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Consensus and Difference in Collaborative Learning

Kenneth A. Bruffee, Harvey S. Wiener, and others have argued that collaborative learning may be distinguished from other forms of group work on the grounds that it organizes students not just to work together on common projects but more important to engage in a process of intellectual negotiation and collective decision-making. The aim of collaborative learning, its advocates hold, is to reach consensus through an expanding conversation. This conversation takes place at a number of levels—first in small discussion groups, next among the groups in a class, then between the class and the teacher, and finally among the class, the teacher, and the wider community of knowledge. In Bruffee's social constructionist pedagogy, the language used to reach consensus acquires greater authority as it acquires greater social weight: the knowledge students put into words counts for more as they test it out, revising and relocating it by taking into account what their peers, the teacher, and voices outside the classroom have to say.

The purpose of this essay is to examine two important criticisms of the politics of collaborative learning in order to explore one of the key terms in collaborative learning, consensus. This seems worth doing because the notion of consensus is one of the most controversial and misunderstood aspects of collaborative learning.

One line of criticism argues that the use of consensus in collaborative learning is an inherently dangerous and potentially totalitarian practice that stifles individual voice and creativity, suppresses differences, and enforces conformity. Thomas S. Johnson, for example, believes that consensus is just another name for "group think" and conjures images of 1984. Pedro Beade worries that consensus might be used to justify the practices of "a crazy, totalitarian state" (708). These critics of collaborative learning want to rescue the sovereignty and autonomy of the individual from what Johnson calls collaborative learning's "peer indoctrination classes." Underlying these political objections is the sense, as David Foster puts it, that the human mind is "far too mysterious and fascinating" to take the social constructionist route and "ground its utterances" in a "normative social community." According to Foster, collaborative learning is

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based on an epistemological mistake: Bruffee's "overeager application of the social constructionist label" causes him to overvalue social practices and thus to deny the primacy of individual consciousness in creating knowledge.

A second line of criticism, on the other hand, agrees with Bruffee that things like selves, knowledge, discourse, readers, and writers are indeed socially constructed. What left-wing critics such as Greg Myers do worry about, however, is that Bruffee's social constructionist pedagogy runs the risk of limiting its focus to the internal workings of discourse communities and of overlooking the wider social forces that structure the production of knowledge. To understand the production and validation of knowledge, Myers argues, we need to know not just how knowledge communities operate consensually but how knowledge and its means of production are distributed in an unequal, exclusionary social order and embedded in hierarchical relations of power. Without a critique of the dominant power relations that organize the production of knowledge, left-wing critics hold, the social constructionist rationale for collaborative learning may, unwittingly or not, accommodate its practices to the authority of knowledge it believes it is demystifying.

In this essay I propose to extend the left critique, not to abandon the notion of consensus but to revise it, as a step toward developing a critical practice of collaborative learning. I want to concede that consensus in some of its pedagogical uses may indeed be an accommodation to the workings of normal discourse and function thereby as a component to promote conformity and improve the performance of the system. My point will be, however, that consensus need not inevitably result in accommodation. The politics of consensus depends on the teacher's practice. Consensus, I will argue, can be a powerful instrument for students to generate differences, to identify the systems of authority that organize these differences, and to transform the relations of power that determine who may speak and what counts as a meaningful statement.

Before I outline the critical and transformative projects I believe are implied in collaborative learning, I want to address the fear of conformity in the first line of criticism—the fear that collaborative learning denies differences and threatens individuality. It is important to acknowledge that this fear points to some real problems that arise when students work together in groups—problems such as parochialism, demagoguery, narrow appeals to common sense, an urge to reach noncontroversial consensus without considering alternatives. After all, we cannot realistically expect that collaborative learning will lead students spontaneously to transcend the limits of American culture, its homogenizing force, its engrained suspicion of social and cultural differences, its tendency to reify the other and blame the victim. But if the fear of conformity is a legitimate one, it is not for the reasons the first group of Bruffee's critics gives. Their effort to save the individual from the group is based on an unhelpful and unnecessary polarization of the individual and society.

The limits of these critics' fear of conformity can best be seen, I think, by emphasizing the influence of John Dewey's educational pragmatism on collaborative learning. What Bruffee takes from Dewey is a strong appreciation of the

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generativity of group life and its promise for classroom teaching. Consensus represents the potentiality of social agency inherent in group life—the capacity for self-organization, cooperation, shared decision-making, and common action. From a pragmatist perspective, the goal of reaching consensus gives the members of a group a stake in collective projects. It does not inhibit individuality, as it does for those who fear consensus will lead to conformity. Rather it enables individuals to participate actively and meaningfully in group life. If anything, it is through the social interaction of shared activity that individuals realize their own power to take control of their situation by collaborating with others.

