

Composition, Collaboration, and Women's Ways of Knowing: A Conversation with Mary Belenky

EVELYN ASHTON-JONES AND DENE KAY THOMAS

When Mary Field Belenky was a graduate student in psychology in the 1950s, she was told to use male subjects because women “mess up” the data. In *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind*, a collaborative work written with Blythe McVicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger, and Jill Mattuck Tarule, Belenky chose to ignore her graduate school advice and focus on women subjects. The results of that research, published in 1986, provide major insights for her own discipline of psychology, for other disciplines, and for everyone interested in the way gender influences knowing and learning. In an ideal world, the collaborative nature of *Women's Ways* would have dictated that we interview all four authors. Although that wasn't possible, Belenky serves as a superb spokesperson, exploring connections among *Women's Ways*, her own current research, and topics central to composition studies.

In the following interview, Belenky provides a rare opportunity for us to hear about how collaboration worked for the authors of *Women's Ways*. She describes a world of “pajama parties” that gave them the “luxury” of “sustained conversation”; feedback on drafts that was “excited and loving” yet “hard-nosed and critical”; and a “sensuous” intermingling of words and voices as they integrated each others' texts into their own. Belenky also relates how their research subjects contributed to this collaborative effort: their subjects were women from varied backgrounds who became both collaborating writers with the researchers (“It was also *their* words”) and audience as the researchers drafted the text. As Belenky suggests, these women became “real participants in the project.”

For Belenky, collaboration is clearly more than just a good way to get work done; it is vital to education and crucial to the survival of the world. She criticizes the current cultural emphasis on competitive models for learning, terming it “irrational,” and she suggests that educational institutions today do reflect the values of both received knowledge and subjective positions, equally problematic perspectives because they preempt any possibility of real dialogue. In place of the current model, she envisions a dialogic pedagogy of

cooperation and collaboration. The pedagogy she elaborates is not “soft” but, rather, allows for both “believing” and “doubting” activities toward cooperative ends. And it is this kind of pedagogy, she maintains, that alleviates the discomfort women often feel with the values of educational institutions.

While Belenky acknowledges that gender politics may influence collaborative interaction, she feels that this problem can be resolved by putting the issue on the classroom agenda. Foregrounding the politics of gender in classroom interaction, she believes, will prove advantageous for all students: women “will get more of a voice” and men “will get to be better listeners.” She also acknowledges a “danger” that research into gender differences can reinforce traditional gender stereotypes and reproduce gender ideology, but she feels the more serious danger is in disregarding women’s ways of coming to know, in “*not* trying to give voice to this whole range of human experience that has not been articulated and is not an integral part of the culture.” Nor does Belenky consider *Women’s Ways* “essentialist” in any way: “What we are really doing,” she says, “is describing characteristics that women and men have developed in the context of a sexist and aggressive society.”

Throughout the interview, Belenky attempts to show how the knowledge that she and her coauthors have constructed is illuminating for composition studies. She discusses several of the epistemological perspectives outlined in *Women’s Ways*: silence, received knowledge, subjective knowledge, procedural knowledge, and constructed knowledge. *Silence* is experiencing the self as voiceless and without the capacity to receive or generate knowledge; *received knowing* is seeing knowledge as absolute and always in the possession of “authorities”; *subjective knowing* is distrusting authority and understanding knowledge as personal and originating within one’s self; *procedural knowing* is perceiving knowledge as objective and rationally derived, though subject to multiple perspectives; and *constructed knowing* is understanding knowledge as “constructed,” the knower acknowledging and taking responsibility for shaping knowledge. She suggests that because student reactions to education will be affected by their epistemological positions, compositionists should enrich their teaching strategies with research done by social psychologists. Belenky also firmly believes that while *Women’s Ways* has been both praised and criticized for its exclusive focus on women, its insights are not limited to women: “We are not claiming that these might not also be men’s ways of thinking.” Women’s ways, she asserts, are ultimately “human” ways.

To Belenky, writing begins in the private world of the expressive and moves from there into a more public conversation. Her philosophy is constantly presented through the personal experience of connecting with the known and moving on from there. Yet, she also sees her work as “steeped” in social constructionism, weaving together the personal and the social. Readers will not find disembodied theory, research, or practice in Belenky. Instead, they will find connections that leave no place for adversarial methods where someone must lose. In this spirit, Belenky provides us with an

enheartening view of our own discipline as she situates composition studies both “at the crosspoints” and “on the cutting edge.”

