

Social-Process Rhetorical Inquiry: Cultural Studies Methodologies for Critical Writing about Advertisements

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Critique involves stealing away the more useful elements and rejecting the rest. From this point of view cultural studies is a process, a kind of alchemy for producing useful knowledge

Richard Johnson

There is mounting evidence that composition studies has recently experienced a “social turn,” and, according to John Trimbur, this social turn is the result of an increasing disaffection among certain composition teachers with the radical individualism promoted by the early writing-as-process paradigm.¹ In the mid 1980s, fueled by emerging debates about academic discourse, professional writing, and writing across the curriculum, scholars such as Patricia Bizzell, Lee Odell, and James Reither, among many others, began to question the individualism implied in previous articulations of the writing process, arguing instead that different institutional contexts for writing (academic, professional, disciplinary) require different writing processes. I believe that the best way to convey this contextual character of writing processes is to teach students the social nature and function of writing, both of the texts they produce in class as well as those they encounter everyday outside of class.

In my experience, those who practice social approaches to composition studies expand the notion of the writing process from its current linear (and recursive) model to a cyclical model. In the linear model, the writing process begins with invention, progresses to revision, and ends with a final product. Of course, these stages in the process are recursive: we may decide during revision that we need to invent more details to support a weak argument, etc. But it is difficult, using this linear model of the writing process, to account for where topics and invented details come from and where essays go when they are finished—and to what effect. As David Bartholomae points out, “If writing is a process, it is also a product; and it is the product and not the plan for writing, that locates a writer on the page, that locates him in a text and a style and the codes and conventions that make both of them readable” (144). The recent interest among composition scholars in professional writing, writing across the curricu-

lum, and academic discourse represents a renewed concern for written products (though no less concern for writing processes), especially insofar as they facilitate and constrain the production of texts, provide socio-discursive contexts for texts, and demand of writers a certain critical literacy as a precondition to entering ongoing conversations in any discourse community.

Thus, as an alternative to the linear (and recursive) process model currently in vogue, a model that I believe gives students the wrong idea about what happens when writers write, I propose a cyclical model of the writing process, one that accounts for the composing strategies of individual and collaborative writers as well as the socio-discursive lives of texts. And I represent this model in the form of a “*social-process*” heuristic for rhetorical inquiry based on the cycle of cultural production, contextual distribution, and critical consumption, a colligation of cultural studies methodologies for critiquing social institutions and cultural representations. Invention heuristics based on this cycle encourage students to understand language and culture as socially constructive forces (production) conditioned by contexts (distribution) and negotiated by critical subjectivities (consumption), and later in this essay I will illustrate one such heuristic designed for use in an advertising analysis unit, perhaps the most common context for critical writing in cultural studies composition classes.

Through using the terms “cultural production,” “contextual distribution,” and “critical consumption,” I intend both to invoke and transform the traditional Marxist concepts from which they derive. In his “Introduction to a Critique of Political Economy,” Karl Marx describes the cycle of production, distribution, exchange, and consumption: “In the process of production members of society appropriate (produce, fashion) natural products in accordance with human requirements; distribution determines the share the individual receives of these products; exchange supplies him with the particular products into which he wants to convert the portion accorded to him as a result of distribution; finally, in consumption the products become objects of use, i.e., they are appropriated by individuals” (193-94). And Marx completes the link in the cycle by arguing for a reciprocal understanding of production and consumption: “Production leads to consumption, for which it provides the material; consumption without production would have no object. But consumption also leads to production by providing for its products the subject for whom they are products” (196). Marx’s own uses of the terms that I appropriate in this essay (“production,” “distribution,” and “consumption”) are, of course, decidedly modernist: production results in material goods; distribution (and exchange) refers to the portioning out of the produced goods and the money that *re*-presents them (in the modernist sense); and in consumption, subjects make use of the produced goods, possibly to produce other material goods, in turn creating a need for further production of the original products.

Postmodern cultural theory problematizes Marx’s materialist description of the cycle of production, distribution (and exchange), and consumption, opening up this useful heuristic to new interpretations and applications. In the

postmodern age of mass production, material goods are, for the most part, no longer produced to satisfy the needs of consumers. Instead, goods exist as potentialities, and the real work of production is the creation of desire in consumers for the potentially producible goods; the physical production of goods becomes less important than the rhetorical construction of desire for them. Cultural production, then, is the creation of social values which manifest themselves in institutional practices and cultural artifacts. Within this postmodern framework, the distribution (and exchange) of material goods becomes secondary to the contextual distribution of the cultural values that construct desire in consumers. Distribution, then, comprises the contexts of cultural values as they are manifest in particular institutional practices and cultural artifacts: some corporations, for example, serve as distributing contexts for particular personnel policies that perpetuate racist cultural values; and some magazines serve as distributing contexts for particular advertisements that perpetuate sexist cultural values. Critical consumption refers to the social uses to which “readers” put their interpretations of produced and distributed cultural values. Finally, the link that completes the cycle relies on the culturally productive power of critical consumption and the precondition of critical consumption for effective cultural production.

A few scholars in composition have adapted specific cultural studies methodologies for use as social-process guides to rhetorical inquiry, yet these few methodologies are limited in their theoretical and practical scope, engaging students in short-sighted concentration on just a single “moment” in the cycle of cultural production, contextual distribution, and critical consumption.

