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Finding "Sponsorship" in the Academy: Three Case Studies of First-Year Writing Students

Herrington & Curtis (2000), building on Goldblatt's (1995) idea of the "sponsoring institution," (p. 48) showed students' need for a personal sense of connection with a sponsoring discourse *when writing in the academy. As Herrington and Curtis, as well as Goldblatt point out, these* sponsoring discourses *often come from outside the academy. Students may find other discourses in or outside the curriculum more compelling than the social constructivist discourses introduced in the class. This study of three first-year basic writing students suggests that students' previous identities, which make up what Ivanic calls the "autobiographical self," (p. 24), seem to impact how they reacted to the social constructivist elements of the curriculum.*

Many composition researchers have pointed to the importance of students' deep personal involvement with their writing. Herrington & Curtis (2000), building on Goldblatt's (1995) idea of the *"sponsoring institution,"* (p. 48), showed students' need for a personal sense of connection with a *sponsoring discourse* when writing for academic classes. Students feel *sponsored* when they see themselves reflected in a discourse; they then draw authority from this connection. Herrington and Curtis explain that a student's connection with a discourse depends on "whether students can imagine that 'institution,' that discourse, as helping them further important personal goals—in other words, whether that discourse offers a way of joining with others and linking private with public interests" (p. 39).

As Herrington & Curtis (2000) as well as Goldblatt (1995) point out, these "sponsoring discourses" often come from outside the academy. In fact, scholars have reported that it can be more challenging for students to find a personal connection with the sorts of academic discourses introduced in classes across the curriculum (Wolf, 1991; Skorczewski, 2000; Herrington & Curtis, 2000; Fox, 1994). In this study, I sought to find out what discourses students felt sponsored by as they wrote in my composition class. The discourse of social constructivism dominated much of the course; however, not all students felt sponsored by that discourse. Other discourses in and from outside the course were often more compelling than the social constructivist discourses introduced in the class. My study of three first-year writing students suggests that students' previous identities, which make up what Ivanic (1998) calls the *"autobiographical self,"* seem to impact how they reacted to the social constructivist elements of the curriculum of the basic writing course I taught.

Social Constructivist Discourse and the Composition Classes

It has become accepted in first-year and basic composition courses to ask students to write in response to anthologized readings. The readings often coalesce around social and cultural topics, such as education or race relations, and students are asked to become part of the discussions going on about these topics within academic and other discourse communities (Bartholomae, 1988). Commonly, the readings are chosen for their ability to challenge students' held beliefs on topics such as education, gender roles, cultural stereotypes, or race. Students' own experiences are given status as data to consider together with the readings, but they are asked to take a new look at their *constructions* of reality and revise personal stories to reflect the new information they are reading. They are asked to question the idea of *"one truth."* In short, they are asked to take on a social constructivist perspective.

A social constructivist position maintains that there is no one way to view world events or knowledge. Instead, any view is constructed socially and, therefore, constantly being negotiated (White & Epston, 1990). This discourse is very different from discourses associated with liberal humanist positions. While liberal humanist discourse stresses individual rights and freedoms, social constructivist discourse maintains that rights and freedoms are socially constructed and unevenly distributed according to power relations among people at any particular time. In his article "Social Construction, Language, and Knowledge," Bruffee (1986) defines a social constructivist (refers to it as "constructionist") world view this way:

> A social constructionist position in any discipline assumes that enti-
> ties we normally call reality, knowledge, thought, facts, texts, selves,
> and so on as community-generated and community-maintained
> linguistic entities—or, more broadly speaking, symbolic entities—that
> define or 'constitute' the communities that generate them. (p.774)

Because reality is socially constructed, it follows that there are no es-
sential truths, only the stories people tell to explain *reality*. Since there
are no essential truths, the truth is always being negotiated, and therefore
the power—control over which version is seen as truth—is always being
negotiated. The parties whose stories are accepted as true in a particular
realm have more power in that realm. That is why social constructivist
discourse does not value the uncritical acceptance of cultural practices or
beliefs. Cultural practices or beliefs may simply have come to be through
their associations with those who have power. Other practices or beliefs
may have been subjugated or left out because of their association with
those with less or no power. Therefore, social constructivist discourse
places value on *revising* versions of history by finding out about and
including subjugated stories (White & Epston, 1990).

