Vygotsky, Dewey, and Externalism: Beyond the Student/Discipline Dichotomy

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Lev Semenovich Vygotsky is, as John Dewey was, often cited but rarely discussed in composition studies, and their educational theories have rarely been juxtaposed. Yet there seem to me to be crucial parallels between the educational theories of Vygotsky and Dewey and, in a wider sense, those externalist or what some would call neopragmatist philosophical views of Donald Davidson, Richard Rorty, and others. Though Dewey and Vygotsky came from very different national, ethnic, and ideological roots, the parallels between the two are not surprising. Each was a polymath who synthesized his wide-ranging knowledge to chart a new course for his nation’s emerging mass education system, though a course that was highly controversial and often misunderstood. Both ran experimental schools, not only to learn about the development of the child (ontogeny/pedagogy) but also to learn about the development of the human race (phylogeny/history). Pedagogy was a tool for exploring in a practical way their deepest philosophical and psychological questions. And both were political outsiders, at least in the final years of their work. Dewey dismissed Marx but supported Norman Thomas and attacked the New Deal as an attempt to gloss over the deep flaws of a fundamentally unjust economic system (see Westbrook ch. 12); Vygotsky took Marx seriously but was denounced by Marxists as bourgeois, perhaps because he saw Marx not as the giver of the Law, the prophet of an inevitable new order, but as another European thinker, part of a tradition Vygotsky saw himself as developing, not replacing or transcending (see Kozulin 99-100, 242-43).

Most importantly for my purposes here, both embraced Hegel in adolescence, then gave up, in their mature work, the Hegelian notion of an Absolute, a transcendental Mind toward which human history evolves, though Dewey, like Vygotsky, “never completely shook Hegel out of his system,” as Robert B. Westbrook quipped (14; see Kozulin 15-18). Both saw in Hegel an insistence on human development, collective and individual, in history and culture, along with a preoccupation with human activity—labor. Both attacked atomistic reductions and abstract dualisms and dichotomies of many sorts in their attempt to view education and communication (in the
broadest sense of both) in terms of history and culture (in the broadest sense of both). While Hegel dealt with atomistic and dualistic explanations by synthesizing toward an Absolute, Dewey and Vygotsky dealt with them by denying all absolutes to assert a dynamic holism.

Beyond Dualisms

One of the dichotomies that Dewey and Vygotsky attacked, one that has hobbled educational reform in composition for almost all of its century-long history, is the supposed opposition between the student and what is variously called content, subject matter, or academic discipline. Since its beginnings in the 1870s, composition has generally been thought to teach not a discipline, a body of knowledge, a content, but rather what Davidson calls a "conceptual scheme" waiting for content (Inquiries 189). Composition is thought of as a generalizable skill or competence or cultural attainment on the part of the student that is applicable to any discipline, profession, or content area, to borrow the term used in secondary schools. Composition teachers are expected to teach students writing, period—not to teach the writing of any specific content but to teach a scheme or method or skill for writing in general. And composition teachers are condemned by other disciplines and by the public because "Johnny can't write," not because Johnny can't write in some particular genre(s) about some particular subject matter, discipline, or content area. The vast majority of college-level writing curriculums and writing improvement programs begin with general-composition courses—that great curricular common denominator in American higher education, first-year composition. Content-specific writing courses and programs come later, if they come at all.

General-composition courses take as their starting point the philosophical premise that the student—his or her intelligence, aptitude, behavior, skill, and so on—can be abstracted from disciplinary content. General-composition courses have tended to be oriented toward the how of writing, not the what, toward the structure not the function, the skills not the content. Partly as a result of this orientation, composition teachers have traditionally been more attracted than have so-called content-area teachers to that Romantic version of progressive education that is variously termed student-centered or child-centered pedagogy. But it is a version that both Dewey and Vygotsky resisted, though their names are often mistakenly associated with it. In this article I suggest that by denying the conceptual split between student and subject matter, scheme and content, Dewey and Vygotsky not only critique certain Romantic notions of student-centered pedagogy but in doing so also challenge the very idea of general composition courses in higher education and thus lead us to a radical critique of the very institutional base on which composition studies in the United States rests.

In 1902 Dewey denounced the student/subject matter dichotomy in a little book entitled The Child and the Curriculum. He repeated his denuncia-
tion many times thereafter, culminating in his 1938 attack on the excesses of progressive education, *Experience in Education* (*Middle 2*: 273-301; *Later* 13: 48-60). The student/subject matter dichotomy, he said, gives rise to a whole set of useless oppositions and wrongly-forced choices: personal development versus content; student-centered versus teacher-centered classrooms, student interest versus disciplinary rigor; and, in a wider sense, the individual versus society and nature versus culture. For both Dewey and Vygotsky, these dichotomies echo deeper but equally useless epistemological and metaphysical dichotomies. But before taking these up we should notice the political implications of abstracting the student from the subject matter.

Dewey points out that those who accept the dichotomy between student and subject matter draw the battle lines over "freedom and initiative" versus "guidance and control" (*Middle 2*: 277). Those who privilege the subject matter side of the dichotomy often phrase their argument in terms of "adjustment" or "discipline" and accuse the other side of neglecting their duty to a discipline or an institution or the state or the economy or cultural literacy or what have you. Those who privilege the student side of the dichotomy often phrase their argument in terms of self-realization and liberation and accuse the other side of suppressing individuality or creativity and of exerting oppressive, hegemonic authority. "Inertness and routine, chaos and anarchism, are accusations bandied back and forth," said Dewey (*Middle 2*: 277).

Theorists on both sides of this imaginary divide share an essentially dualist picture, what Davidson calls "a dualism of scheme and content, of organizing system and something waiting to be organized" (*Inquiries* 189) and what Dewey simply calls "the dualism of Subject and Object" (*Later* 10: 284). This picture divides reality into what Rorty terms "disparate ontological realms," one of beliefs (thought, inner self, subject, and so on) and the other of non-beliefs (extension, material reality, object, and so on) (129). The pedagogical emphasis on the outer world of non-beliefs (content, subject matter, discipline) has a long history: Baconian faculty psychology, which associated certain (outer) subject matters with the development of certain (inner) mental faculties; Lockean educational theory, which viewed learning as the accumulation of associative building blocks to make the (inner) mental slate correspond to the (outer) physical world; the Herbartians, who dominated late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American educational theory and pedagogical practice with their positivist emphasis on (inner) accumulation of (outer) facts through recitation; and twentieth-century behaviorists, with their accumulation of S-R bonds that link the inner with the outer realm. Paulo Freire caricatures this emphasis as the "banking" theory of education. The instructor takes discrete bits of knowledge or behavior from outside the student and deposits them in the student. In composition, this view is most familiar in current-traditional rhetoric, which sets out to provide students with discrete information and skills,
organized systematically, that they can retrieve and apply in any situation requiring written communication. But many other kinds of empiricist pedagogy have influenced composition teaching as well (Berlin 7-11, 36-43).

