Re-Inventing the Modern University with WAC: Postmodern Composition as Cultural and Intellectual History

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Many recent authors have examined the new role that Writing-Across-the-Curriculum (WAC) programs are playing in the rethinking of academic culture and discourse at contemporary universities (e.g., Bruffee, 1984; Herrington, 1981; Mahala, 1991; Walvoord, 1996). For example, in their paper "Clearing the Air: WAC Myths and Realities," Susan McLeod and Elaine Maimon (2000) posit that,

> WAC is a pedagogical reform movement that presents an alternative to the "delivery of information" model of teaching in higher education, to lecture classes and to multiple-choice, true/false testing. In place of this model, WAC presents two ways of using writing in the classroom and the curriculum: writing to learn and learning to write in the disciplines. (p. 579)

This concise description of the WAC movement requires us to posit a cultural opposition between the way knowledge is presented in many "modern" university courses and the production of knowledge in a "postmodern" WAC course. From a pedagogical standpoint, I believe that we can define this cultural and historical opposition between modern and postmodern educational methods by distinguishing between the modern stress on individualism, universal rationalism, mass culture, and disciplinarity, and the postmodern emphasis on interactivity, cultural relativism, collaboration, and interdisciplinarity. Thus, the writing-across-the-curriculum approach to higher education pushes us to see knowledge as being socially constructed through shared acts of collaboration that cut across disciplinary borders, and these shared acts of learning place all education in a situation that is sensitive to historical and cultural contexts.[1] In other terms, instead of seeing knowledge as being universal, fixed, and controlled by a single authority (the teacher) in the classroom, WAC advocates tend to see knowledge as an ever-changing effect of culture and discourse. Moreover, this postmodern notion of the social construction of knowledge production (Rifkin, 2000; Gergen, 1991) also challenges the modern idea that writing represents a neutral transmission of meaning; rather, from a postmodern perspective, writing is itself a learning process that helps to transform the knower and the object of knowledge.

The relation between the WAC movement and contemporary movements in higher education can be understood by connecting diverse definitions of postmodernity to particular conceptions of college composition. For example, Marilyn Cooper (1999) has argued that the central guiding force behind the development of postmodernism in higher education is the enrollment of a diverse student population:

> Postmodernism is, above all, a response to our increased awareness of the great diversity
> in human cultures, a diversity that calls into question the possibility of any "universal" or
> "privileged" perspective and that thus values the juxtaposition of different perspectives
> and different voices and the contemplation of connections rather than a subordinated
> structure of ideas that achieves a unified voice and a conclusive perspective. (p. 142)

By stressing cultural diversity and "the contemplation of connections," Cooper points to a relativistic mode of postmodern education challenging the modern stress on hierarchy, universality, and unified subjectivity. Thus, in this context, we can see the WAC movement as a response to multicultural diversity and the juxtaposition of different voices and disciplines in a non-hierarchical, student-centered educational environment.

Central to Cooper's understanding of postmodern education is her claim that our conceptions of what knowledge is has shifted from the previous modern stress on universal reason:

> The transition involves a shift from the notion of knowledge as an apprehension of
> universal truth and its transparent representation in language by rational and unified
> individuals to the notion of knowledge as the construction in language of partial and
> temporary truth by multiple and internally contradictory individuals. (p. 143)

By moving away from the "modern" conception of knowledge as universal truth, postmodern educators are forced to sift through the competing forces of temporary truths, and this destabilized conception of knowledge and truth leads to the development of interdisciplinary and interactive educational environments like the ones favored by the WAC movement.

As I will argue throughout this essay, the WAC movement is centered on an understanding of knowledge as being intertextual, interdisciplinary, dialogical, interactive, and constructivist. In fact, these social definitions of education are linked by Cooper to the role played by new computer-mediated modes of communication in postmodern culture and education: "in electronic conversations, the individual thinker moves . . . into the multiplicity and diversity of the social world, and in social interaction tries out many roles and positions" (p. 143). According to this description of electronic discussions, new technologies help to create a situation where students and teachers enter into a multicultural environment that stresses the social, dialogical, and interactive foundations of education. In other terms, the cultural multiplicity of new computer-mediated environments requires an understanding of how multiple disciplines and discourse communities can be integrated, and it is also one of the central goals of the WAC movement to provide strategies for inter-connecting these diverse disciplines and communities.

Another important link between postmodernism and the WAC movement can be found in George Howard's (1990) understanding of the conflict between objectivism and constructivism in the natural sciences:

> All across the intellectual landscape, the forces of objectivism are yielding to the
> entreaties of constructivist thought. But it is rather surprising that even our notion of
> science has been radically altered by recent constructivist thought. Briefly objectivism
> believes in a free-standing reality, the truth about which can eventually be discovered.
> The constructivist assumes that all mental images are creations of people, and thus speak
> of an invented reality. Objectivists focus on the accuracy of their theories, whereas
> constructivists think of the utility of their models. Watzlawick (1984) claimed that the
> shift from objectivism to constructivism involves a growing awareness that any so-called

> reality is - in the most immediate and concrete sense - the construction of those who
> believe they have discovered and investigated it. (p. 187)

According to this social constructivist interpretation of the sciences, the modern conception of knowledge as being universal and objective has been challenged by thepostmodern notion that knowledge is always an act of interpretation and invention. Furthermore, by seeing science as the formation of shared constructed versions of reality, postmodern scientists open the door for placing rhetoric and writing at the center of all disciplines, and in this context, the WAC movement can build interdisciplinary bridges and dialogues between the sciences and the humanities.

