



Kurt Spellmeyer Responds

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Source: *College English*, Vol. 52, No. 3 (Mar., 1990), pp. 334-338

Published by: National Council of Teachers of English

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/377764>

Accessed: 03/06/2009 09:49

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cently, fictionalize such a "self." The "voices" that Professor Spellmeyer analyzes in professional and student essays, whether "distant" and "academic" or "personal" and "self-exploratory," all show that revelations of character in writing are fictions. Writing results from tensions between fluidity and stability, not from discoveries or creations of fixed ideas. The "writer," a provisional "character" quite different from the controlling univocal self that Professor Spellmeyer would have us play against "the cultural heritage," is a dramatic actor who always sacrifices personal intentions to execution when writing any genre. A writer, in this sense, realizes (and can be taught by reflexive pedagogies that value rhetorical perspectives) that writers always remain on the margins of discourse, not in it. They are placed there by the act of writing itself, in which people encounter resistances and opportunities in discourse communities that portray them, and any knowledge, as fixed language. We know this, as Mina Shaughnessy and David Bartholomae have pointed out.

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Kurt Spellmeyer Responds

I would like to thank Professor Bazerman for this opportunity to discuss at greater length *The Informed Writer*, which deserves a more detailed treatment than I was able to offer within the confines of my essay "A Common Ground." Anyone who takes the time to look carefully at *The Informed Writer* will appreciate the author's commitment to an emancipatory pedagogy,

one that allows students "to recognize the strength of their own voices" before they "enter into conversation with academic voices." Although I still believe that my observations were justified, they did not adequately reflect the heteroglossia of the text itself. Like any work, *The Informed Writer* speaks in many different and sometimes discordant registers. Whereas I attempted, in my brief remarks on Patricia Bizzell's more recent thinking, to acknowledge the complexity of her position, I neglected to do the same for Charles Bazerman.

This omission is all the more regrettable because, as he affirms, we agree about many fundamental issues. Throughout *The Informed Writer*, for example, he underscores the importance of personal engagement. Early in the book he reminds his readers that "Real intellectual exchange begins when we react to what we read." If "we swallow our reading whole, without thought, we will only be accepting empty phrases" (1985: 20). Later he urges student-writers to draw upon their own experience in assessing an author's claims, and he recommends the essay as the appropriate genre for such assessments (127). Just as I used the trope of conversation, so Bazerman does repeatedly. And just as I argued that students should be encouraged to establish a common ground with the texts they read, so he describes the first stages of "comparing and synthesizing sources" as the search for a "common ground between two books" (220). Beyond this vocabulary, we share many of the assumptions and commitments it implies. We both believe that education should demystify knowledge by showing it to be something made, some-

thing anyone can make, and we both regard knowledge as inherently collaborative: not only something made, but made through the activity of dialogue.

And yet we differ—sharply, in my view—on the nature and limitations of this dialogue. While Bazerman invites students to see themselves as members in good standing of the general community of readers and thinkers, his conception of their actual role in the discourses of the academy implicitly withholds from them the full rights and privileges of membership. As he says, “To produce claims that are likely to convince informed critical readers, you must go beyond the discoveries of personal experience to gather and analyze data according to currently accepted methods and standards” (328). In other words, the “Reading journals, opinion papers, essays drawing on experience”—all of the enabling apparatus that Bazerman employs—are merely propaedeutic to the real work of inquiry in the disciplines, where the “currently accepted methods and standards” are not open to negotiation, at least to negotiation involving students. But even the enabling apparatus seems to me constrained in a similar manner by the assumption that uniform readings can be extracted from texts—extracted rather than constructed—using various “tricks,” steps, and techniques. I would submit that the reduction of practice to methods and standards flatly contradicts the account of knowledge as a dialogue. If knowledge is dialogical only on certain occasions or only to a certain degree, then it is not dialogical at all.

