

Social Construction and Composition Theory: A Conversation with Richard Rorty

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There is no doubt that Richard Rorty is one of the most influential and innovative American philosophers writing today. He is perhaps best known for *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, his critique of traditional epistemology. His newest book, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, promises to generate debate about the relation of epistemology and politics. Recently, Rorty's work has been of interest to compositionists, particularly those concerned with collaborative learning, social constructionism, and what James Berlin has called "social-epistemic rhetoric." The following interview with Professor Rorty may surprise many compositionists in that it suggests that we have constructed a collective interpretation of Rorty's views that is oddly disjunctive with his own positions.

Perhaps most startling to composition theorists, especially those who think of Rorty as a leading social constructionist, is that Rorty does not recognize the term *social constructionism* as referring to any intellectual movement that he is aware of. Nor does he see *social constructionism* as sharing the same fundamental assumptions as *new pragmatism*, as Kenneth Bruffee and others have suggested. Rorty seems sympathetic to social constructionism in a general way, but, as he says, "that's about as far as it goes."

Rorty also responds to Bruffee's concept of writing as "social talk re-externalized." Rorty comments that while Bruffee's theory "seems true enough," the theory is too general to be applied profitably to the composition classroom. In fact, Rorty is "suspicious" of theoretical justifications for practice like Bruffee's rationale for collaborative learning and peer tutoring.

Rorty seems singularly unconcerned about the cultural/ideological positions that have been proffered as correctives to Bruffee's theory and that, by extension, are critiques of Rorty's own pragmatist positions. He sees no danger of peer groups' promoting Orwellian "groupthink"; he side-steps Greg Myers' Marxist critique; and he doesn't seem to think of *gender* as an important factor in the socio-dynamics of a discourse community's "conversation."

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Also surprising are Rorty's opinions about the objectives of freshman English. He calls the writing-across-the-curriculum model, in which students are taught how to join in the conversations of their particular disciplinary discourse communities, "a terrible idea." In fact, for Rorty the goal of freshman English is to teach students to "write complete sentences" and "get the commas in the right place." Clearly, freshman English, in Rorty's view, is a necessary evil, not a means of empowering students to engage in real meaning making.

Thus, it seems fitting that Rorty shares E.D. Hirsch's desire for renewing cultural literacy, arguing that for a society to work citizens must have a sense of "loyalty" to the nation and a sense of cultural "tradition." Consequently, he sees Hirsch's cultural literacy as a cohesive force promoting loyalty, even patriotism. In fact, Rorty's own personal patriotism emerges in his response to leftist political criticism of his views. He calls the United States "a spectacular success story of the growth of democratic freedom" and "still the best thing on offer."

Rorty sees no theoretical inconsistency in his defending the call for increased cultural literacy. Although Rorty has argued repeatedly that knowledge is "socially justified," he supports the cultural literacy movement's efforts to codify knowledge into an accepted canon of texts and facts. He seems oblivious to the argument that if certain "knowledge" is slipping away from mass consciousness and therefore must be recalled and installed formally in an official canon, then such knowledge is, according to his own definition, no longer socially justified—no longer knowledge. Or is it? Perhaps by "social justification" Rorty really means "institutional justification."

Clearly, this interview suggests that it may be necessary to reassess our understanding of Rorty's positions and their relevance to social constructionism and composition theory. Perhaps this conversation will encourage a closer reading of Rorty's work and a more careful application of his ideas. In order to begin a constructive dialogue, *JAC* will publish a collection of short (two to five manuscript pages) responses to this interview in the next issue, scheduled to appear this winter. We invite all readers to participate and will consider all responses received by October 9.

Q. The advertisement says, "When E.F. Hutton talks, people listen." *Your* published work seems to have a similar impact on the scholarly community: when you *write*, people *read* it. How would you describe your own rhetorical style? Do you think of yourself as a writer?

A. I enjoy writing, but I have no idea of what the effect of the style on the audience is. I think, like most people in this line of work, I write to please myself.

