

Interrupting the Conversation: The Constructionist Dialogue in Composition

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In “Current-Traditional Rhetoric: Paradigm and Practice,” James Berlin and Robert Inkster make the important point that epistemological assumptions underlie every conception of rhetoric and composition. They suggest that we cannot demonstrate what it means “to persuade” or “to explain” without a tacit belief in what it means “to know.” I believe they are also correct in acknowledging a general neglect of these assumptions on the part of those of us who teach writing: it is fairly easy for instructors of composition (indeed, most teachers) to buy into a dominant theory of knowledge unquestioningly.

Nevertheless, though awareness of the ways in which written and oral discourse contribute to what people believe they know (that is, how rhetoric may be epistemic) may seem marginalized in the contemporary writing classroom, it has been a central issue for philosophers and rhetoricians since Plato and Aristotle. From that classical period to the contemporary writings of Burke, Perelman, and Young, Becker, and Pike, the tradition of investigating rhetoric’s role in producing rather than merely transmitting knowledge has remained intact. Though it is not surprising that composition studies should follow in the wake of rhetoric and begin investigating the knowledge-generating capacity of language, the writing field seems to have carved out for itself the distinction, and perhaps the burden, of being the first discipline to bring to the fore questions of how this theory of knowledge relates to classroom practice.

A problem has arisen in the field, however, in that most of the rhetoric-as-epistemic arguments have settled on a rather eclectic and politicized conception of the issue and its relevance to the teaching of writing. Composition theorists, working within what appears to me to be a closed dialogue, downplay or completely ignore a wealth of critical thought available in related disciplines—speech communications and social psychology in particular. My use of the term “dialogue” is intended both as a convenient shorthand for “a-community-of-writers-in-composition-who-have-introduced-and-continue-to-popularize-rhetoric-as-epistemic,” and as a way to convey

mysense of that community's insularity from the criticisms and controversies surrounding "social construction," the somewhat generic term for social knowledge-production that composition has adopted in arguing for rhetoric's epistemic powers. In this essay, I'd like to suggest some of the basic premises that seem to underlie composition's conception of social construction, and to critique those premises from the perspectives of theorists in related disciplines that are investigating the relationship of discourse to knowledge.

Rhetoric-as-Epistemic(s)

Briefly (and broadly), a social constructionist argues that knowledge is created, maintained, and altered through an individual's interaction with and within his or her "discourse community." Knowledge resides in consensus rather than in any transcendent or objective relationship between a knower and that which is to be known. The choice of social constructionism as the contemporary composition field's most high-profile conception of rhetoric-as-epistemic is not for lack of alternatives; Michael Leff's "In Search of Ariadne's Thread: A Review of the Recent Literature on Rhetorical Theory" offers a number of candidates. Leff classifies perspectives on the knowledge-generating potential of rhetoric into four major groupings.¹ The first acknowledges rhetoric's weakest claim to knowledge generation: its ability to create a place in an already accepted paradigm for a new particular (cf. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's notion basing arguments on the structure of reality). The second argues a stronger case for rhetoric's knowledge-making capability in noting its role in establishing consensus in order to create a social knowledge which complements personal knowledge (cf. Bitzer's conception of "public knowledge"). The third perspective views rhetoric as establishing the knowledge necessary to mediate the limitations of formal logic. The last notion of rhetoric-as-epistemic suggests that knowledge *is* rhetorical. It is this last view, argued forcefully in Robert L. Scott's seminal "On Viewing Rhetoric as Epistemic," that basically forms what the discipline of composition has come to term "social constructionism."

The term "social construction," however, is the rubric under which a number of theories of social knowledge are subsumed; almost as many variations of social construction exist as there are rhetoricians, philosophers, sociologists, and anthropologists to promote them. Different writers serve as the principal gurus behind particular versions of a social theory. Although Thomas Kuhn and Richard Rorty appear to be most often cited in composition scholarship, social-construction's modern form has been variously attributed to sociologists Karl Mannheim, G.H. Mead and Emile Durkheim, anthropologists Franz Boas and Clifford Geertz, linguists Benjamin Lee Whorf and Edward Sapir, literary critic Michel Foucault, and Karl Marx, to name but a few.

The Constructionist Dialogue in Composition

Though cohesive (if problematic) theories of social construction can be found in disciplines such as the sociologies of science and knowledge, philosophy of science, hermeneutics, and history, no one theory of social construction from any one discipline has been adopted by the field of composition *in toto*. For this reason, the variety of social constructions presented in this paper is actually the result of many social constructionisms—a phenomenon that merits its own lengthy investigation, but not one with which this paper is concerned.²

This paper's stipulative definition of the dialogue's conception of social construction is limited to the manner in which its best-known advocates in the field have presented it, especially as explicated in Kenneth Bruffee's 1986 article in *College English* entitled "Social Construction, Language and Knowledge: A Bibliographical Essay" and James Berlin's article in that same journal entitled "Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class." Though I am arguing that the dialogue's "core" is reflected in these two works, both Bruffee and Berlin have applied a constructionist stance to a broad range of topics of interest to English studies. These two significant articles are inclusive of, but are by no means limited to, the following premises which I suggest form the basis of social construction in composition:

- Real entities ("reality") include knowledge, beliefs, truths, and selves.
- All reality is arrived at by consensus.
- Consensus, and thus knowledge, is "discovered" solely through public discourse (rhetoric).
- Reality changes as consensus/knowledge changes.

