

Fundamentos filosóficos e epistemológicos de uma aula de escrita pós-estrutural

Philosophical and epistemological foundations of a post-structural writing lesson

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Resumo: No mundo da pesquisa ou instrução, operar de diferentes tradições filosóficas e epistemológicas resulta em tipos muito diferentes de salas de aula. Uso uma perspectiva pós-estrutural para mostrar como um professor poderia conduzir uma aula de redação para o desenvolvimento da faculdade. Está incluída uma visão geral da teoria pós-estrutural. Sugiro que uma maneira de acomodar a diversidade na sala de aula seja conscientizando professores e alunos sobre as posições epistemológicas, porque algumas posições capacitam os alunos mais do que outras. Outro motivo para examinar as epistemologias é cultivar a consciência das suposições ou agendas sociais, religiosas, políticas e outras com as quais entramos na sala de aula.

Palavras-chave: Epistemologia da instrução alfabetização; epistemologia pós-estrutural; aula de redação pós-estrutural; epistemologia dos alunos; epistemologia dos professores.

Abstract: In the world of research or instruction, operating from different philosophical and epistemological traditions results in very different kinds of classrooms. I use a post-structural perspective to

show how a teacher could conduct a college developmental writing lesson. Included is an overview of post-structural theory. I suggest one way to accommodate diversity in the classroom is by building both teachers' and students' awareness of epistemological positions, because some positions empower students more than others. Another reason for examining epistemologies is to cultivate awareness of the social, religious, political, and other assumptions or agendas with which we enter the classroom.

Keywords: Epistemology of literacy instruction, post-structural epistemology; post-structural writing lesson, epistemology of learners, epistemology of teachers.

Words are the beginning
of metaphysic.

—*Robert L. Stevenson*

As in the night all cats are gray, so
in the darkness of metaphysical
criticism small causes are obscure.

—*William James*

Knowledge is the making of
ourselves one with the world.

—*Eli Siegel*

Knowing: My Epistemology is Better than Your Epistemology

How we know, what we can know, and what we should know have occupied the thoughts and writings of philosophers and educators for thousands of years. In the world of research or instruction, the implications of operating from, say, an empiricist rather than post-structural framework lead to very different outcomes. Consider the differences between two instructional traditions: one which requires students to memorize a body of facts selected by the teacher and to recite those facts back to the teacher as evidence of learning; while the other engages students in the planning of what learning is to take place and under what conditions, and emphasizes identifying and solving real problems as evidence of learning. Each of these instructional events is rooted in different epistemological traditions, the empirical and the post-structural (PS).

I offer here one philosophical/epistemological perspective, post-structuralism (represented by theorists such as Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard and others), to paint a picture of how a PS teacher would conduct a developmental writing lesson for adults. I include an overview of PS theory (although briefly, since other sources provide substantive understandings of this philosophical school).

One reason I chose the PS perspective is that a key issue in recent years has been how to best serve the diversity of learners we find in our classrooms. A way to accommodate diversity in the classroom is by helping students become aware of their teachers' epistemological positions, especially since some positions empower students more than others. Another reason for examining underlying epistemologies is to cultivate our and our students' awareness of the social, religious, political, and other assumptions or agendas with which we enter the classroom. For example, agendas might take the form:

1. I just want to get my certification and I need this class to get it.
2. The teacher is more educated than I am, so the teacher must know all the answers.
3. My writing/speaking/thinking is not very good and I would like to be just like the teacher/my boss/my friend.
4. I'm accustomed to "playing the game" and I'll do what I have to in order to get a good grade in this class.
5. I want students to be able to analyze texts for key and subordinating ideas and this is what constitutes good thinking.
6. All students should be able to write clearly organized essays as a sign of intelligence.
7. Students must learn facts provided to them by the teacher.
8. Learning is evident by assessing students' knowledge of maxims, rules, and principles.
9. All students should be able to write essays on command and this constitutes skill in writing.
10. Students must write using the conventions determined by the teacher/the school/society.
11. Students ought to take responsibility for their learning.
12. I am the teacher and I know what is best for my students.