Q. Do you think of yourself as a writer?

A. I do, and I'm very puzzled by it because I find writing so hard, so arduous, so painful. If you're engaged as I am in research that's embedded in interpretive-descriptive processes, your major research tool is trying to articulate clearly the understandings that you're coming to—and writing is integral to this process. Interpretive-descriptive research is very different from traditional research in the social sciences, which relies on statistical tools to communicate findings. In the research that my colleagues and I do, we're following in the steps of such social scientists as Piaget, Perry, Kohlberg, and Gilligan. They all are writing a story that grows out of conversation, and they savor the words of the people they've been interviewing, putting the words in a story line. The goal of their work is to understand and describe people's thinking, to try to understand the structures of mind, so the only tool they have is language: language for eliciting people's thoughts, language for trying to understand the deep organizing principles of thought, and, finally, language for articulating these things. So narrative has become a particularly important tool for social scientists who are trying to understand thinking. You know, Lawrence Kohlberg once told me that when he was conducting moral judgment studies at Yale in the late 1950s, several people asked him why he spent his time looking at verbal behavior. It has taken psychology a long time to notice that humans are meaning-making animals.

Q. *Women's Ways of Knowing* has received widespread and enthusiastic attention. How do you feel about its reception?

A. The attention surprised us. We had hoped somebody would read it, but we didn't anticipate that it would be widely read across disciplines, which I find so interesting. It's terrific. When you publish something and people read it with care, you can pick up with strangers just like we are in the middle of a long, exquisite conversation. It's interesting to see how it gets played out.

Q. One recent review criticized *Women's Ways* for excluding men from the research sample. What is your response to this criticism?

A. In the book, we say that we felt that the male template was so powerfully etched on our minds that it seemed very important to stand back from it and to find, to hear, the woman's voice. This is very hard work, and we wanted to do whatever we could to make it more pure, to hear it. Although we studied women and make these claims for women, we are not claiming that these might not also be men's ways of thinking. Actually, I think most of what we say in the book applies to human ways of knowing, but it's important that someone listens to women and tries to see them in their own

terms.

Q. Would you describe how you and your colleagues went about conducting research collaboratively and, more specifically, how you went about writing the book collaboratively?

A. Because the writing was part of a much larger project, I want to convey a bit of the project's history. For a variety of reasons, the four of us thought we might like to do research together. Although some of us had worked with each other before, on the whole we hadn't known each other very well. But we had all been developmental psychologists interested in intellectual and ethical development, interested in thinking more carefully about women. And so we had the first of what we came to call our "pajama-party" meetings at a motel in New Hampshire that was a midway point from where we all were living. In our conversations there, we kept going around and around, trying to articulate what our driving questions were and, also, what we perceived as the driving questions at the edge of our discipline. After this period of eating, swimming, and talking, we went home, wrote a proposal, and got funding from FIPSE. What we created at this first pajama party was an umbrella that framed most of our important questions, even though they were still vague.

Because we all lived in different places, the grant gave us financial support to hold one of these pajama-party meetings about every five weeks for three years. Very regularly, then, every five or six weeks, we were able to sit down together and work around the clock for three or four days at a time. I can't tell you how important it is to have this kind of time for working, sleeping on your thoughts, and returning to the conversation—without distractions from children and telephones. We all had raised families as well as having careers, and the luxury of that kind of sustained conversation was just terrific. The pajama party was very important to the process.

During the three-year period that FIPSE funded us, we developed a very broad conversation with women from all walks of life. The grant allowed us to visit a variety of institutions and talk with women about their life experiences—their histories, especially their intellectual development, and how the institutions they were in were supporting them. FIPSE had primarily charged us with helping the faculty at these institutions to understand their students and their students' development, and with encouraging the faculty to broaden their thinking about pedagogy—this was not an agency funding basic research. In the process of carrying out FIPSE's goals, however, we collected these marvelous interviews and had them transcribed. We were very much interested in the research questions, and working with the faculty on this development project brought a whole other group of people into the conversation. Our work was enriched because it was cast as an *action* project rather than just research.

Q. Are you positing a much larger group of collaborators than the four of you who coauthored *Women's Ways*?

- A. Absolutely. The women we interviewed were themselves drawn in. A word that seems better than *collaboration* is *dialogue* because it suggests that our so-called research subjects were real participants in the project. In a very real sense they were also, much of the time when we were writing, the audience. Let me tell you about Lillian Rubin's *Worlds of Pain*, a study of lower middle-class marriages—a study that is, like ours, based on interviews. Rubin had a pact with the people that she interviewed: they would review and approve any writing she did before it went to publication. She notes that none of those people had much criticism of her writing, so she didn't change or reedit the work in light of it; but I believe, because she had this pact to give them the work before publishing it, that she wrote *to them* in a way—and it's a beautiful book. Rubin's book was a model for us, even though our sample was too large to promise everybody we would get their permission. But as our book was written, we very much had in mind that it would be read by the people we had interviewed.
- Q. So the audience you had in mind as you were writing was a friendly audience, women who could benefit from the information as you organized it?
- A. Absolutely. But the information wasn't just what *we* were thinking or organizing; it was also *their* words because we worked from transcripts of the interviews. In fact, when the book first came out many women said that we had given words to things they'd always thought. It seemed funny at first, a backhanded kind of compliment. Here we'd done this extraordinary thing. But giving words to these ideas was exactly what we tried to do, and that's a lot to do. Moreover, I think we ought to teach ourselves and our students that we can have real choices about audience. We all need to understand how writing the same material for different audiences changes the voice. That is very empowering knowledge to have.
- Q. How did you coordinate the actual writing of *Women's Ways*?
- A. We had a month-long pajama party at a cottage on the shore, a big rambling mansion on the ocean. We spent the month trying to frame the book and talking through the process of writing it; by the end of the month, we had a reasonably firm view of its shape, so we sketched out a table of contents. Then when we looked at the plan, it made sense that one person or another would write certain chapters. Certainly, some decisions were arbitrary, but for the most part we saw a clear and rational division of labor that made deep sense. We also made a decision which in retrospect I think was very smart: that we would not put our names on different pieces. I don't know why we made that decision, and I'm still not sure why that was so smart. But I think it was, and it's probably one of the reasons the book ultimately developed the one-voice quality that it has.
- Q. What means did you use for sending drafts to each other?
- A. We all got computerized early on, but we made a decision to send hard copy—and I think that's very important. I wouldn't want to send around

