DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 369 076 CS 214 268

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TITLE "Murrayesque" Expressivism: A Deweyan Reconsideration of Contemporary Composition's Dangerous Dichotomies.
PUB DATE 17 Mar 94
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (45th, Nashville, TN, March 16-19, 1994).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Higher Education; Theory Practice Relationship; Writing (Composition); *Writing Instruction; *Writing Teachers
IDENTIFIERS *Composition Theory; Dewey (John); Dichotomies; Educational Issues; Murray (Donald M); *Process Approach (Writing)

ABSTRACT

Like the narrator of Robert Frost's poem "Mending Wall," instructors need to ask what is being walled in and walled out of their composition programs when categories such as process vs. product, expressive, epistemic, current traditionalism, and social constructionism are constructed. When divisive categories prevent theorists from receiving worthy consideration, then descriptive fences have become exclusionary, prescriptive barriers. As the dialectical philosopher John Dewey warned, humanity "likes to think in terms of extreme opposites. It is given to formulating beliefs in terms of Either-Ors, between which it recognizes no intermediate possibilities." For instance, when Ken Macrorie and Donald Murray and their writing-process colleagues wanted to advocate their new rhetoric, they engaged in divisive thinking with their process "versus" product approach. A Deweyian reconsideration of Don Murray leads to criticism of the "expressivist" label applied to him by Lester Faigley, James Berlin, and others. Rather than engage in divisive and reductive "Either/Or" thinking, it is necessary to preserve the valuable contributions of inevitable incomplete writing theories like that of Don Murray. By avoiding dangerous dichotomies based on thinking in extreme opposites, writing instructors fulfill Dewey's belief that socially constructed knowledge exists both through its transmission between individuals and its constant reconstruction by individuals. (Contains 27 references.) (SAM)

Don Jones, presented at College Composition and Communication Conference Nashville, Tenn. March 17, 1994

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Process, Product. Expressive, Epistemic. Current Traditionalism, Social Constructionism. These are some of the terms that are echoing through these conference rooms. As members of a discourse community, we sometimes depend upon these good fences marking the field of composition to make us good neighbors. As in Frost's poem, these boundaries can help us make useful distinctions, such as between expressive, poetic, or transactional writing. James Britton and his co-authors created these categories to serve as "a possible means towards [greater] understanding" (198). Yet the first sentence of The Development of Writing Abilities (1975) prophetically warns: "We classify at our peril" (1), and these useful distinctions have become the formulaic assignments that the authors explicitly opposed (198).

Like the narrator of Frost's poem ("The Mending Wall"), we need to ask what is being walled in and out before we construct categories because once formulated, taxonomies often take on a life of their own. When a particular theorist is located behind a certain fence, the complexities of his or her own position in relation to others walled in and out too often are overlooked. For example, in a recent College English article, Nancy Welch describes the contemptuous dismissal of "freewriters" like Peter Elbow at one graduate composition program (391-92). When divisive categories prevent theorists from receiving worthy consideration, then good descriptive fences have become exclusionary, prescriptive barriers.

Such barriers often are erected when a new theory of writing is advanced. When Daniel Fogarty wanted to trace the "roots of a new rhetoric" in 1959, he coined the term "current traditional" (Fogarty 118 and see

Crowley 175 n.12) which many have applied to the nineteenth century theories of Barrett Wendell, John Genung, and A. S. Hill. Sharon Crowley, for example, focuses on current-traditionalism's narrow notion of invention and rigid rules for style (13). A. S. Hill certainly seems to deserve this label when he does not require rhetoric to "furnis[h] a person with something to say . . . [only] how best to say [it]" (The Principles of Rhetoric 1895 qtd. in Young 29). Yet Hill also defies this categorization when he insists that students should not "hide [their] poverty of thought in [the] finish of style" (Our English 1889 89). Hill seems positively progressive when he laments the "dreary" language of themes (96) and advocates self-selected topics so students can "put forth their full powers" in "free and natural expression" (93). The 'current-traditional' category not only treats Hill, Genung, and Wendell in a reductive manner, but in a recent CCC essay, Lucille Schultz also objects that this label has obscured the diversity of nineteenth century writing instruction (Schultz 10).