A key to the postmodern comprehension of higher education is a stress on the rhetorical and interdisciplinary nature of all academic discourses. This "rhetorical turn" not only affects the social construction of the sciences and the humanities, but it also shapes our fundamental conception of what it means to be an individual writer of thinker. Alan Ryan (2000) has made the following argument about how postmodern education changes our definitions of the self:

> Postmodernism is a label that embraces multitudes, but two ideas especially relevant
> here are its skepticism about the amount of control that a writer exercises over his or her
> work, and a sharp sense of the fragility of personal identity. These interact, of course. The
> idea that each of us is a single Self consorts naturally with the idea that we tell stories,
> advance theories, and interact with others from one particular viewpoint. Skepticism
> about such a picture of our identities consorts naturally with the thought that we are at
> the mercy of the stories we tell, as much as they are at our mercy. It also consorts
> naturally with an inclination to emphasize just how accidental it is that we hold the views
> we do, live where we do, and have the loyalties we do. (p. 33)

One of the key aspects of this notion of postmodern subjectivity is that it shows how the self is always a "work-in-progress," and therefore postmodern subjectivity is open to a process-oriented view of writing and knowledge. In other terms, selfhood is something that has to be constantly negotiated and revised and is therefore not a finished product, and this conception of subjectivity feeds into the WAC idea that writing is always a process of learning and revising and not a product of a finished subject.

As Lester Faigley (1992) points out in his *Fragments of Rationality*, the postmodern notion that subjects are multiple and writing is a process conflicts with what he calls the current-traditional academic stress on the Enlightenment ideology of subjective unity, coherency, objectivity, individuality, and universal scientific reason (pp. 4-7). For Faigley, postmodern culture and new media technologies challenge these modern ideologies by emphasizing the contingent and social nature of all acts of writing and knowledge construction (p. 8). Moreover, from Faigley's perspective, there is a growing divide between postmodern students and modern teachers in the ways students and teachers tend to understand the functions and roles of writing, technology, and literacy in culture and education. Throughout this article, I will argue that the WAC movement is well positioned to mediate this divide between students growing up in a postmodern culture and teachers who have been educated by a more modern conception of knowledge, truth, and selfhood.

One of the key aspects that unites the WAC movement to postmodernism and a cultural studies' approach to education revolves around the changing definitions of literacy in contemporary society. According to Christopher Schroeder (2001), in his *Reinventing the University: Literacies and Legitimacy in the Postmodern University*, most textbooks and governmental policies present, "a universalized definition of literacy, as if what it means to be literate can be separated from the

contexts in which literate practices are meaningful" (p. 2). In this critique of the common use of the term literacy, Schroeder affirms the distinction between a functional and a critical understanding of literacy by distinguishing the modern stress on universal neutrality from the postmodern stress on social context. From Schroeder's postmodern perspective, the myth of a universal model of literacy is derived from the ability of powerful vested interests to hide their own particular values behind false claims of universal objectivity. Moreover, Schroeder posits that this rhetoric of universality still dominates the ways our educational systems are structured and the types of literacy that are affirmed in schooling (p. 3).

Essential to Schroeder's analysis of the conflict between functional and critical models of literacy is his claim that the more school literacies are based on de-contextualized, universal models of information delivery, the more individual aspects of culture become the sole purview of experts (p. 5). Thus, central to the modern organization of education is the dual process of universalizing educational access to school *and* segmenting individual subject areas into separate areas of expertise.[2] Furthermore, from Schroeder's perspective, functional literacy is dominated by the modern ideological interests of white, middle-class America, and these modern values, which are presented as being universal, no longer fit with the majority of contemporary students (p. 6).

In opposition to the modern stress on universal reason and neutral functional models of literacy, Schroeder affirms that students bring multiple literacies to universities, and these diverse models of knowledge and learning are most often neglected by our traditional institutions (p. 7). As many other scholars have argued (Gergen, 1991; Postman, 1992; Latham, 1994; Giroux, 1994), postmodern student literacies are most often shaped by television, movies, the Internet, and advertising, and not by the modern emphasis on books and reading as the central source of literacy (p. 10). In response to this binary opposition between modern print culture and postmodern electronic discourse, I will be arguing that we must see how modern cultural literacies are now co-existing with multiple modes of postmodern literacy.

As Henry Giroux (1994) has argued, postmodern education is often linked to the development of cultural studies and the continuous questioning of all aspects of modern education and philosophy:

> The themes are, by now, well known: master narratives and traditions of knowledge grounded in first principles are spurned; philosophical principles of canonicity and the notion of the sacred have become suspect; epistemic certainty and the fixed boundaries of academic knowledge have been challenged by a "war on totality" and a disavowal of all-encompassing, single, world-views; rigid distinctions between high and low culture have been rejected by the insistence that the products of the so-called mass culture, popular, and folk art forms are properobjects of study; the Enlightenment correspondence between history and progress and the modernist faith in rationality, science, and freedom have incurred a deep-rooted skepticism; the fixed and unified identity of the humanist subject has been replaced by a call for narrative space that is pluralized and fluid; and, finally, though far from complete, history is spurned as a unilinear process that moves the West progressively toward a final realization of freedom. (p. 1)

In Giroux's description of postmodern cultural studies, we see how contemporary theories of knowledge and discourse breakdown all of the modern disciplinary borders and help to produce a conception of culture that is philosophical, historical, social, political, and aesthetic. Yet, I want to stress that this battle between modern and postmodern conceptions of culture does not mean that we can simply forget or ignore the continuation of modern influences in contemporary society;

rather, we must retain an interactive and interdisciplinary approach to the relation between older and newer modes of culture.

