

Alexa Sandbakken

Professor Veeder

Reading Response #6

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### Using my Powers for Good: I'm Dancing on a Thin Line

I recognized a lot of information from “Beyond the Personal: Theorizing a Politics of Location in Composition Research” by Gesa E. Kirsch and Joy S. Ritchie. It was sort of like a mix of the Women’s Studies classes I’ve taken combined with the Human Relations and Sociology classes I’ve had. Even though this article is from over fifteen years ago, I’m glad someone has recognized and made the connection between feminist studies and composition studies, especially focusing on “attempting to live within the contradictions between our feminist beliefs and those traditionally valued in our discipline” (487). Even now, I find many academics struggle to combine their various philosophies, often straddling contradicting beliefs and practices.

What counts as knowledge? How do we acknowledge the bias our experiences create within us? Even if we do recognize our different identities and multiple positions (486-7), how does that change our research? Kirsch and Ritchie acknowledge Stanley Fish’s reminder that “no attempt at analyzing our assumption is neutral or value-free” (488). Even if we try to acknowledge and escape our bias created through lived experience, we can’t.

The study of composition, as Kirsch and Ritchie claim, often makes “essentializing distinctions about writers” (489). In other words, Kirsch and Ritchie believe that in composition

studies, there is simply black and white with no gray. Men think and write one way (white men sometimes valued more and featured more often than people of color), while women think and write a different yet specific way (489). This goes along with standard stereotypes regarding gender roles. To walk a different path from these standard subscriptions creates the possibility to be ostracized. Referencing popular culture, when Chaz Bono, a man who formerly lived life as a woman named Chastity Bono, was announced as a contestant and began his run on *Dancing with the Stars*, an ABC reality dance competition, audiences came forward to express their negative emotions loudly. To have a former woman competing as a man on a dance show challenges the status quo, and just as in composition studies, it is often hard to create a niche for an (unwelcome) newcomer who doesn't follow the norms.

One problem I had with this article was when Kirsch and Ritchie acknowledged Harding's account that "our experience may lie to us" (489). If this is the case, how can we even attempt to recognize, subvert, and learn from our experiences? We subconsciously "objectify 'others'" and create dominant group ideas and definitions (491, 490). When we can't trust our own experiences, how can we "locate the experience of others, especially those previously excluded or devalued" (491)? Perhaps collaboration is key; however, as Joy Ritchie acknowledged, there can be specific struggles with collaboration, such as making sure each voice is heard and that stereotypes are not reinforced (490-1).

Also, just as in Patricia Bizzell's contact zones, struggles of power arise between composition researchers and those who have less power and resources than the researchers (496). As teachers, we cannot escape our positions of power with our students (497); for a certain period of time, we will be the ones determining their grades and controlling the classroom, and therefore, the ones with the power. But that doesn't mean that we can't use those interactions to

create meaningful interactions and impressive research. For me, one of the harder transitions from tutor to teacher was the elimination of a peer relationship, replaced with a relationship more power-focused. For now, I can only be their teacher. I give them the grades rather than helping them get the grades. But, I can still help them learn and improve their writing for every other teacher they encounter.

In another demonstration of power struggles, Ellen Cushman, in “The Public Intellectual, Service Learning, and Activist Research,” wrote that the public intellectual often represents “middle and upper class policy makers, administrators, and professionals” and basically excludes the general community (509). While this idea is nothing new, it is important to challenge those in power to recognize all people in society, helping to make their voices heard. In some ways, I try to act as a public intellectual, conforming to systems created long before me. I have long desired to serve as a voice for those whose voices cannot be heard through the hierarchy of power. I don’t understand how some people in influential and powerful positions cannot use their roles as “public intellectuals” to make a difference in the lives of the disadvantaged. I have encouraged my students to write (letters to the editor) on current social justice topics, teaching them to recognize the local struggles in their community.

Kirsch and Ritchie’s article reminded me of something I read five or six years ago in a required multicultural class, and many times since then. Peggy McIntosh’s “Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack: White Privilege” serves as a great tool to help students recognize their undeserved privileges because of their race. I’ve toyed with the idea of having my students read this article, especially when they write narratives. I think it would help some people recognize the advantages they have received because of race, and it would help others feel acknowledged about the struggles they have faced.

As I wrote this response and reread what I wrote, it occurred to me that perhaps Kirsch and Ritchie are correct about the rigid sides (what they called “essentializing distinctions”) in composition studies. As much as I may want to recognize the different voices, backgrounds, and styles of my students, am I not teaching them how to conform to my way of doing things (and MLA style, also)? Since I am the teacher and grader, my way is the *right* way, and they must follow what I say in order to succeed. Now I find myself asking how I can adapt and make room for their situated writing in order to truly allow their voices to emerge.