Such a discourse can provide a way to look at one's own personal
history with the goal of revising the way one used to imagine it. Other
discourses, such as Cultural Empowerment Discourse, and Feminist
Discourse, share social constructivist beliefs about the social construc-
tion of reality and how this relates to the distribution of power. These
discourses extend from this argument to specifics related to cultural
and gender issues. An example from student work that draws on Social
Constructivist Discourse is this line from Maria's essay *The World Was
Placed in the Hands of Men:* "Women find it difficult to gain equality be-
cause society, not man, has molded and created the idea that men are
the superior being" (Maria was a subject of the study).

This kind of curriculum contrasts with a curriculum drawing heavily
on expressivist and writing process discourses that ask students to write
personal essays. There may be similarities in terms of the process students
go through when writing the essays, such as peer response and revising
drafts; however, in the social-constructivist themed course, students are
asked to make personal connections with readings about social issues. In
terms of writing pedagogy, what underlies such a curriculum is a belief that
students can learn a lot about writing by writing about engaging issues they
are reading about. Instructors value critical thinking in the form of social
and cultural critique, and hope students will take on the role of social critic.
Although, other roles such as *expressive writer* and *students going through
the writing process* are made available and are also valued, the dominant
expectation in such a class is that students become social critics.

Autobiographical Identities

Ivanic's (1998) term *autobiographical self* describes the personal history a writer brings to a writing project. Ivanic makes clear that this is not an *ideal self,* but a socially constructed self which is multiple and always changing as a person lives. The identities (termed autobiographical identities or autobiographical selves herein) that make up the autobiographical self are constructed by the individual through social interactions and experiences. These autobiographical identities are associated with particular discourses, or as Brodkey (1996) describes them, "worldviews," that embody value-laden ideologies and beliefs (p.18).

According to Ivanic (1998), particular autobiographical identities that are associated with certain discourses may influence one's experience with new discourses. This process has relevance for the experience of college composition students who are coming into contact with many new discourses, including those associated with social constructivism. Gee's (1991) metaphor for discourses as an identity kit is useful here. Gee characterizes a discourse as an *identity kit* (p. 3). For example, a person who has identified with a feminist discourse would have access to an array of values, styles, and ideologies associated with feminist discourse. Some discourses overlap ideologies, values, and styles, like feminist discourse and social constructivist discourse, or liberal humanist discourse and capitalist discourse. When students bring their autobiographical identities, which connect them to particular discourses, into contact with a new discourse that overlaps with *"identity kits"* of discourses they already have, it may make it easier to take on the new discourses and new "identity kit" elements.

Purpose of This Study

Throughout years of teaching composition, bits of student writing that referenced some other source beyond the structures and values of academic writing drew my attention. Students would weave into their essays quotes from or references to poetry, song lyrics, religion, and other cultural sources not associated with the academic realm. Most of these essays were personal essays or essays that allowed for the mixture of academic structures and material along with personal material, so it is not so surprising that students would feel freedom to add language that referenced identities they inhabited beyond the classroom. Intrigued by these written glimpses into other influences on the students' writing, I wanted to examine students' finished writing for influences from other aspects of their lives as well as from the course. Making sense of their writing in this way meant it was important to ask them about their personal background and engage them in helping me to trace back some of

the influences. It also meant it was necessary to find a way to examine their writing for different worldviews, values and beliefs.

Through interactions with focal students in class, in interviews, and through looking at their writing, I came to see them as social scientists. I began to see their work in the writing class as research, guided by agendas shaped by their own histories, curiosities and personal commitments.

The Methodology

Using a combination of qualitative methods, including ethnographic observation, teacher-research, interviewing and critical data analysis for the study, the study was conducted from a poststructural perspective. To support the exploration of multiple influences on writing, from a variety of discourses, identity was defined as multiple and changing identities, rather than one identity. Data included course materials, student writing, teacher-notes, and interview transcripts. Collection of data began on the first day of the semester and two interviews were conducted with each of the focal students after the class was over.