In “Composition and Cultural Studies,” for example, James Berlin describes an invention heuristic for rhetorical inquiry based on cultural studies methodologies drawn primarily from Roland Barthes’ work on advertising and John Fiske’s work on television. In Berlin’s composition classes, students generate critical essays about the production of cultural meaning in advertising using the following cultural studies heuristic for rhetorical inquiry:

The major devices used to undertake this analysis [of advertisements] were three simple but powerful semiotic strategies that function as heuristics. The first of these is the location of binary oppositions in the texts—that is, the nature of the boundaries that give terms meaning. The second is the discovery of denotation and connotation as levels of meaning that involve contesting. The third is the reliance on invoking culturally specific narrative patterns—for example, the Horatio Alger myth or the Cinderella plot. These served as exploratory devices that enabled students to investigate semiotic codes as persuasive appeals, paying particular attention, once again, to the reliance of these codes on culturally specific categories of race, gender, and class. (51)

While Berlin’s heuristic does draw on a number of established cultural studies methodologies, it does not encourage students to move beyond critiquing the production of cultural meaning in advertisements. Berlin’s invention heuristic, particularly as it relates to advertising analysis, helps students gain a solid

understanding of how texts produce certain social meanings. However, students using this heuristic are not encouraged to explore how the semiotic contexts of advertisements (the magazines, the television shows, etc.) condition the connotative meanings of key terms or how these contexts influence readers to invoke certain binary oppositions and social narratives over others; and students using this heuristic are not encouraged to formulate particular critical stances toward (or subject positions in relation to) the key terms, oppositions, and narratives they find represented in social institutions and cultural artifacts. Berlin's heuristic, in other words, leads only to "production criticism"—the examination of how cultural meaning is produced without concern for the semiotic force of its distributing context or the political force of critical consumption.

James Porter has also developed a heuristic that emphasizes a particular aspect of writing processes in cultural context. In *Audience and Rhetoric*, Porter describes his "forum analysis" heuristic as a method for exploring distributing contexts. Forum analysis offers a *text*-based alternative to the more common heuristics based on sociological ("real-reader") views of audience and community. Drawing primarily on Foucault's theory of discursive formations, Porter describes a "forum" as a "textual system," a "concrete locale, a physical place for a discourse activity" (106, 95); and forum analysis "assumes that audience is defined by the texts (oral and written) it produces and that the writer needs to systematically explore this textual field in order to produce acceptable discourse within it" (112). Porter's forum analysis heuristic has two main sections: under "background," students answer questions about the organizational affiliation, purpose, membership, origin, and reputation of the forum in question; and under "discourse conventions," students answer questions regarding who is allowed to speak or write in the forum, to whom they speak or write, what issues or topics are addressed in the forum, and in what form and style these issues are addressed (114-45). Forum analysis encourages writers to examine in detail the texts that constitute a particular discursive formation, and the knowledge gained through this brand of textual criticism is vital for rhetorical effectiveness. However, in isolation, forum analysis is incomplete; knowledge of the background and discourse conventions of a discursive formation does not necessarily enable a critical understanding of how cultural meaning is produced in particular texts, nor does it encourage participants in discursive formations to adopt critical subject positions in relation to particular discourses. Forum analysis teaches writers the importance of understanding the rhetorical flow of a discursive formation, but its short-sighted emphasis on distributing contexts leaves writers with an incomplete understanding of specific rhetorical practices used both in the production and consumption of texts.

Students who engage in detailed heuristic exploration of all three moments in the cycle of cultural production, contextual distribution, and critical consumption develop the sense that culture itself is a constantly changing process and that their own writing can influence some of the changes that cultures undergo, and social-process rhetorical inquiry brings these processes of rhetori-

cal intervention consciously to bear on students' own critical writing. It is my goal in this essay to develop a more complete social-process approach to composition by proposing a conception of rhetorical inquiry based on the complete cycle of cultural production, contextual distribution, and critical consumption.

The Cycle of Cultural Production, Contextual Distribution, and Critical Consumption

The cycle of cultural production, contextual distribution, and critical consumption has given rise to powerful writing in cultural studies, and I believe it holds similar potential to elicit powerful writing in response to cultural studies composition assignments. In "What Is Cultural Studies Anyway?" Richard Johnson, former director of the Birmingham Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies (BCCCS), describes the cycle of production, distribution, and consumption as a "heuristic" for understanding a wide variety of social phenomena, and this heuristic focuses attention on the complex interactions among encoders, texts, and decoders (all broadly defined) in the act of generating cultural meaning. The value of this cycle to composition studies is that, when viewed as a heuristic for rhetorical inquiry, it encourages students to understand both writing and culture as dialectical social processes through which they can derive a degree of agency. Cultural production, contextual distribution, and critical consumption represent three crucial "moments" in the process of developing social relations in lived cultures, and although I discuss each moment separately in the pages to come, a certain critical veracity is sacrificed if we lose sight of the cycle as a complete process. Each "moment," in other words, relies on the others for critical power and is indispensable to the cycle as a whole.