The pedagogical emphasis on liberating the student through focusing on an inner realm of beliefs has an even longer history, extending from Plato's theory of recollection through Rousseau and his followers in educational theory, such as Kant and Pestalozzi, through Freud and Piaget—all of whom saw the process of learning as essentially a conflict between a human being's original (inner) nature and an illusory or corrupt or repressive (outer) social world. In composition one sees this view in the Romantic student- or child-centered American progressive tradition, which distrusts academic disciplines: from Hughes Mearnes in the 1920s, through the correlated curriculum movement of the 1930s and 1940s, through Peter Elbow and the expressivists, to a wide range of contemporary advocates of what is now called liberatory or oppositional pedagogy (Russell ch. 7).

Dewey argues that when the student and the subject matter are viewed as dichotomous categories, they pose "an unreal, and hence insoluble, theoretic problem" (Middle 2: 273-74). But when they are treated not as separate, static entities on opposing poles but as "two limits that define a single process," a developmental journey of "continuous reconstruction" (reweaving the "web of meaning," in Vygotsky's phrase [Thought 182]), "moving from the child's present experience out into that represented by the organized bodies of truth we call [disciplinary] studies," then the dichotomy disappears and the conflicts with them (Middle 2: 278). Educators are then posed not with a philosophical dilemma or an irreconcilable psychological conflict, but with practical questions of socialization, acculturation, development, with historical questions of how Sally or we or Western culture got from there to here and what, as a result, is now possible from here. For Dewey education is a holistic developmental process, not a battle between nature and society: "The facts and truths that enter into the child's present experience, and those contained in the subject-matter of studies, are the initial and final terms of one reality. To oppose one to the other . . . is to hold that the nature and destiny of the child war with each other" (Middle 2: 278).

It is crucial to note here that in Dewey's view neither facts nor truths nor subject matter nor a discipline is "something fixed and ready-made in itself" (Middle 2: 278). Truths and disciplines are as organic and dynamic and vital as the student is because they are all made of the same stuff: human experience in social activity. Vygotsky also regarded disciplines (even, one might conclude, the discipline of Marxism) as dynamic. Disciplines do not proceed from theoretical discovery of some universal truth of nature to specific practical applications in solving problems, but rather from specific practical problems and human needs to a wide range of analytical and theoretical and technical methods useful in various historical situations. The practical need, the human problem, determines the goal. For Vygotsky,
"Practice [as a goal] transforms the entire methodology of a science" (Istoricheskiy 384, Tr. in Kozulin 101-02). Neither is the student an autonomous subject, an *inner self*, or an accumulation of discrete building blocks, but an integrated whole—integrated through social relations. If one takes a metaphysical approach to truth, an approach that assumes a Cartesian split between mind and world, the student/subject matter dichotomy becomes enmeshed in a great knot of dichotomies, all of which Dewey and Vygotsky tried to throw out like a ball of twine so tangled it is useless to try to unravel.

Vygotsky's educational theory, like Dewey's, builds on Darwin, not on Descartes or Kant. Human beings adapt to—and change—their environments using organs (one of which is between the ears—sometimes called the mind) and tools (one of which is semiosis—speaking and writing, to name only two of the many semiotic means). This materialist and therefore monist approach denies the usefulness of a Platonic or Cartesian mind/body dualism. There is no distinct ontological realm of beliefs or consciousness separate from a realm of nonbeliefs. Thus, there is no need to posit some third thing (what Rorty calls *a tertium quid*) to mediate between an organism and its environment, whether some transcendental constitution of consciousness such as "mind," Platonic Forms, Kantian *a priori* categories, Cartesian *cogito*, Hegelian World Spirit, and so on, or even some conceptual scheme such as a language system (as Saussurian *langue*), a system of social norms, a cultural tradition, or a system of conventions of a discourse community to which our beliefs or thoughts "refer" (see Rorty 132-38; Kent, "On the Very").

As Dewey was fond of pointing out, no one worries about the relation (the "fit") between, say, the hand and the world. Dewey believed all the fuss about the "fit" between the mind and world is equally unnecessary—philosophers in what he called "the alleged discipline of epistemology" playing with abstractions (Middle 6: 111). Both hands and minds are organs useful for doing certain things and not others. Vygotsky also rejected Cartesian formulations ("subjective idealisms") that posited a static correspondence among thought, word, and object. He posited instead a dynamic process: "The relation of thought to word is not a thing but a process... Every thought moves, grows, and develops, fulfills a function, solves a problem" (Thought 218).

Vygotsky and Dewey thus have what Rorty calls an "antirepresentational account of knowledge," one "which does not view knowledge as a matter of getting reality right, but rather as a matter of acquiring habits of action for coping with reality"—of adapting to and transforming their environment (1). The content of the disciplines, including the subject matter of formal education, then, is not a static repository of universal truth or method (even if it is taught as if it were) but an organized set of social practices and activities, a history of previous solutions, adaptations, and methods that have succeeded or failed—and might succeed or fail. As such, the content or subject...
matter of disciplines is immensely valuable and must be taught. Indeed, there is nothing else to teach.

Doing away with the Cartesian epistemological split between Subject and Object, scheme and content, also allowed Dewey and Vygotsky to overcome the individual/social dichotomy that has recently received so much attention in composition theory and that lies immediately behind the student/subject matter split (see Berkenkotter). Dewey and Vygotsky reject the Platonic notion of some "inner true self" that exists in a different realm or plane than the brain, a "ghost in the machine," as Gilbert Ryle caricatured the Cartesian and Kantian views of consciousness. There is no "entity called 'the self' that is something distinct from the web of beliefs and desires that the self 'has,'" as Rorty puts it (185).

However, this in no sense denies individuality or uniqueness to each person (see Zebroski 153). Each of us has a unique sociocultural heritage: a history of interactions with others and events which produces individual, original adaptations and transformations of one's self and others and events. Human beings are not internally (genetically) programmed for the vast majority of their behavior, as animals are in their instincts. Unlike animals, human individuals are born into a social world where they learn particular cultural patterns (habits) of behavior that change profoundly over time and differ radically among groups (cultures) within the species. Thus, an individual's development depends on interactions with others and the world, in a process Davidson calls "triangulation," not on correspondence to some biological or transcendent order outside experience, or on some conceptual scheme outside the indeterminate interactions among one person, others, and events in the world ("Three Varieties"). The social environment is not merely a stimulus for the playing out of preexisting inner biological imperatives; it is the means by which human beings become human. As Rorty points out, Dewey—and we may add here Vygotsky—"took over from Hegel the idea that you have to be socialized to be human" (213). Both theorists move from the social to the individual, not from the individual to the social. Vygotsky summarized the reversal of the Cartesian view thus: "The social dimension of consciousness is primary in time and in fact. The individual dimension of consciousness is derivative and secondary" ("Consciousness" 30). There is, in Dewey's phrase, no ready-made, "original individual consciousness" that exists prior to or apart from human social activity, but there is consciousness nevertheless (Middle 14: 62). Dewey and Vygotsky maintain the social and cultural give rise to consciousness and cannot be understood without it.