Epistemological assumptions are present in our teaching whether or not we choose to understand or recognize them. In other words, as Berlin would argue, “rhetoric is regarded as always already ideological” (1988, p.477). So, some important questions this raises are: Do we wish to embrace the agenda and assumptions implied by our epistemology? Will our agenda empower students or thwart their growth and agency? To this end, some epistemologies are more enabling to students than others in fostering agency, as I have said.

The fact is that teachers already operate in a PS world. Interestingly, even popular culture reflects the PS era with theatrical groups such as the POMO African HOMOs (Post Modern African Homosexuals) and television programs such as “Northern Exposure” which, although no longer in production, included characters who often examined existential problems within a PS framework. (I am thinking of the Disc Jockey philosopher, Stevens, or the Native American, Marilyn, whose indigenous Alaskan behaviors contrasted with the ways of the town’s Manhattan Jewish doctor. My favorite episode contained a scene where the local trappers and business residents attending a town meeting to vote on a new sanitation ordinance consider its historical and philosophical implications—even referring to Toynbee—which so frustrates the town’s mayor that she leaves the meeting realizing there is little of hope of passing the simple ordinance she proposed.) At this point in our philosophical or epistemological development, we have no choice other than to exist in this milieu. Whether you subscribe to the view that actions change before beliefs (Guskey & Sparks, 1999) or that core beliefs must change before practices, PS agendas are present in some form in our everyday exchanges and in our classrooms, nevertheless (although not typically in the way “Northern Exposure” depicted its town meeting).

Many undergraduate education programs have a strong focus on instructional methods with some theoretical course work that prepares pre-service teachers in various schools of thought. In spite of the theory studied, student teachers rarely have occasion to pause and explore the epistemologies underlying those theories they study. A deeper understanding of

underlying epistemology would give teachers more tools with which to design and evaluate effective courses of instruction. This is yet another reason I believe it is important to examine the philosophical and epistemological foundations which guide our instructional choices—regardless of whether we adopt a PS or some other position.

Before continuing, I also want to say a few words about why I consider the writing classroom rather than looking into literature or developmental reading courses. My decision to talk about writing in a post-structural classroom stems from my view that the lack of acknowledgement of the non-dominant or ‘The Other’ culture is, perhaps, more strongly present (if not felt) in the writing classroom. Reading the literature exclusively of the dominant culture certainly can be oppressive to students, but someone else generates, or writes, the readings. As composition has traditionally been taught, writers are governed by the rules of the dominant writing culture. The written work theoretically “belongs” to the individual doing the writing; still, a writer cannot truly own something that has, at its foundation, imposed rules and ways of thinking different from the writer’s ways of expression. Somehow, it seems a more serious infraction to have to change one’s own expression than to have to read others’ expressions that do not represent the culture of the individual doing the reading—if I even dare make such a comparison. And students in developmental writing courses are more likely to represent ‘The Other’ given that often they speak a parallel (or what some used to call a non-standard) dialect or are members of an economic group that did not afford them the educational background which permit them to bypass the developmental courses and move directly into the equivalent of English 101 where students’ writing is more likely to conform to the dominant culture’s expectations. In addition, the context under which students enroll in developmental writing courses is one that derives out of the assumption that these students are not equipped to enter the English 101 track and their skills need to be developed, i.e., the students need to be fixed¹. In any case, whether you accept

¹ Even if individual developmental writing teachers take a developmental perspective in their teaching, believing that people do not need to be

my rationale here or not (and I can understand why strong arguments could be made for analyzing any other type of classroom), the enterprise of examining the theoretical foundations of our practices remains an important one.

