In short, with all due respect to those involved, I would suggest that the foundational terms in which the JAC interviewers addressed Rorty, if they're representative, reveal, dismayingly, more about the stage that the conversation in composition studies is currently at than his replies reveal about either him or me.

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On Personally Constructing “Social Construction”:
A Response to Richard Rorty

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Gary Olson’s interview with Richard Rorty in volume nine of JAC suggests the problems in our field’s new obsession with “social construction.” When Kenneth Bruffee first promoted the term, he usefully foregrounded the contextual nature of discourse. Furthermore, by invoking Rorty and other theorists, he helped composition sense its relation to other rhetorical inquiry. Yet, the boom now enjoyed by “social constructionism” threatens to obscure how notions of “the social” have historically differed. As Cy Knoblauch observed in volume eight of JAC, “When roving, and morally warring, bands of cognitive psychologists, text linguists, philosophers of composition, historians of rhetoric, Marxist critics, post-structuralists, and reader-response theorists all wax equally enthusiastic about ‘the social construction of reality,’ there is a good chance that the expression has long since lost its capacity to name anything important or even very interesting” (54). We should find “important” and “interesting,” though, the ideological differences revealed when theorists of “the social” elaborate what the word personally means to them. Rorty’s JAC remarks offer a good test case.

The interview contains two major surprises. First, Rorty proves unfamiliar with Bruffee’s “social constructionism” and, in fact, declares his notion of writing across the curriculum “a terrible idea” (6). Bruffee can thus be accused of misleading us when he intimates Rorty and he think alike. In fact, Bruffee has often propounded a dubious Whig version of history by suggesting that all noteworthy intellectual trends converge in his doctrine. Yet, we should never have assumed that he and his favorite theorists precisely correspond. As Edward Said points out in The World, The Text, and The Critic, “Theory often gets modified as it ‘travels’ through the academy.”
Rorty himself appropriates Dewey by underscoring his antifoundationalism while downplaying his faith in science and his socialist politics. Our particular field has largely developed by selectively raiding others. Rather than condemn theoretical infidelity, however, we should pinpoint how composition scholars "rewrite" their precursors as well as reproduce them.

Just as Bruffee would hardly welcome Rorty's disdain for his program, so too would he share our dismay over Rorty's second astonishing pronouncement: "The idea of freshman English, mostly, is just to get them to write complete sentences, get the commas in the right place, and stuff like that" (6). At one level, the statement merely confirms how we ourselves must trumpet our dignity. When even theorists who influence us trivialize our mission, we know we are still on our own. Yet, Rorty's declaration is symptomatic as well of problems specific to his way of thinking. Above all, he refuses to consider how he remains entrenched in the intellectual habits he scorns. In short, he practices a de facto foundationalism, even as he decries the official brand.

By divorcing instruction in "basic skills" from opportunities for critical thinking, Rorty affirms the mechanistic psychology that has plagued freshman English from the start. When he endorses E.D. Hirsch's "cultural literacy," he supports merely the latest version of the idea that human minds develop by ingesting chunks of data. In spinning out its implications, Rorty suggests that Hirsch advocates "historical self-consciousness" while Richard Ohmann lacks it. However, as his list and dictionary indicate, Hirsch calls not for historical explanation but immersion in terminology. Meanwhile, anyone remotely familiar with Ohmann knows he has long pressed English studies to adopt historical awareness. And as Rorty himself simplistically calls for American students to learn "the tradition," he ignores how Ohmann and other historians have identified conflicting ones.

Indeed, when Rorty comments on matters of history and politics, he hardly does so as a result of extensive, probing research. He merely capitalizes on the authority he has gained as a critic of philosophy. Although he has questioned that field's image as the ultimate "tribunal of reason," he still borrows its prestige. Furthermore, he keeps epistemology at the center of his thinking, even if only to attack it. This focus leads him to commit a fallacy that Bruffee also displays: the belief that a particular stance on epistemology dictates certain political views and judgments. Thus, both men have suggested that antifoundationalism should make one a liberal and compel one to see that America is "still the best thing on offer" (9).