According to Bruffee, "A social constructionist position in any discipline assumes that entities we normally call reality, knowledge, thought, facts, texts, selves, and so on are constructs generated by communities of like-minded peers" (774). Without denying the existence of a physical reality, social constructionism is concerned solely with human perception of, and interaction with, that reality. To quote Bruffee again, "We generate knowledge by 'dealing with' our *beliefs* about the physical reality that shoves us around. Specifically, we generate knowledge by justifying those beliefs socially" (777). Thus, it is the social arena that produces what passes for knowledge, not "scientific inquiry" in any exclusively experimental sense. As linguistic interaction is necessary to establish and convey knowledge, rhetoric plays a central role in the discovery and solution of whatever problems a society believes it faces. Berlin's sketch of what he terms "social-epistemic" rhetoric summarizes the constructionist position as one which views reality as "located in a relationship that involves the dialectical interaction of the observer, the discourse community (social group) in which the observer is

functioning, and the material conditions of existence” (488). The “observer,” according to Berlin, “is always a creation of a particular and cultural moment” (489). Without explicitly *denying* the possibility of an individual’s intellect existing apart from the communal public knowledge, social constructionists in English studies do not find a place for an individual who is not him or herself constructed by the environment.

For the teacher of composition, a social constructionist perspective has resulted in a focus on *discourse communities*—communities that share “values, objects of inquiry, research methodologies, evidential contexts, persuasion strategies and conventions, forms and formats, and conversational forms” in addition to conventions rooted in language (Reither 18). Much of the constructionist literature concentrates on the dynamics of such communities and the ways in which we as teachers can facilitate our students’ entry into them (Bartholomae).³ Consonant with Foucaultian and Freirean theories of knowledge as power, social constructionists in composition of all political persuasions have sought to promote access to knowledge-creating communities as a critical first step toward student empowerment. Compared to current-traditional and cognitive rhetorics which focus on the individual writer and how he or she can and/or should shape discourse to gain the audience’s assent, one might say that constructionists focus on the ways in which the audience (that is, the community) shapes the discourse of its members.

An important theme in composition studies’ dialogue is that a constructionist theory of knowledge heralds an overdue acknowledgment of a rheto-centric universe—a stance reminiscent of Kant’s coronation of philosophy as “the queen of sciences” for its self-proclaimed ability to sit in judgment of the legitimacy of whatever knowledge sciences might produce. Bruffee has suggested that “it is possible to take the position that since knowledge is identical with language and other symbol systems, the problems presented by social constructionist thought are of a sort that humanists in general and English teachers in particular are especially well-equipped to cope with, if not solve” (778). The appreciation of rhetoric as a foundational discipline, critical for understanding any other academic enterprise, is thus a recurring theme in much constructionist literature, especially in English studies and rhetoric.

To speak of a constructionist dialogue is not to promote a conspiracy theory or to suggest that the political or pedagogical objectives of the dialogue’s participants are identical or even similar. The theories of social construction held by Bruffee and Berlin do not overlap in many respects, particularly in terms of their sources.⁴ Bruffee traces his ideas to Rorty and Vygotsky in order to provide a rationale for classroom collaboration; Berlin draws heavily on leftist literary theorists and Paulo Freire to advance the cause of “radical” pedagogy.⁵ Instead, the term “dialogue” is meant to draw attention to the fundamental epistemic assumptions this conversation’s

participants appear to share as well as those they have commonly chosen to ignore. It is important to note as well that not all social constructionists in *rhetoric* are participants in *composition's* dialogue. Though writers such as Robert L. Scott and Barry Brummett are widely read in composition studies generally, they are not widely quoted by dialogists, nor do they in turn draw from the work of composition theorists to any great extent. The dialogue has no "card-carrying" members, of course, but one often associates social construction in composition with writers such as Berlin and Bruffee as well as Patricia Bizzell and David Bartholomae, as they are a few of the more frequent contributors.

In this paper, I make no pretense of critiquing any single dialogist, definitively characterizing any individual's full-blown conception of a theory of knowledge, trivializing any individual's contribution to our understanding of social construction, or taking a community of writers "to task." Rather, it is my belief that the constructionist dialogue (like *any* discourse among a fairly static group of participants), has a life of its own, especially from the perspective of people outside of the conversation. What I refer to as the "dialogue" is not the sum but a *subset*, a reduction, of its parts. It is this subset, these generalities, that have shaped the discussion of social construction in composition studies and which will be examined more closely. The remaining sections of this paper look at how each of the four constructionist premises listed above can serve as a focal point for critics seeking to resolve what they perceive as weak links in a social theory of knowledge.