Unfortunately, as the dialectical philosopher, John Dewey warns humanity

> likes to think in terms of extreme opposites. It is given to formulating its beliefs in terms of Either-Ors, between which it recognizes no intermediate possibilities. (Experience 17)

When Ken Macrorie, Donald Murray, and their writing process colleagues wanted to advocate another new rhetoric, they also engaged in divisive and reductive thinking. Macrorie attacked those "deadly things called themes . . . [written with] a dehydrated academic tongue" (vii), and the very title of a 1972 article by Murray creates the 'extreme opposites' of "Teach Writing as a Process, not as Product."

By 1982, Murray himself had become the subject of divisive thinking.

For example, one reviewer reduced him to a "quaint" figure of the past while rejecting Murray's annonymous submission to a journal as too "Murrayesque" and "merely expressive" ("But" 2). And another theorist lamented the oscillation between "the Scylla of a decadent Aristotelianism . . and the Charybdis of Romantic Idealism" (83). Murray is similar to a Romantic thinker because like Rousseau educating Emile, he encourages students to learn to write by drawing upon their "extensive contact with life and language" ("What Can You Say Besides Awk?" 1973 in Learning 152). Yet unlike Rousseau, Murray does not define the individual in opposition to society. Instead like the transactional philosopher John Dewey, Murray places the individual in a productive dialectic with society. To further demonstrate the dangers of contemporary composition's dichotomies, I want to offer a Deweyan reconsideration of "Murrayesque" Expressivism.

Although Dewey is best known as a progressive educator, he was a comprehensive philospher whose subjects included epistemology and aesthetics as well as education. Titles like Art as Experience and Experience and Education reveal his central premise. According to Dewey's concept of an experience, an individual continually interacts with the material and social environment. For an experience to be educational, a physical need, an emotional response, or an intellectual desire compels an individual to try to exert some control over the environment through a gradual process of mutual accomodation. In contrast to classical epistemology, knowledge is created through a dynamic process of "inception, development, [and] fulfillment" (Art 55).

An educational experience begins with an individual's ordinary interaction with the environment, yet these everyday events "offer a challenge to thought . . . the material of problems, not of solutions" (Quest

103). An individual connects certain details to create a tentative idea, such as a scientist's hypothesis or an artist's design. Using an architectural analogy, Dewey explains that this tentative idea "can make some headway in . . . forming . . . the plan of a building. But it takes actual operations . . . to make a building out of bricks" (Quest 113). A scientist, for example, 'develops' an experience through the "active manipulation" of an experiment (Quest 95); an artist paints, dances, or writes. Because a hypothesis or a design cannot be fully developed only in the mind, an artist and a scientist must be "willing to leave the outcome to the adequacy of the means . . . instead of insisting upon . . . a conclusion decided . . . in advance" (Art 138-39). The fulfillment of an experience "always presents something new" so the individual feels "the delight of discovery" (Art 139).

By now I imagine you've noticed several connections to Don Murray's theory of the writing process, but let me add one more statement. Because an educational experience depends upon an individual's active doing, Dewey elevates process from its subordinate position in classical epistemology, and he "place[s] methods and means upon the [same] level of importance . . . as ends" or products (Quest 279).

Although Murray has created the "Either/Or" of process vs. product, he too stresses the importance of the process in writing. Like Dewey's description of the artist who approaches a scene "willing to be impressed" (Art 87), Murray asserts that the inception of writing is an "open susceptibility" (Writer 2) to ordinary events, like a grandmother's death. While collecting a "necessary abundance" of information (Write to Learn 63), a writer simultaneously makes connections to create a tentative idea that Murray variously refers to as a lead, a line, and a focus.