The first moment in the cycle isolates *cultural production* as the object of critical study. Studies of cultural production assume that social practices are conditioned by cultural values encoded into and decoded from texts. It is crucial, then, that students understand the ways in which encoders inscribe texts with "preferred readings," because as John Fiske points out, "the preferred reading *closes off* potential revolutionary meanings" and conditions readers to adopt subject positions that fulfill the economic, political, and social desires of encoders (111). In the context of advertising, cultural production is the creation of desire to consume, and this desire is achieved when advertisers promote certain preferred cultural values over others and associate their products with those values. Cultural values are produced through combinations of signs that function as associations, socialized links (often unconscious) between words and visual images and their subjective meanings, and they usually imply "ideal" consumer-audiences and social practices. Visual images in advertising signify associations between products and subjective desires. For example, most people associate stately mansions and expensive jewelry with upper class lifestyles; and when Liz Claiborne portrays mansions and jewelry in her perfume advertisements, the audience associates these products with their desire for wealth, and

their consumption of Liz Claiborne perfume superficially and temporarily satisfies that desire. These associations between Liz Claiborne perfume and an upper class lifestyle imply a number of possible cultural values, one of which is: "Ideal wealthy women own mansions, diamonds, and Liz Claiborne perfume." Words in advertising also signify associations between products and subjective desires. For example, when the CEOs of the Coca-Cola corporation realized that New Coke was a failure, they changed back to its original recipe and advertised the new/old product as Coca-Cola "*Classic*." The word "classic," of course, invokes images of the best things in life that have stood the test of time, and the Coca-Cola corporation wants its customers to associate this new/old "classic" product (actually the result of a disastrous marketing decision) with their nostalgic desire for the good old days when quality—not profit—was the top priority. The associations between Coca-Cola Classic and a desire for the uncomplicated past imply a number of possible cultural values, one of which is: "Ideal nostalgic cola consumers commemorate the past by drinking Coca-Cola Classic (instead of Pepsi, the choice of a new generation)." Images also function to limit the polysemy of meanings words might invoke in readers (the word "dry" signifies different values when accompanied by images of deodorant or moisturizing cream), and words function to limit the polysemy of meanings an image might invoke (the silhouette of a naked female figure signifies different values when accompanied by the words "sensual" or "natural"). These different kinds of associations in advertisements construct cultural values that encourage preferred readings, particular meanings that encoding advertisers want decoding consumers to attribute to the advertised products.

Most advertising cultural values construct readers as ideal identities and encourage certain ideal social practices over others, and they relate these ideal practices to particular products. Cultural values have the surface appearance of descriptive statements; however, they operate culturally as prescriptive behavioral directives that position readers within certain advantageous subjectivities: "if *you* want to be an ideal progressive young adult, then you *should* drink Zima malt beverage," or "if *you* want to be an ideal rugged man, then you *should* smoke Marlboro cigarettes." The element missing from cultural values is the reason for which particular ideal practices are favored over others; the motives that generate cultural values are often selfish and work against the best interests of many people whose lives they influence. For example, cultural values in advertisements for expensive products are often directed toward middle and low income families who cannot reasonably afford the advertised merchandise—for example, Nike ads selling the dream of escaping ghettos through sports, and state lottery ads selling the dream of financial security through "sure thing" odds. Although cultural values are inevitable and essential aspects of any social arrangement, the ones that result in marginalizing and oppressive cultural practices can be recognized through critical reading and revised through careful rhetorical interventions into the institutions and artifacts that construct and maintain these values, and this is one goal students strive

to achieve in advertising analysis essays. Yet it is naive to assume that texts such as advertisements—in and of themselves—contain pure meaning and that readers consume this meaning through direct and uncritical identification with the texts. We cannot, therefore, revise cultural values until we understand their modes of contextual distribution and critical consumption as well.

The second moment in the cycle isolates *contextual* distribution as the object of critical study. It is important to examine the distributing contexts of cultural values because, as Johnson points out, “context is crucial to the production of meaning” (62). When we critique a distributing medium, we examine “the subjective or cultural forms which it realizes and makes available” (62). In advertising, then, contextual distribution is the location (the specific magazine, television show, radio program, etc.) in which the cultural values of particular ads are presented to potential consumer audiences, and this location further limits the polysemy of meanings advertisements might invoke. Media contexts construct their own cultural values through associations, socialized links between recurring key words, hot topics, and visual images and their subjective meanings, and they usually imply “ideal” audiences and social practices. Every element of every magazine contributes to the construction of associations—the cover design, table of contents, editorials, letters to the editor, regular columns, feature articles and their accompanying photographs, personals, and advertisements, etc. Associations link magazines with preferred readings and cultural values, some of which may conflict—popular magazines rarely represent a monolithic discourse. In *Esquire*, for example, certain key words (media, fashion), hot topics (electronic gadgets, Armani), and prominent visual images (handsome single men wearing designer casual suits) construct subjective desires in young men for financial excess and casual European good looks, which imply a number of possible cultural values: “ideal young men own the latest technologies and understand their (elitist) social significance,” and “ideal young men wear designer clothes for confidence and comfort (not necessarily for romantic purposes).” Through associations, distributing media promote certain cultural values over others, and these values either support or subvert the cultural values in the advertisements they contain. For example, the predominant cultural values in *Self* magazine—for example, “ideal healthy women enjoy active lifestyles achieved through safe exercise and nutritional diets”—both subvert a Baileys Light ad (alcohol slows human metabolism making exercise difficult and often leading to weight gain) and also support it (Baileys Light has 33% fewer calories and 50% less fat than Baileys Irish Cream, so it is a healthier option when you want to relax with a drink).