Because there is no "true inner self," no hard-wired biological determinants of behavior, no essential a priori categories, no conceptual schemes that determine beliefs or behavior in advance, there are no universal laws of human thought independent of social interactions, no inevitable stages or directions to development independent of the history of a person or group, no biologically-programmed stages of cognitive development, as in Piaget's
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There is, however, a dynamic hermeneutic, a constant reinterpretation, a constant reweaving of the "web of belief" (Rorty) or "web of meaning" (Vygotsky), a constant "reconstruction of experience" (Dewey) as human beings consciously re-form habits, evolve new social practices (including new disciplinary traditions) to solve problems, to meet human needs, to adapt to and transform their environments. Again, this view by no means excludes or ignores the uniqueness of each individual or the unique, original contributions of individuals; it merely assumes that the uniqueness of an individual is the product of a unique sociohistorical configuration acting upon a very plastic biological potential, and the unique contributions of an individual are contributions to other human beings, to a dynamic sociocultural network. Human history, unlike the history of other species, is a history of change—not genetic change primarily, but sociocultural change. Thus, subject matter—as organized, sociohistorically situated activities—is not opposed to individuals: it continuously reconstructs them and they it, insofar as they participate in those activities, that history.

Dewey's and Vygotsky's denial of the Cartesian split between inner and outer worlds also led both to reject atomistic views of human development, views which emphasized the analogy between human and animal development but ignored the unique plasticity of human behavior made possible through social interactions. Both argued that one can never reduce human behavior to a simple chain of Stimulus-Response bonds, as the behaviorists would have it, or to any other set of little building blocks that would explain human behavior as merely a more complex instance of the same laws that explain animal behavior. The very flexibility and adaptability of human neural functioning allowed the formation of conscious thought—volitional memory, forethought, and all the other uniquely human habits of mind. These habits are learned from social interaction, to be sure, and are the product of socialization in a culture(s), a community(ies), not simply manifestations of some preexisting, ready-made consciousness. But these characteristically human habits free human beings, in Dewey's terms, from merely reflexive responses to the environment and allow reflective responses, so that (and this is crucial) human beings cannot only adapt to their environments, as animals do, but also transform their environments in profound ways (see Middle 14: 54-59 and Westbrook 286-93).

Thus, both Dewey and Vygotsky passionately resisted any learning theories which atomize higher-order human behavior or consciousness into discrete building blocks—whether faculties, functions, associations, localized cognitive processes, or discrete skills—and then prescribe universal rules or laws for their functioning. "The child's life is an integral, a total one," Dewey insisted, irreducible to formulas (Middle 2: 274). And Vygotsky attacked both "mentalist" psychology (faculty, Freudian, and Wundtian) and "reflexological" psychology (behaviorist and associationist) as caught up in a false dichotomy (see Kozulin 83). The whole explains the parts, not the
parts the whole. Human cognition and behavior, he insisted, cannot be explained by the principles governing animal cognition and behavior any more than the unique properties of water can be explained by the properties of hydrogen and oxygen (*Thought* 4-5). Or as Dewey put it, "Self-consciousness is involved in every simpler process, and no one of them can be scientifically described or comprehended except as this involution is brought out" (*Early* 1: 151). Subject matter, then, is not a storehouse of information or behaviors, of little building blocks waiting to be "banked" in students' minds (or in their "behavioral repertoires"), even when it is viewed as such. Subject matter is a dynamic interpretive activity, a "web of meaning," a "reconstruction of experience," individual and collective. And what makes this uniquely human activity possible is communication, semiosis.

**Writing, Learning, and Thinking as Activity**

What part does writing play in learning, then, and in teaching? When language is viewed as a representation of thought, learning to write means finding fit words to express inner states, and when language is viewed as representation of reality, the problem of learning to write is reduced to finding fit words for each outer state. These are the two poles of modern writing instruction, the Romantic expressivist and the behaviorist/positivist views. Both hinge on a view of communication that assumes a great divide between inner and outer realities, a divide bridged by a system of language. Language is assumed to be a logical system (Saussurian *langue*) that, when properly applied, yields a true "fit" or correspondence between inner and outer.

The externalist theories of Vygotsky, Dewey, and Davidson view language and communication in precisely opposite terms. They dismiss as unnecessary and confusing the traditional Cartesian divide between subject and object and the notion of a system of language (or conventions or social norms) as mediation and representation. Speech and writing (one might add semiotic cultural products of all kinds: pictures, gestures, songs, dances, buildings) are not conceptual schemes or systems that mediate between subject and object or represent (re-present) inner or outer states but are instead tools or instruments that facilitate human interaction. As Davidson puts it, "There is no such thing as a language, not if a language is anything like what many philosophers and linguists have supposed"—that is, a tertiary conceptual scheme mediating between two disparate ontological realms ("Nice Derangement" 446). "The metaphors," Rorty says, "which the pragmatist suggests we [use] . . . are those of linguistic behavior and tool-using, of language as a way of grabbing hold of causal forces and making them do what we want, altering ourselves and our environment to suit our aspirations" (81). In the most fundamental sense, speech and writing are physical phenomena, sound waves in the air and marks on a surface, meaningless without human beings who make use of these sounds and marks to
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carry on social activity. In much the same way, human beings make tools of physical objects to organize and facilitate their activity; they make and use sounds in the air and marks on a surface to help them organize their lives and carry on their characteristically human activities.

I deliberately oversimplify several externalist accounts of communication here to get at the basic assumption they share: speech and writing are instruments to carry on social activity. Speaking and writing aren't a means of "getting reality right," as Rorty puts it, but rather a means of "acquiring habits of action for coping with reality"—of learning, in other words (1). One of Vygotsky's great contributions was to systematically explore how people (especially children and adolescents) in the cultures he studied learn to use speaking and writing as tools to solve problems, to adapt to and transform their environments. Though infinitely complex, the process is simple in its outlines. Davidson calls it "triangulation"; it requires nothing more than one person's mind, another person's (or others') mind(s), and events or objects (stimuli) they share. For example, a seven-month-old child who has not yet learned her first word reaches in the direction of a spherical object and babbles. Her parent, seeing this, puts the object in her hands and says, "Ball! You want to play with the ball?" Sooner or later—usually sooner—the child learns that adults may play with her using spherical objects and that certain sounds ("ball") and certain activities accompany human interactions with such objects. She learns through observing others' actions and her own that making the sound "ball" in certain situations often produces certain effects in others. Triangulation has been achieved. And learning.