In fact, for Giroux, interdisciplinarity and intertextuality are enabled by postmdernism because the modern stress on universal knowledge and discursive borders are transformed by the questioning of all master narratives and the melding of high and low cultural references: "The postmodern challenge constitutes not only a diverse body of cultural criticism, it must also be seen as a contextual discourse that has challenged specific disciplinary boundaries in such fields as literary studies, geography, education, architecture, feminism, performance art, anthropology, sociology, and many other areas" (p. 2). It is precisely this stress on interdisciplinarity that I will examine when I connect postmodern cultural studies to the growing influence of the WAC movement and cultural studies in higher education.

From Giroux' perspective, it is important to see how this cultural breakdown of disciplinary borders is fundamental to our desire to mediate the educational structures separating modern institutions and postmodern students:

> It is also useful for educators to comprehend the changing conditions of identity formation within electronically mediated cultures and how they are producing a new generation of youths who exist between the borders of a modernist world of certainty and order, informed by the culture of the West and its technology of print, and a postmodern world of hybridized identities, electronic technologies, local cultural practices, and pluralized public spaces. (p. 3)

By setting up this opposition between modern print culture and postmodern electronic discourse, Giroux may fall into a simple historical binary; however, he uses this conflict to expose some of the more restricting aspects of the modern philosophy of education:

> Within the discourse of modernism, knowledge draws its boundaries almost exclusively from a European model of culture and civilization and connects learning to the mastery of autonomous and specialized bodies of knowledge.

> The practice of ordering, licensing, and regulating that structures public schooling is predicated on a fear of difference and indeterminacy. The effects reach deep into the structure of public schooling and include: an epistemic arrogance and faith in certainty sanctions pedagogical practices and public spheres in which cultural differences are viewed as threatening; knowledge becomes positioned in the curricula as an object of mastery and control; the individual student is privileged as a unique source of agency irrespective of iniquitous relations of power; the technology and culture of the book is treated as the embodiment of modernist high learning and the only legitimate object of pedagogy. (p. 4)

Once again, it is important to point out that Giroux's cultural arguments are also educational arguments that indicate a growing epistemological conflict between modern and postmodern conceptions of learning and knowledge.

Modern and Postmodern Educational Structures

These different epistemological ideologies underwriting modern and postmodern views of knowledge help to shape the divided nature of many educational institutions. In the case of

contemporary universities, the use of large lecture classes,multiple-choice exams, and "delivery of information" models represent a continuation of the modern idea that knowledge is rational, universal, objective and neutral, and thus the transmission of knowledge (the goal of Enlightenment education) is not affected by the race, class, gender, and historical and cultural contexts of the students and teachers (Noble, 2002). However, from a postmodern WAC perspective, knowledge is always the result of cultural and historical contexts, and thus education must be interactive and subject to constant change. Furthermore, the postmodern critique of modern, universal rationalism transforms the role of the teacher from being the one who evaluates the students' mastery of already known facts to role of the teacher as one who helps students engage in a process of knowing.[3] Postmodern teachers of WAC courses are therefore motivated to locate their notions of composition in relation to modern institutional structures that are often at odds culturally with the types of learning that can go on in small, interactive and interdisciplinary learning environments.

I see this institutional and cultural conflict between large, modern lecture courses and small, postmodern WAC classes as representing the central challenge *and* opportunity for the field of composition in the 21st century. In order to show why and how writing can become one of the new intellectual centers of our universities and colleges, I will examine some of the central cultural aspects of the WAC movement and tie these attributes to a possible re-invention of our large institutions of higher education. Many of my findings and recommendations are based on the Ernest Boyer's (1992) important study of American research universities.

One of Boyer's central arguments is that undergraduates should get more involved in the research process that is so important to research universities. However, what is often neglected in discussions of Boyer's work is his stress on the need to create more small, interdisciplinary classes that use writing as a mode of learning and research. Moreover, Boyer asks for a cultural shift in the ways universities think about the role of undergraduate writing and thinking at a time when most universities are stressing mass communication, downsizing, and technological modes of communication. According to "Reinventing Undergraduate Education: A Blueprint for America's Research Universities," universities should provide undergraduates with:

1. Opportunities to learn through inquiry rather than simple transmission of knowledge.
2. Training in the skills necessary for oral and written communication at a level that will serve the student both within the university and in postgraduate professional and personal life.
3. Appreciation of arts, humanities, sciences, and social sciences, and the opportunity to experience them at any intensity and depth the student can accommodate. (online)[4]

By stressing the need to base education on inquiry, oral and written communication, and interdisciplinary knowledge, this important report calls for a postmodern WAC approach to all levels of undergraduate instruction. Instead of basing higher education on the neutral transmission of knowledge from teachers to students in specific disciplines, Boyer stresses the postmodern emphasis on constructing knowledge through a shared social process that links diverse disciplines through an open model of student and faculty inquiry.