As Johnson points out, “narratives or images always imply or construct a position or positions from which they are to be read or viewed,” and certain media—popular magazines in particular—“naturalize the means by which [subject] positioning is achieved.” The purpose of cultural studies is to render these processes of subject positioning “hitherto unconsciously suffered (and enjoyed) open to explicit analysis” (66). In their advertising analysis essays,

students critique the subject positioning engaged in by the medium that distributes the advertisement they have chosen as the focus of their critical essays, and they compare and contrast the cultural values in their advertisement with the values in its distributing medium, looking specifically for consistencies and contradictions.

The third moment in the cycle isolates *critical consumption* as the object of study. Here the focus turns from the cultural values produced in texts and their distributing media to the subjectivities who encounter the produced and distributed values. When we study consumption, we study the impact media messages have on us as “readers.” While Johnson acknowledges the powers distributing media have to construct subject positions for their readers, he is careful to point out that readers also possess the powerful agency to construct alternative narratives and images: “human beings and social movements also strive to produce some coherence and continuity, and through this, exercise some control over feelings, conditions and destinies” (69). And this control is achieved through “critique,” which “involves stealing away the more useful elements [of media cultures] and rejecting the rest” (38). Critical analysis helps students problematize the subject positions constructed for them in texts, and cultural studies writing assignments encourage students to exert pressure on the construction of their own subject positions from which they might solve social problems for the benefit of communities.

In “Encoding/Decoding,” Stuart Hall, also former director of the BCCCS, argues that media generate meaning using a “dominant hegemonic” code, a metalanguage that inherently promotes the cultural values of those already in power; and media texts are encoded with preferred readings (selected from the dominant hegemonic code) that construct subject positions for consumers of media messages.² As Dave Morley points out, “texts privilege a certain reading in part by inscribing certain preferred discursive positions from which its discourse appears ‘natural,’ transparently aligned to ‘the real’ and credible” (167). Uncritical audiences accommodate preferred readings, and they adopt subject positions constructed for them in media by dominant groups. The cultural values inscribed in media representations appear to these audiences as universal truths, inscribed in nature, beyond the realm of critical questioning. Although advertisements and their distributing contexts do at times promote positive cultural values (e.g., many of the new computer animated Levi’s ads suggest that ideal women are independent and creative), too often as readers we accommodate marginalizing values uncritically and accept them as objective facts. When we accommodate cultural values without interrogating them, we allow the media that perpetuate these values to interpret our worlds for us, and we accept their interpretations without questioning the often self-serving social motives implicit in their assumptions. However, as Lawrence Grossberg argues, “the fact that texts encode certain preferred readings does not guarantee that they are read accordingly; that is, we cannot assume effects simply from origins” (138); and Morley agrees that a preferred reading “cannot be the *only* reading inscribed in the text, and it certainly cannot be the only reading which different readers can make of it” (167).

Some communities, often sub-cultures, establish what Hall refers to as “oppositional” codes, metalanguages that inherently resist the hegemonic cultural values of those in power; and media texts, encoded with “dominant” preferred readings, are rejected for promoting values that contradict those of the interpreting community. Based on oppositional codes, audiences deliberately decode media representations according to resistant logics. Audiences resist cultural values when they consciously understand the underlying messages in advertisements and their distributing contexts, yet they refuse to accept the cultural implications of these values and messages. From an “oppositional” perspective, media messages are perceived as “dominant” and therefore oppressive, and they are consumed according to (often marginalized) counter-cultural logics which subvert the dominant hegemonic code. Environmentalists, for example, may consume dominant cultural values in advertisements extolling the convenience, comfort, and economy of disposable diapers through oppositional codes, arguing instead that convenience, comfort, and economy are poor excuses for the systematic destruction of entire ecosystems. But resistance from oppositional subject positions can lead to reactionary rhetorical practices; and oppositional rhetoric elicits oppositional audience responses that often smother the potential for social change.

Most decoding operates according to “negotiated” codes, metalanguages that take the place of the dominant hegemonic code when it is unable to account for situated cultural values. Negotiated codes are not oppositional; they function as contingent correctives to the dominant hegemonic code when dominant cultural values no longer serve the socio-political interests of certain populations. We negotiate cultural codes in advertisements when we invoke specific circumstances from our own social experiences to which the dominant cultural values in advertisements do not necessarily apply, and this act of negotiation may affect our desire for—and use of—the advertised products. Some working class families, for example, may negotiate ads for Fancy Feast cat food, accommodating the desire for a comfortable lifestyle but resisting Fancy Feast’s promotion of excessive consumption for its own sake. Some women may negotiate ads for Revlon Fire and Ice perfume, accommodating their desire for feminine sensuality while resisting Revlon’s implication, in their use of anorexic models, that the ideal female body is thin. Some African Americans may negotiate ads for Lustrasilk Luxury Care relaxing cream, accommodating the desire for straight hair yet resisting Lustrasilk’s representations of ethnic neutrality—the models pictured in the ad have light brown skin—by styling their hair in distinctively Afrocentric fashions. As Elizabeth Ellsworth points out, negotiation requires audiences who “are not passive recipients of the communications of others. Rather, they actively, and unpredictably, construct diverse and sometimes contradictory meanings for the same text” (61). And audiences’ individual and collective cultural experiences generate these divergent readings. According to Morley, “At the moment of textual encounter other discourses are always in play other than those of the particular text in focus—

discourses which depend on other discursive formations, brought into play by the subject's placing in other practices—cultural, educational, institutional” (163). These “other practices” account for divergent negotiations of advertisements, and they comprise the predominant critical focus of advertising analysis essays.