Laying the Groundwork: A Bit of Theory

Some themes common to PS thinkers include recognizing difference and the positions we hold in relationships (e.g., as teachers and learners), a concern with the power balance between people and groups; the effects of language use on power in relationships; and the need to acknowledge diversity or 'The Other.' Linked to these themes are concerns about creating counter concepts that also turn out to be exclusive in nature; defining what freedom and agency really mean; and the logical difficulty (and even impossibility) in the implications of a PS orientation. Since various epistemologies support different power relations between teachers and students, for post-structuralists an issue becomes how to share and pass power and agency on to the students.

I want to be careful that I do not leave the mistaken idea that there is a single PS perspective. In fact, there is much variety in PS views and classrooms could be very different places depending on which philosopher's views a teacher adopts. E.g., a classroom governed by Lyotard's (1984) views might foster the use of non-dominant genres, dialects and forms in writing. In this classroom, teachers must recognize local rules governing language use and be cognizant that no common measures exist to compare these various usages. On the other hand, a classroom governed by Rorty's (1979) views might use a unifying form (what he calls "normal discourse") but encourage tolerance for other writers².

Derrida's classroom could be one where the teacher becomes much more aware of the suppositions our language carries, but rather than all students are in the process of developing, the university typically sets the context I just mentioned.

² Some might debate whether this view places Rorty as truly PS or just on the cusp; I will not take up this kind of analysis here, however.

ries as teachers. Such a classroom gives thought to how what we require in written language alters the identity of the writer. Derrida deconstructs the philosophical tradition that views an “essence” or things that are the same as more real than things that are different. An implication of this for the classroom might be that we give up the search for writing theories and models that imply an “essence,” i.e., models that can be applied to all students. This raises an immediate problem for the teacher who develops a lesson plan. Once the teacher creates the lesson, she has created an “it” or thing which assumes an essence or assumes a need that all students have in common³.

A classroom rooted in Derrida’s ideas would consider how writing instruction oppresses or dominates others. It might be a classroom where participants speak several language dialects with an ability to create more than one text at the same time. The teachers would be fluent in the standard and parallel dialects as they previously expected only their students to be. In the end, Derrida views language as representative of the monolithic order and does not expect to change the rules of such an order. Because of this, such a classroom might preserve students’ refusal to write in order to preserve their difference. A question for writing teachers, then, becomes: Even if we allow diversity in writing, how does the diversity get appropriated? Which aspects get left out, and which get the privilege of remaining?

Different implications hold for classrooms if unbalanced teacher-student power relations are considered acceptable. It is helpful to assess the relationships between power and resistance. In reference to discourse and power Foucault states,

It seems to me now that the notion of repression is quite inadequate for capturing what is precisely the productive aspect of power...What power holds good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn’t only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse... We should admit rather that power produces knowledge... that power and knowledge directly imply one another... (McGowan 1992, p.128-129).

³ Derrida’s attempt to reduce difference to the irreducible falls into the trap of classical philosophy, i.e., that search for the “essence.”

And Foucault continues his analysis of the relationship between resistance and power:

There are no relations of power without resistances; the latter are all the more real and effective because they are formed right at the point where relations of power are exercised; resistance to power does not have to come from elsewhere to be real...It exists all the more by being in the same place as power; hence, like power, resistance is multiple and can be integrated in global strategies (McGowan 1992, p.130).

Foucault equivocates all power and welcomes resistance to power. In this sense, implications for the writing classroom are a bit different. If disruption is viewed as freedom, then non-standard writing products and breaking the rules for academic writing are viewed as a brush with freedom⁴.

A post-structuralist might be concerned that the thinking of students is shaped by the dominant power; and in the writing and reading class, 'The Other' students often become the object of thoughts about themselves as less than—particularly because dominant culture teachers often control and change students' language and their ways of discourse all in the spirit that knowledge is power. But the PS teacher would ask: Whose knowledge? Who becomes powerful? And in what arena is power gained?