Essential to Boyer's postmodern conception of reinventing the culture and discourse conventions of our universities is his commitment to making undergraduate education a more dialogical and interactive experience:

> Important ideas rarely come fully developed from the brain of a single individual; all scholars work from the grounding provided by predecessors, and few are not stimulated by the observations and criticisms of their peers. It is one of the functions of a university to provide the context in which ideas can be most productively developed. Bruce Alberts,

> President of the National Academy of Sciences and a member of the Boyer Commission, has referred to the "accidental collisions of ideas" necessary for the continued productivity of faculty, and has suggested that the presence of students provides a "lubrication" that breaks down intellectual barriers between faculty members. When students at every level--baccalaureate, masters', and doctoral--join with faculty in common inquiry, the opportunities for "accidental collisions of ideas" are optimized. (omline)

From Boyer's perspective, undergraduates need to engage in an intellectual conversation with their teachers, and these conversations should help to improve the knowledge and communication skills of the students *and* the faculty.[5] Of course, many universities and colleges do not have the funding or the commitment to move away from the large lecture format and embrace the types of learning environments Boyer emphasizes; however, I will argue here the many WAC courses and workshops are now performing many of the functions that Boyer hopes large institutions will perform.[6]

Boyer's (1994) desired "re-invention" of the university, and its connection to the WAC movement, can be understood through his conception of "the New American College":

> What I'm describing might be called the "New American College," an institution that celebrates teaching and selectively supports research, while also taking special pride in its capacity to connect thought to action, theory to practice. This New American College would organize cross-disciplinary institutes around pressing social issues. Undergraduates at the college would participate in field projects, relating ideas to real life. (A48)

This passage displays Boyer's commitment to breaking down the modern cultural distinctions between research and teaching, theory and practice, and thought and action by developing project-oriented, cross-disciplinary, postmodern courses. Although, Boyer does not mention the WAC movement here, it is clear that the modes of teaching and learning he celebrates require a interactive and interdisciplinary learning- and writing-across-the-disciplines approach to knowledge and practice.

We can gain a better understanding of the tight fit between WAC courses and "the New American College" by seeing how many proponents of WAC programs have defined their own learning and teaching environments. For instance, in C.W. Griffin's (1985) important study of 139 different WAC programs, he locates a central set of core values and practices located in WAC Workshops:

> Judging from the responses to my survey, faculty who attend our workshops are most fascinated by what we have learned about the writing process during the last fifteen years. Through reading about research, and more importantly through writing and discussing their own writing, they begin to understand concepts like audience and voice, differences between revising and editing, invention techniques, etc. Equally exciting for participants is the concept of writing as learning. As they themselves keep journals and practice their own assignments during workshops, teachers of art history, sociology, biology, and urban studies begin to realize that writing need not be an added burden to their teaching; rather because it requires students to actively work with data and concepts, it may be the most valuable learning tool they have. (p. 401)

Griffin posits that teachers from different disciplines can become enthusiastic about using writing in their courses once the faculty realizes that students actually learn important conventions and skills

through the composition process. However, the question still remains whether these enthusiastic teachers will be able to employ the postmodern practices they learn in WAC workshops once they return to their modern, large lecture classes. In other terms, is their a place for extensive writing and revision in courses that sometimes hold up to a thousand students?

Before I articulate a response to this institutional and cultural problem, I want to delve more deeply into the ways the WAC movement has been defined as central to the educational culture of contemporary universities and colleges. As McLeod and Maimon (2000) rightly point out, the focus of many WAC practices is to motivate students to think about learning instead of concentrating on testing:

> The purpose of writing to learn assignmentsâ€"journals, discovery drafts, in-class writingâ€"is to use writing as a tool for learning rather than a test of that learning, to have writers explain concepts or ideas to themselves, to ask questions, to make connections, to speculate, to engage in critical thinking and problem solving. The audience for this kind of writing is the student him- or herself; it is writer-based prose. The teacher serves as a facilitator rather than a judge, responding to the writing by asking questions, prodding for further thinking, or answering questions posed by the writer rather than "correcting" or grading the piece; here, the prose is reader based rather than writer based. (p. 579)

This stress on the students' learning and critical thinking shows why WAC practices can be so important in establishing a more dialectical and dialogical conception of the culture of higher education: By turning students into readers of their own writing, WAC writing assignments help students to feel more at home, and less alienated, in their academic worlds. Yet, this emphasis on learning over testing still encounters the institutional problem of the role grades play in most of the students' other courses. In fact, many of my own students have told me that my stress on their own thoughts and ideas, and not on their grades and test results, does not jive with the reality that most of their teachers are not concerned primarily with what individual students think or say. My students insist that in large lecture classesâ€"even when they do have the chance to write an essayâ€"what matters most is the ability of the student to tell the teacher what others (including the teacher) have already said. In this structure, the postmodern students run up against a modern system of knowledge transmission and teacher-centered evaluation.[7]

To help my students negotiate this cultural conflict between my WAC conceptions of effective writing and the reward system in their other classes, I try to convince them that the more they become conscious of their own learning and writing processes, the better they will be able to master the skills and knowledge presented in their various courses.[8] This argument can be a hard sell, but I have often succeeded by stressing two WAC necessities: the need to learn the conventions and ideologies of the different disciplines and the importance of voice, audience, context, and language in every academic and cultural situation. By teaching the rhetorical structures of disciplinary knowledge (e.g. Bazerman and Paradis, 1991), I hope that my students will be better able to make conscious decisions regarding how they relate to academic discourses.[9]

This concentration on the conventions and ideologies of the disciplines pushes me to spend a lot of time in class discussing the various cultural and historical ideas supporting our contemporary notions of the sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities. Yet, I often find that even my best writers do not understand concepts like "Modernity," "the Enlightenment," "the scientific method," "social construction," "postmdodernism,""economic determinism," and most other "isms."[10] This lack of cultural and historical knowledge often makes it difficult for students to engage in an

understanding of what McLeod and Maimon call the "epistemologies" of the disciplines (p. 580). Yet, as McLeod and Maimon stress, if we want to move our students and colleagues away from the notion that all we do is teach grammar and mechanics, we must engage our students in an intellectual discussion of the discourses and cultures shaping their academic lives. Moreover, we need to show our students how they can participate effectively in the process of constructing knowledge through writing as a method of epistemological inquiry.

