Current discourse production approaches:

The need for multiple points of view

by

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INTRODUCTION

When I first began to teach composition I felt I knew how to communicate with others by using writing. After all, I had worked in business for years and had authored satisfactory reports and successful grant proposals. Armed with my experience and a syllabus given to me, I approached the classroom, which was filled with freshmen waiting for me to teach them the secrets of composition. It was a frustrating experience.

Some days went well, but I had no idea why they turned out differently than the days when nothing seemed to work. And I couldn't duplicate my successes, or avoid the disasters, in other class sessions. I felt like James Williams, who commented that his initial teaching experiences were "a haphazard process of trial and error, largely influenced by the success stories [he] heard" (xiii).

From my first year of teaching, however, I reached a couple of important conclusions. First, I concluded that writing--discourse production--is an enormously complex activity involving several mental activities that are difficult for anyone--even composition researchers--to describe (cf. Lindemann, 21). And because it seems logical that something difficult to describe would be difficult to
teach, I concluded that Maxine Hairston was dead right when she said (referring to the teaching of writing), "We are engaged in a messy business" ("Breaking Our Bonds" 279).

But these conclusions came slowly, and no doubt at great cost to my students. Although I had an implicit understanding of how language works (e.g. I knew how to write well on the job), I couldn't articulate my understanding to them. Clearly, what was lacking was a theory to inform what I was trying to teach: "If we do not understand the theoretical context in which we function, we're powerless--unable to rationalize what we do and hence stripped of the ability to argue our case" (Winterowd ix).

In fact, most composition teachers see the value in having a theoretical framework as a basis for understanding how language works, and how people use language in writing. Such a theoretical framework can affect everything else in the course, from textbook choice to assignments to evaluation, because that framework enables teachers to discern why some pedagogical practices are more appropriate than others and to analyze why particular teaching strategies succeed or fail. These were both areas in which I was sailing without a rudder when I began.
The point I'm leading to is that theories about discourse production can help us
  - understand the processes involved in composition, and
  - relate these processes to one another as we teach.

However, relying on a single theory to frame the assumptions of one's teaching can be as debilitating, or more so, than operating from an implicit understanding based on experience alone. When Hairston looked at teachers of writing as a product, as opposed to writing as a process, she saw them exhausting themselves by "teaching from an outmoded model" (The Winds of Change" 80). But was it just the fact that they were using an out-of-date model that exhausted them, or could it have been the fact that they were basing their teaching of a complex, multi-faceted process on a single model? Could this be as problematic as relying on an intuitive, unarticulated understanding of the writing process in which our assumptions are unexamined?

The danger of relying on a single way of describing discourse production has been observed by others, including Lee Odell. He sees people working in the field divided over individually held theories. Odell observes that those involved in composition research and teaching "too
often...compartmentalize their knowledge about [the] profession and pretend to certainty where [they] have, at most, plausible hypotheses" (37). He cites the example of the blind men in the Indian fable who concentrate on different parts of an elephant and insist that the part of the animal within the scope of their senses "is" the elephant, without considering what the others have found. Odell feels "this attitude constitutes a major threat to our discipline" (397).

Part of the problem which leads to teachers and theorists holding one theory and insisting that it "is" composition lies in the misunderstanding of what theories are. Theories are a way of talking about complex realities, and when we talk about something like discourse production we are establishing a point of view and changing what we are talking about to bring it into understandable categories or classifications. A theory provides a framework for our observations and data. However, "more than one theoretical construction can always be placed upon a given collection of data" (Kuhn 76).

In constructing theories we use language to describe apparent relationships or underlying principles of something we've observed. When we put our conjectures about how our observations are structured into words, we necessarily
Bruce Gregory writes that "the minute we begin to talk about this world...it somehow becomes transformed into another world, an interpreted world, a world delimited by language.... In order to deal with the world we have to talk about it" (183). And in order to talk about discourse production we can use theories. Gregory observes that "implicit in the way we use language is the notion that language points to a world beyond itself" (183). In this view, language is not tied to the world, and it cannot be. It is separate from the things we use it to talk about. Using language allows us to create simplified approximations of what we are talking about.