disks and have people start changing the text. So we sent around drafts and we wrote all over them. On the whole, we were amazingly excited and loving of what went around and amazingly hard-nosed and critical. We said, “Does that really make sense?” and “Say more,” and “Why would you say that?” and “Where’s your evidence?” For the most part even the early drafts were interesting. It was exciting to get the chapters, and we worked very hard criticizing them.

Q. So you deliberately set a limit on the collaboration, allowing for a writer’s autonomy with hard copy representing personal ownership?

A. That’s right. We would each get the hard copy back, three copies with lots of writing all over the margins, and we would choose whether to follow the suggestions. If you send your disk around and people start changing it, your words and theirs get merged too fast; you need some sort of a balance. Writing collaboratively gets very confusing because, when you’re really working together, when the dialogue really starts, ideas grow and change and no one has real ownership. Yet you have to keep, or you ought to keep, your own voice. Having comments on paper is wonderful because you keep all of the different voices separate for a while. Because of the way my colleagues each wrote in the margin, I always knew their handwriting, and so as I worked on redrafting I had their different voices to work with.

Q. When your voices ultimately merged, how much of a sense of individuality did you feel?

A. It wasn’t always clear. At times someone would write something so gorgeous that you would think it needed to be in your own chapter and you’d fight for it. Sometimes I found myself winning one of those fights and integrating into my own text a beautiful perception from someone else’s text, their words and my words. This process is really very sensuous. It’s so loving to have that mingling going on—knowing that these are stolen words in a way, words coaxed out of someone, but liking the closeness of having her words and my words all mingling right in there. Sometimes this feeling happened, too, as we worked with the interviews that we had collected from the women. I’m sure others have experienced this—for example, when they’re putting a beloved mentor’s words in a document that they’re working on. In my teaching, I try to get students to cite a text and put that scholar’s words and name next to their own words and name, and I try to help them understand that this is a way of making it clear that the two of them are talking together now.

Q. Your collaboration was clearly rewarding. Would you say the collaborative effort was crucial to the writing of *Women’s Ways*?

A. The book could not have been written by any single one of us, without this broader conversation. It has a scope that reflects a wide range of experiences in a wide range of institutions, and a single person couldn’t have created that. I don’t think a single person can get the kind of clarity that comes through working together to pull away the chaff and let the bold

ideas come forth.

- Q. People discussing coauthored works such as *Women's Ways* don't seem to have a conventional way to refer to collective authors. For example, they often refer to *you* as the author of this study, thus unwittingly diminishing the contributions of your colleagues. Do you have any solutions to this dilemma?
- A. This is a serious problem. The people who've had the most interesting things to say about our work are also people who have figured out gracious ways of acknowledging its collaborative nature. Sometimes they've solved the problem in very conventional ways, like writing out all the names each time. Now, that sounds awkward, but when you're reading it's just a clump of text that registers the same way a single name does. Or they find another way of referring to us, saying, "the authors of *Women's Ways*" or "the collaborative" or "the research group." They never single out one person. We have to learn, and we have to find forms for naming collective authors or collaboration is not going to become routine. I suspect that we will find forms as constructive knowledge becomes more widely disseminated in the culture, more widely valued, as more and more we see that this is how our children have to be educated to become constructors of knowledge, as we learn to value the collaborative process. Sooner or later we're going to find forms to support and cultivate collaboration, and then we'll cut across all disciplines.
- Q. How should collaborative research and writing be evaluated by university tenure and promotion committees?
- A. In the academy, collaborative work is demoted, but it should count *double* in faculty evaluations. If a work is embedded in a collaborative process, the writers goad each other into endless revisions. For example, in our study there's hardly a page that wasn't rewritten fifteen or twenty times. No one working alone can do that kind of intensive revision, nor can they benefit from the extensive redrafting that takes place in conversation. The kind of reflection and revising enabled by collaboration brings a quality of depth and scope to a work. Collaborating may only produce two-hundred or three-hundred pages of text, but perhaps they're more enduring than the two- or three-hundred pages of a single voice. Of course, most work that's published under a single author is collaborative as well. Piaget's *The Moral Judgement of the Child*, a work that laid much of the foundation for our own effort, was based on his wife's study of the marble games, his wife's dissertation. If you get out a magnifying glass, you can see the credit in small print. There are similar stories for a number of the other central texts in our discipline.
- Q. Sometimes it's difficult for students to work collaboratively in classrooms. What roles might gender and the educational environment play in this difficulty?
- A. This is at the heart of a lot of gender differences. Some people are so