Another view of power has been expressed in a recent feminist perspective on cultural pluralism in the developmental writing class⁵: Mason identifies conditions under which the:

...benevolent use of teacher-centered power to guide students, particularly the developmental students new to academia, through the complex maze of power structure inherent in the learning process [are necessary]. Expert guidance by teachers need not be synonymous with oppressive male dominance; on the contrary, teacher-centered power that

⁴ One concern I have with this stance, however, is that if teachers were to take this position, they may see no need to foster open, diverse environments where rules, epistemologies and other concepts are examined. They may be satisfied that students have freedom by the fact that students resist some activity or assignment.

⁵ Some would argue that this represents more of a structural rather than PS view: but the author places herself in the PS arena.

respects the varied experiences of students' lives and their cultural values is necessary in order to include students outside the mainstream power structure in the learning process (1994, p.45)⁶.

Operating from this view, a teacher might decide, e.g., that process writing curricula oppress some minority students who are not privy to the rules of the dominant language and also are not taught those rules in a process approach; as a result, explicit instruction of grammar conventions would be provided in the classroom.

Theorists such as Eagleton (1983) express their concern with power relations a bit differently.

Literary theories are not to be upbraided for being political, but for being on the whole covertly or unconsciously so—for the blindness with which they offer as supposedly 'technical,' 'self-evident,' 'scientific,' or 'universal' truth doctrines with which a little reflection can be seen to relate to and reinforce the particular interests of particular groups of people at particular times (p. 195).

In a classroom governed by his ideas, the teacher would use rhetoric as a tool to explore the effects of discourse. The fact that the curriculum is a political vehicle would not be considered as big a problem as the fact that it is a covertly political vehicle. A class objective would be to make the politics of the writing curriculum explicit.

I mention Mason and the other philosophers to demonstrate that a PS classroom might actually take very different forms: from one in which students were provided little, if any, instruction in dominant language usage to one in which focused, explicit language and rhetoric usage instruction was provided. Still, thinking about common themes, at least, suggests for us what kinds of issues these philosophers are concerned about, even if they differ on the specific issues. This theoretical or phi-

⁶ I cannot help but think of the profound early work of Alice Miller who demonstrated the coercion, and at times, physical punishment imposed on children, according to adults for their own good, at the expense of diminishing children's creativity and quieting their voices (1989).

losophical grounding is offered as a context in which to consider the PS epistemological position.

A How-To (but Not Really): Approaching a Developmental Writing Lesson

To explore epistemological foundations, I borrowed seven questions, first organized into an epistemological map by Cunningham and Fitzgerald (1996), and I used them as a basis for creating a developmental writing lesson.

1. Can we have knowledge of a single reality that is independent of the knower?
2. Is there such a thing as truth?
3. What primary test must proposed knowledge pass in order to be true?
4. Is knowledge primarily universal or particular?
5. Where is knowledge located relative to the knower?
6. What are the relative contributions of sense data and mental activity to knowing?
7. To what degree is knowledge discovered versus created (pp.40-42).

Kitchener (who disagrees with Cunningham and Fitzgerald's assumptions that we are living in a post-modern world) believes the following list gets at the salient questions for an epistemological analysis, and which overlaps with the above (2011).

Is knowledge possible?...Does knowledge have to be absolutely certain to be knowledge? What are the sources of knowledge? Are they external to the individual or internal? ...What are the respective roles of reason and sense experience? What are the various types of knowledge, such as acquaintance, skill, and propositional knowledge? What is an adequate definition of propositional knowledge? Is it justified true belief? What is the nature of truth and how can we know when we've attained it? What is the role of justification in knowledge and what is and what is an adequate theory of it? How can the knower attain knowledge of the external world and what is the relation between them? What is the nature of a priori knowledge versus a posteriori knowledge...? (pp.87-88).

I include them here because they address additional aspects of a philosophical epistemology. I have included a few implications for praxis in answer to these questions.

Can we have knowledge of a single reality that is independent of the knower? The beliefs a teacher holds in answer to this question make large differences in the writing (or any) classroom. If a teacher believes knowledge exists outside of the knower, she will not value what the student brings as contributions to the learning environment, necessarily. She will expect that the source of all knowledge originates from the experts and authorities, with little room for students to learn from each other or for the teacher to learn from the students.

