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Comment and Response

A Comment on “Social Construction, Language, and the Authority of Knowledge” and “A Polemical History of Freshman Composition in Our Time”

Kenneth Bruffee’s social constructionist epistemology and Dwight Purdy’s polemical history of composition-teaching are superficially very different (*CE*, December 1986). Purdy’s patron saint is apparently the late Richard M. Weaver of the University of Chicago, a principled Republican who would have been offended to the teeth by Bruffee’s breathless urging of the view that no view is better than any other unless Authoritative Persons (“a community of knowledgeable peers”) agree to take it. Yet the underlying similarity between the two essays is far greater than their superficial difference. Both ignore the world outside the universities, with grievous consequences.

“Social constructionist assumptions,” says Bruffee, allow teachers to “understand better what they are trying to do and, understanding it better,

have a better chance of doing it well” (787); but his argument doesn’t justify *well* or *better*. It justifies only *differently*, or perhaps *more fashionably*. It is academic fashion that really concerns Bruffee. Considering literature “in a social constructionist way opens some interesting, intellectually and aesthetically rewarding lines of conversation that literary critics may not have taken before”—and therefore appeals to young academics who “use language primarily to join communities [they] do not yet belong to” (783, 784). More bluntly, one recognizes “unabashed professional self-interest” (776) in a proposal to change the rules of literary conversation by forging a new consensus. If the rules of literary conversation can be manipulated, like fashions in dress, from year to year, then each new generation of assistant professors can make its play for tenure by tautologically “generating new insights” and damning the stupidity of its elders. To understand such a proposal, one must look at the institution of tenure, at the research fetish, the publish-or-perish syndrome, and their causes in the larger society, which cares very little for literature but a great deal for “the bottom line.”

But Bruffee asks no questions about the strange position of departments of literature in the Reign of Reagan. In a nation where any city is every city, he contents himself with phrases like “the ‘enormous multiplicity’” of our “diverse, rapidly changing world” (779).

Similarly, Purdy’s willed confinement to academia and his praise for the new “professionalism” of “directors of composition” (and even the teachers thereof) leave him with the unexplained paradox that “professionalism perhaps entails necessities destructive to the moral life” (796). He cannot say why material progress should entail ethical retrogression; but he does say, in defiance of reality, that today administrators practice “careful selection, supervision, and evaluation of instructors” (794). Purdy would profit from conversations with the part-timers who (according to James Kinneavy) do sixty-five percent of the teaching in colleges and universities “across the country” (Minutes of the Faculty Senate of the University of Texas, November 3, 1986). What becomes of the MAs whom Purdy’s own department hires each year “to teach nothing but composition for a maximum of three years” (794)? Do their brains “turn to oatmeal,” as UCLA’s egregious Richard Lanham has suggested? Does Purdy’s department also hire MAs on short-term contracts to teach “seminars on Eliot” and to write “about Yeats, Keats, and Conrad” (792)? And what would skilled high-school teachers say, discreetly and in private, to the suggestion that if university professors teach them better “how to teach literature and writing,” college entrants will justify rising

expectations among university professors (795)?

Mildly and without polemic, I suggest that academics choose not to peek over the walls of the academy because the weak fear the strong. We talk about “critical thinking,” but we practice nimble subservience. What would critical thinkers say when Ross Perot is appointed to rectify the life of the mind in Texas or when Ronald Reagan is elected to preside over the world’s most powerful nation? Critical thinking is punished in the educational system of the U.S.A., and if academics want to think critically about themselves and the academy, they must not just peek over the walls but must break them down and work to change a society that has replaced education for freedom with education for economic growth.

My point may be sharpened by describing two poles of Richard Weaver’s teaching experience, one the College of the University of Chicago from the middle 40s to the middle 50s, the other a generalized Large State University (before Chicago, Weaver had taught at Texas A & M, which he unlovingly referred to as “Texas Ass and Mule”). In Large State, rich white redneck males dominate the state’s economy. Some may be billionaires, and their money flows freely in gubernatorial elections. Elected governors then appoint regents, who appoint university presidents, who appoint deans, who appoint chairmen, who appoint committees, which professors jostle to get on so that they can butter chairmen, who butter deans, who butter presidents, who butter regents, who treat Large State’s university as a publicly financed research lab for government, business, and Star Warriors.