In *Truth and Method* Gadamer makes the following observation about dialogical inquiry. “There is,” he

writes, “no such thing as a method of learning to ask questions, of learning to see what needs to be questioned” (1986: 329). He does not mean that inquiry is spontaneous, but the very opposite: methods and standards are an illusion produced by looking at knowledge ahistorically. Arrested for one moment in its ongoing progress, the conversation in a field or discipline can, of course, be reduced to a static schema, as teachers have been doing from one generation to the next. Yet the ability to simplify knowledge in this way has very little to do with the ability to make knowledge. Even for heuristic purposes, the schematization of knowledge is a Sisyphean (and ultimately useless) task because change always overtakes us in ways that such schemas can never predict. What dutiful New Critic, alert to the dangers of intentional fallacy, could ever have imagined Derrida? What anthropologist in the heyday of structural functionalism could ever have foretold the coming of James Clifford? To produce knowledge is to change knowledge, by transposing it into the specific context of a life or lives. Because this act of transposition makes everything problematic from the outset, an emphasis on methods and standards—on “conventions,” to use the current catchword—obscures both the historical character of knowledge and its openness to the present.

Bakhtin’s criticism of linguistics and the philosophy of language might apply with even greater justice to the pedagogy of conventions, insofar as this pedagogy is “primarily oriented” toward the “artificial, preconditioned status of the word, a word excised from dialogue and taken for the norm (although the primacy of dialogue over

monologue is frequently proclaimed)" (*Dialogic Imagination* 1981: 279). In the language of an accomplished practitioner from any discipline, a person with seven or eight years of graduate training and, say, twenty years of professional development, we hear an enormous chorus of voices, some forgotten by the writer, others barely audible, still others continuously resonant. For such a person, writing entails an unending negotiation with all of these voices, a practice of dialogue informed by nearly a lifetime of experience. Students trained to analyze and imitate the work of this practitioner may be able to produce in a matter of weeks or semesters something superficially comparable, but only by suppressing dialogue itself. Since a true conversation will almost never conform to normative models, the teaching of methods and standards inadvertently pressures students to avoid at all costs engagement with the texts we assign. But this heuristic also prohibits them, intentionally and explicitly, from drawing upon the one "chorus" they have at their disposal, the voices they bring from the home and from the past, which are ruled out of bounds by "convention" itself. And yet if we permitted our students, not only freshman writers but undergraduates at all levels, to join in our ongoing conversations—to talk with our texts in their own language, without forcing themselves to speak as we speak, or to think as we think—the voices that have given us our words would gradually infuse their speech as well.

We all recognize, however, that many of our colleagues demand, in the name of "standards" and "coverage," a simulation of learning at the expense of real understanding. It seems to me

that the central contradiction of Bazerman's text—between the desire to empower students and the need to warn them about the constraints on their "power"—reflects a structural contradiction pervading our entire field: the more we attempt to ready beginning writers for activities which are profoundly mechanistic and undialogical, the less prepared they will be to produce knowledge for themselves. Precisely because this contradiction mirrors still larger contradictions within the academy and within the social order as a whole, teachers of writing cannot unilaterally overcome it, but in "Common Ground" I sketched out one possible response. It is my hope that students will learn to think "from the outside," to see that "something is missing," as Adorno says, in the current structure of knowledge. When Professor Miller contends that "Written language" is "read only after it becomes embedded in local or wider discourse communities," she speaks to our pragmatic concern for students who have yet to find a voice within the university. But many of our "communities" will never permit these same students to give voice to the truth of their own lives, even when this truth directly pertains to the subject under discussion.

With such a contradiction reinstated every day in our colleges, we knowingly perpetuate a kind of pious fraud if we use the term community to describe the various disciplines and sub-disciplines. The history of the word community implies an association fostered by agreement rather than enforcement—agreement in the form of conscious assent, but also in the form of a deeper predisposition, a pre-discursive accord (see Gadamer

404–07). Communities exist less through the consistency of their explicit knowledge than by virtue of their underlying values and assumptions, which shape the very character of explicit knowledge. For this reason, no community is sustained by the innumerable regulations so important to bureaucrats and the police, nor does a community inflict on its new members an ordeal of conversion requiring the surrender of life as they knew it in the past. (Much to his credit, it is just this kind of surrender that Bazerman tries to forestall.) Instead, real communities at once renew and enlarge themselves through a process of reflection and debate, a process that uncovers a common ground beyond or beneath the differences of those involved. To recognize ourselves as a community, we must first be willing to disagree, to challenge a status quo which divides us much more than it unites us. Through the activity of dialogue, which always has a history but never a prerequisite, knowledge can become exactly what I called it “Common Ground,” a conversation that “belongs to us all” (275).

