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Different Words: Response to James Paul Gee

C. Mark Hurlbert, Nancy Mack,
James Thomas Zebroski

Our collective response to James Paul Gee will build on the many similar beliefs that the three of us share with Gee to examine the disputes that we have with some of his words. Our response will push forward, suggesting transformative practices that composition teachers can do to create a more democratic classroom and a more democratic profession.

Discourse with a Capital "D"

Jim: I'll begin. I am uncomfortable with Gee's use of the word "discourse"—with a capital "D." I don't object to what Gee says about the word or how he uses it, but to the word's tradition—other voices that have spoken this word and used it to express beliefs with which I disagree.

Mark: On the other hand, "Discourse" is a very powerful term which can be used to bring together some very important and often neglected features of language into a unified act. Gee calls these the "saying (writing)-doing-being-valuing-believing combinations."

Nancy: This use of the word "Discourse" is in itself progressive because it can serve as a corrective for many contemporary discussions about language that get bogged down in an analysis of linguistic formations as if they were separate from world views, beliefs, values, and human conduct.

Jim: Still, I worry that the all-embracing system that seems to be implied in the use of "Discourse" might be read as presenting language as basically a single, static, and unchanging totality. This is what I meant by the word "tradition." This view of discourse comes out of a Western European tradition of language study that is very different from the tradition of language study I have found in the works of Vygotsky and Bakhtin. This non-Western tradition views language as constantly undergoing change with that notion of change being at the very heart of the life of language. For Vygotsky and Bakhtin change is not just a vague possibility but an inescapable given.

Nancy: These changes result in shifts, disruptions, and disjunctures in language caused by many decentralizing forces.

Jim: Composition classrooms should examine these changing forces as a necessary part of the dynamics of language. The political reasons for many of these changes are important because they demonstrate how social groups can shape language for their own purposes.

Nancy: For instance, changes in sexist language use is still an explosive topic for most of my students.

Mark: What we call people with AIDS has political consequences. Whether we say "AIDS victims" or "people with AIDS" makes a difference in human dignity.

Nancy: The essay itself as a genre can be made problematic. I find it interesting that the essay began as a rebellion against schoolmasters, while some three hundred years later the essay has become institutionalized as the major literary vehicle of composition courses and a new generation of schoolmasters.

Jim: Even the traditional notion of authorship is taking some interesting twists in this time of photocopying services. Recent arguments among university professors, photocopying franchises, and publishing corporations call into question the ownership of ideas.

Mark: Presenting a frozen view of language neutralizes all these important political struggles.

Jim: Composition teachers need to convince students that language is a human construct, a social dialogue which, like any dialogue, can be entered into. The invitation to language should be for participation rather than for memorization.

Mark: Traditional classroom instruction reduces language to mere content to be mastered. Gee acknowledges that teaching composition is political, which he concludes is a truism.

Jim: However, this is not a truism among many compositionists today. Many composition teachers believe that they can choose to be objective in the classroom. These people feel that they do not (and should not) indoctrinate political views into their students.

Nancy: Overtly, these teachers do manage to appear apolitical by keeping silent about political issues. They feel that by not taking a stand on political issues, they become a more impartial judge of their students' writing.

Jim: This very decision to appear apolitical, however, is implicitly political. Reigning political and social relations are communicated and reproduced as much by what is omitted as by what is included. In this way, members of the status quo benefit when political talk is excluded from the classroom and is considered to be peripheral to the study of language.

Mark: Then it follows that when composition teachers represent language as a stable, pure, monologic set of individual processes, they

are communicating a particular view of the world. All world views inculcate certain ideological positions. In other words, teaching writing is no less a political act than discussing Apartheid.

Nancy: To make this even more specific, a writing course that focuses on correctness alone without discussing the social and political reasons for correctness and what it ultimately will or will not get the students is taking a political stand. A writing course that only emphasizes reproducing forms and modes of discourse rather than changing those forms and modes is putting forward a political position. A writing course that emphasizes style as a simple matter of clarity and precision without a discussion of the history of style and the reasons why the canons of good writing exist as they do now, in this society and at this moment of history, is putting forward an ideology.

Jim: Language from the tradition of Vygotsky and Bakhtin is a dynamic, plural, always changing set of forces. The forces of language cannot be understood without a consideration of history, which gives us insight into how language changes, who changes it, why it changes, and what the functions of these changes are. When we consider history, we are moving into the explicit realm of human activity, that of rhetoric, power, and thus politics.

