Dialectics of Self: Structure and Agency as the Subject of English

Alan W. France

*The process by which the intellect, instead of being formed, or sacrificed to some particular or accidental purpose, some specific trade or profession, or study or science, is disciplined for its own sake, for the perception of its own proper object, and for its own highest culture, is called a Liberal Education.*

—John Henry Newman

Two random public postings. The first appeared in a *Chronicle of Higher Education* story two years ago about the conflict between literature and composition in English departments. The opening paragraph characterized the work of literature faculty as “discuss[ing] Dickens and Derrida” and of composition faculty as “correcting dangling modifiers” (Schneider A14).

The second appeared in *College English* in a comment by Felicia Ackerman on a review essay by Carol Severino considering several books on politics and literacy. The comment included the following expostulation: “The purpose of a composition course is to improve students’ writing skills. Whether these skills are to be used [to fit into or change society] is for each individual student to decide. It is not the teacher’s decision at all” (Ackerman 839). In her response, Severino offered an even-tempered, unpatronizing explanation of why “skills cannot be taught, learned, or practiced in a social vacuum or politically neutral environment.” They cannot, “because skills are embedded in rhetorical situations with purposes, audiences, and exigencies” and can therefore only be considered skillful to the degree they successfully negotiate the contexts in which they occur” (841).

**Alan W. France** is Professor of English at West Chester University of Pennsylvania. With Karen Fitts, he co-edited *Left Margins: Cultural Studies and Composition Pedagogy*. Most recently, he co-authored with Carol Reeves an essay entitled “Irrigation: The Political Economy of Personal Experience,” in *Composition Pedagogy in Perspective*, a festschrift for Gary Tate.
These two anecdotes are surface ripples of a deeper anxiety, I think, often unarticulated but always threatening to disturb the quotidian politics of English departments: What is there of intellectual substance to composition? Does our teaching subject, our professional claim to expert knowledge, consist merely in an ensemble of techniques adequately represented as “skills” (such as knowing how to correct or avoid dangling modifiers by embedding agency in introductory verbal phrases)? Even if they are complex, performative, impossible to learn out of context, as Severino rightly insists, what do skills have to do with the intellect? With knowledge, aesthetics, sensibility? With character, or ethics? With a liberal education?

In this essay, I will argue that both composition and literary studies have a common pedagogical vocation and, further, that by harvesting some very general insights from two decades of cultural critique, we in English departments can develop curricula that will resolve a good deal of the conflict between literature and composition and improve instruction in both. Such curricula would have to address the basic purpose of Cardinal Newman’s “Liberal Education”: the cultivation of the intellect for its own sake. In literary studies such a reform would refocus attention from critical strategies for reading literary texts to critical strategies for representing (in writing) the experience of reading a literary text. Although my institutional socialization has been as a “rhet/comp specialist,” the claim for which I will be trying to win assent is about teaching English. It is about putting aside specialization, at least at the undergraduate level, in the interest of common educational ideals, and composition specialists are as bad about specialization as anyone else. Because this essay tries to define a common pedagogical purpose for English studies—illustrating theory with specific teaching practices—I hope those in literary and film studies will attend to my argument. This pedagogy is portable. The assignments offered as illustrations can be added to or adapted for practically any undergraduate course. It is the “object of instruction” that counts.

The relative success of composition over the last generation has, in my view, obscured the common tradition we share with colleagues in literary studies and encouraged our pretensions to disciplinary specialization. While specialized study is the essence of graduate work—producing the object of its discourse—specialization precludes discussing the purpose of composition, and of literature as well, in the context of the undergraduate curriculum. That is why some among us can think it possible to teach “writing skills” independent of any intellectual context, while others of us think it possible to “teach literature” to nobody in particular.

Composition specialists tacitly assume that rhetoric and writing instruction—especially introductory composition instruction—performs disciplinary work essential to the study of language and literatures—essential, even, to the acquisition of a liberal education. Nevertheless, while rhetorical theory has enjoyed a recent hermeneutic revival, David Fleming notes that there has been a concomitant decline of under-
graduate rhetorical education as a "consistent program of instruction involving both theory and practice and aimed at the moral and intellectual development of the student" (172). Why, after nearly two generations, has composition not succeeded in making the case for its centrality to a "rhetorical paideia" (Lanham 2)?

One reason for this failure, the one I will take up in this essay, stems from the nearly universal expressivist assumptions about the "self" and about the nature of personal experience that prevent us from explaining (theorizing) the centrality of composition to the intellectual work of "delivering" a liberal education. Our expressivist pedagogy rests on what Jon Elster calls "methodological individualism," the presumption "that all social phenomena (their structure and change) are explicable only in terms of individuals—their properties, goals, and beliefs" (qtd. in Callinicos 76). In composition, methodological individualism means that our pedagogy idealizes the seemingly untutored ("authentic") expression of personal experience, a "writing without teachers" to use Peter Elbow's koine, which, proper as it is as a final objective, is clearly not a good foundation for developing a common rhetorical pedagogy for English literature and language studies.

From the perspective of writing pedagogy, the problem with expressivism is that it encourages us to locate the origin of the composing process in the individual, the student as artist manqué or fledgling "voice" to whom written expression is as natural as speaking. For most students, though, this is not the genealogy. There are instead, as Cathy Davidson puts it, "conventions for selves in personal writing [that] are every bit as scripted as the conventions of scholarship" (1071). All too often personal expression has appeared to be an end in itself: the autobiographical essay, which unthinkingly imposes on students stylistic conventions—if not those of E. B. White, then those of Tobias Wolff or Jane Tompkins—and a ready-made epistemology: an egocentric humanism. In practice, students are assigned to write: assigned a topic or prompt; assigned a genre with conventions (most often of the personal essay); assigned a process of composition (incremental revision of multiple drafts); and of course assigned a word length, due date, and (usually) a grade.

