The Self and Contexts of Knowing in Writing

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Abstract

The paper discusses how the process of constructing conceptual meaning in writing arises from the interplay of different contexts of knowing involved in writing. The discussion leads to a consideration of the writer's self (personal identity) in relation to the writing act.

A Social-Cognitive (Enactionist) View of Cognition

In my discussion, I use connectionist and enactionist explanations of cognition, which in contrast to traditional cognitivism exhibit greater neural plausibility, both being motivated by the recognition that the brain is a neural network. Accordingly, I take the view of cognition (and so of writing as construction of conceptual meaning) as flow of energy through neural networks, with specific patterns of neural activity resulting in specific cognitive-affective states. Because of the adaptive capabilities of the nervous system, repeated interactions between organism and environment lead to *structural coupling* between the two (Maturana & Varela, 1987, 75), that is, changes of states in the nervous system are correlated with changes of states in the environment. What is important, however, is that the environment does not directly specify changes in the nervous system but only triggers them, which amounts to the claim that cognition is not mental *representation* of a knower-independent objective reality. Maturana and Varela (1987) refer to this most fundamental property of a nervous system as *operational closure*, and explain that «the nervous system functions as a closed network of changes in relations of activity between its components» (164). Structural coupling and operational closure are two basic notions in enactionism. In this view, what counts as the environment in perception emerges from the material world through the organization of the nervous system. Thus, as Varela et al. (1991) argue, cognition is not representation of an independent world, that is, we should view «cognition not as recovery [of an outer objective reality] or projection [of an inner subjective reality] but as embodied action» (172). Ultimately, all knowledge arises from and is reducible to embodied action, which means, is grounded in action in context. This enactionist view of cognition and knowledge amounts to the claim that all knowledge is rooted in and emerges from implicit sociocultural experience.

The claim that all knowledge is sociocultural in its origin

comes from the fact that living in social groups, humans engage in a particular type of structural couplings, namely, with each other, which triggers constant mutual adaptations. Individual cognitive states are always the result of a history of such social structural couplings, that is, the sum total of the relationships and interactions we have had within specific communities. These recurring interactions are responsible for structural changes in neural connections and so for the possible patterns of neural activity. This shows that the meanings we can make (specific patterns of neural activity) are always social in the sense of being rooted in a network of mutual adaptive changes.

These reciprocal adjustments and readjustments in our embodied social practices tend to be more implicitly known, but they do form a cline from those completely unconscious to more conscious ones. The conscious end of this continuum of awareness is associated with what we recognize as *free will* or *individual agency* (cf. Giddens, 1984). Flower (1994) discusses aware processes of meaning making in writing as *interpersonal* and *internal negotiations*. Thus, the fact that meanings are social does not have to mean that they arise exclusively through an agentless (unconscious) process – as some social constructionist theories have it. Agentless construction of meaning can be explained as accumulation of implicit sociocultural knowledge and its gradual analysis and conceptualization through unconscious mutual adaptive changes, all these processes being the result of a history of social structural couplings involving an individual in a community (see Reber, 1993, for an argument in favor of unconscious abstraction). Eventually, the individual can become fully conscious of only those meanings that have been conceptualized within the larger implicit sociocultural knowledge base. In this sense, our conceptual knowledge is socially situated.

It does not have to be so that the whole process of meaning making except for the end result takes place beyond our consciousness and so beyond our control. Two researchers of the writing process Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) have shown that learning to write involves acquiring metacognitive control over the meaning making process. I explain this metacognitive control as writers' appreciation for how awareness of a context of knowing affects what conceptual content we come to produce. The framework to be proposed here is to allow us to see how our control of meaning making can be extended from an *internal* to an *external context* of knowing.

