

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

I don't feel it is necessary to know exactly what I am. The main interest in life and work is to become someone else you were not in the beginning. If you knew when you began a book what you would say at the end, do you think you would have the courage to write it?

—Michel Foucault

University open admissions policies in the late 1960s fundamentally changed American higher education and composition studies. Since then, the discipline has witnessed a paradigm shift from the current-traditional way of teaching to the process theories and pedagogies (Hairston 1982). This moving away from a basically teacher-centered pedagogy toward more student-centered teaching has brought teacher authority to the limelight of the composition arena. In the past three decades new schools of thought, such as cognitivism, expressivism, social constructionism, and radical pedagogy, have offered numerous ways of changing the traditional authoritarian role of the teacher in the classroom.

However, issues concerning teacher authority continue to be troubling. The cognitivists' process theory helps teachers realize the distance between the teacher's expectations and the students' performance traditionally ignored by teachers and therefore enables teachers to become more involved in students' writing activities in order to shorten such a distance. Cognitivists, unfortunately, do not address political, social, or cultural issues implicated in the teacher's discourse and teacher's authority in the classroom. Expressivists, on the other hand, attempt to challenge the teacher's authority by simply getting rid of the teacher in the writing classroom, a romantic stance that is articulated by Peter Elbow in his influential work *Writing without Teachers*. Regarding teachers and the conventions of their discourse as constraints that

block students' thinking and writing, expressivists insist that the teacher's role should be to ensure that students write whatever they think and feel without, at least at first, having to worry about using appropriate grammar, style, or organization. The problem with expressivists' position is that they downplay the significance of the teacher in the writing classroom to the extent that they risk denying the possibility of using the teacher's authority constructively to enhance students' learning.

Social constructionists challenge the traditional teacher's authority by demystifying the teacher's knowledge as social artifact communally created and communally maintained, something that has gained its prestige through the "interpretive community" (Fish 1980). Since knowledge is socially created, social constructionists adopted the collaborative learning method in teaching writing, advocating that teachers should become facilitators and collaborators in the classroom and give up the platform upon which they play the role of transmitters of knowledge. However, social constructionists' emphasis on the academic discourse as the passport to the academic community implies their tendency to privilege the teacher's discourse over the students' discourse without questioning why this should be the case. As a result, the teacher's traditional authority remains essentially intact, even though the collaborative learning approach gives the impression of a student-centered classroom.

Radical educationists' analysis of the relationship between power and literacy and their critique of the traditional classroom as a place of reproducing social injustice and inequality have contributed greatly to a new understanding of the teacher's authority in the classroom. By urging teachers to turn students into subjects (Freire) and agents (Giroux) through dialogic method (Freire, Shor, Holzman, Cooper), radical educationists attempt to change teachers from oppressive figures working for the maintenance of the status quo into critical intellectuals struggling to make society more equal and democratic. However, radical educationists' insistence on substituting for the canon a new canon consisting of "marginal works" (Giroux 1990; Bizzell "Beyond Anti-Foundationalism" 1988; Dasenbrock "What to Teach" 1990; Ewell 1990) and their implicit conviction that radical theories are morally superior to other theories threaten to impose new authority on students in the classroom, an authority that, as Hairston in a recent article argues, can be equally oppressive (Bizzell "Beyond Anti-Foundationalism" 1988, "Foundationalism" 1986, "Classroom Authority" 1991, "Power" 1991; Paine 1989).

The tendency to evade political, social, and cultural issues involved in teacher authority in cognitivists' process theory, the inclination to deny the inevitability and necessity of the teacher's authority in teaching in expressivists' doctrine, and the aspiration to a superficially equal relationship between teacher and students in social constructionists' collaborative learning—all this indicates a failure to see the interrelation between the teacher's authority and the teacher's discourse or the political nature of such a relationship. As a result, these new schools of thought have offered, at best, some seemingly democratic techniques of teaching writing, while leaving the basic assumptions of the traditional teacher's authority intact.

I believe that radical educationists' inquiry into the politics of the dominant discourse has truly touched upon the foundation of the traditional authority of the teacher. As Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron rightly point out in *Reproduction in Education, Society, and Culture*, the teacher's authority is mainly secured by the teacher's discourse, which "can never be disassociated from the relation of academic authority in which it is manifested" and which is "able to appear as an intrinsic quality of the person when it merely diverts an advantage of office onto the office-holder" (1977, 110). Thus, for radical educationists, the teacher's discourse embodies the ideology of the dominant culture and reflects all the privileges the dominant class enjoys and all the disadvantages the underclasses suffer in a society of inequality (Giroux, Stuckey, and Ohmann).

