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Thesis Proposal

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The Habermas/Foucault Debate and its Implications for Rhetoric and Composition

In *Moving Beyond Academic Discourse: Composition Studies and the Public Sphere*

(2002), Christian Weisser states “radical theories in composition studies...have recently begun to conceive of *the public sphere* as ... a useful metaphor for how we might envision writing classrooms” (xiii). Indeed, Weisser’s book deals largely with how “many writing instructors are interested in both theories and practices that allow student writing to have real political and social ramifications” (57). Consequently, Weisser dedicates much of his discussion to the social/critical theorist Jürgen Habermas whose theories of communication within an ideal speech situation—that is, the public sphere—were taken up by compositionists in the 1980’s and 1990’s. Composition appropriated Habermasian theory, it appears, in order to provide a theoretical background for their discussions of consensus and intersubjectivity—particularly in collaborative learning—and their examination of the social motives that drive dominant discourses. However, compositions’ focus on Habermas’s continuation of the Enlightenment project which finds universality in *reasoned and consensual* communication—and thus *idealized* dialogic space--has proved troubling for some. Indeed, in her essay “Paralogy, Externalism, and Competence: Exploring Habermas through Thomas Kent,” Jacqueline Rhodes writes “compositionists have grappled (and only sporadically) with [Habermas’s] ideas without much success” (1). The problem, perhaps, stems from the complexity of Habermas’s theories; or more importantly, from the fact that his attempt to continue the Enlightenment project with his focus on Universal Pragmatics does not fit neatly into the landscape of postmodern composition studies (Rhodes 5).

By introducing Habermasian theory into a principally postmodern discipline, compositionists' efforts amount to, as Rhodes puts it, a series of "false starts and misfires" (2). For this thesis, therefore, I propose to examine several compositionists' discussions of Habermas which contradictorily "hinge on the idea that language and knowledge are *local* rather than *universal*—that they are *context-bound, specific, and most importantly, they do not stem from a god's eye objectivism*" (Rhodes 4; emphasis added). Specifically, I will investigate the work of compositionists such as John Aber, Patricia Roberts, and John Trimbur who discuss Habermas's work in terms of the potential of emancipatory discourse based on universal structures. Using Rhodes's assessment of composition's misuse of Habermasian theory as a springboard, I will explore composition's Habermasian dilemma through the lens of his "debate" with postmodern philosopher Michel Foucault, who strongly critiqued Habermasian universalism. Why Foucault? As I see it, in their efforts to make Habermas "work" for composition studies, scholars often make *amendments* to their discussions by incorporating what look suspiciously like Foucaultian principles. This thesis, therefore aims to shed light on (1) the extent to which composition has fallen short in its efforts to examine discourse in the public sphere/politicized classroom; and (2) whether, through a careful exploration of the Habermas/Foucault debate and their competing concepts of discourse, I will demonstrate how they might be used in composition studies, as Bernd Stahl puts it, "...to complement each other, despite their fundamental differences" (4329).

While their "debate" was never a formal, public one, Habermas and Foucault both addressed communication in terms of Enlightenment ideals and responded prolifically to the other's work. This "debate" has been examined in detail in the publications that will inform my analysis: in particular, *Critique and Power: Recasting the Foucault/Habermas Debate*, ed. Michael Kelly; *Critical Theory* by David Couzens Hoy and Thomas McCarthy; and lastly, the

research of technologist and policy advisor Dr. Bent Flyvbjerg. From what I have gleaned from the above texts, Foucault rejects Habermasian notions of universal ideals in communication which attempt to overcome difference via rational consensus. Indeed, Flyvbjerg—channeling Foucault—states: “we should operate as if *universals do not exist*... [In fact] where universals are said to exist, [they] must be questioned” (222; emphasis added). Instead, Foucault posits that domination in public discourse is impaired not by “consensus and the absence of power [but by an examination of] the exercise of power and rhetoric” (216).

I will suggest that Foucault offers radical composition a more realistic conception of communication within the public sphere/politicized classroom based on his focus on *realpolitik*. For, as Flyvbjerg states, “Whereas Habermas approaches regulation [of dominance] from a *universalistic theory of discourse*, Foucault seeks out a genealogical understanding of *actual power relations in specific contexts*” (223; emphasis added). It would seem, therefore, that Foucault’s approach (as a complement to Habermas) would intrigue radical compositionists’ keen interest in the politicized classroom, especially with its postmodern perception of the classroom/public sphere as a “*contested, historically textured, multilayered, and sometimes contradictory site*” (Weisser xiii; emphasis added).

As Weisser states, in composition studies, progressive social constructivists have “attempted to more fully account for the relationship between power and discourse” (25). Habermas appears to be a likely candidate for appropriation into the field since his theory of communicative rationality “brings along with it the connotations of a noncoercively unifying, consensus-building force of discourse in which the participants overcome their at first subjectively based views in favour of a rationally motivated agreement” (Habermas 314). However, Foucault might suggest that aiming for consensus through rationalized debate is

simply the wrong way to go about it. Indeed, the participants in a politicized classroom should not be guided by abstract systems of theoretical thinking but, perhaps, via examinations of resistance and struggle in real, social, and historically grounded context.