Most theories of discourse production present the process as freestanding and manageable. Interconnectedness and continuity are diminished at the expense of an atomic understanding. In Fritjof Capra's view, this is because we need to simplify the complexity we find in the world by reducing what we perceive into discrete objects and events. This technique of breaking unities into components is a means of dealing with the intricate complexity reality is. But the objects and events we divide the reality we are observing into are "an abstraction devised by our discriminating and categorizing intellect" (117) and are not that reality itself. Capra points out that although
theories are useful, they represent a limited and approximate way of talking about natural phenomena, such as discourse production:

All natural phenomena are ultimately interconnected, and in order to explain any of them we need to understand all the others, which is obviously impossible. What makes science so successful is the discovery that approximations are possible. If one is satisfied with an approximate "understanding" of nature, one can describe selected groups of phenomena in this way, neglecting other phenomena which are less relevant. (277)

Understanding that theories are tools we can use to better understand the processes involved in discourse production can help avoid the belief that our theories are what they are describing. When he was discussing theories, Albert Einstein said, "the sense experiences are given subject matter. But the theory that shall interpret them is man-make. It is the result of an extremely laborious process of adaption: hypothetical, never completely final, always subject to question and doubt" (as qtd. in Gregory 179).
In addition to being abstractions and simplifications, another aspect of theories that contributes to misunderstanding them is that theories are points of view, different ways of describing or thinking about the subject at hand. As such, there are many theories of discourse production that are equally valid, although they may appear to be completely different and perhaps even contradictory. For example, we can look at the old saying "you can't see the forest for the trees." Relying on just one theory to explain writing leads to this same shortsightedness. Looking at many theories we can appreciate how some describe a single tree, others look at clusters of trees from various parts of the forest, a few study the interaction of the animals and insects with the trees, and still others look at the forest as a whole and how it interacts with its surroundings. None of the views describes the totality of the forest, but by looking at several of them we can get a better understanding of what that totality consists of.

Different discourse production theories are different descriptions of the process. Each different theory is like looking at a different facet of a cut gem. Looking at only one facet offers us only a flat face with which to view the interior; using one theory gives us a limited perspective. By accepting the multi-faceted complexity of the gem, we can
appreciate the beauty created by the combination of the facets reflected and sparkling from the interior.

When teachers look at theories of composition there is a need to understand various theories and approaches. When I took my first composition theory class I was confused by the manner in which each theorist we studied attempted to privilege their theory and point of view at the expense of the other competing views. It seemed to me that each had something to offer in understanding the processes involved in writing, yet how could I judge them when they all claimed to be the right view. Lee Odell had a student who expressed similar bewilderment: "I did not share her apprehension about the variety of approaches. But I do think she was right to protest the tendency to emphasize the uniqueness of each of these procedures without considering the possible relationships among them" (399). Understanding that each of the theories I was grappling with was a different way of viewing composition, and that as such they could be related to each other, would have helped clear up some of my confusion. Other theorists have pointed out the usefulness of understanding that there are competing points of view (for example, see Donovan and McClelland xi and Knoblauch 126).
I researched ways to group the theories I had studied so that I could distinguish the differences and the relationships between them as I made pedagogical decisions. I realized that I would be choosing one area as my main interest, and in this I lean towards the Derridean influenced understanding of the relationships between thinking and speaking and writing. I also realized that other approaches offered insights into discourse production that enabled me to be more effective in the classroom.

As I looked at the ways theorists grouped the different theories into approaches (for example see Berlin, Faigley, Kent, and Knoblauch) what seemed like logical relationships began to emerge. Philosophers like Fish and Rorty are studying writing's uniqueness as a kind of language use, sociologists like Doheny-Farina and Porter are applying ethnographic research methods to determine social constraints on discourse, cognitive psychologists are investigating the processes by which people produce writing, and writers like Murray and Elbow are describing their inner motivations and exigencies when they write.

One problem common to the discussions of approaches I found was that each of the theorists chose to privilege one approach over the others, rather than presenting them as being related, or as different parts of the same elephant.
Nonetheless, I chose to work with the approaches Thomas Kent discussed. I did so for two reasons. First the basis which Kent used to define each approach, where knowledge is located by the theorists, seemed to express a logical relationship. Second, Kent's choice of four approaches (expressive, positivist, social construction, and hermeneutic) was more complete, and therefore I found it more useful, than the others I investigated.

As I've used the approaches, the theories and models within:

- the expressive approach locate knowledge within the individual
- the positivist approach locate knowledge in the natural world where it can be observed and measured
- the social construction approach place knowledge within discrete social groupings whose members decide what it will consist of
- the hermeneutic approach present knowledge as negotiable and open to interpretation by the individual

In the discussion each approach which follows I present each by giving a brief overview of the approach and some major figures I associate with it. I then discuss why the
theories and models within the approach work, what their limitations are, and the ways they are an approximate understanding of the reality of discourse production.

I am using this format to indicate that theories of discourse production can be related to each other, and that, while none is a complete picture of discourse production, all are useful in understanding different aspects involved.
EXPRESSIVE APPROACH

Expressive theories of discourse production locate knowledge within the individual. Taking a cue from Kant, expressivists construct models wherein communication is based on human thought processes. Of the two main models that fall within expressive theory, the first holds the "romantic" view of the writer writing in isolation to discover the truth within him or herself. The second model says that we share thought processes and that these processes are represented in writing by certain modes of discourse. In both models, knowledge—or the way to it—is located exclusively in the writer's mental processes.