The child will eventually learn many words and effects for many kinds of spherical objects and many kinds of activity that go with them. But the crucial point here is that a linguistic system or conceptual scheme or community norm or discourse convention did not mediate between the child's mind and the object. Another human being, the parent, mediated between ("triangulated with" might be a better phrase) the child and the object. It was the social activity (in this case the verbal and physical action) of another human being that made those vocal sounds salient, useful, instrumental—meaningful. Social activities, practical interactions, organize the human world, not language, conventions, or any other conceptual scheme. Speaking and writing are but tools, instruments (albeit crucial ones) for facilitating this interaction, for organizing activity. Abstract transcendentals or conceptual schemes—tertia such as language systems (such as Saussurian langue), a system of social norms, a system of conventions of a discourse community, and so on—are theoretical baggage we do not need. Unlike animals, which ordinarily react immediately to stimuli based on biologically-determined response patterns, human beings are able to use tools, particularly semiotic means, to accomplish social mediation of their reactions to stimuli, thus allowing for a far wider range of possible behavior—and greater potential for adapting to and changing environments. As soon as children learn to use
semiotic means (and this occurs very early), “the nature of development changes from biological to sociohistorical,” as Vygotsky put it (Thought 95).

What then is the relation of these human social activities, speaking and writing, to thought? Social interactions also organize the higher functions of the brain: thought. Mind is social, historical. This externalist view, shared not only by Dewey and Vygotsky but also by Nietzsche, Davidson, Derrida, the later Wittgenstein, and others, holds that thought is largely a product of human semiotic (interpretive and communicative) activity. As Nietzsche put it, “Consciousness has developed only under the pressure of the need for communication. . . . Consciousness is really only a net of communication between human beings; it is only as such that it had to develop; a solitary human being who lived like a beast of prey would not have needed it” (298). Or as Vygotsky put it, “The mechanism of social behavior and the mechanism of consciousness are the same. . . . We are aware of ourselves for we are aware of others; and this is as it is because in relation to ourselves we are in the same position to others as others are to us” (“Consciousness” 29-30).

Speaking and writing are tools or instruments people use for organizing and changing not only their social activities and their material worlds, but also, significantly, their thought, their consciousness. Speech or writing or any semiotic tool—tying a knot in a handkerchief to remember something, to borrow Vygotsky’s favorite example—is an instrument for carrying on socially-mediated activity, and one of those socially-mediated activities is thought. Through social interactions, people come to think and act the way they do. However, because almost all thought and action are socially mediated, rather than biologically or transcendentally determined, it is never possible to reduce thought/action to a closed logical system, to predict with certainty the thoughts or actions of a person or a group. This means that speech and writing (and their acquisition) are paralogical, to use Thomas Kent’s term (“Beyond System”). Human behavior is the product of history (experience) but never historically determined in advance, because there is no set of universal laws of human behavior (or that aspect of behavior called communication) that can be known outside history (443). We cannot “climb out of our own minds” and achieve a “God’s Eye view,” to borrow Hilary Putnam’s terms (ch. 3). Vera John-Steiner summarizes Vygotsky’s position: “Because the historical conditions which determine to a large extent the opportunities for human experience are constantly changing, there can be no universal schema that adequately represents the dynamic relations” that produce human development (Vygotsky, Mind 125).

Another of Vygtosky’s great accomplishments was to describe the ontogeny of certain kinds of thought as “the process of the internalization of social speech,” thus accounting for the roles of speech and writing in learning (Mind 27). To return to the example of the child, her parent, and the ball: As the child acquires habits of verbal (and physical) behavior having to do with the social uses of spherical objects, she is able to use those habits as an
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Vygotsky summarizes: "Using words (one class of stimuli) to create a specific plan, the child achieves a much broader range of activity, applying as tools not only those objects that lie near at hand, but searching for and preparing such stimuli as can be useful in the solution of the task and preparing future actions" (Mind 26). This social nature of consciousness, and the instrumental role of semiosis in its ontogeny and functioning, is for Vygotsky most apparent in preschool children's talking to themselves as they carry on their activities. This self-talk, Vygotsky argues, is a crucial stage in the internalization of social activity—and thus the formation of consciousness and thought—for those of us raised in Western cultures, at least. In Western and in many other cultures, children under the age of six or seven talk out loud to themselves a great deal more than older children do. Piaget, with his dualist view, theorized that this egocentric speech, as he called it, is merely a survival of infantile autism, a biologically determined developmental stage children naturally outgrow as social speech gradually replaces egocentric speech about age six or seven. For Vygotsky, however, egocentric speech is social, a developmental step toward certain kinds of thought and, as such, not egocentric at all. As the research of Vygotsky and others has shown, in so-called egocentric speech a child may be talking her way through a problem, rehearsing responses out loud, playing various roles in a one-person dialogue, making sense of a previous experience, debating a future course of action, and so forth. At about age six, egocentric speech fades and becomes fully internalized as thought (Thought ch. 2). Adult thought, at least in most cultures studied, is largely internalized speech (or writing), an interplay of ventriloquating voices, to borrow Bakhtin's term (see Wertsch, esp. 31-45, 93-118). Thus, even the thought and activity of a solitary individual (who was raised in a society) are socially mediated. Learning takes place through social activity even when the individual is alone with a book or with his or her thoughts because that unique human capacity, volitional memory (itself a product of social activity, as both Vygtosky and Dewey argued) makes absence present, others' voices heard, and the accumulated experience of human beings, as represented by organized (disciplinary) knowledge, available for changing one's mind and one's world.

Learning is at bottom acquiring habits from other people, habits of activity, including communicating and thinking, which are, in the deepest sense, kinds of activity, since there is no real division between mind and body, thinking and doing. If there is no gulf between the mind and the world, subject and object, scheme and content, then there is no gulf between doing and knowing. Knowledge is certain acquired habits of mind, "an instrument or organ of successful action," as Dewey put it in his 1908 essay, "The Bearings of Pragmatism Upon Education" (Middle 4: 180). But unlike the behaviorists, for whom habits are mere reflexive responses to stimuli, Dewey and Vygotsky refuse to reduce the human mind to an atomistic collection of
responses, as I noted earlier. Human beings (including of course students) transform those stimuli through their own individual cognition (consciousness), create new stimuli (including semiotic ones), and are then able to influence their environments. The processes through which they transform those stimuli have their origin and development in communicative activities, though those activities are not reducible to rules on the model of physics. Human beings can thus change not only their own individual habits, but also their traditions and institutions, because there is no biologically determined or behaviorally determined action. We are not in a prison-house of language or social norms or any conceptual scheme. We can have direct access to other minds and the events (stimuli) in the world we share.