Johnson and others theorize cultural production, contextual distribution, and critical consumption as a *cyclical process*, necessitating a forward-looking link between critical consumption and the future production, distribution, and consumption of cultural values. The cultural production, contextual distribution, and critical consumption of cultural values in all new texts change, in different ways and to varying degrees, the character of the cultures (and the individuals within the cultures) that consume them, and each instance of critical consumption generates new exigencies for different styles of production, distribution, and consumption; as cultures change with the accommodation, resistance, and negotiation of cultural values represented in texts, new economic, social, and political values arise, requiring new texts to address emergent cultural needs. It is in this link between critical consumption and the future production, distribution, and consumption of cultural values where composition studies lends practical effectivity to cultural studies, which remains primarily an academic discourse. Specific concerns in rhetoric and composition for matters of audience, purpose, and style illuminate the importance of practical rhetorical interventions based on the critical knowledge gained through advertising analysis. Thus, while cultural studies is indeed “an alchemy for producing useful knowledge” (Johnson 38) derived through critical consumption, composition studies is a process for transforming “useful knowledge” into *shared knowledge* that influences the future production, distribution, and consumption of cultural values. Critical consumption alone does not, in and of itself, lead to social reform; only careful rhetorical interventions into this cycle make possible the reforms that cultural studies seeks.

In the context of the advertising analysis assignment that I describe in appendix A, students create links between their critical consumption of advertisements and the future production, distribution, and consumption of cultural values by writing letters that attempt to solve some of the problems they discover in their heuristic inquiries and describe in their critical essays, and they direct their letters to *at least* one of three possible audiences: representatives of the company that either makes the product or offers the service advertised (cultural production audience); editors of the magazine that distributes the advertisement (contextual distribution audience); and/or consumers who encounter the advertisement or its distributing medium on a regular basis (critical consumption audience). Before writing these letters, students consider the *quantity of knowledge* each audience might have regarding the cultural values promoted in the advertisement, and the *quality of attitude* each audience might have toward potential reform in the future production, distribution, and/or consumption of the cultural values promoted in the advertisement. These two considerations are crucial to the success of the letters, since they determine students' rhetorical aims

(informative when audiences know little and/or have positive attitudes toward reform, and persuasive when audiences know much and/or are resistant toward reform; most of the letters, however, contain mixtures of informative and persuasive discourse). Having explored the knowledge and attitudes of each audience, students then decide which audience(s) would, having received an effective letter, most likely influence the future production, distribution, and consumption of cultural values within the context of the advertisement in question. This process of rhetorical intervention into the cycle of cultural production, contextual distribution, and critical consumption transforms “useful knowledge” into shared knowledge and enhances the potential for social change, change that is less likely to occur if students end their composing processes with critical essays.

Extensive heuristic exploration of *all three* “moments” in the cycle of cultural production, contextual distribution, and critical consumption—and, most importantly, rhetorical intervention into the cycle (in the link between critical consumption and the future production, distribution, and consumption of cultural values)—is crucial to the practice of social-process rhetorical inquiry. Heuristics that foreground only one of these moments, as Johnson points out, apply only to “those parts of the process which they have most clearly in view,” and these heuristics, like those described by Berlin and Porter, are “incomplete, liable to mislead, in that they are only partial, and therefore cannot grasp the process as a whole” (46). This “process,” of course, is the cycle of developing social relations that cultural studies seeks to critique, and unbalanced attention to just one moment in this process leads to short-sighted conclusions which may inhibit the potential for political action. Johnson explains the need for an integration of these isolated criticisms into a whole-process approach to the study of culture: “All cultural products, for example, require to be produced, but the conditions of their production cannot be inferred by scrutinizing them as ‘texts.’ Similarly all cultural products are ‘read’ by persons other than professional analysts (if they weren’t there would be little profit in their production), but we cannot predict these uses from our own analysis, or, indeed, from the conditions of production” (46). Social-process rhetorical inquiry incorporates *all three* moments in the cycle of cultural production, contextual distribution, and critical consumption into focused and balanced heuristic exploration of the entire process of developing social relations.

Social-Process Rhetorical Inquiry

In appendix A, I present an advertising analysis assignment with two parts, a critical essay and a practical letter. This assignment is intentionally abstract, since students will develop their own responses as they engage the invention heuristic in appendix B. As the assignment suggests, students should first choose a magazine with which they are familiar; it helps if they already know the “code(s)” from which the magazine draws. I encourage students to select magazines with clear audiences, such as *Seventeen*, *GQ*, *Rolling Stone*, *Self*,

Muscle, Hot Rod, etc. Magazines like *Newsweek, Time, Us, and People* are indeed directed at certain kinds of readers, but because they target broad audiences they tend to draw from a number of divergent “codes,” which can confuse students in their critiques of the cultural values in media. Once students have chosen a magazine for the assignment, I ask them to read it cover-to-cover, paying careful attention to everything: the cover design, table of contents, editorials, letters to the editor, regular columns, feature articles and their accompanying photographs, personals, and, of course, advertisements. As they read, students look specifically for recurring key words, hot topics, and prominent visual images that associate the magazine with certain preferred readings and cultural values. The goal here is to give students a “total experience” with the magazine, not just a selective experience with a few articles and ads. Once students have oriented themselves to the “code(s)” within which the magazine operates, their task is to select one advertisement from the magazine; this ad will become the focus of their critical and practical essays. Selecting the ad is critical since not all are equally right for the advertising analysis assignment. The best advertisements have a fairly balanced mixture of visual images and written text that promote cultural values. Ads that are imbalanced toward either visual or textual representations do not highlight the *interaction* of these elements in the construction of cultural values.