Science, technology, and football are the primary concerns of regential types and their friends among the good ol' rich boys, and the public funds cannot be diverted from the athletic programs, the school of business, and the college of engineering to support the graduate students and part-timers who teach composition for a maximum of three years under the inquisitorial eye of a highly professional director. Naturally, graduate students and part-timers cannot be allowed the normal privileges and perquisites of "the regular faculty"; but after carrying heavy burdens for three years on small salaries, they are free to offer their talents to Somewhat Smaller State College at somewhat smaller salaries. The myth of upward mobility is preserved if a few amenable comp-teachers ascend to the professoriat, where they teach seminars on Eliot or direct composition programs and write about the social construction of new paradigms. Process and product are justified by the name of excellence, and only subversively critical thinkers (illegal aliens in academia) wonder aloud why Large State's functionaries can spend millions for a supercomputer or even a Gutenberg Bible (instant ivy for the walls of Large State U) but pronounce it forever impossible to pay a tenured or tenurable staff to teach freshman composition. Freshman comp is a remedial course and would not have to be offered if only them high-school teachers were fitten to teach.

At the opposite pole, the University of Chicago in Richard Weaver's day, the trustees spoke openly of themselves as "money-bearing animals," and once a year they broke cake with the nation's worst-housed faculty at the Trustees' Dinner. Occasionally a

well-coached assistant professor would be bidden to lunch with some grandee whose millions the administration coveted, but no trustee would have ventured to tell even the humblest teacher what to think or what to teach or how to teach it. The faculty were so free that nobody ever cared to prove their freedom by obstreperousness. On occasions when the faculty felt obliged to resist the administration, they did it with courteous dignity, as when Chancellor Lawrence Kimpton proposed to the Council of the Senate that the University return to intercollegiate football and Professor Morton Grodzins chilled the proposal by quietly observing that the faculty wanted none of it.

The staff of English 3 (the nearest match at Chicago for freshman composition at Large State U) was directed by Professor Walter Blair, with occasional visits from Dean Clarence Faust. In the mid 40s, Blair hired young PhDs like Weaver and Wilma Ebbitt. Their primary assignment was to teach composition in the College, where there were no departments but a careful scheme of general education (education for freedom, to repeat R. M. Hutchins' well-wearing phrase). The composition staff, like other staffs, prepared its own textbook or syllabus, which the University Press produced; and each week the staff met over paper-bag lunch to plan the next week's work. Conformity was never imposed or even desired. Stupidity of any sort was promptly rebuked, but education for freedom required that educators (and students) should be free. Students freely told teachers that the teachers were mistaken—and sometimes stingingly proved it. Teachers spoke their minds to department

heads and deans, and in that intellectual atmosphere people like Weaver could make distinguished careers altogether within the College, which students often entered when they were just sixteen and which they left when they began their specialized studies. No brains ever turned to oatmeal, and when teachers of composition left the College, as some of them did, their later careers did not suffer from their years of bad housing, hard work, and good companionship. In the College at Chicago, Kenneth Burke could give a seminar for five composition-teachers, who did not reach consensus either with Burke or among themselves about either rhetoric or politics but who are united in what Dwight Purdy would no doubt call an "ethical vision." They would have hooted at the idea of education for economic growth.

So Richard Weaver could live his ethical vision even within the monstrous economic system personified by the founding John D. Rockefeller because Weaver was a man of character and because he had, in the College at Chicago, a niche where he could do his own respected work in his own responsible way. His character had been formed in a society very different from today's. He was a Weaver of Weaverville, North Carolina, whose first traffic light provoked him to thoughtful comment. But as our System's bosses persist in driving us and the System along the lines of its evil logic, the formation of character like Weaver's becomes harder and harder, and openings for education for freedom become fewer and fewer. The foundations of the System, with whose values we are infected, are stealing and lying—stealing, because the few bosses must appropriate the wealth produced by the

many; lying, because the few must persuade the many that the few are benefactors, not robbers. Within that System, most academics do not enjoy the freedom that Weaver enjoyed and cannot educate for freedom when they are bidden to educate for economic growth. Indeed, we have to ask ourselves whether either we or our students really want freedom, or whether we and they, in our "collaborative learning," prefer "upward mobility in the mainstream culture." In the society built on greed, "professionalism" is indeed "destructive to the moral life," and professionals will indeed prefer acceptance of the consensus among Authoritative Persons to the dangerous quest for true knowledge of ourselves and our world. But to reduce knowledge to the consensus of an undefined "community of knowledgeable peers" is to deny that we can see the noses on our faces or that anybody can acquire the true knowledge to talk truly and knowledgeable about knowledge.