In the larger social context, the radical educationists' criticism of the dominant discourse is progressive and revolutionary because their contention for power with the dominant discourse is deeply rooted in the Western intellectual tradition, is stimulated by social changes, and is motivated by their vision for a more democratic and equal society. However, I disagree with radical educationists that replacing the teaching of the dominant discourse with the teaching of discourses of the others is a means to change the traditional teacher's authority. Teaching is always "symbolic imposition" (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977), and a change of content does not completely change the basic institutional function of teaching and, therefore, does not change the traditional teacher's authority. As J. Hillis Miller points out, form and style can be as oppressive as content (1993). Since feminism, multiculturalism, deconstruction, and radical theories are all responses to the dominant discourse and are therefore parasitic upon it, avoiding teaching the dominant discourse not only leaves an irretrievable

gap in students' education but also impedes students' development of critical thinking abilities and thus disempowers them.

To this day, composition scholars and teachers are still trying to deal with the paradoxes inherent in teacher authority: the conflict between the teacher's desire for democracy and equality in the classroom and the need for authority in teaching; the incompatibility between the teacher's wish to teach discourses of the others and the goal of the institution to maintain and continue the dominant discourse and dominant culture; and the contradictions between the teacher's good intentions and students' diverse and varied needs. No satisfactory solutions to these dilemmas have been offered yet.

These dilemmas hereby formed the central concerns of my research project, an inquiry into the relationships between the teacher and teaching, the teacher's authority and the authority of institution, the teacher's authority and the authority of discourse, and between the teacher's role as social agent for democracy and as cultural agent for learning in the classroom. Informed by Paulo Freire's education philosophy, Richard Rorty's edifying philosophy, Bourdieu and Passeron's theory of cultural reproduction, Bakhtin's philosophy of language, and poststructural theories in literature and composition, the inquiry led to the following results:

1. Having examined the inevitability, unavailability, and necessity of authority—the authority of the institution and of the teacher—in teaching, I argue that radical educationists' attempts to substitute for the canon a new canon or to replace the teaching of the dominant discourse with the teaching of radical discourses do not prevent the teacher's authority from being oppressive and exclusive. We need a new description of the teacher's authority and the teacher's discourse, a description that will recognize the double-sidedness of authority and discourse so as to use them more constructively in the classroom.

2. I argue that the composition discipline's interpretation of Rorty's notion of normal/abnormal discourse is inadequate and limited. For example, Kenneth Bruffee retains only the notion of normal discourse in his pedagogy, neglecting almost entirely the place of abnormal discourse in teaching and learning ("Collaborative Learning" 1984); John Schilb misunderstands the notion of normal/abnormal discourse as binary oppositions; and Patricia Bizzell discounts the significance of Rorty's antifoundational philosophy in teaching, claiming that Rorty can find "no way around an unequal relation between professor and students" ("Arguing"

1988, 150). After I have reread Rorty's normal/abnormal discourse in light of his edifying philosophy and reexamined the relationships among students' discourse(s), the teacher's discourse, and the dominant discourse, I propose to describe the radical discourses as Responsive Abnormal Discourse and students' discourse(s) as Nonresponsive Abnormal Discourse (1979). I believe that the two forms of abnormal discourse are different from each other in their relations to the dominant discourse, or normal discourse, and that they should be treated differently in the classroom.

3. Based on my analysis of the relationships among normal discourse, Responsive Abnormal Discourse, and Nonresponsive Abnormal Discourse, I suggest that teachers participate in teaching through two-level interactions: the primary interaction between Nonresponsive Abnormal Discourse (students' discourses) and normal discourse, and the secondary interaction between Non-responsive Abnormal Discourse and Responsive Abnormal Discourse (the teacher's discourse). Since the two-level interaction established a triangular discourse relationship in the classroom, the tendency of normal discourse to become dominant and oppressive in an asymmetrical teacher-student interaction will be effectively resisted by the presence of a third force, the secondary interaction between Nonresponsive Abnormal Discourse and Responsive Abnormal Discourse.

4. Borrowing from Rorty, I describe teachers who participate in the two-level interaction in the classroom as "edifying teachers." Edifying teachers are similar to Rorty's edifying philosophers in that both speak abnormal discourse and both maintain a critical distance from normal discourse and the dominant culture. However, edifying teachers accommodate normal and abnormal discourses in teaching in such a way that the tension between the different, very often conflicting, discourses provides a space, or a context, for students to develop their own discourse. Furthermore, edifying teachers do not try to evade the tension between the authority of the institution and the autonomy of intellectuals but try to find constructive ways to turn the tension into creative power. Nor do edifying teachers try to avoid their conflicting duties of conserving the dominant culture and discourse as cultural agents on the one hand and problematizing and criticizing them as social agents for democracy on the other hand.

Instead, edifying teachers strive to make their seemingly conflicting duties productive in the teaching context. Like Rorty's edifying philosopher, they participate in the hermeneutic and "poetic"

activities, trying to make connections between their own culture and other cultures or between their discipline and other disciplines. They strive to "keep space open for the sense of wonder" by insisting on speaking abnormal discourse (1979, 370). They see "*conservation* as the ultimate context within which knowledge is to be understood," instead of seeing conversation as a means of searching for justification of one's discourse as the normal discourse (389). In short, edifying teachers differ from all other types of teachers in their ability to turn the constraints of discourse, authority, and institutional practices into creative and enabling power through communicating with their students across the boundaries of communities, cultures, discourses, and disciplines.