to social constructivism, one has a troubling situation. One cannot argue it is true without falling into inconsistency. The assertions that other epistemologies are not true lead to internal inconsistencies. The pragmatic line of argument is no better than the argument that it is more true; it is precisely on pragmatic grounds that social constructivism is most disturbing. The pragmatic critique of expressivism is compelling—that it facilitates quietism because it makes political action nothing more than an expression of preferences—but that is exactly the same criticism that one can make of social constructivism. Apparently denying grounds for dissent, making political action a mere expression of preference, tending toward quietism or endorsing the use of force, the pragmatic consequences of social constructivism are deeply troubling. That leaves the major argument for social construction of knowledge the argument from authority, and even that is problematic.

**Fallible Though We Are**

The case for social construction of knowledge is typically made in
one of two ways: most common is an *expeditio* (in which some form of social construction of knowledge is presented as preferable to positivism and expressivism); less common but sometimes implicit is an argument from authority (in which various authorities, such as Kuhn, Rorty, and Foucault, are asserted to have settled the issue). The problem with the former line of argument is that it relies on a false dilemma; the problem with the second is that it asserts a hegemony in the fields of philosophy of mind and philosophy of science that does not exist. The question of epistemology has not been settled in philosophy of mind, with naive realism (as a philosophy of perception, not cognition) a much stronger camp than the discourse in rhetoric and composition might lead one to believe (for an interesting recent defense of this position, see Hilary Putnam’s *The Threefold Cord*). There remains a lively argument in fields like philosophy of mind, philosophy of perception, philosophy of language, philosophy of science. We have taken part of that argument without ourselves taking part in it. That is, our own disciplinary discourse does not represent the full range of positions present in the disciplinary discourse from which we are borrowing. My intention is not to argue for realism in any form—were our only options social constructivism, positivism, expressivism, I would chose social constructivism—but to argue that there is an argument to be made, that the issue of epistemology is still an open one, with people of principle and intelligence (and various political agenda) on far more than three sides.

There are essentially two formulations of social construction. There is a strong form, the one advocated by Fish and Rorty, and there is a weaker form. The strongest form depends upon Kuhn’s argument concerning “incommensurability”—the notion that different systems of thought are so different from one another that one can only move from one to the other through adopting an entirely new worldview. While many historians of science accept Kuhn’s critique of essentially teleological histories (that the history of science is the history of increasingly unprejudiced men articulating increasingly objective and accurate theories in a steady progress toward truth), they balk at the notion of incommensurability. Certainly, Aristotelian and Newtonian physics are incommensurable, but Newtonian physics and quantum physics are not—in fact, students are taught Newtonian physics along the way to learning quantum physics. Were the strongest form of social construction right, that would be impossible.

The strong form of social construction of knowledge cannot explain why some individuals reject the values of their communities or are able to

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see flaws in dominant paradigms. The weaker form simply says that our thinking is strongly influenced by our social norms, that individuals do not have some kind of direct and easy access to an ontologically grounded truth, that determining the truth and accuracy of any proposition is extremely difficult and never assured. To put it very bluntly, if that is all that social construction is saying, who needs it said? What major philosopher has ever argued anything else?

It is easy, and sometimes rhetorically desirable, to overstate the naivete of the epistemology proposed by Enlightenment philosophers. It is common to propose a skeptical and anti-foundational epistemology by contrasting it to something that presupposes a brain in a vat; finding a major philosopher who proposes an easy and direct relation between mind and reality is a difficult task. Even among the more minor philosophers who do sometimes assert a direct epistemology, such as the New England Puritan theologians of the seventeenth century, one can find assertions regarding the importance of skepticism and self-reflection and the fallibility of human perception. As I have argued elsewhere, the problem is that their political actions (such as hanging Quakers and trying to enslave Amerindians) were not based in the skeptical epistemology they appeared to advocate, but implied an uncomplicated and highly unskepticical estimation of their own ability to be certain.