imbued with the competitive spirit that it's hard for them to work collaboratively, and some people are so imbued with the collaborative mode that working competitively feels dangerous and painful. A classic study that helped usher gender work into psychology was Matina Horner's work on fear of success, an interesting study looking at men's and women's responses to stories she gave them about personal achievements. Two of the vignettes Horner used were about Jane and John, who learn, in their respective story, that they're at the top of their medical school class. Typically, women go on to finish the story about Jane by having her suddenly contract a terrible disease like leprosy and dying; it's a great calamity with death and destruction following in the wake of her success. But John, of course, lives happily ever after—the skies open up and it never rains. Subsequent research has shown that fear of success tends to be a problem for women only if they perceive the success as coming at the expense of somebody else. In a win-win situation, where doing outstanding work is embedded in a collaborative relationship, women don't seem to have problems with the idea of success at all.

And yet we irrationally design our educational institutions to make them more competitive. We pit students one against another; we teach competition; we create it; we take in students selected as gifted and we grade them on a normal curve. We assume, we predetermine, that some of them are going to flunk. Why do we do that? We wouldn't have to spend any more energy teaching collaborative processes and creating forms to support them than we do creating and teaching competitive processes. On the whole women work better in collaborative situations, and women can teach us how to do it, how to teach it. When we do make the educational environment more collaborative, I think we'll *all* be happier in schools—men as well as women.

- Q. Why do you think women seem to be more comfortable in cooperative settings?
- A. You go back to Chodorow's powerful argument, where she elucidates the fact that early childrearing is done almost universally by women. The growing child's first search for identity is encased in that primary relationship and differs because of gender. The little boy, as he starts to ask, "Who am I?" has to say, "Me, I'm different from her," and he separates himself out from his mother. The little girl says, "We're just the same," and she has a kind of continuity and striving to be with/like/the same. So Chodorow argues that women's early embeddedness in relationships comes from women being cared for by women. Another important source for making sense of this is the research on power relationships, and the findings are very consistent: powerless people do the kinds of things that women tend to do. But the explanation I'm most drawn to is that women are involved in raising the next generation. To be noncompetitive—to be connected, to care, to engage in dialogue, to draw out the other person—is a good way to

be if you want to sponsor the development of others. This way of being, which Sara Ruddick calls “maternal thinking,” grows out of being engaged in maternal practice, and it provides a collaborative stance toward the world.

- Q. Several researchers in sociolinguistics have suggested that conversation is inscribed by and reinforces an ideology of gender. For example, Pamela Fishman argues that women do the “maintenance” work of conversation while men control topic and direction, and Don Zimmerman and Candace West suggest that men feel free to interrupt women extensively. Might not this kind of gender politics influence the dialogue of collaborative learning groups? If so, how might women overcome these interactional problems?
- A. I think teachers should put the issue on the classroom agenda: comment on the power of interaction patterns, assign a student in each group to watch gender dynamics—to keep track of it and give everyone feedback—and really talk about how disastrous it is to live in a culture that teaches men to speak and women to listen. Both qualities should be joined in each person. So for each class session, one person is in charge of keeping track of gender dynamics, using research tools, making a report. And, in the end, I predict that women will get more of a voice and the men will get to be better listeners.
- Q. Do you see the need for a balance between collaboration and competition, or do you see collaboration as overwhelmingly the preferred model?
- A. I would say that collaboration is overwhelmingly the preferred model. Alfie Kohn has written a book called *No Contest: The Case against Competition*, which shows why competition is such a problem. I worry, literally, about the ability of the world to survive a competitive stance where it’s about winners against losers and winners taking all. We have to figure out a way to live with everybody participating and everybody’s needs being met. Kohn has examined one side of the coin carefully and accessibly, but somebody needs to do the comparable book that shows why collaboration is so productive of real creativity. In my mind the world should not—cannot—be construed as a zero-sum game. That’s no way to live.
- Q. You distinguish between two types of collaboration, the believing game and the doubting game, citing Peter Elbow’s advice to writers to play the believing game by focusing on the creative side, and then to play the doubting game by applying the critical side. Would you elaborate on this?
- A. Both games are of enormous importance for anybody who’s going to do serious intellectual work. Moving between the believing and the doubting game means moving between one stance, where you actively try to immerse yourself in a body of work and feel your way around the perimeters and get inside of it and understand it, and another stance, where you stand at a distance subjecting the body of work to a range of critical analyses. Both are powerful tools.
- Q. How do the believing and doubting games relate to cooperative and

competitive approaches?