Contexts of Knowing

The important feature of the connectionist approach to modeling cognition is that it is not symbolic but subsymbolic, meaning that it deconstructs concepts into smaller units called *microfeatures* (Rumelhart & McClelland, 1986), which are too small to be meaningful by themselves and whose cumulative meaning ultimately depends on the pattern of connectivity within which they are being activated. Cognitive competencies (writing included), which are traditionally regarded as conceptual, require a subconceptual level of analysis (Smolensky, 1987). In the subsymbolic paradigm, any bit of knowledge is distributed across a large number of processing units. By contrast, the symbolic network was *localist* and imposed *hard constraints* on cognitive operations (Bechtel & Abrahamsen, 1991). It means that with each activation of a concept, the entire concept was assumed to be activated as an intact unit – all its defining attributes being necessarily present (in accordance with the classical view of categorization). In a subsymbolic distributed network, if the same concept is being processed, a large and varying number of microfeatures are being activated in various degrees, with the result that some features may not be sufficiently activated to rise to the level of consciousness. Which features do rise to the level of consciousness on a given occasion depends in the main on the larger pattern of connectivity (the context) within which a given concept is being activated. In other words, the meaning of this concept will vary with context. Thus, the subsymbolic system imposes less rigid conditions on the activation of concepts, which makes it more sensitive and adaptive to different contexts of use. Thus, the characteristic of connectionist architecture is its ability to work within *soft constraints*, which is crucial in the context of our discussion of writing in that it accounts for the context-sensitive nature of meaning making as a *constructive* act. Such context sensitivity of our mental constructions is what connectionists call *tunability* of mental representations to changing environments (Hinton, McClelland, & Rumelhart, 1986). These environments or what I call *contexts of knowing* are themselves to be understood as mental constructions, which is of enormous epistemological consequence, heeded in the enactionist view of cognition. Thus, what conceptual content is activated depends on the larger pattern of activation (a context of knowing) involving mostly implicit sociocultural knowledge. The process of selecting and assembling conceptual content will be called the *internal context* of knowing. It takes place

within an *external context* of knowing, which tends to be implicitly constructed: Our focal attention being on the construction of conceptual content, we are only peripherally aware of the external context, which is thus typically constructed in implicit sociocultural terms.

Context Sensitivity in Writing

As used here, *context sensitivity* is not to be understood as simply equivalent to the tunability/adaptability of conceptual constructions to external contexts of knowing, in the sense of the ease with which concepts can satisfy soft constraints. In other words, the term *context sensitivity* is not to be understood only in the passive-reactive sense of appropriately responding to an implicitly constructed situational context. *Context sensitivity* is used here also in the active sense of our constructing (often referred to as *interpreting*) the context of situation and being aware of this process. Such *active context sensitivity* in effect means ability to take pre-emptive measures against automatic tunability of conceptual meanings to implicit sociocultural constraints by prior purposive construction of a context of knowing. Since conceptual constructions are so tunable to the currently active constraints (consider the meaning of *diamond* when the context is jewelry versus playing cards), in other words, since the larger activation pattern within which a concept is activated affects activation levels of the microfeatures within the concept and so affects what is brought to consciousness, in mature writing the pre-emptive action against this automatic tuning process takes the form of explicit construction of a context of knowing. I refer to this kind of pre-emptive action as *active context sensitivity*, which is a metacognitive skill. Such metacognitive awareness (which Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987, claim characterizes mature composing) may be defined as mature writers' appreciation for how awareness of a context of knowing affects construction of conceptual content. This appreciation results in explicit construction of a context of situation, called then constructing the *rhetorical situation* in contrast to immature writers' constructing the *writing situation* in implicit sociocultural terms.

The notion of *context sensitivity* explains how the apparently individual process of constructing conceptual content in writing is situated in a social context over the construction of which an aware writer can exercise some control Connectionism helps us distinguish between Scardamalia and Bereiter's (1987) processes of either less controlled (*knowledge telling*) or more controlled (*knowledge transforming*) construction of conceptual meaning in writing by allowing us to view writing as a process of deploying conceptual knowledge in terms of a concurrently activated context of knowing. Connectionism thus allows us to view the explicit/focal process of constructing conceptual content in writing in terms of a mostly implicit/peripheral construction of a context of knowing. Importantly, this mostly implicit context of knowing may also be constructed in more explicit terms. Accordingly, the crucial point is that the process of constructing conceptual content in writing is context-sensitive in either a passive way (as in knowledge telling) or an active way (as in knowledge transforming). The non-rhetorical/knowledge-telling approach to writing is the result of an immature writer's largely implicit construction of the writing situation. Such an implicitly constructed context is perceived as objective. This approach to writing thus implies *situational determinism*, that is, a situation perceived as objective is «seen as directly imposing … the ‹appropriate› behavior» (Riley, 1996, 123). On the other hand, a mature approach requires awareness of a rhetorical situation, meaning explicit construction of an external context of knowing, which allows for a more controlled construction of conceptual content. This approach to writing is presented here as an *active context-sensitive* process. The notion of *active context sensitivity* in meaning construction is the essence of the rhetorical approach to writing, which means producing conceptual content as a controlled response to an explicitly construed situation.