An Issue of Ontology

Premise 1: *Real entities ("reality") include knowledge, beliefs, truths, and selves.*

In *The Strife of Systems*, Nicholas Rescher suggests that theories on any subject are comprised of premises which are independently plausible but inevitably inconsistent when taken together as a whole; theorists thus refine their disciplines by exploiting these inconsistencies. Premise 1 of social construction's definition presented here, however, demonstrates an instance in which a basic tenet of the theory has been criticized for being inconsistent within itself. Such a criticism comes from a viewpoint Richard Cherwitz and James Hikins call "perspectivist."

Cherwitz and Hikins note that the social constructionist claim that entities are created intersubjectively (through social interaction) requires an acceptance of the existence of objects (that is, the persons doing the "intersubjectifying"). But this leads constructionists to the "inherently solipsistic" conclusion that "other persons must be regarded as the product of meaning too" and that "in the absence of any account establishing the objective existence of other subjects, intersubjectivity collapses altogether" (254). Similarly, Jeffery Bineham states, "An intersubjective position traditionally is assumed to result from the collision and consequent refinement of two

subjective positions. The subjective mind thus becomes primary in importance" (54). Thus, the status of the knower to the known is indeterminate if one takes literally the premise "reality includes knowledge, beliefs, truths, and selves."

Another variation on the chicken-or-egg riddle this first premise poses is the related ontological issue of whether, temporally, one can posit theories of existence and knowledge simultaneously. Earl Croasmun and Cherwitz argue that "any human system of ontological beliefs presupposes a valid epistemology . . . A general theory of what should be granted the status of knowledge precedes the consideration of any specific ontological statement. . . . It makes no sense to suggest that we know something about the world unless we first determine what it means to 'know'" (8). Bineham too has suggested that the conflation of epistemic and ontological issues is one that will be central to future discussions of rhetoric-as-epistemic. Lack of a clear distinction between "reality" and "knowledge" is what many writers have discerned as social construction's most fundamental error.

The Need for Objective Reality

Premise 2: *All reality is arrived at by consensus.*

Criticism of premise 2 generally settles on the necessity of an objective reality or notion of transcendent "truth." At least three responses to this issue have surfaced in communications journals. Cherwitz and Hikins propose a perspectivist account of reality based on *relationality*. Cherwitz along with Croasmun offer a variation on the theme by resurrecting a notion of *objectivity* (as opposed to "objectivism"), and C. Jack Orr's suggestion that *critical rationalism* replace intersubjectivism offers a third articulation of the need for objective truth. A fourth argument relating to premise 2 does not make a case for objective truth, but instead goes further than the dialogists in the opposite direction: what can be called the hermeneutic perspective claims that not only reality, but *consensus itself*, is illusory.

The problem the first three positions find with a crude constructionist denial of objective reality is that it results in a relativist theory that ultimately must collapse under its own weight. As Orr makes clear, "Even if one insists . . . that the world we know is a rhetorically constructed, interpreted world, we wish to recognize, exchange, criticize, and improve upon our interpretations. This enterprise is made intelligible through the presupposition of an independent reality, a common target, toward which our interpretations are intended" (268). H. Gene Blocker argues, "It is the concept of an objective reality that enables us to acknowledge the limitation of the human standpoint to completely reproduce the world in thought and deed. We recognize our constructions of reality as constructs by making reference to an objective reality which our constructs fail to capture!" (qtd. in Orr 267). In this way, the argument follows, the articulation of any position, including that of a constructionist, assumes an appeal to some objective reality or notion of

truth. Of course, thoughtful constructionists do not deny that material reality “exists,” but neither have they really engaged the issue of representation versus materialism as philosophers of science routinely must. The problems encountered by endorsing subjectivism, even if the “subjects” are entire communities, are as recurring as they are counter-intuitive, yet it is seemingly unavoidable given a premise as all-encompassing as this second one. Though constructionists (with the notable exception of Scott in rhetoric) assiduously avoid using the “r” word, basing reality solely on consensus does not rule out relativism; it merely pushes it onto a higher plane.

Cherwitz and Hikins critique a less strident form of social construction which they label “mitigated subjectivity” that attempts to moderate somewhat both premises 1 and 2 to escape the intersubjective dilemma. Its proponents, notably many philosophers of science, set up a dichotomy in which some realities/entities (such as objects of the material world) are independent of a subject’s perception of them, while others (such as values and beliefs) are constructed intersubjectively. Mitigated subjectivists do not escape the brand of solipsism any better than their unmitigating counterparts for, according to Cherwitz and Hikins, they “embrace the dualist [Cartesian] position in their separation of mental and physical entities, without commenting on the philosophical problems which such dualism engenders . . . How does one account for the influence of one realm on the other? How is it that two so qualitatively distinct worlds coexist and interact?” (254).