The fiction that the result is somehow an authentic expression of personal experience can only be sustained by resort to suspect formulas. Perhaps the most pervasive tactic is the modeling of writing as an individual and relatively autonomous process. Susan Miller has likened process theory to "the assumption of literary New Criticism and other formalist theories, which focus on 'the text itself' rather than on its relations to power" (Textual Carnivals 114). And with the (post)structuralist turn in literary studies, process theory as a textualization of individual expression guarantees that, in Miller's words, "the subject/subjectivity of composition as an intellectual pursuit will remain . . . a subsidiary carnival of the text" in English departments (120).

Another way expressivism obscures the social construction of the composing process is to represent the institutional demand for writing as if it stemmed from the
student's own volition: "Discovering Your Purpose," as one of many textbooks puts it to students (Guth and Rico). A third tactic, the metaphor of writing instruction as midwifery—facilitating the gestation of the writer's voice—masks the reality that most students produce self-expressive "personal" essays only on demand. In our desire to foster student agency, we too often make of the composition classroom, in Michael Bernard-Donald's words, "a safe place where students can experiment with expressions but where the structure of those expressions remain outside the door" (259). My purpose here is to scrutinize the forms that could be said to structure expressions and to suggest how they might be rearticulated in ways that will support the intellectual legitimacy of composition studies and, more important, that will provide a common rationale for a writing-centered pedagogy for English studies.

It might be useful, then, to consider this conundrum in composition theory—the contention between what we call, following Berlin, the social-constructionist and the expressivist representations of rhetoric and writing—as a local version of the more global duality in the recent history of social theory: the dichotomy between structure and agency. Anthony Giddens maintains that sociology has been skewed toward the structure side of this dialectic (253–58; Barrett 134–37). This disposition to value structure is evident, by the way, in the concern to maintain "coverage"—whether of historical periods, canonical authors, or theoretical approaches to literature—and, probably, in the common absence of pedagogical topics in what counts as scholarship in literary studies.

Composition studies, on the other hand, is skewed toward agency, toward the personal experience of the world, including the experience of any structure that might determine or even constrain that experience. Of course, as Alex Callinicos maintains, social structures enable as well as constrain individual agency; no expression, personal or otherwise, could exist without cultural forms—language being only the most obvious—in which to articulate it (76–91). Since there can be no expression without agency (or structures, for that matter), since all writing is from a personal perspective, then the question becomes not whether but how students ought to use their experience in their writing.

If composition studies is to present itself as a coherent practice capable of contributing equally with other sub-specializations to an English studies curriculum, it might well base its calling on the crucial synthetic work that writing instruction performs: the synthesis of experience and culture. Most often unselfconsciously, we practice expressivism and constructivism simultaneously. As Thomas O'Donnell has pointed out, expressivists in composition have largely failed "to articulate the theories underlying their practices in any systematic way . . . while social constructionists were working out epistemological positions and promoting theoretical self-consciousness . . ." (425). But the inverse is true as well. For their part, social constructionists have not worked out much of a theory of personal agency, failing largely to
offer a way out of the “disabling postmodern box of the always already determined subject” (Flannery 707; Carroll).

Yet most would agree that writing effectively—jumping the communicative gap between self and others—requires both a sense of self as traditionally understood and a sense of how, at this moment, both this self and those others have been structured by culture. Inquiry into the processes that structure both personality and discourse can help our students understand the nature of—the constraints on and opportunities for—agency. And the purpose of rhetorical education has been since antiquity, after all, learning the practices of personal agency in their relevant social contexts (see Fleming 178–80).

My argument, then, is that English studies must work towards a post-Foucauldian “technology of the self” by developing a theoretically informed, meta-discursive writing pedagogy—for both composition and literature—that focuses on students’ understanding of the dialectic between self and culture. The central concern of such a pedagogy would remain the student who must learn to assemble and assimilate the fragments of postmodern experience into a coherent, self-conscious identity in order to communicate, or to join discourse communities, as we say. And as I hope to illustrate in a moment, this can be done by making inquiry into identity-formation itself—into the process of acculturation—the conscious topic of writing assignments across the nominal divisions (composition, literature, film, theory) of English studies curricula.

Writing assignments, in my experience, too often suggest a disembodied, pre-cultural self (France, “Assigning Places”). Rejecting this Enlightenment model of the writer as universal “voice from nowhere” will facilitate our students’ reflective control over their worlds, however fragmented and multiple. But to achieve this production of postmodern agency, we can no longer ignore the reality that the self is in significant ways an appropriation of cultural forms.

Bill Readings’s argument in The University in Ruins lends urgency to this claim that post-modernity has already dissolved the position of “the writer” as a stable and independent agent in knowledge transactions. Readings argues that the humanities curriculum, especially Anglo-American literary studies, evolved as the primary socializing agent “outside the nuclear family for the training of subjects of the modern nation-state” (45). The global economy (the trans-national flow of capital in search of maximum profit) “exposes the pre-modern traditions of the University to the forces of market capitalism” (38). With the economic decline of the nation-state, the “idea of national culture no longer provides an overarching ideological meaning for what goes on in the University, and as a result, what exactly gets taught or produced as knowledge matters less and less” (13)—unless of course it can be marketed at a profit. In short, the decline of national cultures erodes the value of traditional literary education as cultural capital and of literary studies “as the bearer of the cultural task of the University” (192). While Readings (a translator of Lyotard) has no specific remedies for
English departments facing this “performativity” revolution, he concludes with a call to transform the university into a dialogical “community of dissensus” where “thinking is a shared process without identity or unity” (192).