- A. They relate to Horner's research on fear of success. I have been doing some informal research, a series of workshops using guided fantasy, in which I invite people to imagine environments where the believing game is played and where the doubting game is played. We do the doubting game twice. In one environment, people are in a zero-sum world where there are winners and losers; it's a nightmare and women hate it. In the other environment, people are in a win-win situation, where they play the doubting game not to win or lose but to clarify arguments, to develop ideas, and to do better thinking. Women have no problem with the doubting game in such a collaborative setting. You can be a marvelous doubter, and doubting can be life-enhancing if it takes place in the service of the clearest possible understanding of truth rather than in one-upping another. We associate competitiveness—winning—with the doubting game, but competitiveness destroys the doubting game; competitiveness makes it a poor game for getting at the truth. Winning an argument and achieving a more comprehensive view of what's true are not the same.
- Q. The research into women's cognitive, intellectual, and ethical development that Gilligan and your collective are doing is exciting. But doesn't it have the potential to reinforce gender stereotypes and essentialist definitions of femininity? Can't research into gender differences ultimately reinforce cultural myths about gender, including gender hierarchy?
- A. Of course, that's a real danger, and I don't know what to do about it. There's also a real danger in *not* trying to give voice to this whole range of human experience that has not been articulated and is not an integral part of the culture—you give away the whole ball game. Men continue to set the standard and perpetuate a world where individualism and competition take precedence over relationships and connections. They create a world where competition is practically the only game in town, and collaboration and cooperation are not cultivated. That seems more dangerous, and I don't know how to get around it. Of course, many people consider the four of us "essentialists"—that is, they classify us with those who see sex differences as immutably rooted in biology. What we are really doing, though, is describing characteristics that women and men have developed in the context of a sexist and aggressive society, a society in which the public and private spheres of living have been drastically segregated.
- Q. Recently, an article in a popular magazine cited Gilligan's study to argue that since women are by nature nurturers and men are *not*, then women who want meaningful relationships with men will have to fulfill the nurturing role—men obviously aren't suited for it. What do you think of such an application of Gilligan's ideas?
- A. This is a poor reading of Gilligan. Nowhere does she say that nature alone accounts for these differences. The most empowering aspect of Gilligan's work for both men and women is that she examines conventional morality

and notes that the conventional woman cares only for others. The self is not an object of the conventional woman's own care because she doesn't see herself as a person equally worthy of consideration. Gilligan's work has been important to so many women because it has helped them understand that they can be caring and nurturing to others but full of self—that they don't have to be selfless. To be true moral agents, women have to take themselves into consideration; they *don't* have to choose between care for the self and care for the other. It's not an either/or situation. That has been a marvelous and important insight, and it accounts for much of why Gilligan has such a widespread audience. Those who argue that women must do the supporting to maintain a relationship haven't even noticed that a woman, to interact meaningfully with a man, has a self she must care for.

Part of the problem is that Gilligan mounted a very complex argument; some people can see part of it and some people can see other parts. Mostly, we have a rigid, dualistic way of structuring the world that makes it hard for people to understand that a voice can be associated with gender without being encased in gender. If you are like Perry or Kohlberg and you study men, it's just so easy to say, "These are *the* forms of intellectual development" or "These are *the* stages of moral development for people." Nobody ever notices. But if you study women, you have to call it "women's ways"; if you called it "people's ways," you would meet with criticism about generalizing beyond your data. But calling it "women's ways" is problematic, too, because then men will think, "Well, if women do it and I'm not a woman, then I can't be like that." It's very confusing because we're gendered, but we're also just human beings.

- Q. In *Women's Ways*, you discuss the politics of talk in family life and family "rules" for communicating that govern interactional activities within the family. What implications might these family rules have for women faced with communicating in the academic environment?
- A. If you apply our scheme to forms of communication that occur in educational institutions, you can begin to see patterns that uphold each of the ways of knowing. For instance, the framework of the received knower, who assumes that knowledge gets passed down from one person to another, is reflected still in the architecture of our educational institutions, with our lecture platforms and chairs all lined up. I recently did interviews with elderly Vermonters near the Canadian border, inquiring about their experience of "voice" as they were growing up. They told me that in the little one-room schoolhouses they had gone to at the beginning of this century they never remembered ever writing their own words. They were always copying other people's words. Taking in and giving out other people's words were the primary educational tasks even in writing assignments, so the books containing their writings were called "copy books," not composition books. They showed us their copy books and it was true.

There were no original words.