Just as Dewey asserts that knowledge "cannot be attained . . . just inside the head" (Democracy 321), Murray states that a writer conducts "experiments in meaning" ("First Silence, then Papar" 1983 in Expecting 23) using a "logical, understandable process" (Write to Learn 4) that conforms to Dewey's modern epistemology. A writer symbolically manipulates an experience in order "to learn, to explore, [and] to discover" (Write to Learn 3). Murray, therefore, asserts that "students become writers at the moment when they first write what they do not expect" ("Writing and Teaching for Surprise" 1984 in Expecting 3). Murray, however, is not naive about the nature of some students' discoveries; he frankly admits that adolescent insights "can be a great burden to the middle-aged ear" of a writing instructor (Writer 153). Yet if students are given formulaic assignments, writing becomes "drudgery, something that has to be done after the thinking is over" ("Writing . . . for Surprise" 1984 in Expecting 3-4). Dewey clarifies the nature of Murray's concept of writing to discover when he explains, "No one expects the young to make original discoveries . . . [but learning should] take place under such conditions that from the standpoint of the learner there is genuine discovery" (Democracy 354). From the perspective of the individual writer, she must write to find out "what [she has] to say in the hope that what [she] discover[s] will be of significance" ("Case History: Finding and Clarifying Meaning" in Expecting 89). This question of significance can only be answered when the writer's active doing, to use Dewey's terms, is matched by receptive undergoing.

Dewey compares an experience to breathing because there is a similar "rhythm of intaking and outgoing" (Art 50). As an individual interacts with the environment, "alert perception" and "creative action" alternate constantly and cumulatively. A painter, for example, perceives what previously has

been done in order to consider what must be done next, and the subsequent brushstrokes in turn change the perception of the developing image. Thus, the individual's active doing affects the environment, and the receptive undergoing of the consequences influences the individual. In order to emphasize this mutual accomodation during an experience, Dewey replaced the word 'interaction' with 'transaction.'

The transactional process of an experience means that the individual's natural powers of perception, action, and communication provide the means for an educational experience, but the material and social environment determine its aims. As a father of a one year old infant, I understood Dewey's subtle difference with Rousseau through his example of a child learning to speak. Although my daughter has the innate ability to make sounds, she approximates language by noting the effect 'ma-ma' has upon her mother (Democracy 132-4). The aims of her developing speech are determined by the social situation so learning is not just a natural unfolding from within the individual as Rousseau assumed. Yet the individual provides the means for an experience so learning is not only a forming imposed by society. According to Dewey's transactional theory, an individual re-organizes and re-constructs social beliefs through educational experiences (Democracy 89).

Since the aims of an experience are socially determined, Dewey states, "the significance of an experience [is understood when an individual takes] into account the experience of others" (Democracy 266). An artist, for example, receptively undergoes the developing image "as a third person might" (Art 106). And in one of his rare references to writing, Dewey explains, "Even the composition conceived in the head and, therefore

physically private, is public in its significant content, since it is conceived with reference to execution in a [common] product" (Art 51).

Like Dewey, Murray never conceives of writing as solely an individual process. When Murray defines writing as "an individual search for meaning in life" ("The Interior View" 1970 in Learning 8), he quickly qualifies this individualism by stipulating that a writer's expectation to "discover something that is unique[e]" or create "a new way of saying" is an essential illusion (Learning 8). It is essential because this hope motivates writing, yet an illusion because the writer's "problems have all been worked out by . . . other[s]" (Learning 8).

Even in his earliest statements on writing, Murray places the individual in a productive dialectic with society. For example, in the first edition of A Writer Teaches Writing from 1968, Murray stipulates that a writer "may write for himself, but he does not write to himself" (3). He then explains, "the writer does not exist without a reader [because] the purpose of writing is . . . to convey information" to another person (3). In this early text, Murray does minimize the social influence upon the writer by delaying its impact. However, in a later article from 1982, Murray acknowledges the continuous nature of the individual-social transaction. The writer's "other self" is a "constructive, critical" awareness that reads a draft to monitor intent and outcome, actual and possible, and effectiveness of communication ("Teaching the Other Self" 1982 in Learning 167). Like Dewey's concept of receptive undergoing, the 'other self' reads the draft to anticipate public responses because as Murray always has insisted, a writer must "face [the] audience" ("Finding Your Own Voice" 1969 in Learning 144). The receptive undergoing of a draft by the 'other self' or through peer response usually

leads the writer to make numerous revisions so a writer is engaged in a Deweyan re-construction of knowledge.