Those who teach composition in English studies curricula at any level should realize that such instruction occupies a central and medial position in preparing students for this postmodern world (the global discursive economy), which Readings suggests will be the cultural milieu our students will inhabit. With literary and cultural studies, linguistics and semiotics, composition studies ought to assume full partnership as one of what Ronald Schleifer calls “the disciplines of language” (440). Although Schleifer himself overlooks the role composition might play in meeting students’ discursive needs in the new millennium, his credo might serve as a theoretical manifesto—the *e pluribus unum*—of English studies: “[W]e who work in [literary and] cultural studies and discourse theory are able to understand phenomena as meaning . . . [because] we have, through the apprenticed practice of our discipline, achieved an attentive sensitivity to the rhythms of signification, the patterns of meaning that are the substances and conditions of ‘culture’—including the disciplined culture of our intellectual life” (442). The “apprenticed practice” of critical pedagogy—that ensemble of discursive practices housed in English departments—can give the capacity to produce agency as an outcome that allows students to understand and use the cultural structures of meaning to which we are all, like it or not, subject. In taking up this task, so vital to the preservation of the liberal arts, English studies makes itself central to Newman’s object of disciplining the intellect for its own sake.

**Toward a Post-Humanist Pedagogy**

It is time now to shift from assertion to exemplum. In the field of rhetoric and composition, theoretical speculations must legitimate themselves by contribution to classroom practice. It is our version of field-testing. Theory must yield “something to do Monday morning,” as we say. I propose, therefore, to offer three illustrative “proofs” of my argument about composition’s pivotal role in the production of agency by explicating a sequence of three “problem-posing” assignments (Freire), which I have worked through with my students in introductory writing classes. Each assignment requires students to confront the structure-agency dialectic without directly entering the theoretical, anti-humanistic discourses that Spellmeyer (and many in composition studies) find stultifying or unusable. While this sequence avoids “theory” in explicit ways, it has grown out of a decade’s work in critical studies and explicitly refuses, therefore, the gesture of self-creation implied by annunciations of “experience as art” and analogies of self-consciousness to Cézanne’s “shimmering chaos [that] . . . we are” (Spellmeyer, “After Theory” 911).1
While it strives to be critically informed, however, the post-humanist pedagogy advocated here is conceived as syncretic—adaptable to a range of courses (basic writing, introductory and advanced composition, undergraduate literary and cultural studies) and to diverse institutional settings—anyplace, that is, still subscribing to the traditional mission of liberal arts education: Cultivating the intellect as “its own proper object.”

The sequence of writing assignments I describe here grew out of my sense that many of my introductory writing students had already learned that their experience is “shimmering chaos” out of which they might make art, just as they had learned that their bodies are vacant tablets on which they might hang, brand, or tattoo insignia—in order to appropriate their meanings for themselves. The assignments ask, in increasingly personal ways, how much of our experience is volitional—the free expression of agency—and how much is “structural,” the product of cultural determination. They address Virginia Anderson’s admonition that too often “our application of critical theory to teaching practice seems to skip this step [disputation], which classical stasis theory called that of conjecture” (207). They ask for students’ conjectures about “choice” as the intersection of structure and agency. I present this sequence of assignments as illustrative (not prescriptive) examples of ways students might “click on the icon of personal experience” and examine its links to the world.

Before proceeding to the specific assignments, a few words about classroom practice are necessary. Because post-humanist pedagogy is concerned primarily with the “positionality” of the individual student among others, the peer discussion group is the inevitable setting for classroom practice. For the assignments under consideration here, therefore, I follow a small group format that will be familiar to most composition teachers. The class is divided into four smaller groups (five to seven students each). I meet with one group each scheduled class period in a two-week cycle. Group members circulate drafts of their assignments (via e-mail work group folders) forty-eight hours before class, and we devote ten to fifteen minutes to discussing each paper. My role is best described as parliamentary: to call discussion back to the terms proposed by the assignment.

The small group discussion is thus essential to doing the work of the assignment, and the moderator’s role is to insist that each proposition relate to the inquiry. All written and oral discourse, therefore, must eventually triangulate personal experience with some theory of the normalizing forces of culture. Without this discipline, an essay based on a writer’s personal experience is formally unassailable (or potentially solipsistic), because, of course, everyone has a right to tell his or her own stories; we necessarily grant each the authority to interpret the meaning of his or her own experience. In investigating the relationship of personal experience to cultural subjectivity, however, all parties to the discussion—moderator included—are simultaneously
experts and dupes. Personal experience is thus evidence out of which each interlocutor must weave a judgment about, say, similarity or difference, but only to the degree it is woven into the reasoning of a particular case is it persuasive or even relevant.

It may be that only among others can we explore, and come to some understanding of, the process of identity formation. Perhaps only by disputatio, bringing multiple perspectives into contention with each other, can any one of us decide how much of our experience is common property and how much is properly our own.

**THREE POST-HUMANIST WRITING ASSIGNMENTS**

*Assignment 1: Comparing Cultural Practices*

One refinement of traditional Chinese cuisine that has not found its way into modern Chinese or Chinese-American culinary arts is the practice described by Guanlong Cao in his recent book, *The Attic*. The dish is called Baby Mice.