We scarcely need to invoke a “world mind” to believe that every human voice can add to the conversation in any area of knowledge. Neither do we need to imagine the individual as something other than a social construction. As I said in a sentence truncated by Miller, “To put it in the simplest terms, we do not deny the socially constituted nature of either learning or identity when we ask our students to write from their own situations, but I believe that it is both dishonest and disabling to pretend that writing, no matter how formal or abstract, is not created by persons, from

within the contexts—historical, social, intellectual, institutional—of their lived experience” (269). While I consider selfhood to be, quite literally, a conversation, I distrust blanket arguments against personal agency, if only because such arguments are often advanced by those invested with the most extensive and irresistible agency. When Miller taxes me with being a closet Hegelian, and then exposes my hidden neo-Kantian agenda, she comes closer to the truth than she probably realized, since the writers who have helped me the most to find my voice—Gadamer and Bakhtin, Adorno, Foucault, and Burke—all pursued a *via media* between an isolating Kantian selfhood and a totalizing Hegelian collectivity. But these writers, however different they may be from one another, never collapse self and society into an unvaried whole: for them, neither communities nor individuals become absolute subjects. Gadamer and Bakhtin in particular have persuaded me that the diversity among individuals reflects the very real diversity in the modes and conditions of social life today. No act of discipline or altruism can set aside these differences without purchasing a premature collectivity at the cost of someone’s unwilling silence.

The individual is certainly a fiction—a *fictio*, something made—and yet individuals are real nonetheless. We exist as “human beings,” as “societies” by virtue of our ability to constitute ourselves in language. But students lose this power of self-fashioning when they are “officially ‘placed,’” as Miller says, within insitutional settings that dictate monologically who they are and what their actions mean. To overcome their disempowerment, not

only in the classroom but in every aspect of social life, they must learn, as we have, to constitute a self which actively resists its own appropriation by appropriating the language of others, through a process of conversation described at length in my discussion of the two student papers. Far from encouraging “detachment, isolation” and “uninvolved superiority,” the activity of unrestrained conversation reveals the personal within the social and the social within the person, though not in a way that suppresses the tensions and differences between them.

No genre will automatically empower student-writers (Who ever said that it would?), but I believe that the essay is uniquely conducive to dialogue in all areas of knowledge, for reasons offered by Adorno in a work I quoted from briefly, “The Essay as Form.” Reflecting on the essay as a historical artifact, Adorno observes that its appearance in the sixteenth-century coincides with the emergence of “Doubt about the unconditional priority of method,” and he suggests that the relative formlessness of the essay has both dramatized and promoted, in different ways during different periods, a process of negotiation between the prevailing conceptions of “truth” and the writer’s actual circumstances (“Essay as Form” 157). I would argue that Montaigne’s version of self-fashioning resists Miller’s charge of Cartesianism, not only because Descartes was born four years after Montaigne’s death, but also because Montaigne consciously renounces the detached certainties of idealism for the uncertain and self-transforming engagements of dialogue, a public dialogue used to counter the false and oppressive collectivities of

his day: the State, the Church, and the Schoolmen. Just as it would be jejune, at best, to reduce Montaigne to a puppet ventriloquized by class interests, so should we resist the temptation to dehistoricize his work by linking it to the idea of “intellectual and perceptual progress,” which owes a great deal more to the nineteenth century than it does to the sixteenth. Nor should we, as I pointed out in “Common Ground,” conflate the undialogical pseudo-writing often required in English 101 with “the essay as literary tradition represents it,” a tradition that includes the kind of essays Bartholomae and Petrosky have assembled in *Ways of Reading*, the textbook we use at Rutgers (270). In my essay I tried to suggest that by accepting our students as contributors to this tradition, not initiates but real contributors, a teacher might begin to approach their work with new respect. If we permit our students to make knowledge—to change knowledge in their own interests—then we will have something to learn from them.

Rutgers University

Two Comments on “Recognizing the Learning Disabled College Writer”

Carolyn O’Hearn’s article, “Recognizing the Learning Disabled College Writer” (*CE* March 1989), should be useful for all composition instructors. As O’Hearn notes, colleges and universities receiving federal funds are mandated to ensure full educational opportunity for otherwise qualified handicapped students; learning disabled (LD) students, included in this