Attacks on positivism and expressivism attribute to not just a naive epistemology, but a naive autonomy (as in the very term “brain in a vat”). Political theorists’ and rhetoricians’ criticisms of autonomy insist that we recognize that our senses of self are strongly influenced by our group memberships; our ideas and our identities have histories. Despite the tendency that people have to attribute these criticisms to post-modernism, this is not an especially new argument. Francis Bacon’s idols of the crowd amounts to noting how powerful such group pressures can be; as early as Aristotle’s Rhetoric, handbooks on rhetoric assume a connection between one’s membership in certain groups and one’s thought; the whole point of the allegory of the cave is that it is possible for us to spend a lifetime with ideas that are given to us by our culture. Immanuel Kant (from whom the term autonomy is drawn) similarly notes how powerful culture can be; John Locke satirizes people who

are apt to conclude that what is the common opinion cannot but be true; so many men’s eye they think cannot but see right; so . . . [they] will not venture to look beyond the received notions of the place and age, nor have so presumptuous a thought as to be wiser than their neighbors. They are content to go with the
The premise of Peter Elbow’s “writing without teachers” or “closing one’s eyes as one speaks” is that tradition, convention, and authority have so much power to shape our thinking. Thus, even (perhaps even especially) proponents of autonomy admit that our notions are largely constructed for us.

Even among the positivists, it is difficult to find examples of naive epistemologies. Karl Popper endorses fallibilism, which he defines as “the view, or the acceptance of the fact, that we may err, and that the quest for certainty (or even the quest for high probability) is a mistaken quest.” Thus, there is no field, including science, which can provide us with a perfectly secure foundation: “the belief in scientific certainty and in the authority of science is just wishful thinking: science is fallible, because science is human” (375). According to Popper, we find truth through intellectual autonomy, which means, among other things, that we make decisions as individuals about which standards we wish to adopt, even when those standards come to us via a religious authority. Popper grants that such autonomy is not easy, that “each of us sees his gods, and his world, from his own point of view, according to his tradition and his upbringing; and none of us is exempt from this subjective bias” (387). In a surprisingly poetic passage, he writes,

Though truth is not self-revealing (as Cartesians and Baconians thought), though certainty may be unattainable, the human situation with respect to knowledge is far from desperate. On the contrary, it is exhilarating: here we are, with the immensely difficult task before us of getting to know the beautiful world we live in, and ourselves; and fallible though we are we nevertheless find that our powers of understanding, intriguingly, are almost adequate for the task—more so than we ever dreamt in our wildest dreams. We really do learn from our mistakes—by trial and error. (382)

Thus, while rationalist, even Popper does not represent the kind of naive foundationalist who serves as the stalking horse for social constructivism.

I am not claiming that no one has ever endorsed the kind of epistemology that social constructivism opposes. In fact, if one stops the person on the street to ask how s/he knows things, one is likely to get a very simplistic neo-positivistic direct epistemology. Although liberal political theorists from John Mill to John Rawls are some species of fallibilist,
public discourse in liberal democracies often asserts that the truth is obvious. Much of American religion is dependent upon just that epistemology, innumerable political texts implicitly assume it, and I think Berlin is correct to connect certain pedagogies to it. There is something odd, however, about pretending that social construction of knowledge is the first or only philosophy of mind to point to the profound impact that doxa has on what we think we know. As Norris has said, social constructivism takes only one part in what has always been acknowledged to be a difficult balance: “There is a failure to conceive how the subject could both exercise a power of autonomous, reasoned, principled decision and at the same time refer that decision to the wider community of knowledge-constitutive interests, of truth-claims, ethical judgments and evaluative priorities arrived at through the process of open participant debate” (Reclaiming 39). Abandoning social construction of knowledge does not mean that we must fling ourselves on the other end of the see-saw, opting for some kind of simplistic notion of the entirely autonomous self; it means looking toward philosophies of mind and science which conceive the self in the complicated, yet intuitively accurate way, that Norris describes above.