This call to involve our students in an intellectual investigation of the disciplines has been made by Alan W. France (2000), who asks the following questions regarding the intellectual import of the field of composition:

> What is there of intellectual substance to composition? Does our teaching subject, our professional claim to expert knowledge, consist merely in an ensemble of techniques adequately represented as "skills" (such as knowing how to correct or avoid dangling modifiers by embedding agency in introductory verbal phrases)? Even if they are complex, performative, impossible to learn out of context, as Severino rightly insists, what do *skills* have to do with the intellect? With knowledge, aesthetics, sensibility? With character, or ethics? With a liberal education? (p. 146)

France answers these questions that cut to the heart of our educational mission by arguing for a cultural studies approach to composition: "If composition studies is to present itself as a coherent practice capable of contributing equally with other sub-specializations to an English studies curriculum, it might well base its calling on the crucial synthetic work that writing instruction performs: the synthesis of experience and culture" (p. 148). France posits that all faculty in English department need to concentrate on the interplay between social constructionist notions of culture and expressivist conceptions of experience in order to make their courses more vital for the general public and their own institutions.

France also argues that an effective writing course requires a constant negotiation between the expressivist writing self and the larger cultural and historical structures shaping student subjectivity:

> Most would agree that writing effectivelyâ€"jumping the communicative gap between self and othersâ€"requires both a sense of self as traditionally understood and a sense of how, at this moment, both this self and those others have been structured by culture. Inquiry into the processes that structure both personality and discourse can help our students understand the nature ofâ€"the constraints on and opportunities forâ€"agency. And the purpose of rhetorical education has been since antiquity, after all, learning the practices of personal agency in their relevant social contexts. (p. 149)

Implicit in this formulation of writing pedagogy is a call for a cultural and historical understanding of the disciplines. Furthermore, France's cultural studies approach asks us to not only re-think the disciplines, but his theory also asks us to re-vise the modern conceptions of subjectivity and culture. In stressing the dialectical relation between the subject and culture in every educational context, France's postmodern epistemology produces a context-sensitive conception of interdisciplinary educational agency.

Using Descartes' Modern Text to Re-Think Postmodern Contexts

One of the most effective texts I have used to help students to take a cultural and historical view of the disciplines is Descartes' *Discourse on Method*.[11] This text not only has the benefit of displaying a

thinker engaged in a self-conscious writing process, but Descartes' text clarifies the various epistemological shifts concerned in the development of the modern scientific method. Moreover, Descartes' work constantly deals with the conflicted relations among religious, psychological, social, and scientific understandings of the world, and by reading and discussing Descartes' text, students gain access to the historical and cultural foundations of our own disciplines and modes of thinking.

To help my students take a postmodern approach to Descartes' theory of modern subjectivity, I have them engage in a class discussion examining several key passages where Descartes analyzes the various ways one can use knowledge and experience to establish truth. The initial quote that I have my students discuss is from the first section of his *Discourse on Method:* "So my intention is not to teach here the method which everyone must follow if he is to conduct his reason correctly, but only to demonstrate how I have tried to conduct myself"(p. 28). Students often respond to this statement by claiming that Descartes is only writing for himself, and therefore he does not want anyone else to follow his path to truth. Many of my postmodern students can relate to Descartes' desire to be a free individual who writes for himself and who is not alienated by someone else's method. Moreover, the next quote that I have them analyze reinforces this libertarian notion that everyone is an individual free to believe in whatever he or she wants: "Consequently I took the liberty of judging all others by myself and of thinking that there was no body of knowledge in the world such as I had been previously led to believe existed" (p. 29). I find that contemporary students can relate to this idea that everything can be doubted, but what they often have problems understanding is the argument that doubt itself represents the foundation of modern science.

In order to help my students see the connections among individual experience, doubt, and the scientific method, I have them examine Descartes' second discourse, where he outlines the four central rules that he will follow to establish his path to truth. In the first stage of this process, he decides: "Never to accept anything as true that I did not know to be evidently so: that is to say, carefully to avoid precipitancy and prejudice" (p. 41). In relation to this passage, what I try to stress to my students is the notion that the scientific method has at its foundation a process that questions all notions of traditional authority. I then ask my students what authorities and prejudices Descartes probably had in mind here. There is usually at least one student who responds by connecting the Enlightenment period with a reaction against Church doctrines. It is often at this time that I have to introduce some historical factors that shape the twin birth of modern science and Western individualism. One of my goals in this discussion is get students to start realizing that the subject matters they study in school grow out of historical disputes and are not natural or neutral disciplines. Furthermore, I want students to pay attention to the ways Descartes uses writing to learn about his culture and his own experiences.

Descartes' careful elaboration of what is now called the scientific method is an important intellectual document for students to examine. Unfortunately, it is still rare for science and math teachers to explore with students the roots and historical foundations of their disciplines. Thus, my students come into class still clinging to the "modern" idea that science and math are neutral and objective subject matters. By looking at Descartes' description of the last three aspects of his method, we see how Descartes himself tries to make his mathematical definition of truth appear to be neutral and natural:

> The second, to divide each of the difficulties under examination into as many parts as possible, and as might be necessary for its adequate solution.