A baby mouse is only as big as the last segment of your little finger. Pink. No hair. . . . The squirming babies are put in a small gilded-porcelain dish and brought to the table. Simultaneously, a dish of sauce is served: mustard, wild pepper, soy sauce, sesame oil, white vinegar, brown sugar, and so on. . . . You just pick one up with the pointed, ivory chopsticks and drop it in the sauce. It rolls and wiggles, coats its body with all the spices. Then you pick it up again and pop it in your mouth.

This probably sounds inhuman (not to mention unappetizing) to you, but the question is this: Is the Baby Mice dish of imperial China basically different from or similar to our own American meat-eating practices? If you think the answer is too obvious, think about oysters on the half shell. Are they dead or alive when they slide down the throat (and what's the difference anyway)?

Your assignment is to write a short comparison (emphasizing similarity) or contrast (emphasizing difference) between contemporary American and traditional Chinese methods of meat preparation and consumption. Formulate your judgment (often called a “thesis statement”) as an introductory sentence that announces the basis of your comparison or contrast. Compose at Guanlong Cao's level of detail, supporting your judgment with enough reasons to make a persuasive case for similarity or difference (about 500 words).

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The objectives of this assignment are multiple, and most are fairly ordinary. First, there are the rhetorical practices specified by the course description of my department's introductory composition handbook. Students should learn to focus on a central idea, a unifying theme; they should learn to support or illustrate that theme with specific evidence or examples; they should know when to rely on personal experience and when to "borrow authority" from other, most often written, sources; they should
know how to use concrete details to articulate generalizations; they should practice using rhetorical patterns such as comparison/contrast, division and classification, extended definition, and so on. The Baby Mice assignment works as an exercise in many of these traditional rhetorical practices.

In addition, however, the assignment asks the student, indirectly at least, to consider where her or his sentient experience comes from. It raises the issue of cultural determination without engaging difficult theoretical readings (in, say, cultural anthropology), which might well shift attention away from student writing. The basic question posed by the Baby Mice assignment is precisely the relationship between structure and agency. Or, to put it a little differently, the assignment asks why everyone in the class experiences abhorrence at the very idea of eating live mice.

As it turned out, nearly everyone in my classes believed that their own meat-eating proclivities had been structured by “American culture” as those of the Chinese were structured by a distant and alien Chinese culture. The question that preoccupied us in group discussions was whether or not these structures are fundamentally symmetrical inflections of a universal reality. If the practices are symmetrical, it means we eat any old thing our culture determines is “meat.” Students who adopted this position, according to which structures predetermine practice (i.e., practices are entirely relative to culture) came to be called in our group discussions “relativists.” Those who believed that there are objective criteria (universals) by which individuals can prefer one set of practices over another (i.e., practices are not necessarily predeterined by culture) came to be called “universalists.”

In all my classes, the relativists formed a large majority. Typically, they emphasized structural determination of parallel meat-eating practices. Kelli, for example, found that “everything lies in the hands of the culture in which [a] person is raised. Americans would never think about eating mice, cats, dogs, or monkeys in any form because of what their culture has taught them” while “the Chinese would never think about eating a good old-fashioned ‘American’ hamburger.” Each culture specifies certain meat-eating practices. She concluded, “If people were to step out of their culture and look at both the American and the Chinese culture they would realize that the two cultures are not that much different even if their meat is.”

Elena put it this way:

If most Americans were asked, “do you eat roasted moth?” their answer would probably be “no!” with a look of disgust. Conversely, the moths are a delicacy to the Aborigine people of Australia. A similar reaction could be expected from them if they were given scraps of cow, pig, and chicken mixed with nitrites and compressed into cylindrical lengths (a hot dog). Supper is supper.

Liza thought that the Baby Mice dish indicated that each culture has its own unique system. Americans see meat different from the animal as a whole. Meat, after it has been cut off the animal, becomes food, something
to cook and eat. It is no longer an animal. For Americans, animals are essentially different from meat.

Drue believed the inherent cruelty of eating animals indicated similarity, or at least symmetry: “Inter-cultural differences, no matter how major, have the same basic parameters within each culture,” as his paper succinctly concluded.

The “universalist” minority of students, however, believed that there is a real-world distinction, not only possible but desirable, between animal flesh (baby mice) and “meat.” For Paul, the process of butchering, processing, and inspecting animal flesh transformed it in an essential way: “There is a basic difference between eating a live mouse and the processed meat from a fast food restaurant.” Dave believed that human beings’ stature at the top of the food chain meant that eating live animals was beneath humans as a species. “The evolutionary process has given man authority over the entire world. The civilized manner of food consumption, by killing and then cooking, allows man to separate from his beastly origins.”

Implicitly, these students who claimed objective criteria for their aversion to Baby Mice were validating their own ability as individuals to recognize a practice as inherently noxious and to choose to avoid or even to condemn it. The “universalist” students, much more than the “relativist” majority, allowed their experience more autonomy in the epistemological question posed by the assignment. They expressed their aversion in ontological terms—a register of something objectively revolting (see Lu and Horner 260–65).

In group discussions, the relativist majority—those who considered the issue primarily an epistemological one—were highly skeptical of the universalist position. They argued that experience is circumscribed much more strictly by cultural codes than the universalists were willing to concede. Intuitive postmodernists, the majority, were quick to maintain that since experience is mediated by culture, all viewpoints (and especially those of the universalists) are “just” personal opinions. Although none used the scare words “prejudice” or “ethnocentrism” to attack the universalist view that our ways (or at least some ways) are superior, it seemed obvious to the majority that cultures are incommensurable and that practices and behavior, folkways and mores, sensibility and self-consciousness, are “all relative.”