Cherwitz and Hikins suggest that perspectivism offers a way out of this bind. Central to perspectivism is the concept of *relationality*, originally formulated by sociologist Karl Mannheim (see Berger and Luckmann), or the notion that “entities in the universe are what they are solely because of the relationships in which they stand to other entities” (Cherwitz and Hikins 252). This position allows that individuals’ accounts of the world are going to vary as their relationships to other entities are unique. In terms of classical rhetoric, one might say it comes down to a question of *stasis*. Disagreement does not result from the existence of different realities, for there is only one reality. Rather, people appear to disagree only because they stand in different relationships to reality. Once *stasis* is agreed upon and the other’s relationship is understood, conflict is resolved: “On this account, the apparently contradictory judgments are really not contradictory at all, *since they are judgments about different aspects of the same object*” (264).⁶

Croasmun and Cherwitz develop further the distinction Cherwitz and Hikins make between *objectivity* and *objectivism* in the formers’ “Beyond Rhetorical Relativism.” Here, “objectivity” is defined as a concept that “frames an ontological assumption about the objects of reality, including discourse,” whereas “objectivism” “characterizes a specific epistemological methodology for gaining knowledge of that reality. To embrace ‘objectivity’ is not necessarily to accept the tenets of objectivism” (3). This seemingly self-

evident distinction enables them to preclude the relativism constructionists themselves would prefer to avoid. One can maintain that reality is objective and at the same time hold that knowledge of reality is subjective.

A third critique of premise 2, closely related to perspectivism in its retention of objective reality, is that of the *critical rationalists*, represented by Karl Popper and C. Jack Orr. Because crude constructionism refuses to entertain the possibility of objective truth, “truth” for them is dismissed as another construct, another social myth humans have invented to assuage our fear of relativism. Nevertheless, the utility of a notion of objectivity is seen by critical rationalists as too important to be discarded. By holding the objective existence of reality as a constant, they say, we are able to *criticize*, a faculty that intersubjectivity denies us. Orr states that critical rationalism is unlike the intersubjectivity of social construction theory in that, “critical rationalism retains the concepts of objective reality and truth. Therefore, it becomes possible to relate knowledge and truth dialectically, that is, to question each consensually validated claim to truth in the name of truth which is beyond consensual validation” (273). Of course, frameworks for knowledge will differ from knower to knower, but if we can engage each other in critical debate by appealing to an objective reality about which some propositions must ultimately be true, then, critical rationalists maintain, we can “take a constructionistic social theory at least several steps beyond the perils of intersubjectivism.” Popper’s influence is clearly felt here, as critical rationalism privileges the rendering of theories *falsifiable*, or subject to disproof.

Finally, perhaps the most troublesome critique of this second premise has its roots within the dialogue itself, in what might be seen as the hermeneutic “stance.” Part of the baggage the dialogue takes on when it aligns itself with intersubjectivist philosophers such as Rorty (and, to a lesser degree, literary theorists such as Foucault and Jacques Derrida) is a belief in the significance of the interpretive act and the assumption that knowledge is not only constructed, but inevitably *mis*constructed insofar as language is rooted in idiosyncratic and unsystematic interpretation even as it is communalized. A strong hermeneutic stance, one might think, would prove especially problematic for constructionist theorists of composition, as they have a tacit investment in the systematic nature of consensual knowledge (that is, they want knowledge to be predictable enough to be of use in achieving some pedagogical end) and yet are intellectually indebted to theorists such as Rorty and Derrida whose conceptions of social construction are anything but “user-friendly.”⁷

Rorty is less insistent than many of his followers in composition on tying reality to consensus by admitting, and even privileging, the existence of knowledge that operates somewhat outside of consensus, which in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* he has termed “abnormal,” though he is unclear as to the where and how of its origins. For Rorty, the goal of philosophy is

to “keep the conversation going rather than to find objective truth” (*Philosophy* 377). In Rorty’s ideal system, the paradigm would be dialectically challenged and undermined, never allowed to wallow in stultifying, “normal” discourse.

It is at this point that the strain of juggling the concerns of social construction with those of education are most apparent. Perhaps in an effort to make Rorty’s perspective more operational, social constructionists in composition talk about “the conversation” (by which Rorty invites abnormal discourses to engage normal discourse in perpetual “edification”), while at the same time suggesting a more normative, systematic approach to knowledge—that based on the consensus of the discourse community. This seems logical; if social constructivists are to direct the teaching of rhetoric and composition toward any end, they cannot have students running about discoursing abnormally. As a correlate, educators have to assume they have some more or less stable knowledge worth imparting to students, knowledge that can be assimilated and used until it is tested and perhaps abandoned.

Thomas Kent underscores the tension the hermeneutic stance causes for constructionist teachers of composition when he notes that Davidson’s and Derrida’s “analyses of discourse suggest that (a) both writing and reading require hermeneutic skills that refute codification, and, therefore (b) neither writing nor reading can be taught as a systematic process” (25). For this reason, social constructionists in composition seem to make strange bedfellows with less-constrained, edifying philosophers who do not face similar occupational hazards. Put another way (and not too glibly, I hope), the educable unit that educators deal with is the individual student: we do not teach bodies of consensus-builders; we can only teach their members. The dialogue’s pervasive preoccupation with consensus, it might be argued, is at odds with the teacherly focus on individual interpretation and agency to which it also subscribes.