**Public Redemption of Validity Claims**

There is a weaker form of social constructivism, one often associated with the notion of communities of discourse—a term indicating that certain journals, disciplines, groups of friends, cultures, and media have different notions about what constitutes normal discourse. As Erika Lindemann says

> Each discipline advances its own understanding of what claims are worth asserting, what constitutes evidence, what sorts of proof may be offered, what aims and audiences are legitimate to address, what genres are appropriate. It is simply not the case that interpreting texts will help students gain confidence in interpreting the results of a chemistry experiment, a field experience in a psychology class, or a sculpture. These contexts all assume different kinds of interpretation. (315)

Lindemann uses this point as the basis for arguing the first year composition classes should not be courses in literary criticism, but the implications go further. Regardless of the topic of the course, this is an important insight, as it shows the problems with English teachers’ impulse to universalize from our own disciplinary conventions (or personal tastes). In my experience, college English teachers often abhor the passive voice,

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and I have found that they (I) encourage students to resist using it. This is extremely good advice for students going into some fields, or writing for some contexts, but extremely bad advice for others. One might make the same point about other writing conventions, such as use of MLA documentation methods, the practice of incorporating and analyzing quotations, inclusion of first person pronouns, and the place of personal experience.

But these are not merely conventions. Condemning certain prose styles as "voiceless" (Lanham 84) ignores that a strongly individualized prose style is a liability in some fields not simply because those fields want to be "most numinous, most impressive, most priestly" (74). There are, as people like Lindemann or Charles Bazerman have pointed out, epistemological issues manifesting themselves in different conventions. One could not simply take an article written within humanistic conventions and change a few aspects of its form in order to make it acceptable for publication in a physics journal. Different disciplines have different notions about what constitutes an important question, appropriate evidence, reliable authority, and a credible ethos.

But these conventions are not necessarily incommensurable. Roy Bhaskar, Donald Davidson, and Jürgen Habermas have, in different ways, argued that even very different approaches to discourse share certain fundamental practices. Norris, Andrew Collier, and Michael Bernard-Donals have explicated and applied Bhaskar’s concept that some disciplines provide the foundations for others; Thomas Kent has argued for grounding rhetoric and composition in Davidson’s theory that all disciplines ultimately rely on similar ways of forming and answering questions (at least at a very abstract level). All of these theories point to ways out of the expressivism/positivism/social constructivism trilemma, and their very existence suggests the partiality of our discourse on this issue. I want to pursue Habermas’ communicative action or what he sometimes calls universal pragmatics as an example of a philosophy of mind and discourse that is not foundationalist, expressivist, or social constructivist.

The basic insight is taken from John Austin and John Searle’s speech act theory, which categorizes language use based upon the different things one might do with a proposition. These different actions (to assert, to promise, to question, to invoke) involve different kinds of truth-claims, as well as different speaker obligations. When making an assertion, one is expected to be accurate, but there is no sense that a question must be true. If one asserts that the meeting is over, one’s hearer
will expect that the meeting is over (or, at the very least, that the speaker sincerely believes it is); but, if one asks the question whether the meeting is over, there is not the same truth-claim being made. This is not to say that people never lie, but that we experience lies as failures and betrayals—if someone tells me the meeting has ended, and I discover it has not, I will be dismayed; if someone asks me if the meeting has ended, and I discover it has not, I will not have the sense that something went wrong with that communication.

Similarly, promises and assertions have different relations to reality. Searle once used the vivid example of a shopping list. If a housemate gives me a shopping list with three items, and I promise to get those items, and I return from the store with only two, that communicative interaction (the promise) is failed. But, I can not redeem the promise by rewriting the list to have only the two items—my housemate will not feel that the interaction was suddenly made successful. I made a promise, and the list constitutes that promise; making the promise fit reality does not make the communication felicitous. In the speech act of promises, one is expected to make reality fit the speech. If, on the other hand, the list is not intended as a shopping list, but a list we’re keeping for budget purposes, then crossing off an item I did not get would be appropriate. In fact, leaving the item on the list and apologizing profusely for failing to get it would likely be experienced by my housemate as dishonest. In assertions, the speech is expected to fit reality.