If *everything* is relative, of course, there is no basis for action—no agency. For the relativist, the world is an aggregate of structures, including other selves, over which one could have little influence. A generation ago, Wayne Booth described this dilemma of subjectivism in a highly technologized, objectivistic world as the “modern dogma”: “the only truth worth having is what I can find for myself in an honest probing of my individuality” (24). The Baby Mice assignment is designed to subvert this subjectivist epistemology with the requirement “to make a persuasive case for similarity or difference.” It asks a question about personal experience—What is the
source of our visceral disgust with eating live mice?—that can only be answered in universal terms from a position outside culture (imaginary but perhaps real) by “discovering and sharing warrantable assertions” (Booth 11). It requires students to make their own truths by working to win assent for them from others. That is Booth’s definition of rhetoric.

What the assignment is really up to, its core objective, therefore, is the production of agency, which is the object also of Booth’s “rhetoric of assent” (xiv–xv). The assigned task, to “make a persuasive case for similarity or difference” of a cross-cultural practice (meat-eating), requires students to construct for themselves a position based on personal experience yet transcending it—bridging the phenomenological gap, so to speak, between self-consciousness and universality.

What arouses the disgust we feel at the idea of eating Baby Mice? The assignment requires a post-humanist response. It raises the possibility that our deepest aversions may not really be “ours” at all; they may be culturally constituted. But neither can an adequate response be made within the anti-humanist canons of structural determination (which, in any case, nearly all of us reject who profess to teach something to students). The determinist response is inadequate because the assignment also insists that we occupy a place—intellectually—from which we can at least work toward an understanding of how our deepest aversions are constituted. The post-humanist rhetorical stance, which this exercise assigns students, is just as incompatible with the heliocentric individual of the Enlightenment. But if individuals are not at the center of the world, they are fully engaged with it. The assignment’s stricture that practices must be evaluated in terms of similarity and difference precludes arguing that a practice violates nature or common sense, or that it is a free exercise of something we Americans like to call “choice.” This post-humanist rhetorical position enables each student to make a partial claim on truth, a claim that must win its way in the discursive world that the claimant inhabits. Such truth claims are partial not only in the sense of being incomplete or of being constituent of something larger, but also in the sense of being inherently biased—that is, interested.

I think this is exactly what contemporary composition pedagogy should accomplish: The development of curricula that produce personal agency in a poststructural world where knowledge is always provisional and positional. That agency is the by-product a student acquires by laying claim to those structures—linguistic, symbolic, material—that Foucault taught us to call discourses (although, of course, he would not have considered them as instruments of agency).

In the process of deliberation I am illustrating here, students exercise their agency; their thinking for themselves “is essentially a by-product, an indirect (though not undesired) consequence of . . . intellectual activity” (Donald 121). Each interpretive articulation simultaneously affirms and disturbs the surface of appearances. For if eating the dish Baby Mice is profoundly different from having it your way at Burger
King, it is only relatively different. And if it is similar, it is only relatively similar. For each student, however, establishing truth is the object of the intellectual work of composing themselves.

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**Assignment 2: How Things Get to Be Cool**

The cartoon sequence (Figure 1) presents an implicit theory about how—and why—things get to be “cool.” Your task in this assignment is to write an essay evaluating derf’s theory of “how it works.” In other words, you will be testing his theory against your own experience of shifting fads and fashions, of how things come to be “in,” and how they go “out” again.

But first you’ll need to pin down as precisely as you can what derf’s theory actually is. Begin by summarizing the narrative (the story) as it is presented in the cartoon. Then, write a paragraph interpreting the meaning or “message.” Finally, choose a fad that you find—or used to find—cool, a fashion or style that you or close friends adopted, and see how closely derf’s theory explains your experience. Your essay should make it clear whether your experience affirms, revises, or refutes derf’s theory.

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This assignment, again, accomplishes a number of the rhetorical tasks that most of us expect students to practice in introductory composition courses. It requires them to interpret—to infer a meaning by constructing a comprehensive and plausible generalization (a theory) to explain the particulars of a text, to articulate that explanation in enough detail to make it credible, to summarize and evaluate competing explanations of social experience, and to use personal experience as evidence for claims.

But the assignment goes beyond most expository uses of narrative in that it calls into question the very category of “personal experience.” It asks students to examine their experience in a larger (cultural or historical) frame of reference—to consider their experience as a dialectic of selfhood and subjectivity. The question becomes, more explicitly than in the Baby Mice assignment, How much of what we experience as personal—in this case, as aesthetically and libidinally desirable—is organized by interpersonal forms of social conditioning? And, perhaps: How are those forms of conditioning related to larger historical processes—to structures of the kind humanists too often want to ignore?

The assignment generated personal narratives of the kind typically associated with expressivist writing pedagogies. Several students, for example, wrote in painful detail about how it felt to be insecure about their bodies and about how consumer products served to reassure them of their individual worth and their normality. Most others needed the traditional prodding to add enough narrative and descriptive detail to satisfy the assignment’s requirement that experience serve “as evidence for claims” (i.e., to support their interpretations of the text). In group discussions and in
HIPSTERS CITYWIDE ADOPT THE BOOGER STYLE. TRAVELLING INDIE-ROCK MUSICIANS SPREAD THE PRACTICE TO OTHER CITIES.

TABITHA Soren reads the MTV NEWS with a small, neatly-trimmed booger swinging from her left nostril. 30 million high school kids blindly follow suit.

IT'S OBVIOUSLY GANG-RELATED. I'M BANNING BOOGER FROM THIS SCHOOL.