Distinguishing among Knowledges

Premise 3: *Consensus/knowledge is “discovered” solely through public discourse (rhetoric).*

A key, perhaps *the* key, argument in the dialogue’s constructivist theory of knowledge rests upon the presumption that all reality is mediated through language. As I noted earlier, such a premise is central to discussions of rhetoric-as-epistemic and makes it easy to understand social construction’s appeal to those of us whose job it is to teach language skills. Critiques of premise 3 can be leveled from at least two slightly different perspectives. Many writers in speech communications as well as the cognitive sciences maintain that emphasis on the discourse within the social environment as *the* generator of knowledge ignores the ways in which the human brain “produces” ideas and perceptions. Other critics fault premise 3 for ignoring the non-social aspects of the “self.” Both groups, basically, are making the case

for widening the term “knowledge” to include forms other than the social.

Cognitivists would be critical of constructionists such as Berlin for not taking into account the varying abilities and idiosyncrasies of individuals in constructing meaning. Berlin seems to suggest that drawing attention to differences in cognitive abilities is politically expedient and has as its result, if not aim, the perpetuation of corporate capitalism (483). However, cognitivists would say that such differences can and do exist independent of their political desirability. George Steiner has noted that there are “such subconscious, deliberately concealed, or declared associations so extensive and intricate that they probably equal the sum and uniqueness of our status as an individual person” (qtd. in Gregg 137). To cognitivists it may seem paradoxical that a constructionist holds the opinion, on the one hand, that any given event cannot have a single, objective meaning, while maintaining on the other, that individuals’ processes of perception are identical or at least inconsequential. It is pointless, from a cognitivist perspective, to argue that qualitative (in terms of superiority) differences in cognitive abilities account for the variety of interpretations; equally capable people are still going to perceive things differently. These critics suggest, however, that it is likewise unreasonable to deny that individuals construct meaning based on private associations that may be withheld from public validation. Much of what I have already presented as the hermeneutic stance clearly ties into the positions of Steiner, Gregg, and others who argue for the primacy of individual cognition.

No contemporary cognitivist perspective that I am aware of supports an epistemology that could be labeled “positivist.” Cognitivists generally concur that meaning is constructed both subjectively and socially and that there is a constant interaction between the environment of the mind and that of the outside world. There are psychological and physiological differences between individuals which suggest that neither associations nor knowledge can be constructed identically from subject to subject. Such features are crucial not only to personal knowledge but to social knowledge as well.

It is worthwhile, I think, to quote extensively from Richard Gregg’s “Rhetoric and Knowing: The Search for Perspective.” Drawing heavily on research in psycholinguistics, Gregg, a strong advocate of acknowledging the distinction between individual and social knowledge, claims that “on the one hand, individual neurological structures are prerequisites for the development of social meanings, and on the other, the development of systems of social meanings will have concurrent consequences both for the further development of the neurological structure and other systems of social meaning. There is constant interaction between individual systems of meanings and a system of socially shared meanings, with neither system effacing the other” (136). To cut away the individual dimension of meaning making and to try to create a purely “‘social knowledge,’ or ‘public knowledge’ or ‘explicit knowledge’ is to artificially render static the active processes

of meaning" (142). Gregg says Steiner has noted that "meaning is full of associative matter constructed from personal experience and the subconscious, and that such associative contexts will vary from person to person" (137). It is our ability to form idiosyncratic associations and our attendant capacity to generate personal knowledge which define our individuality. On a slightly different note, Gregg alludes to research that is discovering the impact *affective states* and *motivation* have on cognition and meaning making (I'll discuss such research shortly). He concludes that "if personal meaning is an inherent part of human meaning, we ought to avoid distinctions which preclude rhetoric scholars from being able to consider it" (138). Thus, Gregg finds the constructionists' rigid separation of personal and social knowledge (and their neglect of the former) both artificial and unproductive.

Whereas Gregg has argued against the premise that knowledge can only be generated through public discourse by suggesting that knowledge is not always *public*, research presented by Linda Flower and John Hayes challenges the notion that knowledge is always in the form of *discourse*. Their "multiple representation thesis" suggests that ideas and their articulation fall somewhere on a continuum ranging from sensory perception to formal prose. In studying how writers represent knowledge to themselves, Flower and Hayes discovered that "different modes of representation can range from imagery, to metaphors and schemas, to abstract conceptual propositions, to prose" (129). Thus, "As writers compose, they create multiple internal and external representations of meaning. Some of these representations, such as an imagistic one, will be better at expressing certain kinds of meaning than prose would be, and some will be more difficult to translate into prose than others" (122). In other words, meaning, and therefore knowledge, may be represented and brought to bear on problem-solving in the writer's mind without the aid of linguistic articulation. Research in cognition has suggested that non-verbal representations may be stored as a *visual image or pattern* that mimics its material referent, a *perceptual experience*, such as might be useful in determining whether the red lifesavers are cherry- or strawberry-flavored, or as a *procedure* "in which perceptual cues play a large share in 'knowing' something (e.g. how to dance your way across a crowded floor)" (130). If constructivists concede that these abilities count as knowledge, it cannot follow that all knowledge is socially constructed.