> The third, to conduct my thoughts in such order that, by commencing with objects the simplest and easiest to know, I might ascend by little and little, and, as it were, step by

step, to the knowledge of the more complex; assigning in thought a certain order even to those objects which in their own nature do not stand in a relation of antecedence and sequence. And the last, in every case to make enumerations so complete, and reviews so general, that I might be assured that nothing was omitted. (p. 41)

By centering his method of analysis on the processes of dividing, ordering, sequencing, and totaling, Descartes helps to base modern science and subjectivity on a mathematical conception of being. In Descartes' text, this method of division, order, and completeness is never questioned itself because he considers math to be a purely formal procedure that contains no specific content or beliefs. However, from a postmodern perspective, we can argue that although scientific and mathematical subjects tend to deny their ideological import, every formal process contains a hidden ideology. Students often respond to this contemporary argument by claiming that science and math courses are objective and neutral, while the humanities are subjective and relativistic. It is my hope that our discussions concerning Descartes' text will help students to question this modern notion of scientific and mathematical neutrality that is still prevalent in postmodern culture.

In fact, in the third section of his own text, Descartes does reveal his awareness that his beliefs are defined by cultural and social factors. For example, in discussing his decision to conform temporarily to the society around him, Descartes declares that he now resolves to,

> Obey the laws and customs of my country, firmly preserving the religion into which God was good enough to have me instructed from childhood, and governing myself in all other matters according to the most moderate opinions and those furthest from excess, commonly accepted in practice by most prudent people with whom I should have to live. (p. 45)

Students are often quick to point out that Descartes' call for the acceptance of the moderate opinions and customs of others directly contradicts his earlier desire to doubt all customs and ideas that come from other people. And in many ways, students are right about Descartes' method of contradicting and reversing himself, and it is precisely this constant movement of Descartes' writing and thought that I want my students to grasp. Instead of just writing about what he already knows for sure, Descartes, like many advocates of WAC, uses writing to explore new ideas and challenge old ideas. He therefore teaches us that writing and thinking are processes that help us to change our minds and discover new things. Furthermore, Descartes' decision to conform to the moderate opinions of the culture around him shows his awareness of the relativistic and constructed nature of the social order.

Yet, one of the main differences between Descartes' modern subject and our postmodern subjectivity is that Descartes is able to quickly neutralize the influences of cultural relativity by conforming to an ideal type of moderate behavior. In fact, Descartes' repression of cultural diversity can be attributed to his desire to escape from moral and ethical doubt. Thus, in an important passage from his third discourse, he declares that his resolute commitment to stick to his social conformity "was capable from then on of freeing me from all the repentance and remorse which habitually agitate the consciences of the weak and wavering minds which allow themselves to proceed with vacillation to practice as being good things which they judge afterwards to be bad. (p. 47).

Descartes claims here that his decision to comply with the probable correctness of moderate social customs affords him a mode of certainty that, in turn, helps him to avoid the vacillations and conflicts of a moral conscience. Descartes' modern neutralization of cultural relativism is thus predicated on his desire to transcend the ambiguities of a moral universe.

By having my students follow Descartes' writing through its various twists and turns, these students begin to see that the disciplines they encounter in college are developed out of choices people make for both personal and social reasons. For instance, Descartes' desire for social conformity allows his modern scientific method to escape from many moral and ethical issues. Here, students start to consider the idea that science and math are not neutral subject matters; rather, these fields of study often neutralize ethical and cultural issues. In reading closely the movement of Descartes' rhetoric, students not only gain access to the constructed nature of academic discourse, but they also see the role that subjectivity plays in writing and education. For example, a careful analysis of Descartes definition of his famous "I think, therefore, I am" reveals how the foundations of the "modern subject" are constructed out of a very ambiguous argument:

> when I considered that the very same thoughts (presentations) which we experience when awake may also be experienced when we are asleep, while there is at that time not one of them true, I supposed that all the objects (presentations) that had ever entered into my mind when awake, had in them no more truth than the illusions of my dreams. But immediately upon this I observed that, whilst I thus wished to think that all was false, it was absolutely necessary that I, who thus thought, should be somewhat; and as I observed that this truth, I think, therefore I am (COGITO ERGO SUM), was so certain and of such evidence that no ground of doubt, howeverextravagant, could be alleged by the sceptics capable of shaking it, I concluded that I might, without scruple, accept it as the first principle of the philosophy of which I was in search. (pp. 53-54)

Even though the received idea of Descartes' cogito is that it represents the unified and isolated subject of modern reason, we see here that the only thing that really unifies Descartes' subjectivity is the repetition of his "I" in his thinking and being. While this may seem like an abstract concept for students to grasp, I will show in the next section how a postmodern film like *The Matrix* relies on this very notion that our mind can transcend all material reality, but we cannot determine whether the contents of our mind are actually true or false. The reason why it is important for students to grasp this intellectual argument is that Descartes' conception of subjectivity still dominates in many conceptions of literary and humanistic studies. For central to the modern university is the separation of the mind from the material realm of labor. Descartes introduces this idea by tying his method of doubt to the questioning of all material existence: "In the next place, I attentively examined what I was and as I observed that I could suppose that I had no body, and that there was no world nor any place in which I might be" (p. 54). For students who have grown-up on a steady diet of science fiction, Descartes' denial of his own body is a very easy philosophical pill to swallow.