James Sledd
University of Texas

I am not such an experienced teacher as Dwight Purdy (*CE*, December 1986). While he has taught composition for twenty years, I have been at it for only ten. While he has administered composition programs for fifteen years, I have been director for only two. Despite these differences, we share some common views. I agree literature should be taught in freshman composition courses. I also agree composition is now much better taught than when I was a freshman. And I am glad Professor Purdy has, as he put it, come out of the "Dark Ages" thanks

to reading and consulting with newly trained colleagues. But here we part ways. Despite his recognition of changes in the teaching of writing and claims of similar advancement, he's still not in the present. Mr. Purdy remains in the Middle Ages in terms of understanding the changes in and applications of composition theory.

Purdy begins his treatise by moaning that "literature—meaning the study of fiction, drama, and perhaps even . . . poetry for their own sweet sakes—dwindles to a thin shade in freshman writing courses" (791). Such sentiments appear to be a response to the first wave of "new thinking" composition teachers who used only student essays as "literature." But most composition teachers have moved beyond the ideas of the 1970s. Studies in the reading/writing relationship have demonstrated the benefits of teaching literature in composition courses, as well as the many ways to link reading with writing assignments. Literature is no longer a "thin shade"—it is very much a part of many writing classrooms.

Teachers of composition value literature, and we want our students to appreciate it too. Purdy maintains that even if literature were taught in freshman composition, "what we don't know is how to make reading poems, plays, and novels pay off for untalented writers" (792). But some of us do. The writing classroom is one of the best places to attain this appreciation, because writing can help to improve comprehension. For example, we can help students focus their reading by having them write paragraphs which predict a story's content. As the students read, they compare their predictions to what they find. When the assignment is finished, they compare

their predictions to their findings in post-reading paragraphs. By engaging students with their texts through writing, we further aid their comprehension.

Some students—usually inexperienced readers—are more difficult to "engage," for they see literature as irrelevant or meaningless. They can be involved in the reading experience by using the strategies of reader-response theory, having students respond in writing to their literary texts. David Bleich, for example, has students write about which character they sympathize with in Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man is Hard to Find." Such written responses help students identify with the literary work. Reading strategies and reader-response theory have been used in writing classrooms since the late 1970s.

Even the traditional research paper can become a means of making literature "pay off." When students do research, they generally read a number of similarly structured texts (such as literary criticism). Cognitive psychologists such as Walter Kintsch and T. A. van Dijk have demonstrated that as they read these texts, students begin to assimilate their organizational structures ("Toward a Model of Text Comprehension and Production." *Psychological Review* 85 [1978]: 363-94). Thus, when they write their papers, they have an approach to apply, which is internalized when put into writing. Using the research paper to develop critical reading and writing abilities helps both talented and "untalented" writers.

Research in reading and writing, as well as in cognitive psychology, suggests that most "untalented writers"

are such because they are inexperienced readers. While Purdy notes that "without exception, all excellent writers of prose . . . learned to write by reading literature," he does not seem familiar with findings that by reading literature (or prose of any kind) writers learn the basic conventions of texts. As Frank Smith points out in *Writing and the Writer* (New York: Holt, 1982), reading can introduce students to even the most mechanical aspects of writing, such as grammar, punctuation, and spelling. Because of our knowledge of this research—necessary to stay up-to-date in the writing classroom—more and more composition teachers use literature in the classroom to facilitate development of all levels of writing ability.

Literature is also used in what Purdy describes as the unliberating "process-centered writing therapy" classroom to demonstrate and reinforce the importance of revision (792). Composition textbooks such as Donald Murray's *Read to Write* (New York: Holt, 1986) contain multiple drafts of published work to show students that good writing requires re-writing. While discovering this, the students are, again, reading literature. Simultaneously, they begin to drop the notion that good writers don't revise, that writing is a gift from God, or that good writing means immediate cosmetic correctness. Given the number of people who have these misconceptions, those texts that dispel them do every bit as much good as Weaver's, Corbett's, or Martin and Ohmann's, which are mentioned with such reverence.