Is there such a thing as truth? If a teacher believes in truth of the capital T variety, again the field is narrowed for allowing the knowledge, wisdom and insights developed by non-dominant cultures. After all, which capital T truths will such a teacher be teaching? Most likely, they will be that of the dominant culture without even recognizing that other ways, ideas, and logics can provide paths to understanding.

What primary test must proposed knowledge pass in order to be true? This begs the question of what constitutes a fact. How do we know that a fact is a fact? What absolute proof is there that something is a fact? A teacher may value different types of assessment depending on how he believes a fact or knowledge can be demonstrated; and the PS teacher accepts varieties of discourse in examining issues. The PS teacher helps students build awareness of the social and political forces that influence their lives. Students learn ways to scrutinize society so that the texts they produce are not superficial. In addition, students participate in inquiry about the implications of post-structuralism. In the PS classroom, a teacher helps students link personal written expressions to broader political issues. Students need help recognizing, e.g., that texts differ with shifts in gender, race, class, sexual preference and nationality. How a teacher answers this question will determine whether he provides typically inaccessible or even censored information to the class.

Is knowledge primarily universal or particular? If a teacher believes that knowledge is universal, then she may be less likely to allow that students from non-dominant cultures (or a culture different from her own) have valid knowledge that may differ from the dominant culture. If knowledge is universal, then any given fact or idea is recognized only as it supports the general or universal principles.

Where is knowledge located relative to the knower? This is an especially significant question for teachers because a teacher who believes that knowledge is located outside of the knower will expect students to behave as empty vessels, waiting to be filled with information generated by the teacher or other expert. Students will not be seen as capable of constructing knowledge or even interacting with text to enlarge any interpretations that already exist. On the other hand, a PS teacher helps students link their writing and knowledge to each other. This teacher helps students explore the relationship of their ideas to the curriculum. Essentially, students and teacher work together to create the curriculum, with the teacher using interdisciplinary methods.

What are the relative contributions of sense data and mental activity to knowing? The teacher who believes that sense data are more important in shaping understanding and knowledge is likely to expect students to memorize maxims, apply formulas and reflect back to the teacher what can be seen and measured. On the other hand, teachers who privilege mental activity as an avenue to knowledge might look toward the contributions of the learner to knowledge using demonstration of processes as one of the indicators of learning.

To what degree is knowledge discovered versus created? This particular question propels teachers to review the importance they place on objective criteria in its role as a tool for acquiring knowledge.

If knowledge is discovered, either through collecting data or apprehending reality, then subjectivity and cultural bias are threats to the discovery of knowledge. Objectivity would then be considered a necessary attribute of the best inquiry... if knowledge is created, either individually or culturally, then objectivity would be considered a ruse used by an elite to ex-

clude the views of other individuals or groups (Cunningham & Fitzgerald 1996, p.42).

Teachers who believe that knowledge is created might involve the students in determining what resources they will use to research problems, in deciding what kinds of knowledge to develop, and in developing criteria for assessing their learning.

Generally, from a PS perspective, knowledge is viewed as particular in the sense that what is known is not the same for everyone (question 4). This knowledge does not exist outside of the knower, and therefore, is not independent of the knower (question 1). For many post-structuralists, truth exists but it is not the kind of truth we would label with a capital 'T' and as such, again, is not independent of the knower. In other words, each individual can come to know various truths (question 2). These truths, then, are judged by their individual, internal meaningfulness rather than by their correlation to external 'Truths;' Cunningham and Fitzgerald (1996) would say that these truths are judged by their pragmatic value to the knower (question 3). But knowledge is not only located inside the knower; there exists a social element to what is known and so this knowledge can be shared, in some way, among knowers (question 5). Since knowledge is an internal event, the mind becomes key in acquiring knowledge (question 6). For the PS teacher, universal truths are not waiting to be discovered; rather, the individual creates knowledge with others and the discourse is multi-voiced (question 7) (Wertsch, 1991).