A dispute between two constructionists, Thomas Farrell and Walter Carleton, proves instructive. Farrell, a "mitigated subjectivist" in Cherwitz and Hikins' parlance, distinguishes between social and "technical" (perceptual) knowledge. Carleton argues that Farrell is resurrecting a dualism that social construction has sought to eradicate, and presents an extended syllogism which he believes logically precludes Farrell's notion of personal knowledge. The first five premises of the syllogism argue convincingly that "selves" have a social "dimension," but the subsequent three premises suggest:

- (6) The impossibility of being a wholly private self entails the impossibility of discovering or expressing wholly private knowledge.
- (7) Yet there is knowledge.
- (8) Therefore, the knowledge we have must be social knowledge. (325)

While the case that Farrell, Gregg, Flower and Hayes, and others make for the individual's potential to create knowledge is not undermined by the acceptance of social knowledge's existence, these scholars would suggest that Carleton's assertion—that as individuals are not wholly private beings, their knowledge is entirely social—fails to resolve the issues relating to the recognition of the role of individual cognition they have advanced.

Finally, research in social psychology is beginning to explore the relationship of affect to cognition and thus has created a whole new literature that undermines a conception of knowledge as entirely social. Although this scholarship is too extensive and varied to summarize adequately here, research on the ways in which emotion shapes knowing can be roughly categorized into three areas: emotion and perception, emotion and avoidance (both cognitive and behavioral), and emotion and memory. I will briefly touch on some key concepts in these areas that seem to have implications for a constructionist theory of knowledge.

The literature on emotion and perception is the least extensive but in some ways the most intriguing in that it focuses not on how individuals deal with or interpret information, but rather on the physical ability to acquire information itself. This research suggests that emotional arousal systems act to physiologically alter an individual's ability to use other sensory systems such as hearing and sight. Douglas Derryberry and Mary Klevjord Rothbart have called this phenomenon *perceptual defense*: "a tendency for stimuli of negative emotional tone to have relatively high recognition thresholds" (139). Psychologists have conducted a large number of experiments using very different designs to demonstrate that emotionally negative words, both written and spoken, more easily escape detection when placed subliminally in text than positive or neutrally toned words, suggesting that emotional (emogen) encoding prior to cognitive (logogen or imagen) encoding may circumvent the mind's cognitive perception processes. Thus, a sender's message is not only subject to personal interpretation, but to personal perception as well.

"Sensation-seeking and avoidance" is the term Marvin Zuckerman uses to describe the way affect motivates people to expose themselves, or avoid exposure, to information that enters cognition. Seeking or avoiding information is based on the "optimal level of arousal" theory proposed by Eysenck in 1967. Essentially, Eysenck, Zuckerman, and others have found that every individual has a level of emotional arousal at which he or she feels comfortable. When this "optimal" level is violated (that is, when the person feels

over- or under-stimulated) cognition reacts accordingly by either seeking sensations to increase arousal to the optimal level, or avoiding sensation in order to reduce arousal to the optimal level. This affective-cognitive phenomenon has numerous implications, of course (see Pieters and Van Raaij), but for our purposes it suffices to note that every individual has his or her own level of arousal and thus seeks and avoids acquiring knowledge idiosyncratically, thus subverting the constructionist's tacit faith in discourse as the sole mediator of cognition.

The last area of research, emotion and memory, is the broadest and most complex literature in terms of the variety of claims and implications made by its researchers and theorists. Major contributors that composition and rhetoric theorists might find of most immediate interest include Gordon Bower, Margaret Clark, and Alice Isen and her coauthors. This area has witnessed tremendous growth over the last decade and continues to attract the attention of scholars throughout the field of psychology. A central theme in this literature is that of emotionally "toned" memory. As one might guess, the basic idea is that knowledge of words, situations, images, and so on may be encoded in long-term memory not only semantically, conceptually, and visually, but also emotionally. In other words, "cats" may be encoded in memory not only through the oral cue /kæts/ and other cognitive associations, but also in terms of one's emotional disposition toward cats. The memory of cats may then be retrieved through similarly emotionally-toned concepts; for instance, if one suffers from many phobias, being in a small, windowless room may invoke the thought of cats as the sensation of fear relates one's claustrophobia to one's aelurophobia. Though the *terms* that are being affectively linked (in this case "cats" and "enclosure") may ultimately be socially defined constructs, the link itself is not created through linguistic association. Clark's recent article "Moods and Social Judgments" demonstrates how such an emotional network may play a role in making simple judgments, but clearly such research has implications for more complex decision-making and knowledge-building.