As John Trimbur has argued, giving up the inner/outer Cartesian dichotomy has profound implications for the study and teaching of writing. Almost all of the theoretical approaches to composition assume this Cartesian split between inner and outer. Writing is internal, preexisting, private thought made external and public, through the mediation of a logical system of langue. Vygotskian and other externalist views reverse this, as we have seen. Writing has its origin and development in social activities, where problems and needs arise that can be solved and satisfied through writing; it is social even when most private, for external discourses are internalized as thought, others’ voices are appropriated, experience continually reconstructed. And as Kent has argued, language is not a logical system, a predictable conceptual scheme for mediating inner and outer states, but one of a number of semiotic tools which function paralogically, so writing instruction can never be reduced to some universal method. What then does this externalist philosophical and psychological account of learning and communication suggest about the student/subject matter dichotomy as it appears in debates over writing instruction?

First, it means that learning to write doesn’t happen naturally through some inner process which will lead to truth or knowledge or skill or authenticity if only we free students from the oppression of external authority, whether that of subject matter, discipline, teacher, or institution. The discipline of composition (and indeed much of American progressive education) appropriated a discourse of opposition between self and society that ultimately ventriloquiates narratives of the Romantic rebel, a hero seizing the Promethean fire and returning to liberate humanity from the Titans, or an individual courageously probing the depths of the unconscious and finding release from the enslaving trauma. It is, as Stanley Fish points out, a narrative “that belongs properly to a foundational hero, to someone who has just discovered a truth above the situational and now returns to implement it” (354).

Both Vygotsky and Dewey quarreled with the whole modern tradition, stretching back to Rousseau and the Romantics (and including Freud), that the individual is at war with society, that some inner natural self resists outer
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artificial cultural constraints, or that the individual, once enslaved by custom, must liberate him or herself from it to achieve personal freedom and self-realization. In externalist accounts, self-realization is always achieved through society, though it may involve resisting one set of social practices (habits, ideologies) in favor of another, more useful set. Dewey and Vygotsky both specifically rejected Freud's notion of a psychic realm divorced from and fundamentally antagonistic toward social activity, along with his elevation of instinct to a central explanatory mechanism of behavior. For Dewey, instinct and indeed almost all of what is called human nature is plastic, "only a neutral potentiality," as Philip Rieff puts it, "without effect until it becomes an element in social habits" (30). And for Vygotsky also, Freud errs in positing two separate realms of mental functioning, a biologically-grounded pleasure principle and a socially-imposed reality principle. As a result, Piaget—whom Vygotsky brilliantly analyzes as being essentially Freudian in his assumptions—posits "a very peculiar theory of socialization indeed... Socialization is a force that is alien to the child's nature," and the result of the conflict is repression, pathology (Thought 47). Vygotsky counters that there is no "dual reality," no separation between the pleasure principle and the reality principle, because social activity gives rise to consciousness, to the mental, and thus there is no need to "divorce realistic thinking from all needs, interests, and desires" (Thought 46, 38). Conscious, realistic, logical thought, including the organized thought of disciplines, is a way of satisfying needs and desires, of solving problems, of adapting to an environment through social means. Realizing one's human potential comes through society, history, culture—and therefore through disciplines—not in spite of them or by transcending them. Biology and consciousness are not antagonistic. They are merely on different levels of functioning, where each interacts with but does not determine the other (see Ratner 210 and Emerson).

Consequently, higher learning in humans (such as acquiring a new written genre) does not happen through the unfolding of biologically-determined stages (Herbartian, Freudian, Piagetian, and so on) or through the behaviorists' stimulus-response, trial and error, but rather through "socially mediated activity" (Vygotsky's phrase) or "associated living" (Dewey's phrase), where communication is essential. Thus, there is no way to escape from groups, although groups may be master/apprentice dyads, the students and teacher in a large lecture, or the inner dialogism of a reader encountering a writer by means of a text. All approaches to writing instruction are at bottom social.

Similarly, it is impossible for teachers or curriculums to liberate students per se because there is no absolute or transcendent or universal practice, some natural state beyond the sociocultural (human) world to which one can escape, only some other set of socially- and historically-bound practices. One may only hope to liberate one's students (or one's self) from some habit or discourse or discipline or authority to some other habit or discourse or
discipline or authority, though even in such liberation the old will inevitably influence the new, the past the present. There is, for Dewey and Vygotsky, no such thing as social construction, only "continuous reconstruction" (Middle 2: 278). One hopes that the new reconstruction will be more successful than the old, and one must set one's goals accordingly. But there are always goals, voices, habits of mind, prior reconstructions toward which the instructor and the curriculum lead students, even when one claims there are no goals—only some abstract notion of "skills," or "personal development," or "liberation," or "empowerment." For in curriculum, as in other things, not to decide is to decide. Some set of social practices must fill the vacuum. And in his 1938 Experience in Education, Dewey, noting the attacks on progressive education from the Neo-Thomist Great Books advocates, warned that a failure of student-centered pedagogy to be clear about its disciplinary goals, its "organized subject matter," "may in the end merely strengthen the tendency toward a reactionary return to intellectual and moral authoritarianism"—a prophecy that came true shortly after his death and is now being fulfilled anew, it seems, in the reaction of the political right to liberatory pedagogy, in the so-called "political correctness" controversy (Middle 13: 58).

Throughout his career as an educator, Dewey insisted that learning must begin with the experience of the student but lead toward disciplinary knowledge—the activities (habits) of the groups that the student is or may be a part of. "The organized subject matter of the adult and the specialist," Dewey said, "cannot provide the starting point. Nevertheless, it represents the goal toward which education should continually move" (Later 13: 56). The curriculum must "end with the organized subjects that represented the cumulative experience of the [human] race," as Lawrence Cremin put it (220), because human experience does not organize itself; groups of people organize their experience, through socioeconomic means. Education is inextricably linked to society. Individuals develop through organized, collective experience, not through random individual experience. The goals of education are always social, rooted in history. For Dewey, "The inescapable linkage of the present with the past is a principle [of learning] whose application is not restricted to the study of history." All learning is a "continuous spiral," weaving together past and present (Later 13: 53). Thus, Dewey argued, students must be under the guidance of a teacher steeped in a discipline, an organized formulation of human experience, of history.

In this view, growth in writing means that students would move toward acquiring the genres, the habits of discourse, the voices of social groups involved in organized activities while students more and more fully participate in (either directly or vicariously) the activities of those groups and eventually contribute to and transform them—not before they participate in them. One cannot learn to write (or think, or reason, or solve problems) apart from the activities of some historically-situated human community(ies).
In a pragmatic sense, conceptual schemes (such as methods or skills) are inseparable from content (subject matter or disciplinary activities). Thus curriculum, in Dewey's view, must consciously and carefully interweave the interests of the learner with the demands of disciplines, but the goal must always be to progressively involve the student more fully in the organized, though always dynamic, activity and knowledge (options for action) of the disciplines.