Welcome to The Matrix of Academic Discourse

In order to clarify the ways Descartes' multiple quests for truth and certainty relate and do not relate to our own time period, I often show scenes from the popular film *The Matrix*. Since this film has several direct references to Descartes in its dialogue, students are able to see the various ways that a "postmodern" film cites and recycles "early modern" ideas and philosophies. Moreover, a careful analysis of *The Matrix* with my students also helps to clarify the interaction in the film and our society among scientific, humanistic, social scientific, and spiritual modes of discourse and truth. Just as our students in contemporary universities often go from their science class to their sociology class to their literature class without taking the time to think about how these different disciplines all represent different versions of truth and belief, *The Matrix* jumps from references to cyberspace, Greek mythology, the New Testament, *Alice in Wonderland, The Wizard of OZ*, Baudrillard, and several comic books and Kung Fu films. This postmodern cultural blender can be analyzed in an academic

way by sorting out with students the different discourses and cultural domains that shape the film's dialogue. In other words, a WAC approach to critical media literacy involves an understanding of the various intellectual traditions that shape our popular and academic cultures.

Like Descartes' writing on the foundations of science and human subjectivity, *The Matrix* examines the central epistemological question of how we know if anything is true or false. In the case of the film, people are living unknowingly in a virtual world that is being pumped into their minds as they rest in a suspended, unconscious state. One of these unconscious subjects is the main character, Neo, who suspects that something is wrong with the world. In many ways, Neo represents the Cartesian subject who doubts what everyone else accepts. Yet, even though he is a subject of doubt, Neo still needs to be trained by his teacher, Morpheus, to wake-up from his dream state and judge the world around him. When I show these scenes to my students, I want them to see that the matrix or virtual world in the film can be read as an allegory for the way education and culture are often fed to us while we stay in a passive state. This film, then, paradoxically asks us to question all of the media around us as we suspend our disbelief and follow the story in the movie.

This conflict between the demands of the movie to suspend disbelief and the claim of the story that we must doubt everything creates a deep sense of cognitive dissonance in students; however, this confusion can be fruitful if it is tied to the educational conflict between learning a subject matter and questioning its foundations. For students in contemporary culture are constantly being sent the opposing messages of conformity and doubt. In educational settings, these opposing messages are often compartmentalized; yet it is one of the goals of the WAC movement to bring these discourses into an intellectual conversation.

In many ways, the content of *The Matrix* is postmodern, interdisciplinary, and multicultural, but the form of the media still is based on the modern delivery of information method. This contradiction between the form and content of the movie is evident in the scene that shows Neo sleeping in his bed, while his computer searches through web sites from various cultures and geographical locations. Like students sitting in large lecture classes, knowledge circulates around the subject as he remains in a passive state. Soon a knock on the door wakes him, and Neo asks his visitors if they ever had the feeling that they did not know if they were awake or asleep. One of the men at the door responds that he has had this feeling, and it is called Mescaline. This same man continues to tell Neo that he needs to unplug. Here, we see that an analogy is being established in the film between Descartes' dream state and the virtual worlds of computers and drugs. In fact, the scene in the film mimics a typical drug scene, but in this case, the drug that is being bought is a computer disk that is hidden in a hollowed-out copy of Baudrillard's *Simulation and Simulacra*.

The images and dialogue in the scene pass quickly, and so it is important to stop the film after each cultural reference. In other words, teachers need to turn the modern delivery of information model into a postmodern interactive learning experience by asking students to stop and think about the various symbols and references that fly by at an incredible speed. In fact, this idea of stopping and thinking about the culture around us is depicted visually in the film when Morpheus teaches Neo about the matrix by having him enter into a simulation of the virtual world that can be stopped and analyzed. Moreover, Morpheus calls this simulation of the virtual environment the "construct," and he informs Neo that this computer program allows them to download and construct any reality they want to examine. This strong visual representation of the social construction of reality helps students to see how symbolic discourse can create objects that we take to be natural and neutral.

By showing the social construction of reality in a fast-paced, visual medium, this film participates in the postmodern tendency to represent simultaneously opposing worldviews. For example, the movie uses the character of Neo to represent the liberal individual who doubts everything around him;

however, the narrative also places Neo in a Christian and Buddhist parable based on the need to place your trust in a higher authority. Likewise the film's central story about computers taking over the world (extreme globalization) and using humans as a source of energy is coupled with a celebration of new computer-generated images. A cultural studies' approach to these contradictions can help students understand that a key element to late capitalism is the ability of the culture industry to get a mass of people from very different backgrounds to buy the same entertainment object. *The Matrix* accomplished this postmodern trick by combining references to many cultures and philosophies (relativism) that pass before our eyes and ears so quickly that we do not have time to think about the meaning or roots of these representations. I would argue that a critical WAC approach to culture and education can help to provide the intellectual tools and opportunities for students to motivate them to better stop and examine the social representations they consume on a daily basis; however, the content of this mode of critical thinking needs to be matched by an educational setting that is interactive and interdisciplinary.