It is argued that students will approach new knowledge in various ways depending on whether they "view knowledge as a set of accumulated facts or an integrated set of constructs, or whether they view themselves as passive receptors or active constructors of knowledge." (Hoffer, 2002, p.1). Others recognize that given major shifts in the dominance of visual texts, e.g., the way that knowledge is represented and the medium used to represent it will influence both what will be learned as well as how (Jewitt, 2008). To this end, and because literacy is

more than a set of technical skills, but rather, has a social aspect to it, literacy in Street's view

...is always embedded in socially constructed epistemological principles. It is about knowledge: the ways in which people address reading and writing are themselves rooted in conceptions of knowledge, identity, being. It is also embedded in social practice, such as those of a particular job market or particular educational context and the effects of learning that particular literacy will be dependent on how particular contexts (Carter, p.2).

While we often think about the importance of teachers being able to articulate their core beliefs as they represent personal epistemologies, it is also important that students identify their personal epistemologies as these beliefs will affect their learning and attitudes toward learning (Sekret, 2018). This view is consistent with Rainville and Jones (2011), who suggest the importance of examining the power and positioning that literacy coaches have.

What does this suggest for the design of a developmental writing lesson? A telling summary of a PS approach to composition is contained in Schlib's subtitle, "The Composition Student as Theorist of Cultural Studies and Post Modernism" (1992). He suggests classroom praxis ought to provide for the following if students are to become theorists. Students must participate in inquiry about the implications of post-structuralism. This ought to be linked to students' scrutinizing society so that any text they produce will be more than superficial, i.e., the texts will have meaning beyond the context of submitting papers because teachers require them. Teachers must determine reading and writing abilities of students and assist them in the above.

In the PS classroom, a variety of discourse is accepted from students as they attempt to examine issues. One mechanism to examine issues might have students "satirize the languages of various cultural phenomena and then consider what leverage they have gained" (Schlib 1992, p.187). PS teachers help students link their personal written expressions to broader political issues. Schlib remarks, "Students may need help recognizing that autobiographies can differ with shifts in gender,

race, class, sexual preference, and nation” (p.187). In the PS classroom, students’ written expressions are linked to other students’ expressions and class discussion; and students explore the relationship of their understandings to the curriculum. In the PS classroom, relationships are encouraged beyond the writing classroom to other classes and programs. Other elements for classroom praxis include:

- Building an awareness of social and political forces by beginning instruction with a dialogue about democratic models;
- Including students and teachers in shaping curricula;
- Using interdisciplinary methods;
- Examining hidden aspects of our social histories;
- Exploring sexism and racism;
- Using comedy to examine pleasure, work, thinking and feeling; and
- Providing typically inaccessible and helpful information in the space of the classroom (Shor, 1987).

These proposals, however, should not be used as an outline for a PS lesson. That is because from a PS perspective, there do not exist universal truths about what writing is and how it should be taught. The PS writing teacher will need to consider what to do with each individual student rather than teach a set of rules, stages, processes or routines that can be used by all students. Yet, the teacher also recognizes that any student’s discourse, as Bakhtin (1981) would claim, represents multiple voices. In a sense, people animate other voices through themselves (Wertsch, 1991). Since knowledge has an internal and social link, the PS teacher helps students develop written texts that are consistent with those internal and social beliefs. This means that the teacher plays a role in helping students identify just what their personal truths are. And because there is a social component to knowledge, the teacher creates an environment where students learn how the texts they produce are related to and affect other people (beyond the effects on the teacher who traditionally was the only other person interacting with the texts). The PS teacher realizes that the truths created by the students may be truths that the teacher cannot explain. This teacher is not afraid to find challenges to the reality known

to her; she uses those challenges to help the students know where their ideas rooted and how they came to be.

