RESPONSE TO SHUCK

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Gail Shuck touches upon some of today's most important issues in literacy education. Among the most interesting theoretical perspectives in Gail's paper is social constructionism as it applies both to knowledge and language use. She also raises questions about audience as a force in shaping discourse. That set of questions, in turn, leads us to consider the ways in which meaning is negotiated in written discourse. Finally, she discusses what it means for student writers to produce authentic discourse. I wish to reflect briefly on these concerns. Social constructionist thought has been at the heart of some literacy debates for more than two millennia. In a feminist rereading of some the earliest social constructionists, Jarratt (1991) examines the influences of the sophists (Protagoras of Abdera, Gorgias of Leontini, Prodicus, Hippias, Antiphon), rhetors and philosophers of the fifth century B.C.E. The sophists, like other social constructionists who followed them, believed that language and knowledge are context-bound: What is considered true in Athens may not be considered true in Rome. The words of one of the sophists, Protagoras, help to define social constructionism: "Man is the measure of all things." He also commented that "on every question there are two speeches that oppose each other" (Murphy, 1983, p. 9; Wilbur & Allen, 1979, pp. 245-250). Humans construct knowledge through the use of language.

Recently in literacy studies, scholars, especially scholars of writing, have rejuvenated social constructionist thinking. They have drawn on the work of such people as Thomas Kuhn (1970), who writes about revolutionary "shifts" in thinking in the physical sciences. They have also been influenced by other scholars in anthropology (Geertz, 1983), sociology (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), psychology (Gergen, 1985, 1991; Vygotsky, 1934/1962, 1978), philosophy (Hegel, 1910/1967; Polanyi, 1958; Rorty, 1979), and literary theory (Bakhtin, 1975/1981, 1986). Very recently, feminist scholarship has helped to view social constructionism in new ways (Bauer, 1988; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Code, 1991; Hartman & Messer-Davidow, 1991; Hekman, 1990). Among the scholars who have done the most to promote social constructionism in composition are Brodkey (1987), Bruffee (1984), Cooper and Holzman (1989), and LeFevre (1987). Within second-language circles, Terry Santos (1992) has raised awareness of this theoretical position.

Gail's students used the group dialogue journals to collaborate to construct knowledge about their topics, the genre of the journals, the course in which they were enrolled, and the language used to negotiate all of their constructions. As they constructed the journals together, they worked within shifting zones of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86), each acting as a mentor to peer writers. Gail's students also came to experience the strong effects of Bakhtin's (1985/1981) heteroglossia, the "Tower-of-Babel mixing of languages" (p. 278) that characterizes human language use, that characterizes human existence.

Within this social constructionist framework, we can also note that Gail's students learned much about audience. Post-structuralists (Porter, 1992) argue that writers can never really know their audiences because those people are constantly changing. (Even if I am writing to myself, I will have changed--will have been further socially constructed--by the time that I read what I have written. Even the act of writing changes me.) In spite of this tricky theoretical position, though, one can reasonably argue that Gail's students will be better able to imagine their audiences (Ong, 1975) because they have had experience interacting with reader-writers. With each additional

experience working with other reader-writers in group dialogue journals, peer review groups, and the like, writers have opportunities to develop further their potential for working with audiences. As they do so, especially in group dialogue journals, they blur the distinction between author and audience (Phelps, 1990) because they learn to dance gracefully between the two roles.

Among the major reader-response theorists, Louise Rosenblatt (1938/1983, 1978, 1993) probably offers the greatest insights to those of us who work daily in classrooms. Drawing on the work of the literary theorist I. A. Richards (1949) and the philosophers and educational theorists John Dewey and Arthur F. Bentley (1929), Rosenblatt argued that meaning resides not in the text, not in the reader, but in the transaction between the text and the reader. (The reader, of course, is very much a socially-constructed being.) What is theoretically and practically interesting about the dialogue journals that Gail describes is that they allow for much more complex, much richer transactions in which each reader is also a writer of the text. As a result, much negotiation characterizes the transactions among the various humans and the text that they collaborate to construct. The context encourages Bakhtinian (1975/1981) dialogism, "a constant interaction between meanings" (p. 426) to flourish: on a very conscious level, each writer's thinking affects and is affected by the thinking of the other members of the group.

Finally, I wish to note that Gail's students produced "authentic" discourse in the group dialogue journals. By that, I simply mean that they wrote about topics that were meaningful to them. Some may think that such a notion is a new-fangled concept, but quite the opposite is true. We constantly keep rediscovering what Greek and Roman teachers were saying more than two millennia ago. Plato (370 B.C.E/1956) and Quintilian (95 C. E./1922) both advised that students write and speak about topics that they find compelling.

Gail's paper touches upon all sorts of interesting theoretical and practical issues that we teachers need to ponder. If we use Gail's paper to reflect on our teaching, we may just find that our students are more engaged with course activities and materials.

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