Metaknowledge

Mark: On the one hand, I like the way Gee uses the word "metaknowledge" to develop a plan of action for the classroom teacher. Gee seems to hold "metaknowledge" as a consciousness of oppression in our society which may, potentially, lead to resistance.

Nancy: Finding a way to take action is important. Recognizing the reproductive social forces that often insure student failure can be debilitating for the composition teacher. It is easy to slip into cynical pessimism or despair over one's powerlessness to make changes in the system.

Jim: Teaching for critical consciousness, as well as other classroom practices designed for creating social change, can give a teacher the opportunity to see his or her actions as part of a larger philosophy of change—and perhaps as part of a social group interested in making improvements in the larger social structure.

Mark: But we need to critique these pedagogies, searching for the ways we valorize current institutional practices that reinforce inequality in power and wealth.

Nancy: So, it isn't the goal of "metaknowledge" that bothers you so much as the pedagogies which may be created to reach for this goal?

Mark: Yes. I am worried that the pedagogy used to teach metaknowledge, no matter how radical its philosophy, will ultimately

serve to oppress the students. In particular, Gee suggests that "classrooms must be active apprenticeships in 'academic' social practices and, in most cases, must connect with these social practices as they are also carried on outside the 'composition' or 'language' class, elsewhere in the University."

Jim: This sounds a lot like the traditional argument for writing-across-the-curriculum, which fulfills a very conservative agenda. Composition teachers are expected to train students in the conventions of academic discourse as an important service to the academy that will increase student success first at the university and then in their future careers.

Mark: Certainly it is important to help students to develop ways of surviving in school and society, but this is the least that we can do. I refuse to view the classroom as some sort of place where students prepare or "warm up" for the "real world." This assumes that the classroom and society are somehow separable. I think it would be more useful to consider the classroom as part of the real world—as a place from which to build better classrooms and better societies.

Jim: Mark, your article demonstrates this point. The social relations in our classrooms are a very good place to start the process of social change. I know that your collectivist classroom is an effort to create new social possibilities for your students now, instead of always waiting for the future.

Mark: There are many risks involved when trying to radically restructure the social relations in the classroom. But could it be otherwise? The point of a collective composition classroom isn't to make a smoother running university or a better sorting system for labeling the competitive achievements of students. Collectivist composition is based on the belief that America—and American education—can be socially, politically, and economically more democratic, and one important context in which to begin this realization is the classroom and through the practices we enact there.

Nancy: This is an important point, since we tend to talk about change as if it can only happen after students graduate and are outside of the university.

Mark: In addition to discussing with our students how our classrooms reproduce the larger social relations, we should also discuss how even academic conventions reflect a history of social relations, many of which are very oppressive to certain social groups.

Nancy: My students seldom see writing conventions as a mirror of social relations. They view them more as requirements handed down from Minerva or at least logically extrapolated from the tablets given to Moses on the mountain.

Mark: Once again I think that we can do more for our "maladapted"

students than just help them to cope with an unjust society. Even helping students to see that they are "maladapted" seems to end in a disabling pessimism. I am not sure that I can go into the classroom each day if the best I can hope to accomplish is to help my students see how disenfranchised they are by society. I'm not sure if my students should come to class everyday if they believe that this is all that I can teach them.

Jim: I suspect that these students already know how "maladapted" they are before they ever enter a college writing class. Most of them have had twelve-plus years of English teachers, not to mention the rest of society, telling them just how maladapted they are.

Nancy: I think Gee was trying to offer a way past inaction by suggesting that to know one is "maladapted" is to have the power of that knowledge.

Mark: I am not willing to stop there—neither, I suspect, is Gee. I wonder if, rather than helping students to conceptualize further what they already know, it might be better to help students turn this knowledge into a call for change, for social, political, and institutional change and for strategies for surviving resistance to those calls.

Nancy: We need to add some cautions about teaching our students to resist. Not only is it very difficult to teach about a resistance that cannot be institutionalized, we must also consider that students have the most to lose by resisting. Students are the most vulnerable to counter-resistance.

Jim: One of the worst things we can do is to teach students to resist for us. We writing teachers have as much or more to do than our students to change the society in which we live and teach.