Chapter one will provide an overview of the Habermas/Foucault “debate,” focusing not only on the fundamental opposition between the two philosophers’ ideas on language in public contexts, but also on points of complementarity. Chapter two will explore the past use and current place of Habermasian theory within composition studies; including composition’s attempts to rehabilitate Habermas through an unvoiced (or even unconscious) reliance on Foucault. Finally, chapter three will explore what use composition might make of a fully articulated, deliberate use of the “debate” between Habermas and Foucault in a politicized classroom.

Annotated Bibliography

Aber, John. “The Technical, the Practical, and the Emancipatory: A Habermasian View of Composition Pedagogy” *Journal of Teaching Writing* 10.2 (1991): 123-136. In this article, Aber discusses Habermasian theory and its influence on composition pedagogy; for instance, by appropriating Habermasian theory, teachers might “open up [their] classrooms...so they become public forums of reflection and rationality,” (130) based on Habermas’s interest in “the human capacity ... to act rationally,” (127) which, in turn, allows students to critique structures of power. For my purposes, I am interested in Aber’s utilization of Habermasian theory to uncover “how knowledge is produced” (126) which might shed some light on what constitutes reason/rationality. Subsequently, I will

look to Foucault's notion that "reason is self created" (Hoy and McCarthy 146) in order to investigate the potential of Habermas's theory of communication in a politicized classroom.

Berlin, James A. "Post Structuralism, Cultural Studies, and the Composition Classroom: Postmodern Theory in Practice." *Rhetoric Review* 11.1 (1992): 16-33. Berlin examines how Postmodern conceptions have challenged the notion of "the unified coherent, autonomous self present subject of the enlightenment" (18) and given rise to a theories that recognize language as "a pluralistic and complex system of signifying practices" (19). This article clearly articulates the social/cultural backdrop against which composition largely situates itself.

Couzens Hoy, David and Thomas McCarthy. *Critical Theory*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1994.

This book brings into focus the disagreements between Habermas and Foucault on the "nature, scope, and limits of human reason" (Back matter). For the purpose of my thesis, it illuminates Habermas and Foucault's approaches to reason, rationality, knowledge, "truth", relativism, and universalism by way of a "dialectical exercise" (4) between Habermasian sympathizer McCarthy, and the Foucauldian Couzens Hoy.

Flyvbjerg, Bent. "Habermas and Foucault: Thinkers for a Civil Society." *The British Journal of Sociology* 49.2 (1998): 210-233. This article offers a comparative analysis of Foucauldian and Habermasian theory "as [their concepts] pertain to the question of democracy and civil society." Indeed, Flyvbjerg presents an invaluable discussion on the contrast between Habermasian "discourse ethics" and Foucauldian "power analytics" and evaluates their usefulness "for those interested in understanding, and bringing about democratic social change" (210). Therefore, if, as Christian Weisser puts it, "writing

instructors are interested in both theories and practices that allow student writing to have real political and social ramifications” (57), this text allow compositionists to expand on their use of Habermasian theory via Flyvbjerg’s juxtaposition of Habermasian notions of consensus and Foucault’s examination of realpolitik.

Foucault, Michel. *The Foucault Reader*. Ed. Paul Rabinow. New York: Pantheon, 1984. This reader provides a selection of excerpts from Foucault’s major works and attempts the daunting task of focusing on his “investigation of the nature of power in society...as it manifests itself in society, schools, hospitals, factories, homes, families” (Back matter). Specifically, Foucault’s main tactic denies the possibility of universals in formulating social models and rejects humankind’s attempts to neutralize certain power structures based on its adherence to abstract utopian principles (4, 5). Consequently, I will examine selections from this reader in an attempt to extract a “response” to Habermasian theories of communication and how these theories are situated in a politicized classroom.

Foss, Sonja K., Karen A. Foss, and Robert Trapp. *Contemporary Perspectives on Rhetoric*. Third ed. Prospect Heights: Waveland, 2002. This book brings the discourse theories of both Habermas and Foucault into clear focus. Indeed, by providing an overview of their work within the context of current rhetorical theory, Foss, Foss, and Trapp highlight their usefulness for “people in the discipline of communication [who] have interpreted [Habermas and Foucault’s] works as relevant to the study of communication” (14).

Habermas, Jürgen. *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*. Trans.

Frederick G. Lawrence. Cambridge: MIT P, 1987. In this text, Habermas takes up the gauntlet laid down by Foucault's (following Nietzsche) critique of modernity and insists that the notion of reason can be rehabilitated by studying his theories of communicative action. Indeed, communicative action "brings along with it the connotations of a noncoercively unifying, consensus-building force of discourse in which the participants overcome their at first subjectively based views in favour of a rationally motivated agreement" (314). These lectures will be useful as they articulate Habermas's direct response to Foucauldian criticism.