PS practices also manifest themselves in some of the following ways. A teacher may or may not offer steps to follow for writing compositions, e.g., brainstorming, organizing, or writing an introductory paragraph to produce a good essay. The instruction stems from the teacher's knowledge about the writing interests of the students. Once those interests have been established, the PS teacher helps students locate appropriate resources (e.g., other literature, other students, analyses of how other writers have tackled similar problems, the teacher).

When it comes to selecting writing topics, it would be inappropriate, for example, to require students to write about the benefits of x or y without knowing whether students shared such a belief. It would even be inappropriate to require the students to react to particular issues, because this assumes that the students consider the teacher-selected issues to be of interest to them; it is possible that the students do not. On another level, in the PS classroom students choose the format for writing. The goal for one student may be to write a reaction to a reading or event in some expository format; the goal for another may be to write a poem that expresses a reaction to or feeling about that same event or reading; still another student may want to make a list of ideas to keep a record of his thoughts. Once those formats have been selected, however, there is room for instruction about the conventions of such formats.

I now offer a sample of a lesson that introduces students to this PS developmental writing class. This lesson may require several class meetings to complete. It is designed to prepare students to participate in creating a plan for their class. Also, please consider that this is a skeletal lesson plan and is intended only to give a flavor of how some post-structural influences might operate in the writing classroom. Naturally, a teacher must provide the support needed to transition and move students from one activity to the next⁷

⁷ There are a number of very good protocols for developing lesson plans, e.g., Madeline Hunter's. I have intentionally not followed any of these

Sample of a Developmental Writing

Introductory Lesson Plan

Goals: To be determined in conjunction with students

Materials: To be determined by students + teacher including readings and other media on dialects, sociolinguistics, critical theory

Introduce students: Ask students to work with a partner and tell each other about the most significant experience they have ever had (or tell about something or someone who strongly influenced their thinking or lives. Then have them free write for 10 minutes about what their partner described to them. Ask them to Introduce each other to the rest of the class. They take home their writing to make any desired changes; the “biographies” can become part of a group publication (if that is what the group decides to do). These descriptions can lead to future discussions about writing biographies/autobiographies.

Introduce course content: The teacher explains the importance of getting to know each other because together they will construct the course plan (content, readings, writing projects, evaluation procedures), including whether writings will be co-authored, individually authored, and whether this will be the same or different for everyone.

Discuss: The teacher facilitates a discussion about the nature of writing, what constitutes good and poor writing, how we determine good and bad, where constructs come from about quality, the purpose of constructs (academic, socio-cultural, economic, political), and implications of those constructs. The teacher asks students to keep track of their ideas in writing. The teacher asks students to determine which ideas from the discussion they wish to explore through further discussion, re-

protocols in this sample lesson in order to call attention to the key elements from a PS perspective. This does not mean that elements of these protocols are not applicable here. But regardless of the protocol selected, I am proposing that the teacher apply Cunningham and Fitzgerald's or questions to map out the epistemological foundations inherent in the protocol. If the teacher assumes a PS position, then the protocol that advances such a belief would be the protocol of choice.

ding or analysis. Students work in small groups based on which topic they are interested in pursuing. They come up with ways to present their ideas in writing, e.g., poems, news articles, letters, graphic arts, etc. The teacher reconvenes the whole group and records their ideas on an overhead in three columns:

Column I.	Names of students
Column II.	Topics of interest
Column III.	Method/genre selected for presenting

Expand knowledge base of students: Have students read about the nature of dialects, social/other registers of speech/writing, theory about the reification of dominant cultural practices through writing conventions and instruction. (N.B.: If the readings are too difficult, the teacher can rewrite summaries in understandable language or help students interpret the texts.) Students view the film, *American Tongues* (Alvarez & Kolker 1992). A sociolinguist or sociologist visits class to continue discussing the issues raised in the previous discussion. Again, students are asked to keep track of ideas in writing.

Discuss: Ask whether students want to change or expand ideas from the previous discussion. Ask them to consider the roles as teacher and students regarding writing constructs, and decisions about fulfilling or changing those roles.