"Our texts and programs," Purdy claims, "expect less than many twenty

years ago" (793). Such a statement completely ignores not only the reality of the past, but the direction of present composition programs. Granted, the old masters' texts may have declared rhetoric "indispensable to the health of a culture" (793). But this message was seldom communicated to students in the composition classroom. Concerns were much more mundane. Purdy himself admits that composition was the "flunk out" course. Emphasis was on grammar and mechanics, and those students who couldn't master them were made to feel inferior. The instructors chose the topics, so students were denied the right to develop their own ideas. Classes were either structured on the "theme a week" schedule, so students seldom had the opportunity to learn the necessity of writing and re-writing, or themes were ignored in favor of tedious drills on mechanics.

In contrast, writing programs now focus on developing reading, writing, and thinking skills. Many texts and programs are based on schema theory and apply psycholinguistics to the teaching of writing. At USC, for example, Malcolm Kiniry and Ellen Strensky have developed a recursive approach to sequencing expository writing based on findings of psychological theory which maintains that learning involves "a hierarchy of cognitive operations" (*CCC* 36 [1985]: 192). By following this program, students not only develop, but retain strategies for writing. Such writing programs have been developed because teachers of composition recognize that writing aids learning.

Recognition of the importance of writing to the learning process has led to the growth of the Writing-Across-

the-Curriculum movement. WAC is not, as Purdy sees it, "a way to save a buck" (791), nor is it a way to "get other faculty to teach 'writing' as well as history, psychology, or art" (796). Rather, researchers in composition, such as Ann Berthoff and Janet Emig, have found that writing so parallels the learning process that incorporating writing in content areas improves comprehension. As such, the WAC movement seems not to parody Richard Weaver's "ethical vision" (796), but to enable it to take seed in students who might not otherwise grasp their subject matter.

This understanding of the importance of writing to the growth of the writer, both intellectually and culturally, is something Purdy claims is gone. He quotes Weaver, who wrote "To write well, one must be alive at every point of one's being, with the result that composition, more than any other subject, is a training of the whole man" (792). Purdy goes on to hope that in the future, the "Great Wheel" will come full circle and composition will regain this emphasis. But again, such sentiments demonstrate an ignorance of current work in composition. In the same issue of *College English*, Kenneth Bruffee points out that "the social constructionist . . . identifies knowledge and language and regards them as inseparable. Placing language at the center of our understanding of knowledge and of the authority of knowledge, it thereby places reading and writing unequivocally where . . . it belongs, at the center of the liberal arts curriculum and the whole educational process" (778). Linda Carey and Lois Josephs Fowler's "Strategies for Writing: Theories and Practices" (*CCC* 37 [1986]: 302-14) is one of many

articles which show how to put these theories into practice. Such ideas are not isolate. Indeed, they are the core of the "Carnegie Report on Higher Education."

Finally, while Purdy claims to admire and respect the changes that have taken place in the teachers and teaching of writing, his closing paragraph ends with the sneer that we "comp people" have come to expect. To label students in freshman writing courses as "the halt and the lame" reveals a surprising contempt in a man who sees himself as a purveyor of the humanities. To equate teaching writing as a process with teaching mere "skills" belittles the breadth of knowledge required to do so. Both attitudes are typical of those untrained in the many facets of composition theory, and underscore the misunderstandings and misinterpretations presented throughout the article. But to denigrate the growing acceptance of composition pedagogy and research as a respectable profession by hinting that such status "perhaps entails necessities destructive to the moral life" goes beyond the bounds of decency. From his title, it is obvious that Purdy intended to be controversial. But his conclusions insult his readers. Worse, they do not speak well of his own teaching.

Sally Reagan

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Mr. Purdy gives higher grades now than he did many years ago because, as he says, his "expectations and . . . grading are fairer than they were." A cynic would respond that he has simply lowered his standards. Although his method of teaching has changed, what has been the effect? With the rise

of the writing-as-a-process movement, one might expect to see students writing better as a result. But this has not happened. In fact some observers would even say that students today write poorer than students in the past, and cite test scores as evidence—as though writing quality could be verified as readily as air temperature. This is a judgment that is endlessly argued, and I will merely note that today most university students would not have been students twenty years ago because they lack the wealth or talent necessary for their success then. The shift from educating the elite to educating the mass and the resulting strains on pedagogy give the appearance of a decline in quality in student performance generally and in writing particularly. But this indicates less a decline in performance than an addition of inferior performers. With the task of educating these new students, educators have developed increasingly sophisticated and detailed theories and programs about writing instruction, and some have experimented with their students, a few to the point of turning the classroom into a laboratory. This has generated considerable discourse and led to writing theory and instruction taking root in the groves of Academe and spreading like weeds amidst the aging trees of literature.