--*Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Enquiry into a category of Bourgeois Society*. Trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence. Cambridge: MIT P, 1989. Habermas's seminal work on the Public Sphere—first published in German in 1962—describes the bourgeois public sphere of the eighteenth century. I am particularly interested in his explication of civil society which includes social institutions (such as the university and hence, the politicized classroom) and his explanation of "rational/critical debate."

Kelly, Michael, ed. *Critique and Power: Recasting the Foucault/Habermas Debate*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994. In his introduction, Michael Kelly asks "Which paradigm of critique—Foucault's or Habermas's—is most defensible philosophically and most effective practically, especially in relation to the role of power in the contemporary philosophical landscape?" (2). By juxtaposing key texts by both philosophers, and then adding commentaries by theorists on both sides of the Habermas/Foucault "fence," Kelly offers me the opportunity to compare their work in terms of issues of power in the public sphere.. and consequently, the politicized classroom.

Roberts, Patricia. "Habermas's Varieties of Communicative Action: Controversy Without Combat." *JAC* 11.2 (1991): 55 pars. 1 June 2006. <<http://jac.gsu.edu/jac/11.2/Articles/12.htm>>

Roberts adopts a Habermasian focus in her discussion of consensual communication in the classroom. However, she notes that there are "problems" with Habermas. She states "One objection to making the classroom the ideal speech situation is that the requirements of such a situation and the goal of consensus excludes students whose language or value systems are *different*" (par.38; emphasis added). Roberts, perhaps unconsciously, expresses a Foucauldian criticism of Habermas's theory of communicative competence. For, in Habermasian terms, the public sphere is a place where one *might* achieve the ideal speech situation, that is, a place where participants might achieve *communicative competence* by following certain rules during an interaction; Habermas calls these rules *Universal Pragmatics*. Yet as Rhodes states (see below) "Notice the universal in Universal Pragmatics." It is precisely Habermas's ideas of universality that Foucault criticizes. It appears, therefore, that Roberts anticipates Foucauldian criticism in her objections to Habermas.

Rhodes, Jacqueline. "Paralogy, Externalism, and Competence: Exploring Habermas through Thomas Kent." Unpublished article. (1995). While my thesis does not concern itself with the theories of Thomas Kent, Rhodes's article is the springboard from which my thesis is propelled. Rhodes notes how "Habermasian theory *could* provide the linchpin for a rhetoric of intersubjectivity...with its focus on the emancipatory, critical aspect... [of] communication that forces us to think of rhetoric as agent rather than scene" (1, 2). However, she notes that composition has fallen short in its perception of Habermas's importance to the field for it seems that while composition-with its

appropriation of his theory- concerns itself with the idea “that language and knowledge are local rather than universal...Habermas’s theory of communication seems disturbingly foundational” (4) in a postmodern era. Indeed, she continues “Because of his...insistence on the universal features of language use, Habermas does not fit neatly into much current rhetorical or postmodern theory” (5). Certainly this causes a problem for compositionists who “emphasize the variable nature of language” (5).

Stahl, Bernd Carsten. “Whose Discourse? A Comparison of the Foucauldian and Habermasian Concepts of Discourse in Critical IS Research” *Proceedings of the Tenth Americas Conference on Information Systems* New York, NY. August 2004: 4329-4336. While this paper focuses on the usefulness of a comparative study of Habermas and Foucault’s theories of discourse for the benefit of critical information systems research, it offers a clear discussion of these competing theories of discourse and even attempts a reconciliation between the two. Indeed, I am interested in how Stahl will employ both concepts of discourse in his effort to demonstrate how they “can be used to complement each other despite their fundamental differences” (4329).

Trimbur, John “Consensus and Difference in Collaborative Learning.” *College English* 51.6 (1989): 602-16. Trimbur’s projection of Habermas’s ideal speech situation in the writing classroom offers students “a utopian representation of consensus [and] 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” (612). According to Trimbur, consensus should be examined in terms of conflict (608); he calls this “dissensus.” My thesis, therefore, will look at Trimbur’s idea of dissensus in comparison

to what Bent Flyvbjerg calls Foucauldian power analytics. Consequently, I will look into whether or not Foucault can articulate Trimbur's dissensus further.

Weisser, Christian. *Moving Beyond Academic Discourse: Composition Studies and the Public Sphere*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2002. In his preface, Weisser "envisions the public sphere [and consequently, the politicized classroom] as a contested, historically textured, multilayered and sometimes contradictory site" (xiii). Consequently, while Weisser kick starts his discussion of the public sphere by explicating Habermas's *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962), he does note later critical theorists' criticism of Habermas' "lack of attention to issues of difference and ideology in his conception of the public sphere" (75). These are the criticisms that interest me; consequently, while using Weisser's text as a touchstone, I will investigate what Foucault has to say about difference, conflict, and the effect historical "naturalness" has had upon communication in the public sphere. Indeed, I will use Weisser's text to keep my investigation of the Foucault/Habermas "debate" grounded against the landscape of radical/political composition studies.