As one of the leading proponents of the romantic view Peter Elbow feels that in the endeavor to communicate innate knowledge, the writer is apt to be strongly influenced by an audience, or at least the idea of one. In "Closing My Eyes As I Speak," he employs the example of scientific language to construct a picture of this phenomenon: "An audience is a field of force. The closer we come--the more we think about these readers--the stronger the pull they exert on the contents of our minds" (51). Elbow goes on to suggest that we look to Linda Flower's concept of "writer-based prose" in order to deal with the phenomenon he has described. His
"limited claim" in the essay is that by teaching students to ignore their audiences and by encouraging them to produce writer-based prose, the student writers are then able to discover what they want to say. Elbow and others feel that writers need to consider the idea of an audience during the revision stages. James Berlin states that dialogue with an audience is useful in determining which parts of a communication are faulty, and writers then revise or remove those parts to come closer to the "ultimate truth" within themselves ("Contemporary Composition" 772).

The other main expressive model is the modes of discourse. In this description of discourse production, writers and readers share innate mental categories. These categories represent mental processes that structure reality for us, and we employ them in writing as patterns of logic which James Kinneavy et al. group into four modes: description, classification, evaluation, and narration (3); each mode gives a partial picture of reality (Kinneavy 9). By using all four modes, the authors contend a reader can come close to a full account of the reality being observed. In other words, by employing the modes to structure reality, we can gain access to knowledge, and since shared innate mental categories are the basis for the modes, using them
also enables a reader to come to an understanding of the writer's meaning.

Both expressive models call for the receiver of the communication to come to the producer's meaning. Elizabeth Harris describes the modal model's view of the relation between the producer and the receiver of discourse when she says the writer's "aim" is important, not how a reader receives it (631). In this model, the reader is expected to share the writer's conception of reality and recognize the knowledge tendered through the mode. Similarly, in the romantic model, Peter Elbow argues that it is not important for a writer to "decenter" in order to accommodate his or her audience; the writer must develop "a sufficiently strong focus of attention to make the reader decenter" (54) and come to the writer's meaning.

Both models of expressive theory are effective in discussing discourse production for several reasons. Prewriting exercises and heuristics derived from the romantic model enable students to connect good writing with mastering specific techniques. In the modal model, the use of modes gives the students specific organizational strategies to employ because once they determine whether their communication falls into description, classification, evaluation, or narration many of the remaining choices are
made from this determination. Modes also enable teachers to make connections between the modes as we use them today and their origins in classical rhetoric in order to impart a sense of history and continuity with students. Teaching conventions also follows, because these patterns of organization have come to be expected in English writing.

Another important way the models are effective is in emphasizing the importance of the student's voice in writing. They both ask that writers take responsibility for finding what they must say within themselves and not in someone or something else, and this can be a liberating and powerful way of looking at discourse production for a young writer.

Although expressive models do have real strengths in preparing students to write, there are limitations to the models. Both of the models emphasize discourse production as an internal process and diminish the social and contextual influences on writing. In each model, students are discouraged from considering how the audience's needs or the context might influence or help shape their material and organization. The modal model also suggests to students that mechanical, formulaic writing is enough to get the writer's meaning across to an audience.
Another limitation is that both models presume an ultimate meaning or Truth and locate it in the individual. Once the individual finds meaning within him or herself, that meaning can be shared with others since meaning follows form, and the forms are archival. Knowledge thus is pictured as a somewhat static entity.

A final weakness is that each model portrays language as a tool to be used and not as a way to use tools. This portrayal leads to an unproblematic view of language usage. Students learn to depend either on themselves or on formulas as the ultimate source of communication. In this picture, if readers can't understand or follow the communication, the fault must lie within the audience and not with the way the writer is expressing him or herself.

The expressive models approximate what is "out there" because they look at discourse in an objective and therefore incomplete way. They each put the writer in the foreground and minimize or ignore any aspects of interconnectedness which link the writer, the text, the reader, and the context. Expressive theory results in a static and simplified representation of discourse production. As approximations and simplifications, the models derived from expressive theory are useful in portraying certain aspects of discourse production. For an introduction to writing,
the models constructed from an expressive view of discourse production have power and pedagogical value. Beyond the basic level, however, the models lose these features, and a different, more complex way of talking about discourse production is needed.

In other words, to use these models as the only view of what composition is would be to encourage the problems that the expressive approach has been labeled with. Using this view alone also leaves the writer inadequately prepared, with an incomplete, writer-centered basis for composing. Clearly, although this approach does have something to say about discourse production, it cannot stand alone and be taken for what discourse production "is."
POSITIVIST APPROACH

Positivist theories of discourse production locate knowledge in the natural world. Positivists "understand discourse production to be an empirical phenomenon that can be tested and measured" (Kent, "Beyond System" 5). In other words, positivist researchers base their models of discourse production on information uncovered by inductive, empirical methods borrowed from scientific research.