Both the procedure for interviewing and the actual questions used were adapted from the in-depth interviewing suggested by Seidman (1998) and the text-based interviewing of Ivanic (1998). The first interview included a general historical overview, focusing on the literacy background of the student and on his or her general autobiographical background. The second interview was a discourse-based interview and was conducted around an essay chosen by the student as the favorite or most satisfying essay of the semester. The information from the autobiographical interview provided a key to help with the analysis of the essay. According to Ivanic (1998), and Kamberelis (1992), student histories are important for understanding the writing they are doing at the moment of the assignment. The historical information collected in this study provided insights helpful for textual analysis, which was an attempt to identify, and then trace back to the source, discourses and genres in the text.

Critical discourse analysis was used (a type of microanalysis of language) to identify discourses and subject positions present in the writing. Critical discourse analysis allows the researcher to study a piece of text at the micro-level without losing sight of the macro-level. The researcher gains insight into the micro-level through categorizing small units of text, while at the same time, because the categories are inherently tied to larger "big-picture" ideas, the researcher gains insight into the macro-level (Bloome & Egan-Robertson, 1993; Willett, Solsken & Wilson-Keenan, 1999). The approach to microanalysis used in this study was based upon work done by Bloome & Egan-Robertson and Willett, Solsken & Wilson-Keenan. Sections of student texts were chosen

for microanalysis because of a strong connection either to students' *autobiographical selves,* or to the course readings.

The Course: English 111

Students were placed in English 111 because readers of their placement tests felt they needed remedial work in the area of writing. Although these students did have trouble with at least the surface features of writing, in our teaching associate groups there was a belief that the work students were engaged in was perhaps more challenging than the regular first-year composition classes because of the intense, often theoretical reading selections. English 111 was designed and developed to be a social-constructivist themed class. In our teaching associate meetings, we consistently recommitted ourselves to this goal. Our coordinator, who codesigned and edited our anthology *The Composition of Our"selves"* felt strongly that this was a sound goal. Because a social constuctivist focus addressed a sense of urgency the instructors felt about teaching basic writers, it was dominant in the course, over other pedagogical discourses associated with teaching writing, such as expressivist discourse or process discourse. This urgency, as I perceived it, was based on two phenomena. First, there was a pervasive sense, in large part I think due to the work of Bartholomae and Petrosky (1986), and then extended by Delpit (1988), that basic writers were facing a desperate situation as outsiders to academia and its demands. Unless they could learn to join the ongoing conversations about academic topics, and unless they could do this with the appropriate use of language to signal belonging, they would be rejected by those who judged their academic writing. Because basic writers are most often made up of students who come from marginalized groups—ESL students, dialect speakers, bilingual students, working-class, first-generation-to-college, African-American, Latino, and learning disabled students—and because we as teachers were aware of the economic and other possibilities offered by a college degree, we felt a responsibility to help students enter academic conversations. The writers of our textbook modeled their book after Bartholomae & Petrosky's (1987) anthology *Ways of Reading*.

The second phenomenon which led to the Writing Program and the teaching associates' advocacy of a curriculum dominated by social constructivist ideas was the belief that a social constructivist curriculum was empowering. Educational theorists such as hooks (1994), Brodkey (1996), and Gee (1991) talked about how the socially constructed nature of language, and the role of language in shaping reality, meant that language arts teachers were really doing potentially transformative work. We saw potential transformative experiences for our students in the work they would do in our writing classes.

