



A Comment on "Democracy, Pedagogy, and the Personal Essay"

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it a comparative nuance that places Muffy in competition with her colleagues. That is the least we owe her.

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PATRICIA HARKIN AND
JAMES J. SOSNOSKI RESPOND

It has seemed to us for quite some time that we're not in Kansas any more. And one of the people who has most helped us in this realization is Alan C. Purves. We are especially grateful for his having pointed out, in *The Scribal Society: An Essay on Literacy and Schooling in the Information Age* (New York: Longman, 1990), that the chief function of norm-referenced tests of language performance is to allow real estate companies to raise the price of houses in the areas where high-scoring children live. We have made good use of his insights in a recent real estate transaction of our own.

The thought of high-scoring children brings us, of course, to Muffy, one of the very cutest denizens of Worthyngton Pointe High School. As captain of the cheerleading squad, Muffy had many chances to *watch* competition, but very few opportunities actually to compete. Only in the cheerleading tryouts, in fact, was Muffy able to triumph over her best friend Tiffany. Had competition been programmed (as it were) into the secondary curriculum, Muffy would be better prepared to participate in a system that has, in Purves's nice phrase, "a

comparative nuance that places her in competition with her colleagues." But, for cogent reasons, our society has declined to permit young women to compete. The toll on their femininity, it is reasoned, would be far greater than the small comparative advantage in skills.

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A COMMENT ON "DEMOCRACY, PEDAGOGY, AND THE PERSONAL ESSAY"

In response to Joel Haefner's article "Democracy, Pedagogy, and the Personal Essay" (February 1992), I would like to point out that critiques should ideally supersede the works they target. While Haefner seems to have undertaken a critique of my article "Common Ground" (March 1989), his argument actually ends where mine begins. In writing "Common Ground," I had hoped that composition studies could move beyond the familiar observation that knowledge is "social" and "collaborative." I believed that insights novel in 1962, when Thomas Kuhn first offered them, and still appealing in 1979, when Richard Rorty gave them a second wind, had by 1989 assumed the character of a long-established dogma. As the subject of endless conference papers and journal articles, the term "community" no longer seemed to open up new areas of research for our profession, but served to close them off instead. Like their predecessors the New Critics, the defenders of "com-

munity” tried to dismiss an enormous range of important issues—the phenomenology of textual meaning, the relationship between speech and writing, the role of difference and dissent in communication—as the products of so many epistemological “fallacies,” if I may use Haefner’s own favored term.

My purpose in writing “Common Ground” was to revive precisely these “fallacies,” which are no more fallacious than the ones commonplace during the glory days of New Criticism. I wanted to show that by invoking “community” with such uncritical zeal, theorists like Haefner have concealed the issue of power even while they claim to speak of nothing else. I mean the concrete relations of power obtaining in any real social setting, not least of all the classroom, where teachers on the left as well as on the right routinely bully and humiliate students “for their own good.” One example of this bullying is an assignment that Haefner mentions with pride: an assignment directing his students to rewrite an essay by Joan Didion “from the persona of a Latina woman” (134). That Latina women share a single, predictable “persona” I feel completely justified in doubting, but I also fail to see how non-Hispanic students working under such a constraint could say anything except what they think the teacher wants them to say.

While Haefner’s assignment is reductive in itself, it reflects a larger and altogether typical poverty at the heart of the constructionist discourse. Despite their endless talk about the so-

cial character of knowledge, proponents of this discourse never examine the dynamics of any actual society—not Puerto Rican villagers, or Zinacantecos, or Balinese, to mention just three groups that might furnish useful models of communicative interaction. Nor do attacks on what Haefner calls the “shibboleth of individualism” allow us to explain how a real-world institution like the Society of Friends (the Quakers), with its extraordinary emphasis on personal freedom, private conscience, and individual revelation, could have played so important a role in major collective movements of emancipation, among them the abolition of slavery and the struggle for women’s rights. But I’m writing here about real societies and real social movements, a strategy that seems to be against the rules. The “community” of my opponents exists nowhere except in their own imagination—which is not the imagination of socialists, as Haefner would have us believe, but of social engineers.