In the hands of his followers—notably the founder of what is called the project method, William Heard Kilpatrick—Dewey's carefully-wrought interwoven spiral unraveled as the child-centered progressives tried to lay aside broader social and disciplinary concerns and build curricula on the experience of the student alone. Kilpatrick resisted attempts by the disciplines to structure students' experiences. This "fixed-in-advance" subject matter, he argued, was the original cause of curricular stagnation and, in the rapidly changing modern world, amounted to a crude guess at the knowledge that students would need as adults. Instead, Kilpatrick hoped to teach students "how to think, not what to think"—enshrining the scheme/content split. Problem solving and writing were thought of as techniques to be taught, methods in themselves, not as activities embedded in disciplinary matrices. The project method gave students "real-life" problems and let them find "their own solutions," without being "repressed" by "fixed-in-advance" knowledge (see Cremin 216-20). Students were expected to discover or create knowledge themselves in child-centered classrooms, without the domination of teacher or discipline. Inevitably, attempts to teach the process of thinking or writing as a Ding an sich, independent of disciplinary activities, tended to separate writing from the disciplines (see Russell 201-06).

With uncharacteristic venom, Dewey attacked as "really stupid" the sentimentalism of these child-centered progressives who, in his words, trusted "planlessness" to liberate students' "independent thinking" (Later 2: 59). For Dewey, freedom is not the original state of human beings or the result of no discipline; freedom is, in Cremin's words, "systematically wrought out in cooperation with experienced teachers, knowledgeable in their own [disciplinary] traditions," through a continuous spiral of carefully selected and guided experiences leading toward a goal—a goal determined in advance from the history, the social formations (habits) of a group (234). The curriculum must not simply give students new experiences, for new experiences must be "related intellectually to earlier experiences, and this means that there be some advance made in conscious articulation of facts and ideas"—ordinarily through the use of spoken and written language (Later 13: 49-50). A student's experience "can expand into the future only as it is also enlarged to take in the past"—both the student's past experiences and those of the human race as organized through academic disciplines, since there is no dichotomy between individual and society (Later 13: 51).
The Future in the Past: The Freedom in Discipline(s)

Vygotsky, like Dewey, assumed that education must be goal-directed. Both set as their goal "scientific" thought, very broadly conceived as the organized concepts/practices of social formations that use deliberate, reflective thought to meet human needs and solve human problems. Science may thus include not only academic disciplines but also building trades, political movements, and so on, which have their own discipline of thought and action (see *Thought* ch. 6; Westbrook 141-43, 169-73). (Indeed, American higher education has made disciplines of a huge variety of previously excluded social practices, from neonatal care to mortuary science.) Like Dewey, Vygotsky always began with the student's experience, familiar objects and relations drawn from the student's life-world. But both theorists insisted school curriculum in industrial societies must deliberately set out to teach students what Vygotsky calls (following Piaget) "scientific" concepts such as those formulated by disciplines (for example, the earth revolving around the sun), not to merely develop and elaborate what he calls (again following Piaget) "spontaneous" concepts, which emerge from the student's everyday experience (for example, the sun revolving around the earth) (*Thought* 190).

And like Dewey's "continuous spiral" of carefully selected and guided experiences, Vygotsky's "zones of proximal development" reach toward some organized set of practices/concepts that is new for the learner but old for others who worked at similar problems or activities or genres before the learner (*Thought* 186-90). Dewey's "continuous spiral" of discipline-directed experience and Vygotsky's "zones of proximal development" toward scientific concepts both depend on teachers (or more knowledgeable peers) who are steeped in a discipline, an organized set of practices/concepts (knowledges), to guide the learner toward the goals. Both theorists recognized that the goals may change (as the social practices/concepts change) in response to the activities of individuals or groups, and that other cultures and historical periods have very different goals. But neither accepted the notion that one can teach or discover or liberate students to attain any universally true (or even any very useful) knowledge or skills apart from the organized knowledge/activity of a disciplinary formation(s).

The parallels between the two theorists are more than coincidental. Vygotsky developed his theories of concept formation and the zone of proximal development in part as a reaction against the very pedagogy Dewey attacked, Kilpatrick's project method, which was imported to the Soviet Union as the *complex method* just after the revolution. In the 1920s the complex method became widespread, but by the early 1930s, when Vygotsky was writing *Thought and Language*, it was widely criticized as ineffectual (see Bowen 3: 509-13). Because Vygotsky took organized knowledge as the goal of education and development, he attacked not only Kilpatrick's theories but also the theories of Piaget and others who argued that education should merely provide opportunities for students to reach "natural" stages of
development. For Vygotsky, systematic instruction in formal knowledge is functionally connected to development, not merely its accompaniment or replacement. "Development and instruction have different 'rhythms,'" he says. "Instruction has its own sequences and organization[;] it follows a curriculum and timetable" which do not always correspond to the "developmental processes it calls to life." Nevertheless, "instruction usually precedes development," rather than merely following the student's maturation to some biologically-determined developmental level (as Piaget had theorized), because the student "acquires certain habits and skills in a given area before he learns to apply them consciously and deliberately," just as children usually learn to pronounce a word before they come to understand its uses and meanings (*Thought* 184-85). Habits/skills in some area (including those habits of thought Dewey called knowledge) are acquired from socially mediated activity in that area—mediated in most cases by *more* knowledgeable, *more* skillful persons: parents, instructors, mentors, advanced students. Assisted development usually precedes independent development because human beings can learn through social means such as imitation, as well as through the trial-and-error operant conditioning that animals are confined to (*Thought* 186). But neither is education merely accumulating more and more discrete bits of information or skills (as the behaviorists argued), for unlike animal learning, human learning is holistic. It involves applying knowledge (old habits) to novel problems consciously and deliberately. Training is thus transferable (another area where Vygotsky disagreed with behaviorists such as Edward L. Thorndike), because human beings can consciously apply experience from one set of activities (discipline or community) to another set of activities (discipline or community). "All the basic school subjects act as formal discipline," Vygotsky wrote, "each facilitating the learning of the others" (*Thought* 186).

Just as Vygotsky disagreed with Piaget's characterization of early socialization as the imposition of adult functions on biologically-determined stages of cognitive development, so he disagreed with Piaget's characterization of students' acquisition of scientific concepts as the replacement or suppression of natural spontaneous concepts. Instead, the formal, systematic content of scientific concepts taught in school subjects transforms, through complex developmental interactions, the structure of thought, including the so-called spontaneous concepts, which were themselves a product of instruction (albeit informal and unsystematic) during the preschool years. And the spontaneous concepts can also transform the disciplinary concepts, as students produce novel (creative, original) responses. Again, nurture is not at war with nature.

This leads Vygotsky to certain conclusions that, like many of Dewey's conclusions, challenge traditions of progressive writing pedagogy in the United States. He opposed dropping the formal study of grammar, as many child-centered progressives in the Soviet Union (and the United States)
advocated—and still advocate. He acknowledged that its study is of little practical value and is in one sense superfluous, since children have learned to use most grammatical constructions before they even enter school. But through studying grammar as a formal system of concepts, a discipline, the student becomes “aware of what he is doing and learns to use his skills consciously, flexibly, adaptably,” and can attain “a higher level of speech development” (Thought 184; cf. Dewey, Later 17: 291).