For Deweyans, the effort to save the individual from the group is at best misguided and at worst reactionary. On one hand, pragmatists see no reason to rescue the individual from "normative communities" because in effect there is nowhere else the individual can be: consciousness is the extension of social experience inward. On the other hand, the desire to escape from "normative communities" and break out of the "prison house of language" by grounding utterances in the generative force of individual consciousness springs from an ideological complex of belief and practice.

Dewey's educational pragmatism recasts the fear that consensus will inevitably lead to conformity as a fear of group life itself. Pedagogies that take the individual as the irreducible, inviolate starting point of education—whether through individualized instruction, cultivation of personal voice, or an emphasis on creativity and self-actualization—inscribe a deeply contradictory ideology of individualism in classroom practice. If these pedagogies seek to liberate the individual, they also simultaneously constitute the student as a social atom, an accounting unit under the teacher's gaze, a record kept by the teacher. The fear of consensus often betrays a fear of peer group influence—a fear that students will keep their own records, work out collective norms, and take action. Rather than the liberation of the individual it claims to be, the fear of "group-think" is implicitly teacher-centered and authoritarian. It prevents a class of students from transforming themselves from an aggregate of individuals into a participatory learning community. The mode of teaching and learning remains what Bruffee calls "authoritarian-individualist": the atomization of students locks them into a one-to-one relation to the teacher, the repository of effective authority in the classroom, and cuts them off from the possibilities of jointly empowering activities carried out in the society of peers. In short, the critique of consensus in the name of individualism is baseless. Consensus does not necessarily violate the individual but instead can enable individuals to empower each other through social activity.

We may now take up the left-wing critique. Here the issue is not the status of the individual but the status of exchange among individuals. We should note, first of all, that Bruffee and his left-wing critics occupy a good deal of common ground concerning the social relationships of intellectual exchange as they are played out in the classroom. For teachers and theorists looking for a critical pedagogy, Bruffee's work has been important because it teaches us to read the classroom and the culture of teaching and learning as a social text.

How we teach, Bruffee suggests, is what we teach. For Bruffee, pedagogy is not a neutral practice of transmitting knowledge from one place to another, from the teacher's head to the students'. The pedagogical project that Bruffee initiated in the early seventies calls into question the dynamics of cultural reproduction in the classroom, a process that normally operates, as it were, behind our backs. What before had seemed commonsensical became in Bruffee's reading of the classroom as a social text a set of historically derived practices—an atomized and authoritarian culture that mystifies the production of knowledge and reproduces hierarchical relations of power and domination. Bruffee's formulation of collaborative learning in the early seventies offers an implicit critique of the culture of the classroom, the sovereignty of the teacher, the reification of knowledge, the atomized authority–dependence of students, and the competitiveness and intellectual hoarding encouraged by the traditional reward system and the wider meritocratic order in higher education.

In his early work, Bruffee sees collaborative learning as part of a wider movement for participatory democracy, shared decision-making, and non-authoritarian styles of leadership and group life. "In the world which surrounds the classroom," Bruffee says in 1973, "people today are challenging and revising many social and political traditions which have heretofore gone unquestioned"; if education has been resistant to collaboration, "[e]lsewhere, everywhere, collaborative action increasingly pervades our society" ("Collaborative Learning" 634). In Bruffee's account, collaborative learning occurs—along with free universities, grass-roots organizing, the consciousness–raising groups of women's liberation, the anti-war movement, and so on—as a moment in the cultural history of the sixties, the name we now give to signify delegitimation of power and the search for alternative forms of social and political life. I think it is not accidental that collaborative learning emerged initially within open admissions programs, as part of a wider response to political pressures from below to extend literacy and access to higher education to black, Hispanic, and working-class people who had formerly been excluded.

From the late seventies to the present, Bruffee has asked what it means to reorganize the social relations in the classroom and how the decentering of authority that takes place in collaborative learning might change the way we talk about the nature of liberal education and the authority of knowledge and its institutions. Bruffee's ongoing efforts to find a language adequate to this task—to theorize collaborative learning as a social constructionist pedagogy—have turned, in the ensuing discussion, into the source of recent left-wing challenges to his work. One of the central issues of contention concerns Bruffee's appropriation of Richard Rorty's notion of conversation.