While students are reading their magazines and selecting an ad for their critical essays, I spend two class periods (on a Tuesday/Thursday schedule) helping students apply the heuristic in appendix B to a specific magazine and a few of its advertisements. Since these magazine and ads are the objects of class discussion, they are then off limits for the students’ advertising analysis essays. During the first class period, I bring in several (as needed) identical copies of a single magazine with a well defined audience. I have students examine the magazine issues in groups, working through the “contextual distribution” questions in the appendix B heuristic. I give student groups about thirty minutes to examine every aspect of the magazine, after which we discuss the associations and values promoted in the medium. During our class discussion of the magazine, I have students generate lists (which I write on the board) of the recurring key words, hot topics, and prominent visual images. We usually fill the chalk board with words, topics, and images, some of which may contradict others in the lists, serving to demonstrate the polysemous codes within which magazines operate. Having filled the chalk board with lists, students then generate the subjective meanings and desires that the recurring key words, hot topics, and prominent visual images in the magazine imply. If there is enough room on the chalk board, I try to write the meanings and desires below our lists of words, topics, and images so that students can clearly see their interrelationships.

Students then generate cultural values implied in the magazine, and I take this classroom opportunity to discuss what makes a good statement of cultural value. Effective statements of cultural value have two components: ideal identities and ideal social practices. First students ask from the perspective of

the magazine in question, “What ideal identities do the key words, hot topics, and visual images in the magazine construct?” As we have seen, the key words, topics, and images in *Esquire* construct “young men” as its ideal audience, and the key words, topics, and images in *Self* construct “healthy women” as its ideal audience. Some magazines may construct two or three different identities. Next students ask, again from the perspective of the magazine, “What ideal social practices do the key words, hot topics, and visual images in the magazine construct for that ideal audience?” The key words, topics, and images in *Esquire* construct purchasing high tech gadgets and designer clothing as ideal social practices for young men, and the key words, topics, and images in *Self* construct safe exercise and dieting as ideal social practices for healthy women. Most magazines construct multiple ideal social practices for their ideal audience(s). We then consider the relevant questions from the “critical consumption” section of the heuristic in appendix B, critiquing each cultural value (arguing for our accommodation, resistance, and/or negotiation of it) and its association with the magazine under examination.

During the second class period, while students are reading their magazines and selecting an ad for their critical and practical essays, I have students collaboratively choose two or three ads from the magazines we examined during the previous class period. Here we discuss the differences between balanced and imbalanced ads, and the class votes on which few they would like to critique for the rest of the class period. With the ads chosen, and examining them one at a time, students begin to generate lists of associations among the words and images in the ads and the subjective desires they imply. Again, I write these lists of associations on the chalk board so that students can look at them as they begin to formulate the statements of cultural value implied by the associations. In formulating these statements of cultural value, first students must ask from the perspective of each advertisement in question, “What ideal identities do the words and visual images in the ad construct?” In IBM laptop computer ads, for example, words and images imply that ideal consumers are successful CEOs; in Calvin Klein jeans ads, ideal consumers are sexy women; and in Gerber baby food ads, ideal consumers are doting mothers. Some ads may construct two or three different ideal identities. Next students ask from the perspective of the advertisement, “What ideal social practices do the words and visual images in the ad construct for that ideal audience?” IBM’s ideal successful CEOs work late hours on (IBM) laptop computers; Calvin Klein’s ideal sexy women wear close-fitting (Calvin Klein) jeans; and Gerber’s ideal doting mothers stay home with their kids and feed them (Gerber) baby foods. Some ads may also construct multiple ideal social practices for their ideal audience(s). We then consider the relevant questions from the “critical consumption” section of the heuristic in appendix B, critiquing each cultural value (arguing for our accommodation, resistance, and/or negotiation of it) and its association with the advertised product.

We end this second class period exploring each potential audience for our own rhetorical interventions into the cycle of cultural production, contextual distribution, and critical consumption. For example, students might decide to write a letter to IBM executives explaining that their advertisements encourage husbands and fathers to neglect their families, which could be damaging to IBM's long-term public reputation, and recommending that they discuss a different promotional campaign with their advertising department; students might write a letter to the editors of *Esquire* magazine, a medium that distributes the IBM advertisement, explaining that the ad contradicts *Esquire's* values regarding casual lifestyles, and recommending that they discontinue the ad in future issues; finally, students might write a letter to *Consumer Reports* magazine (or a local newspaper for a local ad) describing to other potential consumers the damaging cultural values promoted in IBM advertisements, and recommending that consumers boycott IBM products until it changes its advertising practices. In most instances, a three letter combination is the best rhetorical choice for enacting changes in product/service advertising. However, there are audiences that will decode such letters oppositionally; often, in these cases, sending just one or two letters to potentially receptive audiences is the best rhetorical choice. "Potential impact" is an important consideration in students' choice of audiences. I always encourage students to send their letters to the audiences they most want to reach, and we discuss the responses as they arrive throughout the rest of the semester. Many of the responses are oppositional and reactionary, and students learn quite a bit about tone and purpose from critiquing them; they also learn valuable political lessons about the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of their own rhetorical choices. Other responses, however, acknowledge the problems students have pointed out in their letters, describing a potential course of action, and the students take pride in knowing that their writing has affected for the better their own cultural lives and the lives of others.