Questions are more complicated in that they are expected to fit reality only to the extent that there are assertions implicit in them. So, “Is the King of France bald?” implies something about reality (that there is a King of France) which might be judged as an assertion. In other ways, however, one does not speak of a question as true or untrue. Invocations (what Searle and Austin call performatives) are speech acts that change reality, as when a chair declares a meeting adjourned or festivities begun, or someone with appropriate power proclaims a law to be in effect.

Searle claims that these speech acts are universal, not in the sense that all cultures enact every kind of speech (as not all cultures have promises, for instance) but that the obligations remain constant among those cultures which do have them. That is, while not all cultures have promises (although the number that do not is extremely small) all cultures that do have promises assume that promises involve obligations of sincerity. And all forms of communicative action (that is, action oriented to understanding)—whether promises, assertions, questions, or invocations—imply four claims, that one is:

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uttering something *intelligibly*,
giving (the hearer) *something* to understand,
making *herself* thereby understandable, and
Coming to an understanding with *another person*.

(Habermas, “What Is Universal Pragmatics” 22)

These might be summarized as comprehensibility, communicability, accuracy, and sincerity. One can, of course, point to forms of speech that fail to fulfill one of the conditions: a drama that has a patently inaccurate premise, such as Einstein and Picasso meeting in a bar; a figure of speech that is ungrammatical or literally impossible; irony and satire. Searle generally categorizes such examples as indirect speech, whereas Habermas does not count them as communicative action. For Habermas, public discourse is necessarily communicative action, meaning speech that appeals to the obligations and assumptions involved in assertions.

Again, this does not mean that Habermas is so deluded as to think that public discourse never has people failing to fulfill their obligations; moral obligations are not laws of physics, but are norms that have a powerful function in argument. He refers to establishing morals “for a community in a convincing manner” (“Genealogical” 3) and says that last phrase “means that the members of a moral community appeal to these norms whenever the coordination of action breaks down and present them as prima facie convincing reasons for claims and critical positions” (4). They are a kind of rhetoric that helps people to identify injustice. This is an important point about Habermas’ philosophy, one which it seems to me is often overlooked: that morals, for him, are not universal prescriptions, but statements that have a specific function in public argumentation.

Perhaps one of the most challenging aspects of Habermas’ thought is trying to understand exactly what he means by terms like “rational discourse” and “Reason.” While it is difficult to be certain just what he does mean, it is clear what he does not mean, and he does not mean some relatively simplistic foundationalist, positivist, or materialist concept. Like Norris, Habermas notes that modern moral skepticism makes its case by rejecting a correspondence notion of truth and

If one assumes that, in general, sentences can be valid only in the sense of being “true” or “false” and further that “truth” is to be understood as correspondence between sentences and facts, then every validity claim that is raised for a non-descriptive sentence necessarily appears problematic. (“Genealogical” 36) In contrast to foundationalists who would like to posit “a class of basic sentences whose truth is immediately accessible to perception or to
intuition” (37), Habermas insists upon the importance of background understanding and argumentative context. A statement is true to the extent that it is justified through argumentative discourse: “The truth predicate refers to the language game of justification, that is, to the public redemption of validity claims” (37).

Habermas grants that public argument is difficult in the absence of substantive norms, that there is a predicament in which the members of any moral community find themselves when, in making the transition to a modern, pluralistic society, they find themselves faced with the dilemma that though they still argue with reasons about moral judgments and beliefs, their substantive background consensus on the underlying moral norms has been shattered. If they choose not to resolve the differences through bargaining or force, “their initial impulse is to engage in deliberation and work out a shared ethical self-understanding on a secular basis,” a good summary of the impulse behind the communitarian movement. “But,” says Habermas, “given the differentiated forms of life characteristic of pluralistic societies, such an effort is doomed to failure” (“Genealogical” 39). Instead, we should look to the act of communication itself, “on the ‘neutral’ fact that each of them [pluralistic societies] participates in some communicative form of life which is structured by linguistically mediated understanding” (40). While he grants that such a basis is “rather meager” he also makes a persuasive case for replacing “appeal to moral content” with “a self-referential appeal to the form of this practice” (41). Rather than appeal to the moral dicta of whatever religious or cultural background we each happen to have—an approach to argument that requires shared values—we appeal to the morals implicit in the act of arguing with one another.