The term conversation has become a social constructionist code word to talk about knowledge and teaching and learning as social—not cognitive—acts. Knowledge, in this account, is not the result of the confrontation of the individual mind with reality but of the conversation that organizes the available means we have at any given time to talk about reality. Learning, therefore, cannot be understood strictly on cognitive grounds; it means rather joining new communities and taking part in new conversations. Learning, as Rorty puts it, "is a

shift in a person's relations with others, not a shift inside the person that now *suits* him to enter new relationships" (*Philosophy* 187). By organizing students to participate in conversation, Bruffee argues, collaborative learning forms transitional communities to help students undergo the stressful and anxiety-inducing process of moving out of their indigenous communities and acquiring fluency in the conversation of liberally educated men and women. For Bruffee, Rorty's notion of conversation provides a rationale for collaborative learning as a process of re-acculturation, of learning to participate in the ongoing discussions of new communities.

This is a powerful rationale because it translates a wider reinterpretation of knowledge taking place in contemporary critical theory to the classroom—and gives us a way to incorporate what Bruffee calls the "social turn" in twentieth-century thought into the theory and practice of teaching. Still, for left-wing teachers and theorists, there is something troubling about Rorty's notion of conversation, something in the metaphor worth unpacking.

For Rorty, the term conversation offers a useful way to talk about the production of knowledge as a social process without reference to metaphysical foundations. Rorty's notion of conversation describes a discourse that has no beginning or end, but no crisis or contradiction, either. Cut loose from metaphysical moorings and transcendental backups, the conversation keeps rolling of its own accord, reproducing itself effortlessly, responsible only to itself, sanctioned by what Rorty sees as the only sanction credible: our loyalty to the conversation and our solidarity with its practices. All we can do is to continue the conversation initiated before we appeared on the scene. "We do not know," Rorty says, "what 'success' would mean except simply 'continuance'"(*Consequences* 172).

In political terms, what Rorty calls "postmodernist bourgeois liberalism" hangs onto the "ideals of the Enlightenment" but gives up the belief in Enlightenment reason. In Rorty's hands, the metaphor of conversation invokes an eighteenth-century vision of freely constituted, discoursing subjects taking part in polite speech, in Enlightenment salons and coffee houses, in the "republic of letters" emerging in the interstices of the absolutist state. To historicize Rorty's metaphor is to disclose what Terry Eagleton calls the "bourgeoisie's dream of freedom": "a society of petty producers whose endlessly available, utterly inexhaustible commodity is discourse itself" (16-17). As Eagleton argues, the "bourgeoisie . . . discovers in discourse an idealized image of its own social relations" (16). Conversation becomes the only truly free market, an ideal discursive space where exchange without domination is possible, where social differences are converted into abstract equalities at the level of speech acts.

Only now, Rorty says, the discourse must operate without the consensus of universal reason that eighteenth-century speakers took to be the normative grounding of their utterances. Given the postmodernist's disbelief in metanarratives of reason and freedom, Rebecca Comay argues, the conversation loses its emancipatory edge and "adapts to the episodic rhythms of commercial culture" (122). If we've traded in the old metaphysical comforts for a cheerful, if ungrounded affirmation of conversation, we do so, Rorty says, so we can "read more, talk more, write more" (*Philosophy* 375). The logic of planned obsoles-

cence drives the conversation as we look for the "new, better, more interesting, more fruitful ways of speaking" (*Philosophy* 360). In a world without foundations, "nobody is so passe as the intellectual czar of the previous generation . . . the man who redescribed all those old descriptions, which, thanks in part to his redescriptions of them, nobody now wants to know anything about" (*Consquences* xl–xli). According to the idealized exchange of a free and open market, conversation keeps circulating in a spectacle of production and consumption. The new becomes old, the fashionable out-of-date, but the conversation itself is inexhaustible. "Evanescent moments in a continuing conversation . . . we keep the conversation going" (*Philosophy* 378).

Stripped of its universalist principles, the conversation turns into an act of assimilation. Unpacked, Rorty's metaphor of conversation offers a version of nonfoundationalism without tears. The consensus that keeps things rolling is no longer based on higher purposes but instead on the recognition that if we cannot discover the truth in any final sense, what we can do is to keep on talking to each other: we can tell stories, give accounts, state reasons, negotiate differences, and so on. The conversation, that is, gives up teleological ends to reaffirm the sociability of intellectual exchange. And if, as Rorty says, the conversation is simply the way we justify our beliefs socially, then we might as well relax, get good at it, and enjoy it.