WAC and the Institutional Status of Composition

A cultural studies approach to WAC also has the advantage of placing the field of composition at the heart of many debates and research projects that are currently emerging in our universities and colleges. This need to expand the cultural and intellectual focus of the WAC movement has been articulated by Steve Parks and Eli Goldblatt (2000), who argue in their *College English* article "Writing beyond the Curriculum: Fostering New Collaborations in Literacy," "If compositionists reframe WAC to reach beyond university boundaries, we can foster cross-pollination and interdisciplinary discussion of how knowledge is shaped and conveyed in culture" (p. 585). Parks and Goldblatt posit that a turn to an analysis of the cultural foundations of knowledge circulating inside and outside of academic discourse will not only improve the status of composition within particular institutions, but it could also improve the reputation of writing instruction outside of the academic domain: "By asserting the place of writing not only within the curriculum but within the local social context, academics will be in a better position to explain to a skeptical public just why research and publication really do matter to the society at large" (p. 588) . While Parks and Goldblatt stress the need for service learning classes to help connect writing courses to the world outside, I believe a cultural and intellectual approach to WAC can also help to improve public support for higher education by demonstrating the concrete links between academic discourse and everyday social knowledge.

Perhaps the most important aspect of a cultural and historical version of WAC for compositionists is the idea that writing courses have an important cultural and intellectual content. By affirming the value of studying "the epistemologies of the disciplines," writing programs will be better able to compete with other academic departments for scarce resources and valued faculty support (e.g. McLeod, 1987; Russell, 1997). Therefore, in order to debunk the myths that WAC courses only teach "grammar-across-the-curriculum" (e.g. Knoblauch and Brannon, 1983) and writing courses have no content, we can affirm that the WAC movement represents one of the intellectual centers of our contemporary universities. For it is often only in small, interactive, and interdisciplinary courses that students are able to use their own thoughts and communications to connect together and examine critically the various fragmented discourses they encounter in the postmodern university and the world around them.

Many of the suggestions I have made for placing WAC programs at the intellectual center of our universities fit in well with recent discussions concerning the over-all goals of writing programs. For example, in the "The WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition," we find the following list of important rhetorical tasks that students should master in their first-year composition courses:

- Focus on a purpose
- Respond to the needs of different audiences
- Respond appropriately to different kinds of rhetorical situations
- Use conventions of format and structure appropriate to the rhetorical situation
- Adopt appropriate voice, tone, and level of formality
- Understand how genres shape reading and writing
- Write in several genres (p. 324)

All of these goals require a WAC approach to understanding the rhetorical situation of various academic discourses. Moreover, these objectives rely upon an understanding of the epistemological and intellectual foundations of the disciplines.

Unfortunately, this need to teach students the cultural and intellectual foundations shaping the diverse discourses that they have to enter is often hidden behind vague goals like "Use writing and reading for inquiry, learning, thinking, and communicating,"

"Integrate their own ideas with those of others," and "Understand the relationships among language, knowledge, and power" (p. 324). This stress on critical thinking and the interaction between students and other people's ideas does not specify what kinds of ideas and thinking are privileged in most modes of academic discourse (e.g. Bazerman and Paradis, 1991). I believe that it is one of the central tasks of all WAC programs to help provide the intellectual background for students to enter into conversations with the various academic disciplines they will encounter within and outside of our institutions of higher education. In other terms, if the field of writing wants to become one of the intellectual centers of our universities and colleges, we need to turn to a WAC model of intellectual and cultural history that helps students to understand the rhetorical and epistemological foundations of the sciences, social sciences, and humanities. We may not be able to make large university lecture classes smaller, but we can help our students and fellow faculty to re-invent our institutions of higher learning by stressing a WAC approach to pedagogy and writing.

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Notes

[1] What is often neglected is the fact that what helps to define the Postmodernity ofthinkers like Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Jean Baudrillard is that they refuse to be limited by disciplinary boundaries. Thus, it is hard to tell if Derrida is writing literary criticism, philosophy, or cultural studies.

[2] In his *Electronic Word*, Richard Lanham (1994) argues that in most American universities, the relation between lower-division and upper-division courses is structured by the opposition between universal standardization and segmented specialization (p. 112)

[3] Susan McLeod (1987) has argued that the WAC movement requires a "change in the entire educational process at the university level" (p. 23).

[4] While Boyer's stress on the depth of analysis appears to be a return to a modern understanding of knowledge, I would are that postmodern culture often uses modern values but places them in new and conflicting contexts.

[5] See Gerald Graff's (2003) *Clueless in Academe* for an extended call to increase the dialogical nature of higher education.

[6] We also find a strong evidence of Boyer's recommendations in the structure of honors programs that are often restricted to only a small number of undergraduate students.

[7] I have been defining postmodern students by the roles that new modes of technology, culture, and knowledge play in shaping a more relativistic and social constructionist worldview. Postmodern students can therefore be defined by the movement away from the modern stress on universal reason.

[8] It is important to note that the modern stress on consciousness does not just disappear with the advent of postmodern culture; rather consciousnesss is placed within a larger cultural context.

[9] Some critics (Jameson, 1991; Gergen, 1991) have argued that the process of making unconscious processes conscious is a thoroughly modern technique and is not relevant to postmodern culture. I would argue that this theory calls for a radical break between modernity and Postmodernity; instead of this type of modern linear historical model, I argue for a multli-linear combination of modern and postmodern techniques and theories.

[10] In *Lives on the Boundary*, Mike Rose (1989) argues that many of the writing problems plaguing undergraduates can be traced back to the difficulties they have understanding academic terminology and methods of analysis (pp. 182-204).

[11] France (2000) offers a similar but different method of getting his students to engage in a cultural and rhetorical analysis of the disciplines. In the classes he describes in his *College English* paper, he has students analyze various popular culture representations to see how they locate agency in a postmodern context (pp. 152-161). In my own classes, I constantly try to combine the reading and discussion of modern texts with the presentation of postmodern popular culture representations.

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