In composition research, the most influential positivist models are derived from psychological studies in the field of cognitive development. Within these studies there are two basic theories: the Piagetian view that cognition influences language and the Vygotskian view that language influences cognition. In the Piagetian model, the level of the subject's cognitive development influences his or her level of writing. In the Vygotskian model, it is language use, and especially writing, that enables humans to develop their abstract thinking capabilities. Both of these models have had a powerful effect on discourse production research.

Linda Flower is one of the most influential researchers in this area, and in her 1979 article "Writer-Based Prose: A Cognitive Basis for Problems in Writing," she discusses
principles of Piaget and Vygotsky's research concerning the cognitive features of egocentric thought. She then uses them to analyze the writing of a student. In a later article Flower and John Hayes constructed a model of discourse production using protocols from writers and interpreting them in light of cognitive development theory. Many other researchers have also drawn from this area of psychological study to analyze data based on observations of writers. A measure of the influence of positivist models derived from cognitive development research is the fact that many current composition textbooks include material derived from this model.

Another popular positivist approach to discourse production is ethnographic research, in which methods and assumptions are taken directly from ethnologic research. Stephen Doheny-Farina and Lee Odell feel that employing this type of investigation will lead to a better understanding of "the nature of the composing process, the characteristics of 'good' writing, and the ways in which readers go about making meaning out of what someone else has written" (503).

The positivist models are an effective way of talking about composition for several reasons. The most important is that they are easy for instructors to use in the classroom. The explanatory power of being able to refer to
the results of empirical research has obvious advantages for teachers. Teachers are able to discuss strategies and techniques that have been shown to be effective for other writers, such as using writer-based prose for a rough draft and transforming it into reader-based writing. Teachers are also able to use research results to discuss what the problems are in ineffective writing, such as the difficulties writer-based prose causes for the reader.

Another reason the model is effective is because researchers, using empirical methods, have uncovered several steps that successful writers go through in order to produce a finished product. Flower and Hayes have divided the basic processes involved in these steps into planning, translating and reviewing (369). Planning consists of the steps of generating ideas, organizing, and goal-setting; while translating involves putting the plans into words, and reviewing includes the steps of evaluating and revising those words. Thus, the positivist model has been an important influence in developing the process view of writing and in helping the process view replace the product view of writing in the classroom.

The positivist models' limitations are implicit in the objective approach used in researching its theories. By breaking the writing process down into discrete units such
an approach produces a mechanistic picture not only of the writing process but also of the relation between the writer, the text, the context, and the reader. Reliance on empirical data is very seductive to teachers and students who, through the analysis of data, begin to see writing as a skill that can be reduced to a series of steps which can then be taught and learned by anyone. A major problem with basing a model on empirical data is that the series of steps produced consists of generalizations derived from observing a finite number of writers at work. Positivists assume that an awareness of the steps used by writers judged as good writers by teachers will allow writers judged as poor writers to improve.

But James Berlin ("Rhetoric and Ideology" 483) points out that the factors which influence successful writers to use effective strategies could be influenced more by the social level they were brought up in and the view of the importance and the function of writing that upbringing gave them than by the choices they make when they write. In other words, giving so-called "poor" writers the surface techniques of so-called "good" writers does not bring them the perspective that the good writers have. C.H. Knoblauch saw this problem and wrote that
teachers or researchers who assume that students failing to thrive in scientifically refined environments are themselves responsible for the failure reveal the ideological consequences of reifying knowledge and thereby reducing human beings or their activities to the abstract models and structures intended to 'explain' them. (131)

By concentrating on what some writers do with language, the positivist model excludes what they, or others, "might" do. The model cannot be used to tell why writers do specific tasks, except as some abstract function of cognition, and this affects the model's ability to deal with areas like creativity.

A final limitation is the model's view of knowledge. Like the expressive model, the positivist model sees knowledge as a static entity that is located in the natural world waiting for us to find it. There is no explanatory power within this model to account for mutability or change regarding knowledge; the model demands certainty about truth and meaning.

The positivist model is an approximation of discourse production because it looks at the elements involved in writing as separate units that can be isolated from the whole. The model has also been criticized for its emphasis
on psychological research and the reliance on explaining writing through the individual's brain development. There is a subsequent underemphasis on how context and relationships between writer, text, and audience affect decisions concerning the writing situation.