Of course there are considerable attractions to this view. But there are some problems too. Rorty acknowledges, for example, the tendency of discourse to normalize itself and to block the flow of conversation by posing as a "canonical vocabulary." The conversation, as Rorty starts to acknowledge here, is perpetually materializing itself in institutional forms, alloting the opportunity to speak and arbitrating the terms of discussion. But Rorty, finally, backs away from the full consequences of conversation's normative force. At just the point where we could name the conversation and its underlying consensus as a technology of power and ask how its practices enable and constrain the production of knowledge, privilege and exclude forms of discourse, set its agenda by ignoring or suppressing others, Rorty builds a self-correcting mechanism into the conversation, an invisible hand to keep the discourse circulating and things from going stale. This is abnormal discourse or, as Rorty says, "what happens when someone joins in the discourse who is ignorant of . . . conventions or who sets them aside" (*Philosophy* 320).

Rorty's view of abnormal discourse is, I think, a problematical one. On one hand, it identifies abnormal discourse with a romantic realm of thinking the unthinkable, of solitary voices calling out, of the imagination cutting against the grain. In keeping with this romantic figure of thought, Rorty makes abnormal discourse the activity par excellence not of the group but of the individual—the genius, the rebel, the fool, "some*one* . . . who is ignorant of . . . conventions or sets them aside." This side of abnormal discourse, moreover, resists formulation. There is, Rorty says, "no discipline which describes it, any more than there is a discipline devoted to a study of the unpredictable, or of 'creativity'" (*Philosophy* 320). It is simply "generated by free and leisured conversation . . . as the sparks fly up" (321).

At the same time, though we can't know abnormal discourse on its own terms, we can identify how it functions, but now from a pragmatist perspective, to keep the conversation going. In other words, at just the moment Rorty seems to introduce difference and destabilize the conversation, he turns crisis, conflict, and contradiction into homeostatic gestures whose very expression restabilizes the conversation. What remains, once we've removed universal reason, narratives of emancipation, or "permanent neutral frameworks" as the grounds for adjudicating knowledge claims, is civility, the agreement to keep on talking. The "power of strangeness" in abnormal discourse "to take us out of our old selves" and "to make us into new beings" (*Philosophy* 360) simply reaffirms our solidarity with the conversation.

Left-wing critics are uncomfortable with this position. They want to interrupt the conversation, to denaturalize its workings, and to talk about the way conversation legitimizes itself by its very performance. Left-wing critics worry that Rortyian conversation downplays its own social force and the conflict it generates, the discourses silenced or unheard in the conversation and its representation of itself. They suspect there are other voices to take into account—voices constituted as otherness outside the conversation. For this reason, left-wing critics want to redefine consensus by locating it in the prevailing balance of power, as a marker that sets the boundaries between discourses. As Myers suggests, we need to see consensus in terms of differences and not just of agreements, "as the result of conflicts, not as a monolith" (166). Redefining consensus as a matter of conflict suggests, moreover, that consensus does not so much reconcile differences through rational negotiation. Instead, such a redefinition represents consensus as a strategy that structures differences by organizing them in relation to each other. In this sense, consensus cannot be known without its opposite—without the other voices at the periphery of the conversation.

By looking at consensus in terms of conflict rather than agreement, we get a somewhat different picture of the relationship between normal and abnormal discourse than the one Rorty and Bruffee have offered. Redefining consensus leads us, I think, to abandon the view that abnormal discourse functions as a complement to normal discourse, something which, as Bruffee says, students can turn to from time to time to question business as usual and to keep the conversation going. Instead, abnormal discourse represents the result at any given time of the set of power relations that organizes normal discourse: the acts of permission and prohibition, of incorporation and exclusion that institute the structure and practices of discourse communities. Abnormal discourse is not so much a homeostatic mechanism that keeps the conversation and thereby the community renewed and refreshed. Instead, it refers to dissensus, to marginalized voices, the resistance and contestation both within and outside the conversation, what Roland Barthes calls acratic discourse—the discourses out of power. Abnormal discourse, that is, refers not only to surprises and accidents that emerge when normal discourse reaches a dead end, when, as Wittgenstein puts it, "language goes on holiday." In the account I'm suggesting, it also refers to the relations of power that determine what falls within the current consensus and what is assigned the status of dissent. Abnormal discourse, from this perspective, is nei-

ther as romantic nor as pragmatic as Rorty makes it out to be. Rather it offers a way to analyze the strategic moves by which discourse communities legitimize their own conversation by marginalizing others. It becomes a critical term to describe the conflict among discourses and collective wills in the heterogeneous conversation in contemporary public life.