Habermas lists several principles he sees naturally resulting from such an appeal, the “principle of discourse” and “the principle of universalization.” The first, previously discussed, is that “Only those norms can claim validity that could meet with the acceptance of all concerned in practical discourse” (“Genealogical” 41); the second is that “A norm is valid when the foreseeable consequences and side effects of its general observance for the interests and value-orientations of each individual could be jointly accepted by all concerned without coercion” (42). Perhaps what makes Habermas’ use of terms like “rational” and “Reason” so challenging is that he uses them to define contexts, not statements. That is, like his rejection of a correspondence notion of truth
(which puts the truth or falsity of statement within the proposition) in favor of one which evaluates the truth of a statement on the basis of the process by which it is defended, so Habermas’ definitions of rationality delimit a process. He summarizes his argument:

Thus the rational acceptability of a statement ultimately rests on reasons in conjunction with specific features of the process of argumentation itself. The four most important features are: (i) that nobody who could make a relevant contribution may be excluded; (ii) that all participants are granted an equal opportunity to make contributions; (iii) that the participants must mean what they say; and (iv) that communication must be freed from external and internal coercion so that the “yes” or “no” stances that participants adopt on criticizable validity claims are motivated solely by the rational force of the better reasons.

Habermas explicitly declines to specify exactly what constitutes better reasons, saying instead, “Of course, what counts as a good or bad argument can itself become a topic for discussion” (44).

Although Habermas argues that certain obligations are inherent to language, that does not mean he sees them as inevitable or irreversible historical processes, or that he thinks democracy does not need protection. After discussing the values necessary for the success of popular sovereignty, he writes,

Naturally, even a proceduralized “popular sovereignty” of this sort cannot operate without the support of an accommodating political culture, without the basic attitudes, mediated by tradition and socialization, of a population accustomed to political freedom: rational political will-formation cannot occur unless a rationalized life-world meets it halfway. (“Popular Sovereignty” 59)

He is not making an empirical claim about how people behave, but about an always already-present potentiality. Because it is a potential, it can be ignored.

The implications of this argument are interesting for teachers of composition. If we accept Habermas’ view that all communities of public discourse share certain conventions, then we establish and enforce those conventions in our classes. The rules we establish for the communities of discourse would be relatively minimal: those implied in speech act theory, the principle of discourse, and the principle of universalization. Students would be asked either to use good reasons as constituted by the
communities they are trying to reach, or to make those communities’ notions of reasons the subject of argument. What seems so extraordinarily powerful about this approach is that it suggests a productive response to the situation described by Dolores Schriner and William Rice: a homophobic student who wants to argue from a substantive background not shared by the other students. In one of my favorite passages, Habermas says, “The equal respect for everyone else demanded by a moral universalism sensitive to difference thus takes the form of a nonleveling and nonappropriating inclusion of the other in his otherness” (“Genealogical” 40). The central obligation that the homophobic student must recognize is to make the argument from a perspective a homosexual shares; he cannot make an argument based on premises that student might share were he not homosexual, or otherwise deny the genuine differences. Similarly, of course, a student arguing for homosexual rights would need to argue from premises that the homophobic student shares.

My intention in all of this is not to argue for foundationalism or expressivism as preferable to social construction of knowledge. Social constructivism makes a compelling case against the recurrent impulse to metaphysics, and against any philosophy (of mind, language, or science) that assumes the correspondence theory of truth. But not all philosophies are metaphysics, and not all rely on the correspondence theory of truth. I am arguing against the notion that the trilemma of social constructivism, positivism and expressivism exhausts our options. Nor am I arguing for a four-part expeditio, and suggesting that we should adopt Habermas’ view because it is superior to expressivism, positivism, and social constructivism. Instead, my intention is to criticize the hegemony of social constructivism in rhetoric and composition by applying to social constructivism the criteria by which positivism and expressivism are rejected, and to argue that there are far more than three options.

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Works Cited

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