The current research into affect is raising some exciting questions. Most fundamentally, it asks "what counts as knowledge?" If affect is not a discrete counterpart of cognition (as is commonly assumed) but actually *shapes* cognition by directing our attention to information and stimulating memory, what implications does this have for a conception of knowledge rooted in social discourse? It would seem to suggest that extra-linguistic phenomena play an enormous role in our mental lives. Though the realm of affect is by no means exempt from social construction in many respects, it certainly becomes more difficult to maintain an exclusively language-based theory of constructionism when affect is understood as critical to cognition.⁸

Questioning the Dynamics of Change

Premise 4: *Reality changes as consensus/knowledge changes.*

Central to social construction is the premise that reality changes as knowledge changes. Kuhn's phrase "paradigm shift" attempts to account for this change in the realm of science to an extent. As new observations and inexplicable phenomena challenge the existing paradigm, the paradigm must evolve so as to maintain the coherency and cohesiveness of the community. When the strain of the challenges becomes too great, however, the old paradigm crumbles, giving way to a new paradigm capable of commanding the community's allegiance. Though constructionism thus grants that consensus is subject to change, critics of this fourth premise suggest that a fairly loose intersubjective theory of knowledge, such as the one constructionists in composition promote, does not explain how *inter-communal* knowledges negotiate new consensuses. It makes sense that an outsider's opinion, either that of an individual or of some other extra-consensual entity, must serve as a catalyst for change; yet social constructionists do not explain how a minority's knowledge can exist in the face of consensus, much less alter that knowledge. From where do individuals derive unconventional ideas, and how can the expression of this "abnormal" discourse be tolerated?

Greg Myers raises a similar question when he points out that Bruffee fails to explain how knowledges evolve, differentiate, and come together again as consensus. He notes that "bodies of knowledge cannot be resolved into a consensus without one side losing something" (167). Though this conclusion may seem self-evident, the dynamics of consensus are neither specified nor alluded to in the dialogue which has generally played up the positive aspects of consensus-building. Like Kuhn, composition's constructionists are often content to confirm that inter-communal consensus is subject to change but do little either to show *how* competing communities arrive at all-important consensus or to acknowledge that consensus-building may not always be a progressive, "liberatory" process, that it could involve coercion instead.

Donald Cushman and Lawrence Prelli's "action theory perspective" takes the Wittgensteinian premise that "for an idea to count as knowledge, rules must be provided which allow agents embracing different ideological systems to share the same thoughts" and concludes that "knowledge, therefore, consists of those observations and ideas which remain stable under transformation" (275). At first glance, this definition of knowledge seems to preclude social construction altogether, but Cushman and Prelli suggest that it is by virtue of rhetorical action that understanding and rational consensus between ideologies is possible, again making consensus the focal point of knowledge, but providing at least a theory of how communities interact. Although the action theory perspective presumes a much less structured, theoretically "clean" conception of knowledge and of community than social constructionists do, their article (which is not a criticism of social construction

per se) goes some way toward raising questions that a coherent theory of constructionism must address.

Conclusion: Resuming the Conversation

The purpose of this paper has been to look at social constructionism from the perspective of those that have found it lacking rather than from the perspective of its champions; naturally the resultant picture of constructionism is unfairly skewed to some extent. Also, I've purposely streamlined the constructionist argument so that it may be used as a springboard for exploring the scholarship of other fields. Even so, many of the questions these other perspectives raise seem important to composition but remain inadequately or inaccurately represented by those composition theorists who have taken the lead in importing the constructionist conversation to our own discipline. This is especially disturbing as the issues raised in this paper "against" social construction are hardly new; most if not all of the points made by communications theorists and psychologists have been fairly common currency in rhetoric for quite some time.

The question is not whether the field of composition can gain anything from a constructionist perspective; clearly it can and has. In a sense, the constructionist dialogue in composition is a welcome reaction, a counterbalance, to a field that has for too long accentuated the role of the individual writer and ignored the social forces that shape the writer's perception of reality. Current-traditional rhetoric enforced a long period of neglect of traditional social considerations such as audience and *kairos*, and subsequent rhetorics (including those emphasizing cognition) which tacitly acknowledge that the writer is only part of a broader social matrix, have been slow in examining the implications of this. A by-product of this reaction, however, seems to be that social construction has often been construed in such a way as to give further impetus to a political agenda, common in contemporary English departments, that centers on issues of social justice and empowerment even though there is little in constructionist theory itself that suggests a moral or political stance. Still, though the relationship of their social aims to a theory of knowledge might give one pause, constructionists in English have nonetheless succeeded in pushing concern for the social constraints imposed on the writer to the forefront of many theoretical debates—not a bad thing.

Social construction and its advocates in the field of composition have provided valuable insights into rhetoric's relation to knowledge. They undoubtedly will continue to raise critical questions about what we are doing in the composition classroom and in our research, and they have suggested many new areas of inquiry in interpretation theory, especially those having to do with discourse communities. What should be of concern to everyone, both inside and outside the dialogue, however, is that if the conversation sidesteps the difficulties it engenders in the belief that political or educa-

tional agendas are thereby furthered, it will become less responsive to other voices, ultimately to the detriment of those of us in rhetoric and composition who look to our journals for fresh ideas and critiques. In other words, the problem I find with the constructionist dialogue is not that its perspective is incomplete; *that* criticism can be easily and accurately leveled at any position. Rather, it is the threat of insularity of which we must be mindful. Insularity is bred, perhaps, whenever a theory becomes so closely identified as a vehicle for social, political, or pedagogical values that a call for a review or for a reframing of the theory becomes associated (unnecessarily) with a repudiation of those values. Primarily for this reason, I would argue, critical thinking about social construction in composition is in danger of falling victim to the aura of political-correctness often associated with it.