Bruffee argues that such an emphasis on conflict has led his left-wing critics to want to "turn to 'struggle' to force change in 'people's interests'" (Response 714). I would reply that struggle is not something people, left-wing or otherwise, can "turn to" or choose to do. "Struggle," at least the way I understand it, is something we're born into: it's a standard feature of contemporary social existence. We experience "struggle" all the time in everyday life precisely because, as Bruffee points out, we "all belong to many overlapping, mutually inclusive communities." We "experience belonging to each of these communities as both limiting and liberating" (715) in part because we experience the discourses, or what Bruffee calls the "vernacular languages of the communities one belongs to," as a polyphony of voices, an internal conversation traversed by social, cultural, and linguistic differences.

Bruffee uses the term vernacular to call attention to the plurality of voices that constitute our verbal thought. The intersecting vernaculars that we experience contending for our attention and social allegiance, however, are not just plural. They are also organized in hierarchical relations of power. The term vernacular, after all, as Houston Baker reminds us, "signals" on etymological and ideological grounds "'a slave born on his master's estate'" (2). The term vernacular, that is, cannot be understood apart from the relations of domination and subordination it implies. The conversation, in Bakhtin's word, is "heteroglot," a mosaic of vernaculars, the multi-accented idiomatic expression of race, class, and gender differences. The conversation gives voice to the conflicts inherent in an unequal social order and in the asymmetrical relations of power in everyday life.

Bruffee worries that "struggle" means interrupting the conversation to "force change in people's interests." Bruffee's worries here betray what seems to me a persistent anxiety in non-foundationalist versions of social constructionist thought about its own radical disclosure: that once we give up extra-historical and universal criteria and reduce the authority of knowledge to a self-legitimizing account of its own practices, we won't have a way to separate persuasion from force, validity claims from plays of power. As Rorty puts it, to "suggest that there is *no* . . . common ground seems to endanger rationality. . . . To question the need for commensuration seems the first step toward a return to a war of 'all against all'" (*Philosophy* 317). In the account I'm suggesting, "struggle" is not a matter of interrupting the conversation to replace consensual validation with force. It refers rather to the relations between the two terms—intellectual negotiation and power—in what we think of as rational argument and public discourse. The term "struggle" is simply a way of shifting rhetorical analysis, as Victor Vitanza has suggested, from Aristotelean persuasion or Burkean identification to an agonistic framework of conflict and difference—to a rhetoric of dissensus.

The choice, as I see it, does not consist of solidarity with a self-explaining conversation or violence. I want to preserve, along with Bruffee and Rorty, the value of civility and consensus. But to do this we will need to rehabilitate the notion of consensus by redefining it in relation to a rhetoric of dissensus. We will need, that is, to look at collaborative learning not merely as a process of consensus-making but more important as a process of identifying differences and locating these differences in relation to each other. The consensus that we ask students to reach in the collaborative classroom will be based not so much on collective agreements as on collective explanations of how people differ, where their differences come from, and whether they can live and work together with these differences.

To think of consensus in terms of dissensus is to challenge a central rationale Bruffee has offered for collaborative learning. Bruffee currently holds that one of the benefits of collaborative learning is that its consensual practices model the normal workings of discourse communities in business, government, the professions, and academia. Myers argues, correctly I think, that Bruffee's use of consensus risks accepting the current production and distribution of knowledge and discourse as unproblematical and given. The limit of Myers' critique, however, is that it concedes Bruffee's claim that consensus is in fact the norm in business, industry, and the professions. In this regard, both Bruffee and Myers seriously underestimate the extent to which the conversations of these discourse communities are regulated not so much by consensual negotiation and shared decision-making as by what Jurgen Habermas calls a "success orientation" of instrumental control and rational efficiency.