This kind of hands-on classroom practice gives students the confidence they need to fully engage the difficult heuristic questions in appendix B, and individual teachers may spend more or less class time on heuristic exploration as the need arises. It is crucial for a social-process approach to rhetorical inquiry that students engage the heuristic cycle of cultural production, contextual distribution, and critical consumption *collaboratively*, since students working in isolation may: 1) view advertisements and their distributing media as monolithic, true, universal representations, leaving accommodation as the only viable critical stance; or 2) view advertisements and their distributing media as monolithic, false, particularized representations, leaving resistance as the only viable critical stance. Collaborative heuristic inquiry, on the other hand, highlights the plurality of cultural values promoted in advertisements and their distributing media; in class, students argue among themselves about what cultural values advertisements and magazines represent, and they argue even more about their own negotiations of these cultural values. Even when teachers

assign the advertising analysis critical and practical essays as individual projects, initial collaborative heuristic inquiry demonstrates to students the polysemous discourses represented in the advertisements and magazines they will critique, and this knowledge results, I believe, in more complicated critical writing than when students do not collaborate.

The advertising analysis assignment works best when it is preceded with collaborative heuristic inquiry, but it is most successful, in my own experience, when the entire assignment is written collaboratively by groups of three or four students. Here social-process rhetorical inquiry is best served because students must reconcile their differences in the critical essay (many of which are left graphically represented as dialogue) into a single rhetorical purpose in the practical essays. Collaborative heuristic inquiry into the cycle of cultural production, contextual distribution, and critical consumption generates polysemous readings of ads and magazines; however, this polysemy must be constrained if students' rhetorical interventions are to succeed.

The advertising analysis assignment I describe also works equally well with or without research. Students can use research in a number of ways in critical essays and rhetorical interventions to improve their skills in conducting primary and secondary research and incorporating sources into their writing. Under "cultural production," for example, students might find print sources on the company that makes the product or offers the service: they might, for example, research the Philip Morris company to explore its own cultural values as a tobacco company and to what extent those values are manifested in their ads for Marlboro cigarettes. Under "contextual distribution," students might find print sources on the company that owns and distributes the magazine that contains the ad in question: they might, for example, research Condé Nast Publications to explore its own cultural values as a communications corporation and to what extent those values are manifested in the pages of *Glamour* magazine. Under "critical consumption," students might interview different populations regarding their reactions to the cultural values promoted in the advertisement or magazine in question. Here students might gather and record reactions from "cultural groups" to their advertisement: they might explore a variety of responses from different ethnicities, social classes, genders, sexual preferences, religions, political affiliations, educational backgrounds, geographical regions, etc. These different responses, like the earlier collaborative heuristic explorations, complicate critical consumption by highlighting the polysemous character of cultural values, and they foster a more inclusive ethic in students' critical writing.

The cultural studies methodology for rhetorical invention described in appendix B is a *social-process* heuristic precisely because of its cyclical character. Not only does it encourage students to understand writing as a process, but it also encourages students to understand culture itself as a process that is open to change through careful rhetorical intervention. The heuristic gains its most significant power when students critically consume the production and distri-

bution of cultural values with an eye toward producing their own values to be distributed and consumed in particular discourse communities. In other words, once students have examined an advertisement in terms of its production of cultural values and its distribution in a semiotic context, and they have explored their own critical consumption of the produced values in both the ad and its context, then they must continue the cycle through specific rhetorical interventions into the processes of developing social relations—they must produce texts of their own for specific distributing contexts and for consumption within particular communities, which in turn elicit further texts, contexts, and critical readings, etc. And these rhetorical interventions are most effective when cultural values have been negotiated through dialectical rhetorical practices that incorporate multiple perspectives on social problems.

Conclusion

I propose a movement in writing instruction toward what I have called *social-process* rhetorical inquiry, and this movement requires further pedagogical adaptations of cultural studies methodologies into invention heuristics for critical inquiry. These heuristics, however, should provide students with guides for careful rhetorical inquiry through the complete cycle of cultural production, contextual distribution, and critical consumption, and they should help students explore means for rhetorical interventions into this cycle. Invention heuristics for critical inquiry based on cultural studies methodologies help student writers tap into the knowledge they already possess about their own cultural experience, thereby demystifying critical writing for many students who might otherwise precipitously adopt “oppositional” perspectives in relation to cultural studies composition pedagogies.