Few would argue with the intellectual value of such endeavors or their place in the academy; but to consider them important in promoting better writing is another matter entirely. The difficulty begins with the assumption that a better method of instruction will produce better writing, an outgrowth of the ameliorative theory of methodology. This assumption should be challenged in the face of evidence to

the contrary, the evidence that writing quality has not improved with any particular method. Yet the assumption persists because instructors see such a gap between what they think they teach and the results in their students' writing. And instructors, most of whom are overly-conscientious and too quick to find their own weaknesses, agonize over what they see as their lack of success. They seek better ways of teaching, thinking that as they progressively discover better methods, their students will progressively become better writers. When this does not happen, instructors can burn out, or at least feel internally singed.

Perhaps writing instructors need to develop a more detached attitude towards their students and recognize their own limitations. They are not clergy or counselors or social workers. They are writing instructors; and when they present their students with the basic principles of writing, set writing tasks for them, describe and evaluate the students' work, they have done their job. The rest is up to the students. Some will learn well, some not so well, some badly, some not at all. Instructors who think everyone should do well, or even pass, are inevitably frustrated. Anyone who has taught for even a short while knows that sometimes groups of good students predominate in a class and poor students in another. When this becomes evident, the instructor makes an adjustment in emphasis, but the substance of the course remains the same. At the end of the term, the results are predictable: the good class receives good grades and the poor class poor grades. And what has this to do with the method or even the quality of instruction? Very little indeed.

Even when classes are composed of more varied students, the results are equally predictable: the best students begin by writing well and continue to do so, the better than average students begin writing better than average papers and continue throughout the term. The average students do the same, the barely passing students the same, the failing students the same, with the exception that many of them do not manage to write for the entire course. Aside from these predictable students, there is a small minority, perhaps four or five at most, who actually learn something fundamental about their own writing and significantly improve during the course. These rare few delight their instructors even more than the best students because in these reside some concrete results of teaching.

I see no reason for that small portion of any class to increase. Most freshman students write little better at the end of the year than at the beginning. But this is no cause for despair, or for an intensified search for a better way of teaching, or for abolishing the Freshman English requirement, because the principal value of the course for the majority, whose writing improves little, is the general education the students receive by confronting a number of specific writing tasks about important matters and coming to grips with them repeatedly throughout the year. Engaging in this action needs no justification in terms of competence or even preparation to do something else. It is its own value and its own end, even though it is undeniably good training for any academic endeavor.

Reginald D. Clarke
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Dwight Purdy Responds

My first respondent's eagerness to wed my essay to Kenneth Bruffee's leads him into misunderstandings. Sledd opines that Richard Weaver is my "patron saint," then himself lovingly recalls the man—the recollections meant to show the folly of my ways, of ignoring "the world outside universities." Wrong. I invoked Weaver to make the very point that composition texts and courses used to be based on commitment to "the world outside"; now they are service courses or ends in themselves—writing for writing's sake (which sounds nice but will, I suggested, ultimately do to us what it did to the exponents of a similar doctrine in the nineties). I said that we have lost, to our peril, the wider vision of the 50s and 60s rhetoricians. Sledd seems bent on misunderstanding that. (Weaver is almost my patron saint. His *Rhetoric and Handbook* had as much impact on the shape of my career as any other book. James Sledd introduced us, back in 1969.)

I am a good deal sorrier that my remarks about how we train secondary teachers were misunderstood. Our small English staff spends 50% of its meeting time discussing composition and about 20% discussing prospective secondary teachers. Since Sledd is from a large university, he probably cannot share my intimate, individual view of the process of getting people ready (really not getting them ready) for licensure. We see each one through a series of reviews. Most of them take a class or two from me. I visit a few when they practice-teach. I said in my essay that I hoped we would soon be doing a better job in this process than we now do. I was insinuating faults in