Q. Do you feel that it's productive for teachers to use models such as yours and William Perry's to help them understand students' ways of thinking?

A. Absolutely. These theories can help teachers see some of a student's deep thinking and to understand where a student is coming from. A teacher always wants to start from where students are and then move along *with* them. I use these theories all the time, although I often find that I'm wrong, that I've misdiagnosed a student. But I don't think this matters. If you're wrong and you operate for a while on a perspective that turns out to be inaccurate, the student corrects you. This process is enabled by Rogerian feedback: "So what I hear you saying is. . . ." And, correcting you, the student says, "No, that's not what I'm thinking." And you hear it and you adjust. The struggle to understand students is very life-enhancing, even if you don't always get it right.

Q. How can a teacher respond to a student operating from a received knowledge perspective—a student, for example, who comes into a composition class where the model is one of creative or critical thinking?

A. A teacher can talk about looking inside for insights and words, and when somebody does look inside and develops a new insight, the teacher can say, "Oh, that's neat. What an interesting idea. You've helped me understand that." The student experiences creating an idea that the teacher writes down, learns from, and passes on to somebody else. This kind of response can really break a hole in the received knower's world view. Received knowers often describe this kind of response as a turning point out of received knowledge for them; they discover that they, too, can be an authority who has ideas worthy of teaching to others.

Q. We often think of shifts from one epistemological position to another as taking more time than you're suggesting here. Can the movement out of the received knowledge position occur just that quickly?

A. Somebody who has such an "Aha!" experience is probably somebody for whom that world view is already beginning to fall apart, whereas a person imbued with looking upwards for the goodies might not even be able to hear, "That's an interesting idea." But one of the wonderful things about writing is that people's ideas are put forth in a concrete form, so you can look at it and say, "Oh, there it is." People looking at a portfolio of their writings can reflect on their own constructions, trace how their thinking grows and evolves and changes, and see that the ideas grow out of struggle and thought—they don't just come out of the sky. You can teach students how to trace what's going on in their own minds, through their own writing, in their own papers.

Q. What theoretical and pedagogical issues are pertinent at the subjective and procedural levels of knowing?

A. I see a great shift in the culture, a broad cultural trend of moving from a received position to a subjective position, with the more privileged seg-

ments of the population being carefully tutored to be procedural and constructed knowers. Cognition is consistently governed by subjectivism in the culture because there's so little dialogue in our educational institutions. People are easily locked into their own world view because they're not being engaged in hard-nosed conversations in which they're asked to compare their view of things with external realities. Without such conversations, we don't come to understand that words can communicate truths and that ideas can be developed and shaped. The subjectivist world view is narcissistic and private, one that thrives only in a culture like ours where people work too much in isolation.

Dialogue can certainly be realized at the procedural level. In a way, that's what procedures are, encouraging the knower to make, record, and communicate observations. Procedural thinking requires a much more active stance and more participation in dialogue than the previous stages do. Procedures cannot be taught without lots of small seminars and lots of laboratory experiences where students are doing whatever it is that's done in that particular discipline. Teachers have to have students engaged in the craft because students don't easily develop procedures by passively listening to lectures.

- Q. You seem more hesitant than Perry does about describing epistemological perspectives as a developmental or sequential scheme of growth. Yet from what you've just described, you seem to view them as a model of growth.
- A. It's complicated. My coauthors and I don't always agree on the "stage" nature of the epistemological perspectives. Perry's research, based on interviews of the same Harvard college students every spring, year after year, was a study designed for making developmental statements. The developmentalist usually selects a small homogeneous population, where the least desirable approach would be to interview and collect data from, say, the first graders and the third graders and the eighth graders and the twelfth graders and then make statements about their development. To make developmental statements, the most desirable tack is like Perry's, where a researcher interviews the same students every year over a period of several years: a longitudinal design. Perry had good data for making powerful developmental statements. In fact, my coauthor Blythe Clinchy and her colleague Claire Zimmerman felt that Perry's claims were not strong enough. The data that Blythe and Claire collected at Wellesley, in a study following the epistemological development of students there, was so orderly that they were convinced Perry could have spoken in an even more powerful voice about the stage nature of his scheme. And even Perry doesn't call them *stages*; he calls them *positions*, and he conceptualizes "backsliding" as a normal part of development. Many classic stage theorists say, "It's onward and upward"; any incidence of regression forces them to throw out the whole thing. And, of course, they tend to make very bold statements about universality, which Perry doesn't do.

Conversely, our study is poorly designed for making such developmental statements. We had a wide range of people, ages, social classes, and institutions. In some ways this was terrific because we had such a breadth of voices, but we can't make developmental claims from our data. Further, I think all four of us feel a great discomfort with the developmentalists' tendency to assume that a particular sequence is universal. To us, that seems audacious, even immoral, and we want to distance ourselves from such a stance. Some of my colleagues found it hard even to argue that one of these positions is inherently better than another. Now, that boggles my mind, because each position seems so much more adequate and adaptive than the previous positions, at least in the context of this culture.