In an article on hermeneutics, Rorty speaks of a “preoccupation with ‘radicalizing’ the terms in which . . . problems are described.” He goes on to say of hermeneutics what I believe can be applied with equal acuity to the constructionist conversation hermeneutics has helped to generate in English departments: “To the extent that ‘hermeneutics’ becomes the name of a movement which tells students ‘These concepts are now old-fashioned; use these new ones—the recently discovered *right* ones—instead,’ that movement betrays its own origins . . . it will eventually become as sterile as the tradition of positivistic scientism has become” (“Hermeneutics” 14). Conversing with its critics can spare the constructionist dialogue that fate.⁹

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Notes

¹Jeffery Bineham similarly divides discussions of rhetoric-as-epistemic into four basic positions, each centered on either the “Objectivist Thesis,” the “Critical Rationalist” position, the “Social Knowledge Thesis,” or the “Consensus Theory.” He argues that the four positions overlap in many ways, notably in their stance towards the “Cartesian” dichotomy pitting a Platonic conception of truth against unbridled relativism. Using Bineham’s system of classification, I would place composition’s dialogists in the Consensus Theorist camp along with Robert Scott, Barry Brummett, and Walter Carleton. Thus, Bineham’s critique of the Consensus Theory from the perspective of the first three positions raises many of the same issues I am exploring here.

²Kenneth Gergen’s widely cited article “The Social Constructionist Movement in Modern Psychology” offers an interesting account of the interdisciplinary roots of social constructionism. Although, as the title suggests, Gergen is primarily concerned with how social psychology can be situated in a constructionist framework, the article provides ample references to philosophy and rhetoric. Of particular interest to readers of the present paper might be Gergen’s brief critique of social construction’s assumptions on pages 271-73.

³The notion of “community” in composition studies has been reviewed by Joseph Harris. One of Harris’ central arguments is that “one does not need consensus to have community” (20). The idea that communities are (to use his word) “organic” and rooted in the consensus of their

members is commonplace in the constructionist dialogue, though Harris notes that "social theorists" in composition have begun to moderate their position on this issue. Nevertheless, I would argue that the characterization of communities as monolithic is so endemic to the dialogue (given its social and pedagogical commitments), that it is one that will continue to plague constructionists in composition whose emphasis remains on *inter-communal* conflict.

⁴Kenneth Bruffee has complained that his notion of social construction has been mistakenly termed "a theory," preferring, instead, that it be understood as "a way of talking, a language, a vernacular" ("Response" 145). Presumably, then, he might argue that to critique constructionism is to miss the point. However, for most purposes (including that of this paper), I think that it is reasonable to present social construction as a theory, especially since it has been used to critique the theories of others and is sufficiently systematic and complete (especially in its compositionist incarnation) to bear critique of its own.

⁵For a more detailed account of the sources of social constructionism and the various strains of antifoundationalism in composition studies, see Stanley Fish's chapter on composition in *Doing What Comes Naturally*. See also Patricia Bizzell's lengthier discussion and critique of both foundationalism and antifoundationalism in rhetoric.

⁶Rescher has termed the perspectivist position "syncreticism" (belief that every theory is true to some extent) in opposition to "skepticism," the position that doubts that anything can be true. The syncretic/skeptic dichotomy is one on which he elaborates extensively in his book and is, I think, an interesting alternative to the Cartesian dichotomy (Bineham) or the exogenic/endogenic dichotomy (Gergen) as a way of understanding the underlying tensions that spawn variations of social constructionism.

⁷In interviews with the *Journal of Advanced Composition* conducted by Gary Olson, both Rorty and Derrida make clear that writing teachers adopt the strong hermeneutic program at their own peril. As Rorty puts it, "Higher education should aim at fixing it so the students can see that the normal discourse in which they have been trained up to adolescence . . . is itself a historical contingency surrounded by other historical contingencies. But having done that, whether they remain happily embedded in the normal discourse of their society or not is something teachers can't predict or control" (Rorty, "Social Construction" 8). Addressing this issue further, Thomas Kent's notion of "paralogical" rhetoric is an interesting attempt at reconciling interpretation with the exigencies of the classroom.

⁸Rom Harré's *The Social Construction of Emotion* and Carol Stearns and Peter Stearns' *Emotion and Social Change* are two good sources for the constructionist perspective on affect. Chapters in both works demonstrate how language and social norms play a major role in how individuals understand their feelings. Although a continuing debate surrounds the issue of whether affect is post-cognitive (that is, exists only after it is assessed) or pre-cognitive (exists as an arousal that leads to low-level preferences of some sort *prior* to appraisal), both sides in the argument maintain that a feeling's eventual appraisal is subject to social forces and then re-enters the cognitive process as a socially constructed "artifact" of experience.

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