Mark: We can begin by exploring what we can do to open up the academy, the place where new attitudes about literacy and society can be shaped. We need, for instance, to take every occasion we find to speak against the conservative conventions oppressing our students and ourselves. We need to make ourselves heard as writing teachers by making and taking every opportunity we can to speak when our institutions deliberate about the philosophies guiding writing-across-the-curriculum programs, when academic standards are discussed, and when literacy standards are being set.

Faking It or Mushfaking It

Nancy: I have problems with making "faking it," as in "mushfake Discourse," the goal of the composition classroom. Whether you call it "partial acquisition" or "mastery," this is where the whole issue of skills gets terribly out of balance. The focus should be on doing something important with language—on what the students want to say—better yet, on what they want to mean. In this regard, college teachers could bene-

fit from learning about the whole language movement in the elementary schools. Skills are taught within the context of purposeful language use: skills never take over class time, getting 15-minute mini-lessons at the most.

Jim: In the traditional classroom model, the emphasis is on what the students don't know rather than on what the students do know.

Nancy: Emphasizing the perceived deficiencies of lower class students serves to oppress these students even more than they were before they entered the classroom. The irony here is that the teachers sincerely want to help their students to succeed, but these classroom practices end up demeaning the students so badly that they rarely risk trying to write about anything important. I don't want to spend my time trying to get my students to "pass" for members of the upper class. There is no integrity in that enterprise.

Mark: All the student learns from this type of activity is his or her own powerlessness in the face of the academy.

Nancy: Which brings up the question of who or what is really being mastered when the focus of language learning is on mastery.

Jim: It seems we have a model of teaching that is built on the myth of upward mobility for lower class students.

Nancy: I can remember trying to dangle this job carrot in front of my first class of inmate men, hoping that they would go farther and faster because of it. They very quickly wised me up by bringing to my attention that I was overly concerned with making money. They assured me that they knew quite well how to make money, and they felt somewhat sorry for me since I did not have their knowledge. The problem was that I wanted them to buy into the working class ethic. I wanted them to become me—which ultimately meant that I had very little respect for who they were.

Jim: "Respect" and "integrity" have been important words for you lately.

Nancy: I believe that it is impossible to teach a person you feel sorry for. Pity is a poor motive for helping someone. I learned to respect the inmates for many reasons. For example, they know a lot about resistance and how to "do the time and not let the time do you." They also have a strong code of ethics which often makes more sense than a lot of university politics.

Jim: Then it is this respect for your students which leads you to believe that they have some knowledge to write about.

Nancy: Yes, this is where integrity comes in. Anyone who has been marginalized by the academy has a social group for whom to speak. I would include here even the traditional first-year student who has very recently suffered the institutional oppression of *in loco parentis* and the

cultural stereotype of being a useless teenager. Moreover, the academy makes a lot of money off of first-year students by placing them in large lecture halls, closing them out of certain classes, having acceptable attrition rates and bell-shaped curves. Speaking up for your collective needs and rights gives a person integrity.

Mark: Even more importantly, the academy needs the wisdom that people from different race, class, and gender groups have. In other words, the academic discourse community needs an affirmative action program.

Jim: Not because we're trying to even things up or because we feel sorry for them, but because African-Americans, factory workers, and women know something about themselves and their lives that the academy doesn't know and could benefit from knowing.

Nancy: Writing has integrity when it is being written, at least in part, for a larger social purpose. A writer feels differently when writing something for a group, particularly if that group is pushing for social change. Most assignment writing never taps into these motives. Many concerns about skills fall into place when there is a significant reason for writing.

Jim: The concern should be with transforming the academy rather than transforming the student.

Mark: Language can play many roles in this transformation. For it is with language that our students can conceive of themselves as part of a social group and even conceptualize the changes that they wish to make.

Nancy: This is language learning for ideology production rather than ideology reproduction. Gee had it right when he said that nothing short of changing the social structure will do. I agree that people who teach literacy are prime candidates for social action; however, we must make room for our students to generate their own changes in society. As Freire explains in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, our literacy students will become their own leaders for their own social movements. We can only help them to see how language dialectically relates to their acts of social transformation.

Mark: It becomes important that we refrain from giving students "our" words and demanding that they speak exclusively in those terms. These are words from another generation. Our students are from a new generation with new social groups. We should not ask them to live in the past. They must make their own changes in meaning. They must speak with different words in order to construct a future for themselves.

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