- Q. So even though your study's design makes you hesitate to assert a developmental model, you feel that the *Women's Ways* model is developmental in some sense?
- A. Right. But I'm not sure if, even in this society, people move from received to subjective to procedural positions in that order. I can imagine—and I have some evidence—that it might be possible for a person to move from a received to a procedural position without spending very much time in a subjective position. My students at Vermont have been collecting interviews of undergraduates, and it seems like a number of the undergraduates they've interviewed are doing this in two very different ways. In the university context, most of the shift from received knowledge directly into procedural knowledge is through the route of separate knowing and is still quite authority oriented. But we also see people in a dialogue-rich environment moving from received into connected procedures without spending very much time in the subjectivists' world view.
- Q. So it might be a developmental model but not necessarily a sequential one?
- A. Possibly. In the study that I'm currently working on, with very isolated women in a poor part of Vermont, we have longitudinal data on 120 women that's just now going into the computer. These interviews, all scored blind, were conducted at three different times, about nine months apart. So our data is spread over about a two-year period of time, and it shows *on the whole* that the movement is through the sequence as we portrayed it and is extremely orderly.
- Q. Several feminist compositionists are exploring the implications of your research for theory and pedagogy in composition studies. For example, in "Women's Ways of Writing," Marilyn Cooper explores the implications of your work for women, describing the benefits of communal journals in a center for battered women; and in "Composing as a Woman," Elizabeth Flynn discusses gender in relation to research in the field and classroom writing assignments. What are your thoughts on the kinds of writing that might be beneficial for students, especially women?
- A. I love the idea of a collaborative journal, especially the computerized communal journal that Cooper discusses, and I'm anxious to learn more

- about it. I think journal writing and what Elbow calls freewriting are excellent because a lot of thinking starts there. But I'm also worried. There's a danger in a narrow focus on private journal writing and private freewriting that doesn't broaden into a more extended and hard-nosed kind of dialogue and thus keeps a person lodged in the subjectivist mode. While personal journal writing creates an open process that lets a person be free and expressive, collaborative journal writing lessens this danger because the exchange can keep on going until, like with the writing of our book, the collaborating writers get very, very hard-nosed with each other.
- Q. Are you suggesting that encouraging private, expressive writing can do women a disservice? Are you encouraging more of a balance among different kinds of writing?
- A. One problem is the way we define "male" and "female" modes of writing. We look at the male mode as being real, true, hard, and the female mode as being soft, fuzzy, loving. But that's not true. What are all those words? What is often called the "female mode" can be so much more complex because it's always trying to hold everybody's perspective. It allows for an extended dialogue and, thus, for coming to clearer, sharper understandings of the essence of things. Yes, we need to have a balance, and the image of the extended dialogue is a productive way of thinking about it. In collaborative writing projects, whatever they are, writers experience the dialogic work of going through draft after draft, many more drafts than a writer working in isolation can create.
- Q. In "Embracing Contraries," Elbow emphasizes two necessary processes for the classroom teacher. On the one hand, the teacher must be a supporter and nurturer of students (much like your conception of the teacher as midwife); on the other hand, the teacher must function as gatekeeper, upholder of standards, evaluator. How can a teacher balance the duty to nurture and support students and the duty to uphold academic standards?
- A. I'm going to answer by going back to that original pajama party, where my colleagues and I kept moving between trying to think about who we were as individuals and what the driving questions at the edge of the field were. In a similar way teachers have to start with who students are—including their perspectives on the world—and, from that start, help students articulate what their driving questions are. If they are to find a home in the world, it's important that students eventually merge their questions with the ongoing questions in their disciplines, and students need help in making useful connections between these two kinds of questions. To be engaged in upholding the standards of the field or the institution without ever noticing who students are and what their driving questions are—which I think is very common practice—is an unfortunate imbalance for men as well as for women and for the state of the society.
- Q. There's an epigraph in *Women's Ways* from Nel Noddings' *Caring*: "It is

time for the voice of the mother to be heard in education.” But the role of the nurturing mother whose approval is unconditional may be problematic for women teachers at grading time. What is your view of grading?