It can be misleading, therefore, to tell students, as social constructionists do, that learning to write means learning to participate in the conversation and consensual practices of various discourse communities. Instead, we need to ask students to explore the rhetoric of dissensus that pervades writing situations. As Susan Wells argues, even such apparently prosaic and "unheroic" tasks as writing manuals for the computer-assisted redesign of an auto body section take place within a complicated network of competing and contradictory interests. In the case of the design manual that Wells cites, the technical writer faces three different audiences. Concerned with the overall operation of a computer system, the first audience of systems programmers may be just as likely to guard their professional knowledge of the system as to collaborate with others. They may, in fact, see the second audience, application programmers responsible for writing programs for specific design tasks, as "enemies" looking for ways to "tweak" or "jiggle" the system to get their work done—and who thereby threaten the overall performance of the system. The third audience of users, on the other hand, needs to know how to operate the system on narrow job-related grounds. But from both the programmers' perspective, this group is an unknown variable, men and women who may be "demonically curious" and want to play with the system, to see how it really works.

By exploring the differential access to knowledge and the relations of power and status that structure this writing situation, Wells says, students can learn

not only how technical writers "write for success" by adjusting to multiple audiences. (As it turned out, the technical writer produced a separate manual containing quite different information for each of the audiences.) Students can also learn to articulate a rhetoric of dissenus that will lead them to see that the goal of discourse in this case, as Wells puts it, "is systematic misunderstanding and concealment . . . the total fragmentation and dispersal of knowledge" (256). They can learn, that is, not how consensus is achieved through collaborative negotiation but rather how differences in interest produce conflicts that may in fact block communication and prohibit the development of consensus.

Of course, it is true, as Wells notes, that not all organizations rely upon such a rigid division of labor. Collaboration and consensual decision-making, after all, have become buzz words for "new age" managers and technocrats. Part of the current conventional wisdom about the new information society is that cooperation and collaboration will replace the competitive and individualistic ethos of the entrepreneurial age of industrial capitalism. But finally what collaboration and consensus amount to are not so much new paradigms for a high-tech post-industral order as new versions of an older industrial psychology adopted to late capitalism—human relations techniques to bolster morale, promote identification with the corporation, legitimize differential access to knowledge and status, and increase productivity. Even in the ostensibly disinterested realm of academics, the production of knowledge is motivated as much by career moves as by consensus, by the efforts of individuals to enhance their credentials and relative position in a field, to build up their fund of cultural capital

At issue here is not whether collaborative learning reflects more accurately than traditional pedagogies the actual social relations that produce knowledge and make organizations run. Surely it does. But by modeling collaborative learning on the normal workings of discourse communities, Bruffee identifies the authority of knowledge with the prevailing productive apparatus. For social constructionists, this is an uncontroversial point. In one sense, it is the point—that the present configuration of knowledge and its institutions is a social artifact. But in another sense, this line of thought also concedes the authority of knowledge to the professional judgment of experts, to academic specialties and professional training, to the wider meritocratic order of a credentialed society.

If one of the goals of collaborative learning is to replace the traditional hierarchical relations of teaching and learning with the practices of participatory democracy, we must acknowledge that one of the functions of the professions and the modern university has been to specialize and to remove knowledge from public discourse and decision-making, to reduce it to a matter of expertise and technique. By the same token, we must acknowledge that it devalues the notion of consensus to identify it with the current professional monopolies of knowledge. If anything, the prevailing configuration of knowledge and its institutions *prevents* the formation of consensus by shrinking the public sphere and excluding the majority of the population from the conversation.

The effect of Bruffee's use of consensus is to invest a kind of "real world" authority in the discursive practices and tacit understandings that bind the discourse communities of specialists and experts together. It makes the conversa-

tion a self-explaining mechanism that legitimizes itself through its performances. "This," we tell students, "is the way we [English teachers, biologists, lawyers, chemical engineers, social workers, whatever] do things around here. There's nothing magical about it. It's just the way we talk to each other." The problem is that invoking the "real world" authority of such consensual practices neutralizes the critical and transformative project of collaborative learning, depoliticizes it, and reduces it to an acculturative technique.

To develop a critical version of collaborative learning, we will need to distinguish between consensus as an acculturative practice that reproduces business as usual and consensus as an oppositional one that challenges the prevailing conditions of production. The point of collaborative learning is not simply to demystify the authority of knowledge by revealing its social character but to transform the productive apparatus, to change the social character of production. In this regard, it will help to cast consensus not as a "real world" practice but as a utopian one.