The enactionist view of cognition allows us to understand situational context in writing as constructed rather than objectively given and deterministic in the sense of being mentally *represented*. In contrast to the objectivist view of the rhetorical situation as «a complex of persons, events, objects, and relations» (Bitzer, 1968, 6) existing independently of the writer-knower, the notion of active context sensitivity (rooted in connectionist and enactionist views of cognition) involves a view of the rhetorical situation as a constructed knower-dependent entity. In fact, the rhetorical situation is a complex of entities including audience, purpose, as well as the writer – the last frequently discussed as the problem of *self-representation* in writing. However, from the enactionist perspective, we cannot speak of self-*representation*, which brings us to the issue of the construction of *self* in writing.

There is one more reason why the notion of *self* deserves consideration in this discussion of writing as

an epistemic process. The claim that construction of conceptual content depends on a context of knowing may be taken to imply a deterministic view of human meaning making. In fact, the proposed notion of *active context sensitivity* is our protection against a socially deterministic view of human cognition, allowing us to go beyond such a restrictive view. There is a place for individual agency (whose ultimate manifestation is the metacognitive awareness called *critical awareness*) within the larger connectivity pattern determining what conceptual meanings we eventually become aware of.

The Writer's Self

The more aware meaning making makes individual agency central in the kind of writing called *knowledge transforming* (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1987) or *internal negotiation* (Flower, 1994), thus bringing to light the problem of the writer's self.

In the enactionist view of cognition, individuals have adaptive capabilities and there is a great deal of indeterminacy (also called *plasticity*) in the functioning of complex nervous systems. So, in any situation, it is impossible to predict individual behavior with certainty, that is, to predict what knowledge will be enacted in order to deal with a situation in the service of individual interests and desires. What is important then is that meanings are constructed by people with purposes, which brings in the issue of individual agency in meaning construction. Even in the case of the knowledge-telling approach to writing (which, in contrast to the knowledge-transforming approach, lacks the conscious problem-solving component), Scardamalia and Bereiter (1987) point out that it is not that such writers have no goals. However, in terms of the framework being proposed here, such writers become aware of their goals as existing independently of them and being imposed on them by the situation, due to their implicit construction of the external context of knowing. Knowledge transforming and knowledge telling depict writing as, respectively, more aware (due to active context sensitivity) and less aware (due to passive context sensitivity) processes of constructing conceptual content, however, without paying attention to how this construction of conceptual knowledge is situated within a larger context of mostly implicit knowledge – in other words, dependent on the writer's personal history of sociocultural experiences. These two models can tell us that the difference between the two ways of writing and knowing lies in the level of our awareness of our construction of goals, that is,

in the degree of metacognition. But because of their focus on conceptual knowledge and explicit meaning making processes only, they do not account for the full range of cognitive processes involved in writing from implicit through explicit and so cannot explain the two approaches to writing as differing in the level of individual agency in meaning making. The range in conceptual meaning making from uncontrolled knowledge telling to controlled knowledge transforming has been explained here as resulting from completely implicit through partly explicit construction of an external context of knowing. I have claimed that there is a place for individual agency within the larger connectivity pattern which determines what explicit conceptual meanings we construct and eventually become conscious of.