Q. Are you conscious of yourself as a writer when you write?

- A. Well, I'm conscious of striving after turns of phrase and that kind of thing. I spend a lot of time polishing things up.
- Q. In "Philosophy as a Kind of Writing," you say that for philosophy "writing is an unfortunate necessity," and you comment that "philosophical writing, for Heidegger as for the Kantians, is really aimed at putting an end to writing." You then point out that for Derrida "writing always leads to more writing, and more, and still more." What do you believe is the role of writing, the role of rhetoric?
- A. Well, insofar as one defines rhetoric by contrast with logic, I suppose that the ideal of the logician is to make both metaphor and idiosyncratic stylistic devices unnecessary. And the kind of attack on traditional positivistic philosophy of science that we've had in the last thirty years or so adds up to the claim that not even in science is there this disjunction between logic and method on the one hand and rhetoric on the other.
- Q. In "The Contingency of Language" you argue that "only sentences can be true, and that human beings make truths by making languages in which to phrase sentences." In this essay, as in most of your work, you have a great deal to say about language, but you don't often focus specifically on *written language*. Drawing on the work of Michael Oakeshott and Clifford Geertz, Kenneth Bruffee argues that writing is a "technologically displaced form of conversation." Bruffee argues, "If thought is internalized public and social talk, then writing of all kinds is internalized social talk made public and social again. If thought is internalized conversation, then writing is internalized conversation re-externalized." Does this concept of writing correspond with your own?
- A. What Bruffee says seems true enough, but I'm not sure what it shows. It comes down to saying that all thought, discourse, and, *a priori*, all writing take place in some social context, and that's certainly true; but I'm not sure what Bruffee would say follows from this.
- Q. I believe he's trying to establish a theoretical rationale for writing and for the teaching of writing, and so he puts it in the context of mirroring the kind of knowledge-making process that *you* suggest is in play in the larger arena.
- A. It doesn't seem to me that one can draw many conclusions about how to write from something that general. There are all kinds of utterly unconversational modes of exposition which are handy for some particular pedagogic or other purpose.
- Q. Do you consider yourself a social constructionist?
- A. What's a social constructionist?
- Q. Bruffee attempts to define social constructionism this way: "Social construction understands reality, knowledge, thought, facts, texts, selves, and so on as community-generated and community-maintained linguistic entities—or, more broadly speaking, symbolic entities—that define or 'constitute' the communities that generate them." And he continues,

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“Social construction understands knowledge and the authority of knowledge as community-generated, community-maintaining, symbolic artifacts.” Is this a position that you’re sympathetic with?

A. Yes, that seems true enough.

Q. Is *social constructionism* really just another name for *new pragmatism*?

A. I think that the only things they have in common are opposition to an idea of knowledge as accurate picturing of things as they are in themselves, and that this conception of knowledge is the subject of attack by a dozen schools.

Q. You don’t, then, specifically consider yourself a social constructionist?

A. Well, when I read people like Peter Berger, I feel sympathetic, but that’s about as far as it goes.

Q. Several scholars have suggested that you have generalized for all knowledge what Kuhn suggested for scientific knowledge—that it is a social construct. Do you see your work as an extension of Kuhn’s?

A. Yes, I guess so. I’m not sure that Kuhn would like the idea, though. That is, he and I have been trying to define our differences over the years, and I keep trying to drive him in the direction of blurring the distinctions between science and non-science. I’m not sure that he’s quite as ready to do that as I am.

Q. Your ideas on the social nature of language, knowledge, and discourse communities have influenced rhetoric and composition studies significantly. Bruffee draws on your work to establish a theoretical rationale for collaborative learning. He argues that placing students in peer groups in writing classrooms is an effective way of teaching writing because it mirrors the process by which, as you posit, knowledge is created and maintained—the “social justification of belief.” Others disagree, claiming that even if knowledge is created and maintained as you suggest, it’s a big leap to organizing classrooms into several mini-discourse communities. What are your thoughts on this subject?

A. I guess if the way Bruffee does it works, fine. I don’t see why it shouldn’t work, but there’s no way to find out except trying. In general, I guess I’m suspicious of theoretical justifications for practice. I would want to look at how well the practice comes off first and worry about the rationale later.

Q. So you would suggest that *praxis* precedes theory?

A. Well, obviously they play back and forth, but in as concrete a case as this it seems to me that you can just see whether a pedagogic experiment succeeds; if it doesn’t, that may leave the theory intact or it may not, but the thing to do is find out whether it actually works.

Q. Some scholars recoil from the idea of peer groups in the classroom because they feel they promote Orwellian “groupthink”—that they suppress differences and conflicts and promote conformity. How would you respond to this critique?