To draw out the utopian possibilities I believe are implied in collaborative learning, we will need to distinguish between "spurious" and "genuine" consensus, as grounded and problematical as these terms may appear to be. In his theory of "communicative action," Habermas defines "genuine" consensus not as something that actually happens but instead as the counterfactual anticipation that agreement can be reached without coercion or systematic distortion. Consensus, for Habermas, is not, as it is for social constructionists like Bruffee, an empirical account of how discourse communities operate but a critical and normative representation of the conditions necessary for fully realized communication to occur. In Habermas' view, we should represent consensus not as the result at any given time of the prevailing conversation but rather as an aspiration to organize the conversation according to relations to non-domination. The anticipation of consensus, that is, projects what Habermas calls an "ideal speech situation," a utopian discursive space that distributes symmetrically the opportunity to speak, to initiate discourse, to question, to give reasons, to do all those other things necessary to justify knowledge socially. From this perspective, consensus becomes a necessary fiction of reciprocity and mutual recognition, the dream of conversation as perfect dialogue. Understood as a utopian desire, assembled from the partial and fragmentary forms of the current conversation, consensus does not appear as the end or the explanation of the conversation but instead as a means of transforming it.

To cast consensus as a utopian instead of a "real world" practice has a number of implications for the collaborative classroom. For one thing, a utopian representation of consensus offers students a powerful critical instrument to interrogate the conversation—to interrupt it in order to investigate the forces which determine who may speak and what may be said, what inhibits communication and what makes it possible. The normal workings of collaborative learning, as Bruffee describes them, ask students to generate an interpretive response to a literary work or a rhetorical analysis of a piece of writing and then to compare the results to the responses or analyses of their teacher and the community of scholars the teacher represents. The pedagogical goal is to negotiate a com-

mon language in the classroom, to draw students into a wider consensus, and to initiate them into the conversation as it is currently organized in the academy. The utopian view of consensus, on the other hand, would abandon this expert-novice model of teaching and learning. Instead consensus would provide students with a critical measure to identify the relations of power in the formation of expert judgment.

Let me give an example here. Collaborative learning in literature classes is often based on the idea that students need to avoid, on the one hand, the objectivism that assumes the meaning is in the text and, on the other, the radical pluralism that assumes we cannot distinguish the merits of one reading from another. Collaborative learning, that is, seeks to locate authority in neither the text nor the reader but in what Stanley Fish calls interpretive communities. From the perspective I am suggesting, however, the identification of collaborative learning with interpretive communities takes for granted the enterprise of interpretation as an end in itself.

In contrast, I think we need to begin collaborative classes by asking why interpretation has become the unquestioned goal of literary studies and what other kinds of readings thereby have been excluded and devalued. We would be interested in the forces which have produced dissensus about how to go about reading a literary text and about what constitutes a literary text in the first place. Students, of course, already know a good deal about all this: they are used to naming Shakespeare and Dickens and Hemingway as literature and disqualifying Stephen King, thrillers, and science fiction. What students have had less opportunity to do is to investigate collectively these implicit hierarchies in terms of the relations of power that organize them. Their literature classes have taught them to segregate kinds of reading but without asking them where these differences come from.

For this reason, we might begin the conversation in literature classes by talking not about how to read a literary text but rather about how the students in the course have been trained to read literature and how their schooled reading differs from the way they read outside of school. By examining these differences, freshmen and sophomores in introductory literature courses, I have found, can begin to examine critically the prevailing representation of literature and the institutional base on which it rests. Students rather quickly will distinguish between literature—which is assigned by teachers and is "good for you"—and the other reading they do—which is "for fun." They explain to each other and to me that literature is filled with "hidden meanings" and that the point of schooled reading is to dig them out, while the reading they do for "fun" produces strong identification with characters and teaches them about "life" or gives them the opportunity to escape from it.

The point of such discussion is not to reach agreement about what properly belongs in the realm of literature and what lies outside of it. Nor is it to abandon the usefulness of schooled reading. Rather what students begin to see is that literature exists as a social category that depends on its relation to non-literature. Students, that is, can begin to sketch the rhetoric of dissensus that structures the

dominant representation of what literature is and is not and that produces marked differences in the way they read and experience texts.

Such discussions, moreover, give students permission to elaborate what they already know—namely, that schooled reading for "hidden meanings" reinforces the authority of expert readers and creates professional monopolies of knowledge. By drawing on their own experience as readers in and out of school, students regularly and spontaneously make the same telling point William E. Cain makes in *The Crisis in Criticism* that the institution of literature depends upon the "close reading" of specialist critics. In this regard, one of the most valuable things students bring to a literature class is what we as professional readers have largely forgotten—the imprecise, unanalytical act of non-close reading, the experience of ordinary readers at home, on the subway, or at the beach in the summer, the kind of reading that schooled reading marks as different.