For neither Dewey, nor Murray is a first draft final. Dewey admits that emotion is "necessary" for art, but an impulsive "spewing forth" is not sufficient (Art 62). Instead Dewey asserts "to express . . . is to carry forward in development" (Art 62), and Murray compares a text to a photograph because "slowly, it evolves" (Writer 11). It's corresponding statements like these that have made me believe that Murray agrees with Dewey that knowledge is not a "spontaneous flow" (Democracy 133) from an individual who is "complete and self-contained" (Art 107). Yet Murray's theory of the writing process has been reductively categorized as a pressing out or an expressing of the Romantic self through the inhibiting layers of social conformity -- hence the label "expressivism."

Through this Deweyan reconsideration of Don Murray, I tacitly the have been criticizing the expressivist label applied by Lester Faigley, James Berlin, and others. According to Faigley, one hallmark of expressivism is "originality" ("Competing Theories" 1986 531), yet as stated previously, Murray admits the complexities of the essential illusion of writing to discover. Spontaneity also characterizes Faigley's expressivist category, yet Murray -- married to Minnie Mae for many years -- asserts, "the art of writing is no more spontaneous than the art of marriage" (Writer 6)! In Rhetoric and Reality (1987), Berlin admits the importance of language for a moderate expressivist like Murray, yet he insists that an expressivist's "inner vision finally exists apart from language" (152-53). Murray, however, asserts that writing is a "process of discovery though language" ("Teach Writing as a Process" 1972 in Learning 15) and even more explicitly, he states, "I do not agree with the romantics who feel [that] the act of writing

and the act of thinking are separate" ("Response of a Laboratory Rat" 1983 in Expecting 272)

Yet I don't want to find fault with these two theorists as much as I want to warn against the construction of prescriptive barriers. And the fault for divisive and reductive dichotomies lies less with composition stars like James Berlin, and more within ourselves. Neither Faigley in his article on "Competing Theories , nor Berlin in his first article on "The Major Pedagogical Theories" even mention Murray by name within the expressivist category (Faigley 527, Berlin 771)! The fault lies within this discourse community when we insist on thinking 'in terms of extreme opposites.' For example, the recent College English article entitled "Is Expressivism Dead?" met with with one published response denouncing any attempted "marriage of convenience - between expressive and epistemic rhetorics" (Farmer 549).

Rather than engage in divisive and reductive "Either/Or" thinking, we need to continue to question the inadequacies of Murray's writing process theory, such as the power relations between various discourses. For example, in "Silenced Dialogues," Lisa Delpit asserts that African-American students may need more explicit instruction in discourse conventions (287). Yet she also concludes, "The issue [of process vs. product] is really an illusion created initially not by teachers but by academics whose world view demands the creation of categorical divisions . . . for . . . easier analysis" (296). We also need to recognize similarities as much as differences, especially as new rhetorics are announced. In "The Cognition of Discovery" (1980), Linda Flower and John Hayes begin with a critique of "the myth of discovery" (21), yet Murray states a "writer must plan and calculate, scheme and decide . . . mak[e] a thousand executive decisions" (Writer 6). Trying to understand a writer's decisions leads to Flower and Hayes' cognitive map of

a riter's mind. Finally we need to preserve the valuable contributions of inevitably incomplete writing theories like that of Don Murray. As contemporary composition studies academic discourse to understand the heuristic value of some conventions, we also should heed Murray's caution against trying to teach the desired product too directly. When some instructors now argue for "critical intervention" in students' possibly naive political beliefs (France 550), we need to remember Murray's -- and Dewey's -- respect for students as both the way to begin and to sustain learning. By avoiding dangerous dichotomies based on "think[ing] in . . . extreme opposites," we fulfill Dewey's belief that socially constructed knowledge exists through its transmission between individuals and its constant reconstruction by individuals.

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