Although the positivist view of discourse production is useful in explaining writing through empirical data and positivist models do present a way of talking about discourse that complements the expressive models and their focus on the individual's role in writing, neither addresses the social context of discourse production very well.
SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION APPROACH

As a reaction to the writer-based models of the expressive approach and the empirical based models of the positivist approach, some composition researchers work with models derived from social construction approaches to discourse production. Models based on social construction theories locate knowledge in the social world. According to Kenneth Bruffee,

A social constructionist position in any discipline assumes that entities we normally call reality, knowledge, thought, facts, text, selves, and so on are constructs generated by communities of like-minded peers. ("Social Construction" 774)

Social constructionists propose that discourse production 1) can be understood only with an awareness of the social context within which it is produced, and 2) cannot be accomplished without the writer taking into consideration the norms and values of the community he or she is writing for. Bruffee even sees a causal connection between conversation and thought and feels that thought is therefore "an artifact created by social interaction"
In this model, cognitive terms for thinking processes are merely talk about talk.

Under the models generated by social constructionist theories, effective discourse is produced within the boundaries of "discourse communities" or "communities of knowledgeable peers." These terms have been defined by various researchers (see Bruffee, Porter, Freed and Broadhead) but they are all similar to Lester Faigley's view that "within a language community, people acquire specialized kinds of discourse competence that enable them to participate in specialized groups" ("Nonacademic Writing" 238). Within these specialized groups the community decides what is to be accepted as knowledge or meaning and even what counts as acceptable discourse (Bruffee, "Collaborative Learning" 642). James Porter feels "a text is 'acceptable' within a forum only insofar as it reflects the community episteme" (39). Therefore, in order to produce discourse, writers first have to familiarize themselves with what is considered knowledge and truth by the discourse community they wish to enter.

Within social construction models, knowledge is not talked about as certainty, something that can be found inside the individual or discerned by empirical means. As Bruffee writes, the social construction view of knowledge is
that "there is no such thing as a universal foundation, ground, framework, or structure of knowledge" (Social 776). Rather, knowledge is an agreement of the community of knowledgeable peers and lasts only as long as there is a consensus among those peers about that agreement.

In this model, writing becomes "an attempt to exercise the will, to identify the self within the constraints of some discourse community" (Porter 41). The goal of the writing teacher is to introduce students to the social nature of writing, and, more specifically, to teach them the differences between discourse communities and how to write appropriately for the community within the field they wish to enter. Bruffee points out that "without successful teachers the community will die when its current members die, and knowledge as assented to by that community will cease to exist" ("Collaborative" 650).

The models of discourse production developed through social construction theory are effective in talking about composition because they describe the effects of context on writing. The idea that writers are not writing in a vacuum but fulfilling the expectations of readers, especially in matters of writing conventions and formats, enables the teacher to explain the necessity of those conventions and formats. The models are also useful when doing peer group
work in class; students can see themselves as "knowledgeable peers" within the context of the group. They can realistically see that each one has a voice in determining and shaping each other's writing and how their own writing is influenced by the expectations of the rest of the group. It would be difficult for them to see themselves as gaining a voice or competence in other discourse communities without extensive background work, but they see their effectiveness within the classroom context much easier.

The limits of models derived from social construction theory are serious. In the first place, discourse communities are presented as totally separate writing situations, each calling for different methods, techniques, and background knowledge that must be mastered before a writer can be accepted by the community as a member with something to add to the discourse of the community. To a young writer, this can be a very intimidating view of writing. In reality, all discourse communities share common assumptions within a larger society and don't operate in the isolated environments social constructionists investigate.

Another major problem is the difficulty in teaching writing because of the nonfoundational, relativistic state of social construction models. Within the models, knowledge and truth become impermanent; changeable based on the
decisions, or whims, of the community's leaders. The nature of discourse production suffers from this same instability, and changes in writing conventions come to be seen as arbitrarily arrived at. A second effect of the nonfoundational basis of the models is that they are necessarily descriptive. Researchers are forced to rely on narratives to discuss the principles of their models because they can't explain them causally.

The model is an approximation of discourse production because of the compartmentalized way communities which produce discourse are pictured. This compartmentalization is a result of the attempt to create a model where discourse production could be viewed in a logical, codified way. In order to construct the model, researchers look at individual "discourse communities" rather than looking at discourse production as a whole. There is no room in the model to explain how discourse is understood across the barriers of communities or how and why programs like writing across the curriculum work within universities.
HERMENEUTIC APPROACH

Theorists working on the hermeneutic approach describe knowledge as being manufactured through pragmatic interpretations and located in negotiable human activities. Hermeneuticists look at language and how it operates in the world to determine how to talk about discourse production rather than looking at isolated groups or individuals as do expressivists, positivists, and social constructionists.