Write: Ask students to develop a written work based on any of the previous meetings and discussions (on dialects, social registers of speech, how dominant cultures influence writing classes, etc.) for some interested audience (previously identified) using one of the forms previously suggested. Meet in small groups before, during and after writing to discuss the paper.

Shared writing: Ask students to identify and read a section of their work to the rest of the class. Facilitate a discussion so that students react to each other's ideas. Ask if their work over the last few days suggests ideas for planning the course content, resources and assessment of work.

Establish syllabus: Students work together to determine goals for themselves and the class based on their writing,

knowledge, discussions, interests and needs. The teacher records goals from the group members and distributes photocopies of the class goals. The class discusses how their goals link to the broader college curricula, other programs, and life outside class. Students meet in small groups to determine how to structure the class meetings to accommodate their goals e.g., they discuss what they want to learn more about, any overlap in goals, resources to be used (the teacher could be consulted here), types of writing projects they want to engage in.

Final Thoughts

A key to this plan would be the role that the teacher plays in facilitating the process, using his expertise to get students talking and in creating an environment in which voices that may not have traditionally been heard find expression. The PS teacher also plays a major role in helping students examine how any ideas generated by the group for class structure get privileged. On the other hand, the teacher is a contributing member of the class community and, as such, should not retreat from offering expertise and suggestions when students seek them.

Some would say that a big problem with post-structuralism is that it is devoid of praxis: that associating freedom with plurality does not guarantee agency nor does it provide a way for Western citizens to behave (McGowan, 1992). Yet, Schlib, Berlin, and Shor imply a sample of activities for the classroom. Further, beyond simply acknowledging plurality, the PS perspective does not seek a resolution of dissonance in consonance, i.e., the idea that the many becomes resolved in a universal concept or way (Stone, 1994). Instead, the PS educator seeks to foster plurality without bringing those that are different into the fold, so to speak. A revolution in composition programs has been taking place pointing to the issues in the academy and the world in the way minority groups are received, and many of us are becoming self-conscious about the positions that we hold. Many of us recognize the political agendas inherent in our curricula and are trying to come to an understanding of the role of language and discourse regarding power and agency in the

writing classroom. One of the dilemmas for the PS classroom, however, is that there is no way to separate “good domination” from “evil domination.” This puts quite a burden on the instructor who wants to make instructional judgments.

The quest for curricula and classrooms that emancipate students, that share power among dominant and ‘The Other’ cultures, and that create environments to respond to who are represented in those classrooms seems a noble quest and an assumed stance of the PS educator. Yet, a cautionary has been proposed because it appears that social constructivism in composition is becoming reframed as the politically correct way to teach—a completely anti-PS concept (Petraglia, 1994)! We must guard against allowing even the politically correct to govern what is taught in all classrooms for all students if we do not wish to derail this quest. Still, PS classrooms offer more opportunities for students to move into powerful roles.

The PS classroom is an environment that recognizes the impact that an authoritative text or voice of any kind has on people. The authoritative text, from Bakhtin’s perspective, because its meanings are fixed, does not allow dialogue with other voices; as such, it denies the nature of human discourse as multi-voiced (Wertsch 1991). The PS classroom, instead, seeks meaning in the multi-voicedness of the text with its social, cultural, institutional and historical layers of meaning.

How does a particular philosophy, epistemology, or policy impinge on my teaching? How does it advance students’ learning? How does it empower students? Answering these questions, as I proposed at the beginning of this article, could transform our teaching. In offering ideas for praxis in the PS classroom, however, I have only presented single instances of activities rather than a model for instruction here. In a sense, it would be hypocritical of me, from the PS perspective, to duplicate what I have described. And in my own classrooms, I find that for every change in structure I implement, I encounter more philosophical questions to be resolved. These encounters have caused me to constantly re-evaluate the effects my ins-

structional positions have on students. As much work as this involves, I am not sure this is a bad thing.

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