Enactionism allows us to see knowledge construction as interaction resulting in congruent changes in all the involved entities, which are the elements of the social-epistemic field: the individual organism, the whole social group, and the environment – all engaged in reciprocal structural coupling. This view of cognition is highly reminiscent of the social-epistemic view of the dialectic of knowledge (Berlin, 1988). Although both approaches are truly dialectical, presenting the elements of the social-epistemic field as locked in a relation of mutual specification, their focus seems to be on the individual organism equipped with a specific nervous system without which all the social-cognitive phenomena would not be possible. Varela et al. (1991, 174) say that «the organism both initiates and is shaped by the environment» and so it is «not simply embedded within and constrained by the surrounding world, it also contributes to the enactment of this surrounding world.» The individual organism, endowed with a complex nervous system and adaptive capabilities, appears to be at the center of the social-cognitive phenomena in the biological and epistemological sense – being the perceiving/knowing self. However, there is a fundamental contradiction between our ongoing sense of an individual self, that is, between our sense of unity and identity through time, and our inability to pinpoint that self in our reflection. That is, although the existence of a real self seems so obvious to us at the immediate experiential level, reflection leads us to recognize that no such real self is given to us in our experience. Hume (1739/1964) makes the relevant observation, «I never catch *myself* at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception» (I, VI, iv).

Without ultimately grounding the problem in biology

the way enactionism does, social-epistemic rhetoric as defined by Berlin (2003) takes the perceiving/knowing self as its primary concern in the dialectic of knowledge. As Berlin explains, «social-epistemic rhetoric is the study and critique of signifying practices in their relation to subject formation within the framework of economic, social, and political conditions» (2003, 83). The term *subject* comes from post-structuralist theory and psychoanalysis, where it carries a sense of self which is unstable, inconsistent, and occupies different *subject positions*. Here the term *subject* refers to the producer of discourse, who engages in a signifying practice and thereby constructs knowledge. In accord with the dialectic of knowledge, the subject is at the same time a construct of the signifying practice s/he engages in. Berlin (2003, 88) accordingly states that

> the subject of the rhetorical act is not the unified, coherent, autonomous, transcendent subject of liberal humanism. The subject is instead multiple and conflicted, composed of numerous subject formations and positions.... has available a multiplicity of selves… not all of which are appropriate for every discourse situation.

If this statement is interpreted outside the framework of the dialectic of knowledge, the assertion about the subject/self being not coherent but multiple and conflicted will certainly not be readily accepted but perceived as counterintuitive. We have an ongoing sense of self as unified, which is assumed to be the normal condition (as attested by, e.g., the term of *multiple personality disorder*.) Thus, Berlin's further claim about the «multiplicity of selves» will likely be interpreted as multiplicity of social roles played in life or different ways of presenting *one*self. Indeed, this is how the issue of self has traditionally been dealt with in rhetoric, where a distinction has been made between *ethos* and *persona*. As Ivanic (1997, 90) defines them, «*ethos* means the personal characteristics which a reader might attribute to a writer on the basis of evidence in the text» and «*persona* means the social role(s) which a writer adopts while producing a particular piece of writing.» She sees ethos and persona as interacting aspects of discoursal construction of writer identity. Ivanic contests the traditional view which tends to equate ethos with the real author. She points out that «*ethos* can be discoursally constructed just as much as *persona* is, and that neither are necessarily the ‹real self› of the writer – if such a thing exists» (1997,

91). In this context, Ivanic does not however think it necessary to address the issue of writer identity in relation to the problem of the self, apparently assuming her interest in discoursal construction of writer identity to be independent of the issue of the self, and the latter as not relevant to rhetoric.

Varela et al. (1991, 59) observe that in fact all Western traditions have always refused to confront the problem of the self, namely, that through our everyday experience we are convinced that there is a self that is lasting, single, and independent, and yet on reflection, our experience turns out to be empty of a self. As Varela et al. show, in the Western tradition this problem has been dealt with in two ways. Recognizing that reflection contradicts our sense of self, some choose to turn away from the problem, for example, Hume, who «resigned himself to the separation of life and reflection» (Varela et al., 1991, 60). Others choose to postulate a transcendental self which is simply inaccessible to experience, for example, the transcendental ego of Kant. As Varela et al. point out, in effect Kant also turns away from the problem rather than confronts it because the point is not whether there is an absolute self that we cannot know, nor whether we can come up with a definition of self which is intellectually satisfying, but rather to develop a critical awareness of our human condition, our situation as we experience it here and now. Actually, developing such critical consciousness is the aim of social-epistemic rhetoric, and Berlin (2003) makes it an educational goal, too.