Vygotsky also advocated imitation, another ancient pedagogical tradition rejected as unoriginal, unauthentic, and repressive by many child-centered progressives. But imitation for Vygotsky is not “the layman’s belief that imitation is a mechanical activity and that anyone can imitate almost anything if shown how” (Thought 187). Imitation is a complex developmental process involving conscious reshaping of meaning. It is not the “automatic copying” or “drill imitation by trial and error” many animals are capable of, but “intelligent, conscious imitation” that “results in new general abilities” because the imitator has internalized a conceptual structure and made it his or her own; the person thus has new knowledge, new options for adapting to and shaping an ever-changing environment (Thought 188). “To imitate,” Vygotsky insisted, “it is necessary to possess the means of stepping from something one knows to something new” (Thought 187). This kind of uniquely human imitation usually comes through careful guidance of a novice by an expert—in school environments an instructor or more knowledgeable peer—who leads the learner to internalize a past formulation (discipline, history) for the sake of new possibilities for action.

One can see the subtle persistence of the Romantic idealism of rebellion—echoing the Platonic and Cartesian dichotomy of inner and outer realities—in much twentieth century discussion of writing pedagogy, particularly of the purported freedom/discipline dichotomy. Indeed, it is a tradition stretching at least from Hughes Mearns in the 1920s to the present (see Russell ch. 7). When one posits a conflict between individual and society, student and subject matter, inner and outer worlds, the tendency is to imagine some universal conceptual scheme, some tertium quid, that will mediate between subject and object or free the individual from the domination of society.

Much the same tendency is present today, even in anti-foundational theories. The Platonic and Cartesian ways of thinking about writing and learning are so entrenched in modern Western habits of thought that even when composition theorists invoke Dewey or Vygotsky, Rorty or Davidson, Bakhtin or Derrida, they often arrive at pedagogical conclusions which assume this scheme/content, subject/object split. “Theory hope” drives them to search for some universal method in philosophies that deny universal method, as Stanley Fish has argued. John Trimbur and James Zebroski (“Writing”) have traced the tendency of composition theorists in the 1970s and early 1980s—Peter Elbow, Janet Emig, Andrea Lunsford, James Moffett,
and Barry Kroll—to treat Vygotsky as if he shared the Freudian assumptions of Piaget about the nature of writing acquisition. And it seems to me equally curious that some recent uses of Vygotskian theory argue that students must transcend or be liberated from the authority of disciplines or subject matter. If one looks closely at many of the uses (or to my mind the misuses) of Vygotskian theory in composition, they look very much like the misuses of Deweyan thought within that complex movement (or vast continental drift) that we call American progressive education, the movement which in large part gave rise to composition studies.

Some practitioners of what is variously called critical or oppositional or liberatory pedagogy link Vygotsky with Marxist educational theorists such as Freire, Stanley Aronowitz, and Henry A. Giroux; they suggest that Vygotskian theory is in some sense “liberatory,” that pedagogies based on it bring students to a critical perspective on disciplinary knowledge that transcends disciplines (see for example Fiore and Elsasser; Randic). Yet such Marxist (or rather marxisant) educational practices are, whether they acknowledge it or not, teaching students a discipline: the activities (questions, problems, methods, assumptions, conventions) of critical theory of some stripe(s) or feminist theory of some stripe(s) or some other logical, disciplined, conceptual formulation. Students in Freire's educational project, for example, begin with concepts from their previous social practice, their life experiences. But within the instructional setting, they move toward concepts their teachers offer them, with the goal that these logical, systematic concepts, drawn from a certain intellectual school—yes, a discipline—will help students adapt to and transform their environment, to discourse (engage in dialectic) in some of the ways the group of intellectuals who formulated the concepts discourse. By the same token, there is always the potential for the life experience, the “spontaneous concepts,” of the students also to transform the teachers and the theory (the discipline)—an important feature of radical pedagogy (see Freire 68). But the potential for students to change disciplinary formations is, as Vygotsky and Dewey pointed out, a potential of all pedagogy, for in time students develop to become the discipline, and their unique experiences change and transform it, though in ways that are always the product of history (experience) but never historically determined in advance (see Kent, "Very Idea" 443). The question is not whether students will liberate themselves from a certain disciplinary formation (they both will and will not) or whether they will find their “own” voices; the question is what disciplinary formulation should they (re)create, what voice(s) should they appropriate or ventriloquate as their own? Liberatory pedagogy cannot not free students from the domination of disciplines, but only of some disciplines in favor of another discipline(s): other logical, organized, conceptual discourses. Thus, the test of oppositional pedagogy (or any other) is not what it opposes but what it proposes, not how well it deconstructs but how well it reconstructs (see Rorty 16; Ritchie 173).
I believe teaching students the conceptual framework, the theory, the discipline of liberatory pedagogy is a good thing, but as Robert G. Wood points out in this issue of *JAC*, liberatory pedagogy can defeat its own aims when some sociohistorically contingent practice/theory comes to be thought of as a universal method and thus excludes others—women, for example—whose experience of oppression is very different from the experience of those for whom (or by whom) the practice/theory was evolved. This tendency to assume that some historically conditioned and contingent theoretical insight is actually a universal truth or method was the major target of Vygotsky's critique of psychology (*Istoricheskiy*) and, I believe, of Soviet Marxism as well. For Soviet Marxism posited a method and a discipline beyond history, a radical break with the European intellectual tradition, whereas Vygotsky saw Marx and Marxism as part of that tradition and thus incapable of transcending it—although quite capable of transforming it, albeit in indeterminate ways, as people collectively reweave the "web of meaning" (see Kozulin 99-100, 242-43).

A Romantic idealism also seems to lie behind the anti-foundational approach of Kenneth Bruffee in his much-discussed article, "Collaborative Learning and the Conversation of Mankind," an article in which he invokes both Rorty and Vygotsky in support of his views. Bruffee begins by denying the usefulness of the polarized debate between "subject-matter" and "native gifts" schools of thought about liberal education—the same dualism that I am attacking here. And from an externalist or neopragmatist perspective, he is correct that authority of teachers comes not from some correspondence to a truth that transcends social relations, but from their being "certified representatives of the communities . . . that students aspire to join" (650). But Bruffee immediately goes on to posit a "largest community," a "community that encompasses all others," whose values and interests lie in resisting the "conservative tendency" of disciplines to "maintain established knowledge." What is this community? Humankind? The "conversation of mankind," as he says, following Michael Oakeshott? In what journals is the discourse of this largest community carried on? In what genres? And why must this community of the whole inevitably resist the conservative tendency toward disciplinary order? Indeed, the body politic is notoriously conservative, particularly in matters of education. This overarching community Bruffee posits looks disarmingly like a repository of universal values—the values of Western liberalism, as it turns out.