Both nurture these sentiments partly by neglecting configurations of power based on gender, race, and class. As I and others have increasingly pointed out, Bruffee's constant references to "communities" and "conversation" obscure processes of domination and struggle. His bibliographic essay on "social construction" in the 1986 College English significantly omits feminists (out of forty entries in this discussion of what Bruffee calls "the conversation of mankind," only three are by women), Marxists, Afro-
American theorists, Third World theorists, and other analysts of power like Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu. In Rorty's case, note how he trivializes the concerns of such thinkers when Gary Olson determinedly brings them up. The language Rorty uses at these moments and others also betrays his lingering affinity with his native field. In the name of antifoundationalism, he deflates other people's statements with a vocabulary he considers somehow more basic. When he observes "that the idea of democratic politics and equalization of opportunities is just to fix it so that these hindrances to access are minimized," and when he concludes "that we all, Marxists and everybody else, divide the world up into the good and the bad" (5), he rejects nuanced, rigorous, political inquiry in favor of behaviorist platitudes. Note his use of expressions like "it comes down to saying," "you can just see," "just to get them," "it's going to be primarily just a matter of," "it really comes down to," "it's just going to make it possible," "I just look for," and "just a syncretist." Such quick dismissal of richer vocabularies also discourages exploration of how discourses can vary. Similarly, when Bruffee uses the word "community" or some form of it eighty-two times in his 1982 Liberal Education article and eighty-three in his 1984 College English one, he does not exactly cultivate heteroglossia.

Rorty sustains, as well, epistemology's penchant for tidy dichotomies. His writings often reveal a dualistic cast of mind, most prominently in their absolute distinction between "solidarity" and "objectivity," "we pragmatists" and other theorists. The contrast chiefly looming in the interview is that between "normal discourse," which high school students are to be taught, and "abnormal discourse," which is "a gift of God." Yet, as I have suggested, Rorty's sense of American history's "normal discourse" neglects the interplay of hegemonic and resistant traditions. If he wants Kuhn to blur "distinctions between science and non-science" (4), he himself needs to ponder Kuhn's belated insight that paradigm changes can be frequent and numerous within scientific fields. In other words, we must avoid distinguishing between "normal" and "abnormal" for our own theoretical or administrative convenience. When Bruffee declares in his 1984 College English article that composition should teach "the normal discourse of most academic, professional, and business communities" (643), he raises the prospect of standardization by sheer fiat.

Bruffee and other "social constructionists" might also be surprised to discover strains of individualism in the Rorty interview: his statement that "I write to please myself," his admiration of "people who seem to be strikingly original." Yet Rorty has long cultivated the image of himself as a free-floating, cosmopolitan intellectual. Despite the word "solidarity" in the title of his new book, its cover is a photograph of a lone figure: Richard Rorty. And when he does invoke "solidarity," he refers to contingent theoretical alignments, not the visceral class bonding that Marxists envision. Remember, too, that when Bruffee discusses "communities," he actually summons up an
academy deeply fragmented into various fields. Does the project of "social construction," then, ultimately depend on social deconstruction? To answer this question, we must keep analyzing not only the shifting dialectic of individual and society, but also the institutional conditions through which theories of it "travel."

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**Hurling Epithets at the Devils You Know: A Response to Carol Berkenkotter**

**DAVID FOSTER**

Having been described by Carol Berkenkotter as "hurling epithets," "conjuring images," and "perceiving devils" (of positivism), I feel positively possessed—with gratitude that she's taken up the issues I wrote about, and with curiosity as to just what she's actually saying. I must admit, I always thought devils were what were conjured, and images perceived, but perhaps the conjurer's hand and the perceiver's eye hoodwink us differently in the present postmodern twilight. Her rhetorical strategy appears to be to polarize the attitudes of composition scholars between the "hermeneutically-oriented" and the "experimental research community," the latter of which must continually cope with the paranoid "xenophobia" of the former. I was prepared to be offended until I reread my own article and discovered much the same polarization there; it's a habit of mind composition specialists tend to harbor—I clearly among them—and I wonder now whether I could have found a way to make my argument with less divisiveness. I'm not sure. I do find her article interesting and informative; it helped me understand more clearly some of the historical roots of the positivistic tradition. But it did not help me understand as clearly as I had hoped just what Berkenkotter thinks the place of empirical research in composition today is or ought to be. Indeed, her essay left me at least as perplexed as it did informed.

Early in her essay she says that she is "not sure that [she] entirely disagree[s]" that scientific assumptions and empiricalist rhetoric heavily influence the discourse of composition today; then she traces positivism's influence as a way (so I thought) of indicating her modest agreement. Yet, at the end she returns to her accusation that "hermeneutically trained colleagues" are suffering from "epistemological ethnocentricity" for indulging their "fear of a positivist-minded hegemony"—just that hegemony whose