CONFISCATED

PATHETIC HAS-BEENS AND VAIN BABY BOOMERS ADOPT BOOGER STYLE IN A LAME ATTEMPT AT HIPNESS. MADONNA APPEARS ON LETTERMAN SPORTING A BOOGER...

WILL YOU BLOW YOUR NOSE ALREADY?

F**K OFF!!

CALVIN KLEIN INTRODUCES A FAUX CLIP-ON BOOGER WITH HIS LATEST COLLECTION, SENDING THE ORIGINAL ART STUDENTS LUNGING FOR THE KLEENEX.

STERLING SILVER
their individual essays, students were divided quite evenly on derf’s representation of “How It Works.” Many found his implicit causal explanation of fashion convincing; many others argued to the contrary: that, in Liza’s formulation, fashion moved from “top down” rather than from “bottom up.” In our small group discussions, these contending positions came to be called the “celebrity theory” and the “rebellion theory.”

Shannon’s narrative, for example, drew on the latter. She argued that her childhood infatuation with Cabbage Patch dolls was the result primarily of their contravention of elite models of beauty. (They served as a “site of resistance” in the lingo of cultural studies.) Cabbage Patch Kids, she wrote, confirmed derf’s theory because the dolls were not very appealing to the eye. Gone were the conventions of the “cupie doll,” there was no cute upturned nose with sparkling blue eyes gazing up at you from a creamy complexioned face. The Cabbage Patch dolls had cloth faces that were bunched to create the features of the face. The fact that they were so ugly that they were cute was a major factor in their enormous popularity.

Drue, on the other hand, saw the machinations of marketing in all the fashions he had experienced. “The idea that fads are pearls of the colloquial oyster is merely a utopian fabrication,” he wrote. “Most fads are spawned in a corporate board room. Corporate America knows that people are willing to spend great amounts of money for the false sense of belonging and a common bond with the masses.” His narrative examined the “air pump” athletic shoe, which had been in his childhood the “magic carpet to deal with the world.”

Those familiar with contemporary issues in material culture studies will have recognized the two poles of theoretical controversy: the cultural populism of John Fiske versus the cultural pessimism associated with the Frankfort School tradition (see Morris). But the “How It Works” assignment raises the fundamental issue of the degree to which we are conscious agents—as opposed to passive dupes—of culture. My point here, of course, is that a post-humanist composition pedagogy can take this issue up, independent of the technical language of critical theory. And we must, I’m arguing, because the question of where our experience comes from, how it gets organized into what we “sense” as truth and beauty—or coolness—is basic to self-knowledge, the intellect’s “own proper object,” as Newman put it.

* * * *

The third and final assignment of the sequence begins with the reading and discussion of an excerpt from Dorothy C. Holland and Margaret A. Eisenhart’s study of college women, Educated in Romance (primarily Chapter 7, “Gender Relations” 93–107), an ethnographic examination of courtship practices at two institutions of post-secondary education. I must briefly summarize this segment of Holland and Eisenhart’s argument before describing the writing assignment.

A central thesis of Educated in Romance is that heterosexual middle-class youth culture socializes men and women by means of a mechanism very much like a commodity
market. Holland and Eisenhart describe the structure of this exchange as the “cultural model of romance.” In this model, “attractiveness” cannot be reduced to a set of characteristics, although there certainly are culturally preferred physical and social qualities. Instead, “attractiveness” is a kind of rhetoric of assent (to recur very loosely to Booth’s term), the outcome of an ongoing and systemic disputation over taste, in which the invidious play of heterosexual dating relationships serves to rank men and women as more or less desirable. Attractiveness, then, is an individual’s valuation (or going price) in a continuous sexual bidding war that Holland and Eisenhart call the “sexual auction.”

This process of ranking is not symmetrical, however. Women’s status and self-worth are much more dependent on men’s attention (i.e., “demand”), Holland and Eisenhart found, than men’s are on women. In fact, the authors argue that for a woman, having men “interested in her as a romantic partner” creates her attractiveness, thus resulting in women’s “dependence on men for feelings of social worth” (99). Women’s treatment by men (especially high-status men) thus translates directly into self-image and self-esteem. According to Holland and Eisenhart, then, “the model of romance also implies that attractive women will be well treated—a sign of their attractiveness—and correspondingly, that unattractive women will be badly treated” (101). Thus, men create women’s social worth, but not the other way around. And the most disturbing corollary is that “women deserve whatever treatment they receive from men” (104).

After students have read the excerpt from Educated in Romance, they receive a handout containing a page of the more incendiary quotations from Chapter 7 along with the following assignment.

* * * * *

Assignment 3: Attractiveness and the Cultural Model of Romance
(Or, How People Get to Be Hot or Not)

1. Write two paragraphs (each about 100 words) defining what Holland and Eisenhart call the “calculus of attractiveness.”
   a. In the first, use “academic discourse”—the language of the chapter itself.
   b. In the second, use colloquial discourse—the language of dorm or street, which you use to talk to your friends (especially same-sex friends) about dating and sexual relations.

2. In about a page (250 words) summarize Holland and Eisenhart’s argument, quoting its most salient phrases.

3. Decide whether or not Holland and Eisenhart think this system is fair to both male and female students. Is their language entirely objective, or are they pushing a political agenda? Illustrate your answer with two examples quoted from the passage.