- A. I should think that it's overstated to suggest that they lead to groupthink. I should think the worst they could lead to is committee prose. It's a familiar phenomenon that when you have to have all members of a committee agreeing on the text of a report, you get something bland. That would seem more of a danger than any enforced conformity.
- Q. The next question is somewhat related. Marilyn Cooper suggests that your discussion on the discourse of hermeneutics (in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*) is "idealistic," and that your consideration of intellectual communities only in terms of "intellectual beliefs and discourse conventions" conceals many *cultural* factors that affect ability to participate in community discourse—such as political, moral, economic, class, and, I might add, gender factors. As Cooper points out, "Even if the epistemological assumption of external standards of knowledge is dispensed with, not everyone has equal access to the discourse." What are your thoughts about these socio-dynamics of equal access?
- A. It seems perfectly true that there are all kinds of difficulties getting in on any given conversation, but I don't see what it has to do with idealism. That is, I take it that the idea of democratic politics and equalization of opportunities is just to fix it so that these hindrances to access are minimized, but what notions you have about the nature of inquiry don't seem to be much affected by whether you live in a society which imposes hindrances or doesn't impose hindrances.
- Q. Greg Myers would go a step further. He argues that these cultural factors—social class and race, especially—are the very heuristics by which people come to know. As Myers suggests, "Ethnocentrism and economic interests . . . are the whole systems of ideas that people take for granted and use to make sense of the world." Again, how do these cultural factors fit into your hermeneutical framework? You seem to suggest that perhaps they may not have as much of an impact as some of these people believe.
- A. I don't think one should minimize the impact, and I think Myers has a point: that a large part of what one does in setting up a system of thought or a set of principles is a matter of defining one's own group over against other groups—the people on the wrong side of the argument over against the good people on your side. But, again, I don't see what conclusion one can draw from this except that we all, Marxists and everybody else, divide the world up into the good and the bad.
- Q. Most of the critiques of collaborative learning have been from this kind of cultural, social framework; gender is another factor, it would seem to me, that limits interaction in any given discourse community. And, of course, feminist scholars suggest that women's positions in large discourse communities are problematic because social expectations of women must necessarily modify their rhetorical stances in a community. In other words, if they fulfill expectations of "female" discourse, then their

discourse is devalued; however, if they seek to appropriate “male” discourse—male ways of speaking, talking, and thinking—they’re invalidating their own experience as women and exposing themselves, perhaps, to ridicule. Can your account of normal and abnormal discourse shed light on the problem women have in creating a credible *ethos*? Or do you think that this issue, too, perhaps is not as important as it appears?

- A. No, I think it’s important all right, but I think that the history of oppressed groups ceasing to be oppressed so much has been a mixture of the oppressed showing that they can speak the language of the oppressors just as well as the oppressors can and, on the other hand, also being able to say something that the oppressors have never thought of before. I think all movements of liberation have fought on both fronts simultaneously, so it doesn’t strike me as a great big dilemma. I should think some feminists are good at simply doing the kinds of things that men have traditionally done as good or better, and other feminists are good at doing things that no man or woman has thought of doing before; the latter tend to be identified as something distinctively feminine, at least at first, and then with luck they just become absorbed in the general experience of the culture.
- Q. Some scholars have used your notions of discourse communities to argue that the job of freshman English is to teach students the discourses of the academic disciplines rather than the traditional “essay” which students are traditionally taught in first-year English. Other scholars, such as James Kinneavy, remind us that students should also learn to talk with people outside of their discipline-specific communities. Would you agree that your hermeneutical position suggests the former, or do you think this kind of discipline-based instruction should be the concern of freshman English?
- A. Tell me a little more about what the proposal for discipline-based instruction looks like.
- Q. Rather than teach the traditional academic essay that for decades and decades has been the model that students have imitated in freshman classes, some compositionists now are saying, “That’s an artificial form; no one in the real world really writes those things to begin with. What we ought to be teaching students is how to enter the particular discourse communities of their fields. So, let’s forget this traditional, artificial essay; let’s teach them the normal discourse, if you will, of whatever field the student is going into.”
- A. The suggestion that they learn the normal discourse in the field suggests that, as freshmen, they try to pick up the jargon of a particular discipline.
- Q. And the rhetorical forms, too.
- A. It strikes me as a terrible idea. I think the idea of freshman English, mostly, is just to get them to write complete sentences, get the commas in the right place, and stuff like that—the stuff that we would like to think the high schools do and, in fact, they don’t. But as long as there’s a need for freshman English, it’s going to be primarily just a matter of the least

common denominator of all the jargon. Besides, I don't see how freshman English teachers are supposed to know enough about the special disciplinary jargon.

- Q. Well, there is a movement across the country in several universities to try to train teachers to move around in the various disciplines and help students apply rhetoric to any field; it's called writing across the curriculum.
- A. I think that America has made itself a bit ridiculous in the international academic world by developing distinctive disciplinary jargon. It's the last thing we want to inculcate in the freshmen.
- Q. Do you share E.D. Hirsch's desire for increased "cultural literacy," a sharing of a common vocabulary and a common body of knowledge?
- A. Yes, I think he's perfectly right about that. The effect of the present system is to keep education for kids from relatively well-educated, middle-class families who pick up the common knowledge of society as a whole. And kids who come from other kinds of families don't have a chance to pick it up in school.
- Q. But wouldn't it seem that the passing away of the kind of knowledge that Hirsch hopes to recall suggests that that knowledge is no longer "socially justified"? For example, Richard Ohmann suggests that we do, indeed, share a common culture, albeit one so superficial that perhaps we're afraid to acknowledge it, one based on the messages of the mass media, and so on. It seems that if you have to try to "save" a particular kind of knowledge or a particular body of knowledge, then perhaps it's no longer valuable for one reason or another. In other words, perhaps even according to your own system, it's not really even knowledge itself any more.
- A. What Ohmann presumably suggests is that you can keep a democratic tradition going without any historical self-consciousness on the part of the citizens of the democracy about how their society arose and how it differentiated itself from alternative social forms. This seems to me very dubious. I should think what Hirsch has going for him is that in order to have a sense of citizenship in a country, one has to have enough historical perspective to see that this arose out of certain conditions for certain reasons and has been maintained for certain reasons against other alternatives. And that kind of historical self-consciousness I don't think anybody's going to get out of the mass media.
- Q. Clifford Geertz has argued that a social conception of knowledge makes conventional education almost impossible—that, as he says, the "enormous multiplicity of modern consciousness renders the image of a general orientation . . . shaping the direction of culture . . . a chimera." You, however, have suggested in "Hermeneutics, General Studies and Teaching" that education should offer students "a sense of tradition, of community, and of human solidarity." How can tradition, community,