Berlin's term *subject formation* means that any rhetorical act, being an act of knowledge construction, involves constructing a self that coheres with the other elements of the rhetorical situation. As he observes, all the key terms of social-epistemic rhetoric are «dense formulations» which require «unpacking» (2003, 83). Specifically, the formulations relating to the dialectic of knowledge are not only difficult to understand but also difficult to accept because they negate the existence of the ego-self that we cling to instinctively. Hume's remark above demonstrates that reflection on the contents of our consciousness shows not a trace of the self which we feel is not merely the stream of experience. Varela et al. (1991, 72–79) review evidence for momentariness in the functioning of the brain, showing that when we subject the apparent continuity of experience to analysis, we find only discontinuous moments of perception and awareness. Thus, science also seems to indicate that a self is not needed for mind to arise. Naming their chapter dealing with the

self «The I of the storm,» Varela et al. make their key point: The self is empty. However, at the same time they keep saying that the self is neither unified nor fixed. What is *not fixed* then? Following the *eye of the storm* metaphor, it seems to make sense to think of the self as an empty space to be filled by socially constructed experience.

The only knowledge of self that we can possibly claim to have is knowledge of our personal identity in the form of our personal experiences. Tulving (1973) talks about such knowledge, making his now classic distinction between *episodic* and *semantic* memory. Tulving's episodic store corresponds to implicit sociocultural knowledge which is gradually analyzed and structured into explicit conceptual knowledge – Tulving's semantic system. Relevant to our discussion is his claim that the direct encoding of information into the episodic store means that episodic memory is a record of personal experiences. He observes that «an integral part of... a remembered experience... is its reference to the rememberer's knowledge of his personal identity» (1973, 389). It might appear contradictory to say that our record of personal experiences constitutes our sociocultural knowledge, which means equating the personal with the sociocultural. However, since personal experiences take place within a sociocultural milieu and are socially mediated (cf. Vygotsky, 1978) or, in enactionist terms, since personal experiences are part of the network of mutual adaptive changes (involving the individual, the community, and the environment) and constitute a history of structural couplings, they are said to make up our sociocultural experience, that is, knowledge which is both personal and social. Accordingly, the self as an empty space is said to be filled by socially constructed experience. Such sociocultural knowledge is unique and individual only in the sense of being a specific history of structural couplings, that is, a unique set of personal-sociocultural experiences which is different from any other such set. Cognitivists (see Wegner & Vallacher, 1980) claimed that sociocultural experience was gradually conceptualized and organized into the most complex and powerful of all schemas, namely, the *self schema* (knowledge of personal identity). Such a comprehensive self schema could supposedly account for our sense of unity and identity through time.

However, the self is multiple and conflicted because our personal-sociocultural experience is multiple and conflicted. Every act of knowledge construction, from implicit (sociocultural knowledge) to explicit (conceptual knowledge), involves coordination of experience – mutual adaptive changes ranging from unconscious coordination of embodied practice (Gergen, 1990) to conscious negotiation (Flower, 1994). Thus, knowledge construction constitutes a move toward unity and coherence in both the individual and the social group. Being concerned with discursive practices and so with the more conscious negotiation, social-epistemic rhetoric maintains that any unity and coherence achieved by the subject through a rhetorical act is always local and limited to a specific discourse situation. Berlin (1988) argues that discourse directs our experience in three important ways, telling us what exists, what has value, and what is possible. These are the three aspects of ideology (Therborn, 1980), which is thus inscribed in the daily discursive practice and is said to operate through it. As Therborn explains, discourse directives about what exists deal with epistemological issues such as «who we are, what the world is, what nature, society, men, and women are like. In this way we acquire a sense of identity, becoming conscious of what is real and true» (1980, 18). This means that our sense of identity is dependent on discourse and ultimately ideology directing and organizing our experience.