4. Finally, decide to what extent you agree with Holland and Eisenhart’s model of courtship—the dating relationships between today’s male and female students. Test their model against your own personal experience and the experience of at least six of your peers. For this, you should interview six or more student “subjects,” explaining Holland and Eisenhart’s argument (see 1.a above) and recording their responses. Your essay evaluating Holland and Eisenhart’s model should be five to six pages.
The *Educated in Romance* assignment has a number of goals in common with most “research-based” writing courses, introductory and advanced. It requires students to practice summary, paraphrase, and critique. It introduces the concept of disciplinary conventions by asking students to “translate” Holland and Eisenhart’s socio-ethnographic discourse into another, “local,” vernacular: that of middle-class youth culture and its ethnic variants (Black English Vernacular is particularly rich in resources for the “translating” that section 1.b asks for). Students have little difficulty moving back and forth between the “learned” conventions of the text—obliquities such as men being “romantic partners” and women allowing relationships “to become more emotionally and physically intimate”—and their colloquial equivalents. And the ethnographic convention of distancing and objectifying observation by reporting it in the past tense (“A male romantic partner made a woman feel attractive”) quickly finds its way into the grammar students use to (con)test the validity of Holland and Eisenhart’s model (93–99).

The assignment introduces students to ethnographic research as well. They are quick to find illustrations of the “peer ranking” lexicon used to figure the “calculus of attractiveness.” Several of the more courageous narratives written for this project were among the most harrowing I have read in twenty years worth of student writing. One that stands out vividly in my mind is the account of verbal assault, which an obese young woman suffered in one walk down a corridor of open doors in a co-ed dorm. Many students recognized, indeed agonized about, their own complicity and even participation in the often overt cruelty of the ranking process. Kim writes, for example, that

> we are all classified by this system that was created and is run by our peers. We are all victims of this game. As you sit on a bench and watch couples walk by you are easily tempted to comment on each one. Thoughts run through your mind like “she’s not good enough for him” or “she can do way better than that.” Although we are all guilty of these games, when asked the question, “Are attractive people supposed to only date someone as attractive as they are?” the answer is always no.

By the end of her essay, which rests on a rueful but comic story about her first experience with dating in college, Kim concludes that the ranking process is “stereotyping . . . based on jealousy and intolerance.” But Kim, like almost all students in this sample, seems to contradict her own reported experience and that of her informants by rejecting Holland and Eisenhart’s claim that the act of stereotyping was what produced “attractiveness” in the first place. “[A]ttractiveness is not based on just appearances but on what a person is like inside,” she writes in her conclusion.

Most students, then, were willing to grant the existence of these structural constraints (of gender) on their lives. But most were not willing or able to explain how they
personally might be constrained. To put it slightly differently, students agreed with Holland and Eisenhart's claim that "attractiveness" produced ranking, but not with their central claim that ranking produces attractiveness. Symptomatic of this refusal was that students generally used "good looks" and the equivalent interchangeably with "attractiveness." Looks are "objective"—the testimony of our own eyes. Holland and Eisenhart's model of attractiveness, however, maintains that we, literally, ought not believe our own eyes, that seeing—or, more specifically, aesthetic and libidinal judgment—is not a private experience. It is instead structured by forces at once outside and inside our own heads. This dissolution of the boundary between self and culture served as the outer limit of conceptualization in small group discussions and in students' essays.

**Post-Humanist Pedagogy in Literary and Cultural Studies**

What follows is intended to suggest how a "post-humanist" pedagogy might shape student writing about imaginative texts. I know (from observing colleagues teach) that assignments such as the ones I am proposing are already operative in literary and cultural studies classes. Too often, however, writing pedagogy in literature classes suffers from subjectivist assumptions: autonomous individuals recording (perhaps intersubjective) "responses" to the stimulus of a text. And this expressivism is far superior to assigned topics for writing of an earlier generation, which asked students to imitate formal literary criticism.

Today's expressivist writing about literature, as one very popular survey puts it, "affords the opportunity to respond to . . . outrageously alive voices of the past" (Abcarian and Klotz). In its advice to students about writing, this anthology specifically isolates the individual reader and the literary text from culturally mediated forms of understanding: "Your impressions, as you jot them down, represent your response to the work" (35). How these impressions get formed is not part of the inquiry. The raw experiential material to be assembled in a writing response is described in pre-cultural terms as "reactions to characters," or "personal feeling and recollections triggered by the work," or conflicts "between your own moral values and those embodied in a particular work" (35–36).

It seems to me that this articulation of private responses to a work is necessary but not sufficient to the larger objectives often claimed for the study of literature. Rather than suggesting that the response to a text is determined by a collection of random biographical details or—what is worse—by some interpretive schemata espoused from the lectern, assignments ought to ask students to examine not just their responses, but also the subject position that helped determine their responses in the first place.

Take for instance Richard Wright's *Native Son*. Some time ago, in the first flush of critical enthusiasm, I published an essay claiming that, in the context of patriarchal
capitalism, Bigger Thomas’s struggle against racial dehumanization necessarily implicated him in the dehumanization of women (“Misogyny and Appropriation”). As a black man, Bigger was denied access to a normalizing system in which male status depended on the appropriation and “consumption” of women. After all, Bigger’s signature crime, the rape-slaying, is the ultimate semiotic form of consumption. Or, as I wrote then, building on Cixous, Derrida, and Irigaray, Bigger’s rebellion necessarily “takes the form of the ultimate appropriation of human beings, the rape-slaying, which is also the ultimate expropriation of patriarchal property: the total consumption of the commodified woman” (414).

This approach would certainly count as an “anti-humanist” approach to the literary text, and, indeed, when the essay was collected in an anthology of criticism, that arch-humanist Harold Bloom wondered in an editor’s note, “whether Bigger’s authentic force as a literary character is not diminished by our current cultural politics and related resentments” (xvi). It seems to me now that a profitable question for students of Wright’s Native Son is whether or not it is possible to understand Bigger Thomas’s “authentic force as a literary character” apart from “our current cultural politics and related resentments.”