Hermeneutic theories of discourse production have an antecedent in the Sophistic tradition of rhetoric. The Sophists were a class of teachers in ancient Greece, and rhetoric was an important part of their curricula. They reached their height about the end of the 5th Century B.C., and were disseminating their theories about a century before Plato and Aristotle. Sophists described rhetoric as a unity, which is the opposite of the Aristotelean view. In the Aristotelean scheme of things, learning about discourse production evolved into the study of the parts (or "categories") that make up the communication. The categories most commonly associated with the Aristotelean scheme are inventio, dispositio, elocutio, memoria, and pronuntiatio. Michael Leff points out that a shortcoming of reducing communication to such categories is that categories
are "temporary, motile structures; and they assume importance only as they come into contact with the specifics of a case at hand" (24). For example, the first category, invention, is presented by many theorists and teachers as a discrete step in the writing process. Certainly, for some writers, using invention techniques such as freewriting or outlining can prove helpful. But it is not a prerequisite for writing, nor does everyone who writes use invention strategies or view invention as a separate step in their process. So, for specific cases the categories make sense, but that doesn't make the categories applicable to everyone's writing.

According to Leff, under the Sophistic system, discourse production was not reduced to a static and "abstract general theory" that could then be taught through rules to others. Instead, discourse was seen as a dynamic skill in communication that involved taking into account all the factors that influenced its production. Leff characterizes this view by explaining that to the Sophists the orator confronted diverse and shifting situations where success depended on adjustment to specific circumstances, and thus no set of static rules could enclose this activity...the skill
required had to emerge organically from particular experiences. (25)

In the hermeneutic approach, not only must the speaker--or writer--adjust to the circumstances to communicate, but the hearer--or reader--is also seen making adjustments in order to render the communication intelligible. In discussing the New Rhetoric, which offers a similar view of discourse production to the hermeneutic approach, James Berlin declares that "the message arises out of the interaction of the writer, language, reality, and the audience" ("Contemporary" 775). Truth and meaning operate within a "given universe of discourse" (Berlin, "Contemporary" 775) that is defined by those elements. By including the role of language and the contemporary understanding of reality, in addition to the writer and the audience, in defining discourse, Berlin's view extends beyond the notion of a discourse community and its reliance on consensus among the knowledgeable peers who make up such a community, as well as its reliance on the authority of the community to decide what constitutes acceptable discourse.

Stanley Fish gives an example of this interaction between elements of a universe of discourse in his essay "Is There a Text In This Class?" In the essay, a student asks a colleague of Fish's, "Is there a text in this class?" To
which the professor replies affirmatively and then proceeds to give the student the list of required texts for the class. The student indicates that she was not asking about the class's texts; what she wants to know is what comprises a "text" for the class. As Fish points out, the professor has interpreted the student's words from the context of talking to a student during the first days of school, whereas the student was grounding her question in a context based in literary theory. The question can easily be seen to apply within both contexts, and each participant could understand it in either, so once the student corrected the professor, he could adjust the context he originally placed the sentence in and answer her.

Borrowing from Donald Davidson, Thomas Kent calls what occurred in Fish's example "radical interpretation" and says the term means that we employ our knowledge of a language to make guesses about what speakers and writers desire to communicate, and no formal method may be established to ensure that our guesses are correct. A knowledge of conventions--linguistic or otherwise--only helps make us better guessers. (Beyond 19)
In hermeneutic theories, writers and readers are connected through pragmatic interpretations on the part of both. Citing the works of Donald Davidson and Jacques Derrida, Kent argues that there is no conventional link between a word and its intended effect in the world ("Paralogic Hermeneutics" 2). As Fish showed, once an utterance is produced it is, in effect, floating free and not anchored to a single interpretation. When a receiver of discourse intercepts the utterance, it is interpreted within a context. Fish points out that "when we are asked to consider a sentence for which no context has been specified, we will automatically hear it in the context in which it has been most often encountered" (310). The act of interpreting the utterance, making sense of it and identifying its context, occurs instantaneously and intuitively. In the case of a misinterpretation, the discourse receiver either adjusts his or her understanding of the meaning and context based on clues from the discourse producer, or the receiver must relay that he or she has no experience with what the producer is intending, and the producer may then back up to a point of shared agreement of meaning and proceed from that point (Fish 315). If the producer of the discourse is not available, then the receiver must either familiarize him or herself with the background material needed to interpret the
utterance, or leave the utterance uninterpreted. In either case, according to Fish, "the introduction of new categories or the expansion of old ones to include new (and therefore newly seen) data must always come from the outside or what is perceived, for a time, to be outside" (315). As Kent points out:

Discourse production, therefore, always embodies interpretation, for in order to produce discourse that will be comprehensible to others, we must first interpret the other's code before we can attempt to match ours to it. ("Paralogic" 3)

Of course, receiving discourse involves a parallel job of interpreting the producer's code.

Within the hermeneutic theories, researchers picture a web of meaning that must constantly be rewoven in order to accommodate communication. Meaning is not a static entity, but rather a constantly evolving body. This web of meaning is what we come to, and eventually help reshape, in discourse production and reception.