and solidarity be realized in education and why should education seek these particular ends?

- A. I think that you have to have some sort of loyalty to the, well, it really comes down to the nation, in order to care enough to vote, to care about who's elected, to care about what policies are adopted, to think of yourself as a citizen. Without that sense of the tradition to which you in your political role belong, I don't see how anybody is going to take social criticism or suggestions for reforms seriously. The fact that our culture is becoming increasingly varied and cosmopolitan doesn't strike me as a great big change. It's always been pretty varied and cosmopolitan. The changes Geertz speaks about seem to me to have been going on fairly gradually for a couple of centuries, and I don't see that they create any special problems.
- Q. But would you suggest from this that in the educational setting students first ought to be taught what you call normal discourse? I know you, at certain times, have suggested that students need also to understand how to go about abnormal discourse, but I suppose you're saying that first it's important that they learn this normal discourse, this sense of community, this sense of solidarity and tradition.
- A. Yes, I think of abnormal discourse as a gift of God rather than anything anybody gets educated for or into. It seems to me that the normal division between secondary and tertiary education is and should be the line between getting in on the normal discourse of the tradition in the nation and the community to which you belong, and higher education is a matter of being told about all the alternatives to that tradition, to that discourse. But that isn't necessarily going to move you into one of these alternatives; it's just going to make it possible, if you have an imagination, for that imagination to work.
- Q. So you don't really see the role of education as trying to teach people to engage in abnormal discourse?
- A. That isn't the way I'd put it. I think higher education should aim at fixing it so the students can see that the normal discourse in which they have been trained up to adolescence (or up to age eighteen, or something like that) is itself a historical contingency surrounded by other historical contingencies. But having done that, whether they remain happily embedded in the normal discourse of their society or not is something teachers can't predict or control.
- Q. Besides other avowed pragmatists, what theorists do you feel particularly sympathetic to nowadays; what theorists are particularly worth reading?
- A. I think I just look for people who seem to be strikingly original—Harold Bloom in literary criticism, for example. There are people whose individual voice is so distinctive that one feels immediately attracted, and I guess I just look for such individual voices rather than for building up theoretical agreement with them.

Q. Would you include Derrida?

A. Yes, I suspect that Derrida and I have wildly different interests. And I'm not sure that when I read him I read him the way he wants to be read; but he is, God knows, about as distinctive a voice as we have writing nowadays. And one has the feeling that people like Bloom and Derrida are the ones in our century who are going to be remembered.

Q. And, no doubt, yourself.

A. No, I think of myself as just a syncretist rather than somebody saying something original.

Q. Quite clearly, you and your work have been cited extensively by a wide range of scholars from numerous disciplines. While such frequent citation is undoubtedly flattering, it also increases the opportunity for misunderstanding or misrepresenting your views. Are you aware of any specific misunderstanding that you would like to take issue with at this time, that you would like to set straight? Any critiques of your work that have been off base that you might want to mention now?

A. Well, I tend to get two kinds of criticism: one from my fellow philosophers suggesting that I want to put an end to philosophy, and one from the political left saying that I'm, in effect, defending the current status quo. I tried to guard against the first objection by saying that philosophy just wasn't the kind of thing that you could ever end, but that it has quite often changed the key in which it was written and the topics to which it attended, and that you could think that a good deal of contemporary philosophy was becoming boring and repetitious without wanting to end philosophy as a subject. The leftist political criticism, I think, just reflects a genuine difference about what features of contemporary America should be attended to. I think of America as still a spectacular success story of the growth of democratic freedom, whereas my opponents on the left think of it as a racist, sexist, imperialist society. Both descriptions, I think, have a good deal going for them, but one's politics depends on which description takes precedence. So, having admitted that it's a racist, sexist, imperialist society, it seems to me it's still the best thing on offer, whereas my opponents tend to think that having said that you can sort of set it aside.