- A. The current grading system is fraught with problems because the traditional system places all the responsibility for evaluation in the hands of faculty. If you want to help people develop powers of evaluation and self-reflection, it’s unwise to give this responsibility solely to faculty. Grading should be part of a shared process of dialogue and collaborative evaluation. If people are going to develop thoughtful, internal standards, they need to participate in these processes in schools as well as in the family. The maternal approach involves the hard work of trying to understand students—who they are, where they’ve come from, and where they’re going.
- Q. But doesn’t the mother model place women teachers in a position that reinforces what society socializes us to believe about women—that authority and the feminine are incompatible? Susan Stanford Friedman, for example, expresses such reservations about the mother model of teaching.
- A. I’m reminded of a collaborative study by Richardson, Cook, and Macke from Ohio State University, “Issues in Sex, Gender and Society: A Feminist Perspective.” This study looked at teaching styles and identified two modes: a collaborative, maternal mode, involved in the discourse of the rhetoric of inquiry; and a more authoritarian mode, involved in the discourse of the rhetoric of authority. Students invariably liked the inquiry mode more, felt more benefitted by it, and made more progress with it than they did with teachers more involved in the authoritarian mode. Whether the teachers were men or women, students personally liked and felt more benefitted by the inquiry mode—but they saw those professors as being less competent. Furthermore, in the institutions these researchers studied, they found fewer and fewer professors who worked in the inquiry mode as they moved up the academic ranks. But I’ll bet if you look at institutions deeply imbued with the constructivist view, you might find a very different pattern—that senior professors are the ones most involved in a constructivist, collaborative, inquiry mode.
- Q. Do you think that a student’s epistemological orientation influences the way she or he evaluates those teachers?
- A. Absolutely. You have two things going: first, the students and their frameworks and, second, the institution and its overriding philosophy. These can differ. An institution tries to bring students up to the ways of knowing it understands and values. And you have schools that primarily see themselves as teaching received knowers, as bringing people into their way of knowing. You have other schools, some of them educational experiments of the 1960s and 1970s, that conceptualize a subjectivist view of learning. And then you have some institutions deeply informed by a constructivist paradigm.
- Q. In what ways is your work informed by social constructionism?

A. It is steeped in the very deepest roots of constructivism. For all four of us and our work in social psychology, the starting point is somehow the work of Piaget. I'm not sure you would necessarily think of Piaget as a social constructivist, but he certainly is a constructivist. In his very early work on moral judgment, he says the development of morality requires only the company of one's peers. Piaget pitted himself against the received view, often looking at the forms of the child's knowledge that were idiosyncratic to the child. The child would tell him things about how the world was that would never have been passed down by an adult, that were so different from the way adults see the world. His whole emphasis was on the original thought of the child and not on shared thought. That helped many of us break out of the received view. Vygotsky, on the other hand, had a deeper understanding of the social nature of language and thought, exploring the role of language and community in the development of thought and how language operates both internally and externally.

The constructivists' stance is important on many different fronts, whether it's to articulate, as Mary and Kenneth Gergen do, the philosophical basis of the social constructivist approach to the world or whether it's to do empirical research to show which kinds of writing best sponsor the development of mind. There's a lot of work to be done, and a lot of people in your field, like Bruffee and Elbow, are doing it right now.

Q. Composition is a field that has shifted toward a constructivist paradigm in the past few years, and this shift has raised a number of political and epistemological questions. Perhaps not coincidentally, it also is a field where the percentage of women on faculties has been increasing dramatically. How do you view these changes of politics, epistemology, and gender?

A. Women in composition may be in just the right place. With the shift from received to much more complex epistemologies, there has been a great shift in the balance of attention from reading to writing. We're now much more interested in the creations that students can construct than in the knowledge that they can absorb. Donald Graves looks at the fact that in the past no federal monies were supporting research on writing; all of the monies were going into research on reading—taking in words—decoding. But with this epistemological shift, there is also an enormous shift towards emphasizing writing, the kind of writing involved in the construction of knowledge. More than most disciplines, composition—the way it is now being taught—is a discipline involved in a pedagogy that's much more closely aligned with the actual processes involved in the development of mind. The way you are now teaching writing more closely approximates the processes that good writers actually use. In a world that is going to need everybody functioning as active thinkers, not just the privileged few, writing as a way to thinking should be taught to everyone.

Q. Composition has reached out to different fields in the last few years, to the

extent that we sometimes question whether the discipline has a core, and we often debate what that core might be. Would you comment on this?

A. You're on the cutting edge. Look at history. The Renaissance occurred at the crosspoints of travelers, of communication. It is certainly not high status to be at the margins or the crosspoints in the academic world which is pushing toward specialization. But anybody who is involved in working across disciplines is much more likely to have a lively mind and a lively life. You may not get as many brownie points, but in the long run you probably make a better contribution.

M.A. and Ph.D. in English with Specialization in Rhetoric and Composition

The University of South Florida offers a specialization in rhetoric and composition at both the M.A. and Ph.D. levels. Students can choose this specialization to prepare themselves to conduct research into rhetorical history, theory, and practice, and to teach composition and literature at the college and secondary levels.

This program allows students to study the history and philosophy of rhetoric, the theory of composition, composition research and its design, the teaching of writing and literature, the theory and practice of stylistic analysis, and the administration of writing programs. Students also study traditional British and American literature and critical theory.

Teaching assistantships, tuition waivers, and other kinds of financial aid are available. For further information call or write: Professor Sara M. Deats; Director of Graduate Study; English Department; University of South Florida; Tampa, FL 33620 (813-974-2421).