A good post-humanist writing assignment for the undergraduate literature course, therefore, would use literary and critical texts as the means to direct students’ reflections on their own experience of gendered acculturation. After reading Native Son (and perhaps building on students’ work with the Holland and Eisenhart thesis) and writing a short interpretation of “Misogyny and Appropriation,” students might be given something like the following assignment:

Behind the gender-neutral terms “domestic violence,” “stalking,” and “serial murder” lies a reality in which men routinely assault women (and very occasionally the other way around). What is there about being a man (or being a black man) that causes Bigger Thomas to assault and kill women? How well does the “struggle for dominance” model of manhood implied by the argument of “Misogyny and Appropriation” explain Bigger’s crimes? While your essay is an interpretation of Wright’s novel, its argument should be based on your own experience of gender, your observations of peers, your sense of the “messages” we all get from popular culture. In considering gender, you are engaged in thinking about your own identity as a woman or a man and how you believe this identity has been shaped by our cultural recipe for “normal” behavior.

Again, the purpose of the assignment is to get students to construct a defensible truth from the experience of the diacritic and of the “real” world. In the process of writing this essay, students must decide how much of what their culture normalizes about the characteristics of men and women as bromides about “Mars and Venus” is actually destructive and dehumanizing. Students would have to decide how much of their will and libido are properly their own and how much are manipulated by forces beyond their control.
There are no doubt many ways to achieve the pedagogical objectives outlined here, to occasion serious intellectual inquiry into the formation of the self as well as the articulation of selfhood. I have tried to make the case that teaching students to perform this reflective and integrative process in disciplined ways will require that composition studies be admitted as a full-fledged partner, with literary and cultural studies, in the English curriculum. It will also require that we in composition studies change the way we think about our icon of “personal experience.” And the assignments discussed here are intended to serve as exemplars of this reflective process, exemplars in the sense that Thomas Kuhn used the term (459): to refer a tried-and-true solution to a knowledge problem. I have tried to define that problem broadly as a desire to preserve Newman’s ethos of a liberal education in an age dominated by Lyotard’s razor: performativity as the “best possible input/output equation” (46).

If the university, and the humanities curriculum in particular, is in ruins, as Readings argues, then the kind of pedagogy outlined here might well serve as the nucleus of a revived and reformed commitment to the liberal arts education. Composition studies will need to persuade departmental colleagues and administrators that “learning to write” is a process of acculturation by which each student acquires the ability to organize and validate knowledge for himself or herself.

There is something of a “grand narrative” in this. Beth Daniell, writing in the special issue of CCC subtitled “A Usable Past: CCC at 50,” calls on composition studies to eschew grand narratives. Such narratives have, she argues, mischaracterized “the complicated social, political, and economic situation of the United States at century’s end” (400–01). Instead, she endorses “postmodern little narratives” of literacy that are “marked by a tension between Foucauldian determinism and human agency, showing the power of institutions to control people by controlling their literacy and the power of individuals and groups to use literacy to act either in concert with or in opposition to this power” (406). Of course, “little narratives” are central to the work of introductory composition instruction, but I have argued here that composition, and indeed the other components of an English studies curriculum, must focus much more on the purpose and the effect of the narratives we assign in the process of teaching students how to write. Mere expression is not enough; we must also have students examine the “structures of expression.” This reflective self-examination is sanctioned, in the final analysis, by the grand narrative of the liberal education, for which Cardinal Newman has served me iconically.

For those outside English departments, to whom we need to make our case for the central role of composition studies in the delivery of a liberal education, I would explain that the purpose of all writing assignments in the English undergraduate curriculum is to teach students how they can decide for themselves what is true, or at least what is most likely. That is the basic job of rhetoric and composition, teaching processes of knowing rather than a body of knowledge, and I would say the same of undergraduate literature
courses. I would explain that this ability to decide what is true or most likely is especially necessary in our information- and image-saturated world, where everyone is exposed to a worldwide glut of things parading as "true." And I would explain that as long as we value the integrity of individuals, we must equip them with the intellectual means to translate public knowledge into personal meaning—and back again.

Notes

1. Elizabeth Leonard takes my concern with producing agency in a different direction: assignments as experiments with genre and style (219–22).

2. William Spanos uses "posthumanist" to refer to Heidegger, Derrida, Foucault, Kristeva, Lacan, and Althusser, each of whom "discloses the aporia—the absence or presence (or center) this second-order humanist logic (problematic) [which] would conceal . . . difference . . . ." a difference "which is in fact the condition of the possibility of structure" (189–90). And difference creates as well the possibility of agency, what Spanos calls the "antropologos" (191).

3. I again want to emphasize that the approach to writing I am offering here is not incompatible with others. Linda Brodkey's "autoethnography" also pursues what I would call a "post-humanist" critical objective, although Brodkey is more interested in autobiographical student narratives than I am here (27–28). Gerald Graff's important argument that students should take a direct part in what might be called the "forensics" of intellectual dissensus is also part of my concern. My argument, which again is complementary rather than contradictory, points students toward the phenomenological process by which they, as subjects of culture, do the referencing of conflicting positions. The process, I am claiming, opens up the possibility of freedom, which, if it occurs, must take place "in here" (Graff and Hoberek). Finally, three other recent studies should be referenced here, those by Kristie Fleckenstein, Julie Lindquist, and Min-Zhan Lu. All three anticipate a number of points I am developing here.

Works Cited


Ackerman, Felicia. A Comment on "Teaching and Writing 'Up Against the Mall.'" College English 59 (1997): 839.