In order to participate in communication with others, we must first acquire the necessary background. Context and meaning occur within the web. In explaining this intimate link between context and meaning Fish points out, "it is
impossible even to think of a sentence independently of a context" (310), whether our interpretation of the intended context is what the producer intended or not.

To answer charges that looking at discourse production using this approach is hopelessly relativistic, Fish states that "only if there is a shared basis of agreement at once guiding interpretation and providing a mechanism for deciding between interpretations [can] a total and debilitating relativism...be avoided" (317).

Richard Rorty admits that there is a lack of certainty or objectivity with the model, but he finds this yearning for certainty to be based on a desire to imitate the scientific models, which have been powerful ways to talk about the physical universe. When looking at discourse production, he feels "we should avoid the idea that there is some special virtue in knowing in advance what criteria you are going to satisfy, in having standards by which to measure progress" (38). Rorty feels that the desire for certainty is the result of a belief in a "Truth" located somewhere outside us and waiting to be found. He feels that this idea should be replaced with an understanding of "'true' as a word which applies to those beliefs which we are able to agree as roughly synonymous with 'justified'" (45).
Researchers working with hermeneutic theories agree that discourse production cannot be codified or systematized. Each instance of communication is a unique circumstance and requires interpretation of the context by all the participants before they can enter into the conversation. In order to enter into this conversation, a potential participant must listen to the group long enough to acquire the background necessary to bring sense and add to it. The social nature of discourse is emphasized, and discourse operates within the web of meaning we all share. Under these theories, the participants do an interpretive "dance to discover agreement and thus there is no one meaning, no one Truth, but there are agreements, based on pragmatic interaction. By learning the conventions, the participant can help his or her interpretations become more accurate, but can never eliminate uncertainty.

Hermeneutic theories are effective when discussing composition because they are an attempt to portray the complexity of discourse production. As a holistic description it shows the importance of the interaction between the writer, reader, text, and context that takes place in communication. The theories also stress the uniqueness of each writing situation, and discredits the notion that responding to each situation can be accomplished
by relying on formulas. By gaining an insight both into how all the features are connected and into the complexity of discourse production, a student has a better understanding of how and why communication is successful or not.

The limits of the approach are the difficulty teaching with it because, on the one hand, the theories are so general and on the other hand it is so complex. Using the approach to talk about discourse production to inexperienced writers may cause them to be overwhelmed by it all and could only confirm their hopelessness at trying to become competent in their writing. A teacher using the hermeneutic approach exclusively is unable to give the students any specifics about how to complete an assignment successfully. Depending on the background knowledge each student has, each one will respond differently to each writing situation, and each student requires individual attention, an impracticality with today's enrollment limits for composition classes. When a teacher tries to use the model descriptively, it is so complex that to present an accurate picture of the communication being analyzed would require prohibitive amounts of data gathering.

The hermeneutic theories of discourse production are only approximations because they must remain so general. In trying to find a way to present the complexity involved,
researchers working with hermeneutics opt for a model that will fit all situations and give an overview of the communication process. As a result, no "certainty" can be generated when discussing discourse production.
Two reasons to classify the theories, which we as teachers are influenced by as we teach composition, are to see 1) how they might be related and 2) how they offer different points of view of discourse production. Since a realistic picture of discourse production is far too complex to be useful, we employ theories, which are simplifications of reality, as tools to talk about discourse production.

Classifying different theories and models of discourse production under the four approaches I've chosen is a convenient way to talk about them, just as the theories and models themselves are a way of talking about discourse production. The four approaches represent just one of many possible ways of grouping the theories. Of course, theories are never static and are constantly being refined. Odell writes, "one may argue that our knowledge is tentative, provisional, subject to ongoing revision. If this revision ever ends, so will our discipline. And so will our ability to survive as thinkers and teachers" (397). As such, these approaches are subject to revision, as are the views of the theorists and researchers placed within each. The result is that these groupings are as approximate as the theories within them, and it would probably be difficult to find any
theorist or researcher that was a pure, dyed in the wool member of any individual approach. But, like theories, the approaches are useful ways of talking about the theories they classify and in seeing the relationships between the different theories. In this way, we can hope to get a better understanding of what composition is, and impart this understanding in a more efficient and effective manner to our students.

What we are attempting to do with the various theories of discourse production is, as Albert Einstein said about science, "to make the chaotic diversity of our sense-experience correspond to a logically uniform system of thought" (as qtd. in Gregory 143). As tools, theories are useful means we employ to attain our goal of helping students become more competent at writing; they enable us to talk about the "chaotic diversity" that makes up composition.