Our personal identity, formed by our personal experience, is sociocultural in the sense of being the result of mutual adaptive changes leading to structural coupling. The crucial question is why this personal-sociocultural experience is multiple and conflicted. The answer is that our experience is shaped and organized by competing ideologies, with one of them being dominant in a specific situation. Behavior aimed at coordinating experience in social systems is called communication, and discourse is the most important form of communication in humans. Thus, communication takes place within specific discourse communities, with their specific hierarchical power relations. Within any social system, there are different authority regimes (e.g., school, home, peer group) and competing ideologies – each naturalizing a specific system of power relations, that is, presenting it as normal and inevitable, and just in the nature of things (Therborn, 1980). From this point of view, the discursive practices of a discourse community are stable patterns of communicative behavior which constitute a *cultural code* maintaining the ongoing structural coupling within one system of ideology and power relations binding a group. Thus, membership in different social groups is typically associated with different discourses – carriers of different ideologies, which guide our experiences in

specific ways. Hence, it seems that the *eye (I) of the storm* metaphor is particularly apt as it allows us to view the self as an empty space that may be filled by multiple and conflicted, personal and yet sociocultural experiences.

Functioning in different contexts, we unwittingly follow different cultural codes, construing each situation and our position in it according to the dominant code. My notion of *passive context sensitivity* will account for this kind of knowledge construction, defined as automatic *adaptation* of conceptual knowledge to an implicitly constructed context of knowing (i.e., according to a dominant ideology). However, as Berlin (2003) points out, rather than be a passive and unwitting follower of cultural codes, the individual may become «an agent of change» and then «the subject negotiates and resists codes rather than simply accommodating them» (85). This is the case when the individual achieves some critical awareness of the different cultural codes and of the ideological conflicts underlying different discursive practices. At this point individuals can become aware of how the discursive practices followed in a group define them and the whole community. Varela et al. (1991) refer to such a level of awareness as an «experience of mind... without ego-self, [which] can be profoundly transformative» (81).

At the point of critical consciousness of a conflict between alternative discursive practices and cultural codes which define the self, there appears the need to construct a self that is coherent with an explicitly constructed context of situation, which is how a rhetorical situation is defined here. Every rhetorical act starts at the point of awareness of conflict (an exigence) which brings about the need to resolve the conflict and produce coherence involving the key elements in the epistemic field – the knower, the discourse community, and the material world. Thus, a rhetorical act brings about a newly defined relation between the three, a relation holding just for a singular situation. In rhetorical composing, the individual, who, as Berlin (2003, 85) puts it, is «the location of a variety of significations» (i.e., multiple personal-sociocultural experiences constructed in accord with situationally dominant codes), becomes «an agent of change,» that is, becomes aware of the ideological conflicts underlying the multiple experiences and, rather than be an unaware and passive follower of the dominant codes, starts to either actively negotiate or resist them. Showing how writers construct goals, what problems they become aware of, and how (or whether at all)

they are able to negotiate them as they write, Flower (1994) is an example of how the abstract notion of ideological conflict can be operationalized in studying the composing process. She uses the metaphor of *inner voices* to present writing as a process of not only interpersonal negotiation but also as writer-internal negotiations. Particularly this latter type of negotiation aims at constructing a unified self which is consistent with the rhetorical situation including the audience/ discourse community, purpose, and the matter being discussed – the coherence of all of these resulting from their interdependence as elements in the dialectic of knowledge.

Our awareness of conflict makes us agents for change and makes individual agency possible in meaning making. As Berlin (2003, 88) observes, «each of us displays a measure of singularity.... our own separate position in networks of intersecting discourses makes for differences among us as well as possibilities for political agency, for resistance and negotiation.» It is negotiation rather than resistance that social systems are based on. To construct a social system, that is, coordinate action and maintain structural coupling, individual organisms have a need for mutual adaptive changes, which are made possible by their neural capabilities and which at the level of consciousness take the form of negotiated construction. In accord with this enactionist view of cognition, social-epistemic rhetoric views knowledge construction as an arena of ideological conflict. This is because knowledge involves the dialectical interaction of the individual knower, the social group/discourse community, and the material conditions of existence. Although these three do have some existence apart from language, we cannot really know them apart from language. That is why this dialectic of knowledge is said to be grounded in language (Berlin, 1988). That is, the experiencing self, the social conditions of experience, and the material conditions experienced are all discursively constructed and so knowable only as such social constructions of a particular historical moment. In other words, these social constructions are the result of particular signifying practices. It is these signifying (i.e., knowledge-constructing) practices that are always at the center of conflict and contention. As Berlin (2003) explains, «In the effort to name [in effect, to direct and coordinate] experience, different groups constantly vie for supremacy, for ownership and control of terms and their meanings in any discourse situation» (89). To make one's meanings prevail amounts to having one's ideological directives prevail (telling us what exists,