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Notes

¹ Even typically asocial rhetorical theories have gravitated toward the study of culture as a context for teaching writing: in *The Construction of Negotiated Meaning*, for example, Linda Flower describes a “social-cognitive” theory of writing in which she examines the cultural forces that shape human thought processes in the acquisition of literacy; and in *Romancing Rhetorics*, Sherrie Gradin articulates a “social-expressivist” approach to teaching writing, describing subject formation as a dialectical interaction of social and individual forces. No more than a decade ago, the terms “social-cognitive” and “social-expressivist” would have been considered oxymorons, but in recent years they have become commonplace.

² It is important to note, however, that a dominant hegemonic code is only dominant from a particular perspective; in other words, what is dominant in one social arrangement or discursive formation (environmentalist codes in Democratic discourse on preserving the environment) may be marginalized in another social arrangement or discursive formation (environmentalist codes in Republican discourse on reducing government excess). Unfortunately, much cultural studies still theorizes media as a monolithic discourse, encoding a single “dominant” ideological perspective into all media messages, and it still theorizes media

audiences as the duped “masses.” While such theories, developed in the 1940s and 1950s by members of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, helped explain Nazi crimes against humanity, these totalizing theories are overly simplistic when applied to the complex polysemy characteristic of postmodern media.

Appendix A: Advertising Critical and Practical Essays: Assignment

In this essay, you will examine the culture of “advertising” critically. We all encounter hundreds of advertisements every single day, whether we are conscious of them or not. Advertisements bombard us in our cars, at work, at school, and—most of all—in our homes during leisure time. It is crucial, therefore, that we develop a critical understanding of how advertisements affect us and our surroundings. Only then do we have the power to choose consciously whether to accommodate, resist, or negotiate the cultural values each advertisement promotes.

Your first task in this assignment is to choose a magazine with which you are already familiar, and get a recent copy of it (you will turn the copy in when you turn in your final advertising critical and practical essays). Next, choose an advertisement within the particular magazine issue you have bought or borrowed; it should have an equal mixture of visual and verbal elements. This advertisement will be the primary focus of your critical and practical essays.

The Critical Essay

You have two options for the general structure of your advertising critical essay: you might organize your critique around the concepts in the invention, slightly altering their order to contextual distribution, cultural production, and critical consumption; or you might organize your critique around the dominant cultural values that you find in the advertisement and the magazine.

The Practical Letter

Attempt to resolve one or two problems that you describe in your critical essay by writing *at least* one formal letter for which there are three possible audiences and purposes:

- 1) a letter to the company that makes the product or offers the service advertised, providing specific and viable alternatives to their present advertising practices.
- 2) a letter to the editors of the advertisement’s distributing medium, pointing out contradictions between the medium and the advertisement it contains.
- 3) a letter to the editors of *Consumer Reports* magazine, warning other potential consumers about the advertising practices of the company and/or medium in question.

Appendix B: The Cycle of Cultural Production, Contextual Distribution, and Critical Consumption: A Cultural Studies Heuristic for Rhetorical Inquiry into Advertising

The following heuristic is designed to help you explore the cycle of cultural production, contextual distribution, and critical consumption as it relates to magazine advertisements.

Cultural Production

Explore the advertisement's production of cultural values ("ideal" audiences and social practices) through associations:

List associations between the predominant images in the advertisement and their subjective meanings.

List associations between the key words in the advertisement and their subjective meanings.

What cultural values do the associations in the advertisement imply?

Circle the cultural values with which you feel uncomfortable.

Contextual Distribution

Explore the cultural values of the magazine that distributes the advertisement you have chosen to critique:

List associations between the key words in the magazine and their subjective meanings.

List associations between the hot topics in the magazine and their subjective meanings.

List associations between the predominant visual images in the magazine and their subjective meanings.

What cultural values do the associations in the magazine imply?

Mark with an asterisk the cultural values of the magazine that directly contradict the cultural values of the advertisement.

Circle the cultural values of the magazine with which you feel uncomfortable.

Critical Consumption

Critique (accommodate, resist, and, most importantly, negotiate) the cultural values in the advertisement and its distributing medium:

Identify cultural values *in the advertisement and the magazine* that you accommodate, and explain based on your own personal experience why you accommodate those values.

In the case of each cultural value that you accommodate *in the advertisement*, explain whether or not you believe the value is legitimately associated with the advertised product.

Identify cultural values *in the advertisement and the magazine* that you resist, and explain based on your own personal experience why you resist those values.

In the case of each cultural value that you resist *in the advertisement*, explain whether or not you believe the value is legitimately associated with the advertised product.

Identify cultural values *in the advertisement and the magazine* that you negotiate, and explain based on your own personal experience why you negotiate those values.

In the case of each cultural value that you negotiate *in the advertisement*, explain whether or not you believe the value is legitimately associated with the advertised product.

Rhetorical Intervention as Cultural Production

Compose effective rhetorical documents challenging the cultural values that do not serve the interests of a community to which you belong:

Cultural Production Audience:

Do representatives of the company (that either makes the product or offers the service) know that the cultural values in their advertisement have negative effects on you and other consumers?

What is the company's attitude toward these negative effects?

Contextual Distribution Audience:

Do the editors of the magazine know that the cultural values in the advertisement contradict the cultural values of their medium?

What is the editors' attitude toward these contradictions?

Critical Consumption Audience:

Do other consumers know that the cultural values in the advertisement and/or the magazine have negative effects on them?

What are consumers' attitudes toward these negative effects?

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