Though we use theories in this way, it's important to recognize that no one theory can cover the entire field. Bruce Gregory explains:

What we say about the world, our theories, are like garments--they fit the world to a greater or lesser degree, but none fit perfectly, and none are right for every occasion. There seems to be
no already-made world, waiting to be discovered. The fabric of nature, like all fabric, is woven by human beings for human purposes. (186)

When we use language to describe anything, that language shapes how we perceive what we are describing. When we use language, in the form of theories, to talk about discourse production, then what discourse production is becomes shaped by the language we choose to talk about it. Zenrin Kushu described this phenomenon of causing changes by talking about something when he wrote: "Begin to preach, and the point is lost" (as qtd. in Gregory 201).

But what does this all mean to composition teachers? Odell says, "as teachers our goal is not simply to convey knowledge but to help others learn to construct their own meaning" (401). D.T. Suzuki offers a similar interpretation that applies to writing as well as the zen martial arts he is specifically referring to: "if one really wishes to be master of an art, technical knowledge is not enough. One has to transcend technique so that art becomes an 'artless art' growing out of the Unconscious" (10). In other words, our job is more than just teaching the technical matters of grammar, punctuation, and format. It also involves imparting a holistic understanding of the entire writing environment as well.
Doctors have found that the study of anatomy is an important part of their profession. Knowing where the different organs are located and how they are physically connected with the rest of the body's systems helps them gain an understanding of how the body works. But this is only one view of the body, and it is not the same as a living body with all its components working and interacting with each other. Recently, even the living body viewed in isolation has come to be seen as a partial view, and more and more doctors have come to an understanding of the importance of a holistic view of the body operating in its total physical and spiritual environment. In the same way, composition studies at first concentrated on viewing the process in isolation, then breaking discourse production down into its components. Studies moved on to discourse production in a discourse community, and lately a more holistic interpretation is being offered by the researchers in the hermeneutics approach.

As I've already shown, each of the approaches is an approximation, and as such each has strengths as well as weaknesses. Even given the strengths of the individual approaches, none is satisfactory standing alone. Each takes a different point of view of discourse production, and none is the only point of view.
One of the most effective ways National Public Radio presents a complex issue is to offer interviews with several different people on an issue without ranking any as being better than another. For example, on the tenth anniversary of the Nicaraguan Revolution they interviewed three residents of Managua. One was a pro-Sandinista, another was an anti-Sandinista, and the third was a storekeeper who had originally been sympathetic to the revolution but who now viewed the government with skepticism. Although the three views presented by the three people don't offer a complete picture, they do give us a small insight into the complexity of modern day Nicaragua. Each is an approximation of the total reality, and none alone is adequate for comprehending that reality. In a similar way looking at the four approaches in relation to each other helps us understand the difficulty of discussing discourse production with certainty.

In order to teach effectively, Harvey Weiner says: "Teachers must map out one journey to competence by starting somewhere, ending somewhere else, by putting some things in and leaving some things out, and by deciding on an order of instruction" (87). We are responsible for providing guidance on the journey and we must prepare properly for our task. By understanding the nature of theories about
discourse production, their relation to one another, and realizing that no matter how much sense any theory might make to us it can't stand alone, we can offer more competent guidance to our students. The expressive, positivist, and social construction approaches all offer a more or less static (or mechanistic) representation of discourse production. The hermeneutic approach, on the other hand, offers a dynamic relativistic (or organic) way of talking about discourse production. Both the mechanistic and the organic views are valid ways of presenting the subject. We must make the best use of where to place them as we map out a journey in our classrooms.

We should never become so complacent that we don't reassess what we are doing as we plan and implement our classes. Edward Corbett suggests that it might be useful "from time to time, pause to ask yourself, 'Am I doing my students any good?'" (452). If we are confined to teaching from one point of view, there is little we can do if we answer that question negatively. However, if we have several points of view from which to talk about composition, we can do what we ultimately hope our students will be able to do in their writing and adapt to the situation by calling upon the most effective way of answering the situation at
hand. Having an understanding of several theories of composition allows teachers flexibility in their teaching. James Williams discusses his movement from wishing there was certainty he could depend on in teaching, to gaining a more flexible outlook regarding what needs to be done in the classroom. When he first began teaching, he wished he had a set of recipes, or a composition cookbook, that he could work from. As he gained experience in the classroom he saw that it took more than a cookbook of lesson plans to be an effective teacher. Williams learned that research and theory were related to the task of teachers developing their own teaching styles and strategies. Teachers needed to be able to draw on theory "because pedagogical recipes have to be seasoned to suit the individual needs of individual classes and students" (xiv). The role of theory and research is to "inform the teaching process, helping us to know which seasoning to use" (xiv). We need to keep abreast of the current composition theories in order to ensure that our spice rack is adequately stocked to meet the diversity of students in our classroom, students who bring with them a multitude of inherent attitudes concerning composition.
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