what has value, what is possible) and thus be able to guide the sociocultural experience that shapes selves and realities as well as be able to enforce some power arrangements and challenge others. Thus, according to Berlin's (2003) social-epistemic conception of rhetoric, «rhetoric was invented not because people wanted to express themselves more accurately and clearly, but because they wanted to make their positions prevail in the conflicts of politics» (89). There are accordingly two major goals that social-epistemic rhetoric poses for itself: (a) «studying the operation of signifying practices [cultural codes] within their economic and political frames» and (b) «persuasion in the play for power» (Berlin, 2003, 89).

Social-epistemic rhetoric views every rhetorical act as starting with some critical awareness of conflict (the result of our selves being constructed in terms of different cultural codes) and leading to its resolution through negotiated construction. Thus, from the social-epistemic perspective, teaching composing entails analyzing cultural codes/signifying practices and negotiating conflicts resulting from them. This is why Berlin (1988) sees social-epistemic rhetoric as «inevitably support[ing] economic, social, political, and cultural democracy» (489). Since all knowledge arises in ideology, decisions on such matters as what exists, what has value, what is possible, and how power should be distributed in society must be continually negotiated by all and for all, and not made by one group or individual. Negotiated construction of knowledge is the key to harmonious coexistence in social groups and it is what teaching composing is all about. This is why composition instruction must be seen as such a valuable component of general education.

Pedagogical Implications

If teaching to compose involves developing metacognitive control over constructing conceptual content, instruction cannot be reduced to assigning topics and requiring students to simply write. The discussion presented here points to the importance of using well-designed writing tasks which cue students to construct explicit contexts of knowing (rhetorical situations) in preparation for their constructing relevant conceptual content. Such explicit construction will involve constructing a self that coheres with the other elements of the rhetorical situation, particularly, their purpose in writing and their audience. In the classroom situation, even if presented with an assignment containing instructions to consider their purpose and audience, students will

typically reduce the assignment to a topic with no realization on their part that their extraction of a topic is an interpretative process which accords with their implicit construction of the immediate social context. A good writing assignment will require students to relinquish their dependence on a writing situation as implicitly constructed. To immature student writers, their writing situation interpreted in terms of implicit social context becomes *the* objective writing situation involving themselves as students writing for a teacher. A good assignment must help them see the writing task in terms other than student-teacher interaction. Their construction of an alternative context of knowing is facilitated if they exercise their writing as part of familiar social practice. For example, in one assignment I asked my students to write a formal anti-cheating policy statement to be followed in our university. They were to consider such points as (a) a definition and kinds of cheating; (b) explain why cheating is wrong; (c) state appropriate penalties for different kinds of cheating. The assignment makes the students identify and define their purpose as warning students against cheating. This purpose defines their audience as the academic community. It might be seen as a weakness that the assignment contextualizes the writing task in the academic community because it may easily allow for implicit construction of the student-teacher relation. However, this might be a problem for all academic writing assignments because they allow for implicit construction of this relation. But for the student to learn academic discourse means to learn to speak with authority as a peer, not a subordinate. Actually, this assignment requires student writers to abandon their role as students, automatically evoked by the context, and to assume a role of authority. This need to construct a new self consonant with the audience and purpose proved very difficult for the students: They all limited themselves to saying what the appropriate punishment for cheating «should» be, evidently assuming they can only make suggestions and lack the power to make policy decisions. The assignment requires students to speak with authority in the academic community, which is what we require from our students when we expect them to write academic discourse.

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