One of the benefits of emphasizing the dissensus that surrounds the act of reading is that it poses consensus not as the goal of the conversation but rather as a critical measure to help students identify the structures of power that inhibit communication among readers (and between teachers and students) by authorizing certain styles of reading while excluding others. What students in introductory literature classes learn, I think, is to overcome the feeling that they don't get the point of literature or that they just like to read "trash." Instead, they learn why readers disagree about what counts as a reading, where the differences they experience as readers come from, and how we might usefully bring these differences into relation to each other. They learn to probe not only the ideology of the institution of literature but also the ideologies of popular reading. Just as they learn how schooled reading constitutes them as students in a complicated relationship to the authority of teachers and the institution of literature, students also learn that the reading they do outside of school is not simply a pastime but more important represents an act of self-formation that organizes their experience and desire in imaginary relations to the popular culture of late capitalism and its construction of race, class, and gender differences.

The revised notion of consensus I am proposing here depends paradoxically on its deferral, not its realization. I am less interested in students achieving consensus (although of course this happens at times) as in their using consensus as a critical instrument to open gaps in the conversation through which differences may emerge. In this regard, the Habermasian representation of consensus as a counterfactual anticipation of fully realized communication offers students a critical tool to identify the structures of power which determine who may speak and what may be said. But more important, this notion of consensus also offers students utopian aspirations to transform the conversation by freeing it from the prevailing constraints on its participants, the manipulations, deceptions, and plays of power. Through a collective investigation of differences, students can begin to imagine ways to change the relations of production and to base the conversation not on consensus but on reciprocity and the mutual recognition of the participants and their differences.

Unlike Habermas, however, I do not believe removing relations of domination and systematic distortion, whether ideological or neurotic, from the conversation is likely to establish the conditions in which consensus will express a "rational will" and "permit what *all* can want" (108). Instead, I want to displace consensus to a horizon which may never be reached. We need to see consensus, I think, not as an agreement that reconciles differences through an ideal conversation but rather as the desire of humans to live and work together with differences. The goal of consensus, it seems to me, ought to be not the unity of generalizable interests but rather what Iris Marion Young calls "an openness to unassimilated otherness" (22). Under the utopian aegis of consensus, students can learn to agree to disagree, not because "everyone has their own opinion," but because justice demands that we recognize the inexhaustibility of difference and that we organize the conditions in which we live and work accordingly.

By organizing students non-hierarchically so that all discursive roles are available to all the participants in a group, collaborative learning can do more than model or represent the normal workings of discourse communities. Students' experience of non-domination in the collaborative classroom can offer them a critical measure to understand the distortions of communication and the plays of power in normal discourse. Replacing the "real world" authority of consensus with a rhetoric of dissensus can lead students to demystify the normal workings of discourse communities. But just as important, a rhetoric of dissensus can lead them to redefine consensus as a utopian project, a dream of difference without domination. The participatory and democratic practices of collaborative learning offer an important instance of what Walter Benjamin, in "The Author as Producer," calls the "exemplary character of production"—the collective effort to "induce other producers to produce" and to "put an improved apparatus at their disposal" (233). In this regard, the exemplary character of production in collaborative learning can release collective energies to turn the means of criticism into a means of transformation, to tap fundamental impulses toward emancipation and justice in the utopian practices of Habermas' "ideal speech situation."

It would be fatuous, of course, to presume that collaborative learning can constitute more than momentarily an alternative to the present asymmetrical relations of power and distribution of knowledge and its means of production. But it can incite desire through common work to resolve, if only symbolically, the contradictions students face because of the prevailing conditions of production—the monopoly of expertise and the impulse to know, the separation of work and play, allegiance to peers and dependence on faculty esteem, the experience of cooperation and the competitiveness of a ranking reward system, the empowering sense of collectivity and the isolating personalization of an individual's fate. A rehabilitated notion of consensus in collaborative learning can provide students with exemplary motives to imagine alternative worlds and transformations of social life and labor. In its deferred and utopian form, consensus offers a way to orchestrate dissensus and to turn the conversation in the collaborative classroom into a heterotopia of voices—a heterogeneity without hierarchy.

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