As a means of clarifying this distinction, I will cite in passing Marx’s *German Ideology*, where he argues for an economic and political order conducive to the “self-activity” of “complete individuals, and the casting off of all natural limitations” (*Marx-Engels Reader* [New York, 1972] 156). Because the central issue for Marx was never collective harmony per se but freedom from necessity, he expressly rejects the “crude communism” that “negates the *personality* of man in every sphere” (*Karl Marx: Early Writings* [New York,

1964] 153). Even if one would like to dismiss the early, visionary Marx, the fact remains that he went on to make similar statements many years afterward in *Capital*, where he celebrates the ideal of “*praxis* in the realm of freedom” ([New York, 1967] 3:820). The Marxian utopia is one of “personal fulfillment” for everyone, and Marx says as much, over and over, but Marx is not the only holdout for this “bourgeois shibboleth.” Terry Eagleton concludes *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* by arguing for the restoration of a public sphere “in which all individuals must have participatory rights whatever their distinguishing particularities”—rights so complete that “the individual particular is thus raised to the universal.” In a passage that sounds very much like one by Graham Good, whom Haefner uses Eagleton to belittle, Eagleton himself observes that the “privilege of the oppressor is his privilege to decide what he shall be; it is this right which the oppressed must demand too, which must be universalized” ([London, 1990] 414).

Individuals and their needs have assumed such importance for Eagleton because no one can say with certainty how to achieve the utopia of “personal fulfillment” that Marx envisions. While any truly collaborative pedagogy must begin with an acknowledgment of this dilemma, the social engineers in our profession continue to deny it. Confident that they have glimpsed the outcome of world history, Haefner and his colleagues feel entitled to look past the recalcitrant details, especially details of

history itself. Whether Haefner’s subject is Montaigne, Dr. Johnson, or Virginia Woolf, he is itching to tell the same story over and over—about oppression and exclusion. It never occurs to him that the past might be “another country” indeed, and that emancipation for Woolf meant something different from what it meant for James Baldwin. If Haefner historicized in earnest, he would discover that Montaigne’s readers regarded his self-fashioning not as an affront to their own freedom, but as a sign that such freedom lay within the realm of possibility for them. Montaigne’s readers saw his power to resist the institutions of his day as an incitement to their own acts of resistance, and they understood the essay as a discursive space within which this resistance might unfold. Far more important than exposing undergraduates to the tendentious conflicts of our profession is the creation of just such a space for them, where they can exercise the power to negotiate in their own interest the meanings and uses of “our” textual knowledge.

But it is precisely this freedom that Haefner would like to withhold by appeal to the preeminence of “community.” If the essay as a genre is “deeply embedded in discourse communities,” then it must, he reasons, be “communal, not individualistic.” Again on the same page he argues, “If the self is not unitary” and if “language is not based on individual knowledge,” then “the referentiality of personal, expressive prose is called into question” (129–130). But why? When an essayist like

Alice Walker writes about her childhood, and when we all know that she did not create herself and her language *ex nihilo*, why would anyone come to “doubt” the “referentiality” of her prose? For my part, I simply cannot see how these conclusions follow from Haefner’s premises. That such things as selfhood and personal freedom are indeed constructions scarcely makes them any less real than a community of, say, literary critics. Constructionists like Haefner often seem to believe that people merely suppose they have self-awareness and agency, when communities are the “real” social agents—or should be. But “communities” are made by human agency, and when people claim to speak for a collective, they speak first of all for themselves.

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JOEL HAEFNER RESPONDS

In “Of Experience,” Montaigne comments that “we do nothing but write glosses about each other.” Academic discourse in general—and this Comment & Response format in particular—exemplifies exactly Montaigne’s wry observation. Kurt Spellmeyer dislikes my gloss of his earlier article, and so glosses mine; here I gloss his gloss. We proceed in an Escherian repetition. Although Spellmeyer seems to find no “common ground” between his essay and mine—only antithesis, division, and debate—I would point out that the

battle lines are perhaps not so sharply drawn as he suggests.

The dichotomy that Spellmeyer creates in his response is between the community and the individual, a polarity he discovers in my essay. Yet a careful reading of my article would show that I am not claiming that individuals have no role in a collaborative pedagogy. To make such a claim would be ridiculous. In fact, I suggest that students be given the opportunity to “explore and debate the issues of individualism and collectivism which have informed our recent re-evaluations of the personal essay” (135). The point here is that I feel the time is right for our students to enter into the debate, to take up, within their own experience, the issues that we contest in the pages of *College English*.

Spellmeyer also suggests that I fail to historicize fully the reconstruction of a personal essay’s narrative voice in classroom assignments. I only meant to suggest that such a process of historical restoration was important if we were to understand the full context of an essay. I quite agree with Spellmeyer that the “communicative interaction” of “real societies and real social movements” should be explored in writing classes. That is certainly not against my rules, and I believe that I said as much in my article. But such contextualization would have to be worked out in a forum different from my *CE* article. For example, Spellmeyer claims that Montaigne’s readers “saw his power to resist the institutions of his day as an incitement to their own acts of resis-