The externalist theories that I have called upon deny we can ever step back from disciplines or communities and find some Olympian community or discipline that transcends the others. We are always already situated in traditions, to paraphrase Derrida, another philosopher who has been called an externalist (Wheeler). If we try to step back from a discipline and critique it, we are stepping into another discipline, another historically-rooted social practice (often without having looked back and noticed where we are).
example, Bruffee asks students to critique disciplines, but he does so (perhaps without noticing) from the perspective of another discipline: the sociology of knowledge. Bruffee’s attempt to get students to step outside disciplines and see them from an Olympian perspective as “knowledge forming communities” within a “largest possible . . . community of knowledgeable peers” is, from a Deweyan or Vygotskian perspective, an attempt to teach students yet another discipline, albeit a relatively new one. Indeed, Bruffee uses the concepts, the terminology, the voices of that discipline (particularly of Thomas Kuhn) to accomplish his critique. The students are no longer doing discipline X or Y but instead are doing sociology of knowledge, involved in the systematic conceptual framework, the “content,” of that discipline. I suspect the sociology of knowledge is a good thing for students to do/know, but that discipline does not consist of “the largest community” (it’s actually a rather small discipline), and there is nothing inherently liberal or liberatory about the sociology of science (or about any discipline); it too has its normal discourse, its habits of thought and discourse, and its conservatives and rebels.

Toward an Externalist Pedagogy
The danger of teaching in composition courses some method or another as if it were a universally applicable scheme beyond disciplinary content/practice is not that students will fail to learn to write. Students can and often do learn to write in certain ways by participating in any activity that requires writing in those ways to carry on its activity. Nor is the danger that a method has no content, no discipline. The externalist denial of the scheme/content dichotomy means that there is always content (even if the method is the content). Nor is the danger that students will be repressed. Every method/content is potentially repressive—and liberatory. For example, using one’s authority to put a class in five circles of five students each rather than five front-facing rows of five students each is not a giving up or challenging of authority per se; it is challenging one authority to institute another.

The danger lies in being confused about the goals of instruction, and thus dissipating the energies of the students and the teacher in purposeless activity leading in no particular direction. The danger, in other words, is having a poor discipline. This was Vygotsky’s and Dewey’s indictment of Romantic student-centered education. This indictment cannot be answered by claims that some pedagogical method is more natural or liberatory or true to reality per se, unless one assumes that there is some natural or universal community, some conceptual scheme that lies behind or above experience against which one can judge. The only satisfying reply is to point to the specifics, the gritty details, of the disciplinary content (organized human activities) one is teaching, to argue that teaching one discipline instead of another will offer students more useful options for solving present and anticipated problems, for adapting to and recreating
their and our human world.

Because writing, like problem solving, is not a Ding an sich, a method or technique universally applicable to all communication situations that require writing, but is instead a matter of learning to participate in some historically-situated human activity that requires some kind(s) of writing, it cannot be learned apart from the problems, the habits, the activities—the subject matter—of some group that found the need to write in that way to solve a problem or carry on its activities. This is why trying to teach students the conventions of various disciplines without their content (activities) is often so hollow. Students may learn to parrot the phrasing or structure of some genre, but unless they are then involved (directly or vicariously) in the problems, the activities, the habits of those who found a need to use writing in those ways, the discourse is meaningless—except as a requirement of a powerful institution. And this is also why trying to teach some method without acknowledging its inherent content is so often hollow, directionless.

From an externalist perspective, one that denies the scheme/content dichotomy, the search for pedagogical method in composition is at bottom a search for content, for subject matter. One cannot teach writing without teaching writing about something for someone, any more than one can teach history without teaching the history of something. One can claim to do so, but inevitably the writing and the teaching and the learning must be about some need or problem, about the activities of some person or group (though it may be about the needs of the teacher or his or her discipline or institution rather than about those of the students). This is why both Dewey and Vygotsky insisted that writing always be taught under the pressure of some social need. It must be an activity "the child needs," a "complex cultural activity" that should be incorporated into a task that is necessary and relevant for the child's life (Mind 118).

With the dismissal of rhetoric as a discipline in the late nineteenth century, general composition courses were created to teach writing per se, writing as a generalizable scheme waiting for any content, any subject matter. They were based on positivist or idealist assumptions (sometimes both), that separated student from subject matter, thought and/or reality from language. Learning to write—learning the skills—could supposedly proceed independent of content. American composition instruction is still largely trapped in this false dichotomy. General composition courses are thought to have no content, in the sense that most other disciplines do, but to be merely service courses for other disciplines. They are supposed to teach a universal scheme. They are supposed to focus on students. But it is not considered the job of general composition courses to teach the content of the disciplines. Their goal is to teach the scheme without the content—an impossible task, from an externalist perspective, a task that leads to formlessness, goalessness. And the history of general composition courses shows the consequences of abstracting students from disciplines.
The history of composition instruction in the United States might be read as a search for subject matter, for content, for a discipline. Composition courses have tried various systems of literary criticism, of Freudian or behaviorist or Gestalt or Rogerian therapy, of general semantics, of linguistics, of the Great Books, even (though rarely) of rhetoric. In the last two decades, composition has added decision theory in information processing, cognitive psychology, sociology of knowledge, literary theory, cultural criticism, Marxism, group process, and so on. Even when composition theorists eschew disciplines, as with Elbow, they do so on the basis of—or in search of—some method, some theory, some set of techniques and concepts to teach students.

After more than a century of searching for a method, a conceptual scheme, there have been no knock-down successes, no dramatic breakthroughs, not even any noticeable let-up in the complaints about poor student writing. It might be useful to call off the search, just as Dewey and Vygotsky concluded Western philosophy and psychology should call off the search for a universal, metaphysical solution to the problems of philosophy and psychology. Instead of searching high and low for universals, for schemes applicable to any content, we might look around us at what is working in other places and behind us at what has worked in other times, to find new possibilities for change in what we are doing now. For example, historical study yields possibilities that Romantic and positivist habits of mind have excluded: memorization, imitation, contextualized grammar study, praeccto, progymnasmata, and so on. Workplace and writing-in-the-disciplines research is causing us to notice that every day in every nation people learn to write new genres in the process of learning to carry on new activities, solve new problems. Research into this apprenticeship learning or situated cognition yields possibilities for reweaving/reconstructing formal instruction (Lave and Wenger). Comparative educational research, such as the Composition in Cross-National Perspective project at Iowa State University, may cause us to wonder why we are virtually the only nation on earth that has general composition courses at the college level. Such pragmatic, sociohistorical research approaches, which frankly acknowledge the holistic relation of students and students' writing to subject matter—to organized human activities—may lead us to drop the abstraction (and perhaps the institution) of general composition courses in higher education (and I am well aware of the dislocation that would cause to the profession of composition studies, to English departments, and to American higher education). But in giving up abstract dichotomies such as the student/subject matter split, we will have given up none of our present possibilities for learning and teaching, and we may well gain some that are new (to us).

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