We felt that many of the readings available in our anthology, like other anthologies of the kind, could model for our students how to transition from considering only the personal to moving to a more critical, academic stance. The text included texts with autoethnographic elements and hybrids between personal and academic writing. We wanted students to tell their personal stories related to topics they read about, but then to question and analyze their experiences in a way that both might approximate academic dialogue and transform their thinking as well. The readings in the text that most closely approximated the kind of writing we hoped for from students embodied the spirit of "autoethnographic writing"—writing that captures the sense of the ethnographer's attempt to "make the familiar strange" (Moss, 1992, p. 161). These readings, such as an excerpt from Cofer's memoir *Silent Dancing,* show the authors critiquing their own social and cultural experiences, as if these experiences were data. Cofer highlighted this stance in her memoir through casting some of her memories as scenes in a home movie.

Cofer uncovered some of the cultural values of her Puerto Rican extended family. They are family oriented and they are proud of their Puerto Rican culture. There are very strict roles followed by the men and the women in her family. She also uncovered the cultural conflicts buried under the surface. Her father represented the pressure to assimilate to the dominant culture, while her mother and her extended family held on to their Puerto Rican cultural identities and looked down upon those who talk of assimilation too much:

> It became my father's obsession to get out of the barrio, and thus we were never permitted to form bonds with the place or with the people who lived there. Yet El Building was a comfort to my mother, who never got over yearning for la isla. She felt surrounded by her language: the walls were thin, and voices speaking and arguing in Spanish could be heard all day. Salsas blasted out of radios, turned on early in the morning and left on for company. Women seemed to cook rice and beans perpetually—the strong aroma of boiling red kidney beans permeated the hallways. (Cofer, p. 126)

We wanted our students to move beyond writing about their experiences; we wanted them to analyze cultural aspects of their experiences and to move toward critiquing these experiences based on what they were reading about social constructivism and culture and power. We felt that because autoethnographic writing embodied the sense of inquiry, research, and critique while allowing students to write about what they know, their own experience, it blended personal and academic goals.

The text for the course, *Composition of Our"selves,"* contained essays presenting social constructivist concepts—based on the idea that there is no

one "correct" way to view world events or knowledge. Any particular view is seen as constructed socially, and, therefore, reality is seen as constantly being negotiated (White & Epston, 1990). Other readings in the text included memoirs, and personal narratives depicting the personal impacts of social cultural issues. Pieces such as *Silent Dancing,* by Ortiz (1990), *Hunger of Memory* by Rodriguez (1981), *Nobody Means More to Me Than You and the Future Life of Willie Jordan,* by Jordan (1985), *On Taking Women Students Seriously* by Rich (1979), and *On Keeping Silent* by Spender (1980) depict conflicts between dominant or other cultural languages, forced or chosen cultural assimilation, gender inequities, and discrimination based on sexual orientation. In our discussions and in subsequent writing assignments, I encouraged students to use social constructivist ideas to make sense of these readings and applications in their own lives. Assignments and models encouraged students to write essays drawing on elements of the genres of personal essay, autoethnographic memoir and polemic essay.

Other roles related to expressivist writing such as the expressive or vivid writer, were made available to students through my teaching, and from their own experiences, but the roles associated with social constructivism were the ones continually stressed. Although the identities made available through expressivist and process pedagogies for both teachers and students have certainly been shown to be transformative and empowering for students in terms of their sense of self as a writer and a student (Elbow, 1973; Tobin, 1993; Newkirk, 1997), we were convinced that the foremost issues for basic writers were related to access and empowerment through social critique.

The Students
The basic writing students in the class came from a wide range of backgrounds—African-American, Asian, Haitian, Latino and white European-American. The majority of students were foreign-born, having emigrated to the U.S. as children or teenagers. There were 16 students in the class, four females and 12 males. I gathered some general data from all of the students, but I asked for volunteers to participate in interviews about their general literacy background and specifically about the writing they had done during the semester. Six students volunteered to be interviewed, three males and three females. One male and one female student did not follow through with all three interviews. Although I had three interviews from another female student, the interviews were difficult to transcribe and analyze because of English-as-second-language issues. The three remaining students became the case study students for this study – Maria, Job, and Brian. They represented a compelling range in terms of their relationship to the discourses and identities made

available in the course. Maria's autobiographical identities brought her to a question for which a social constructivist curriculum provided a partial answer, while Job and Brian's *autobiographical identities* brought them into conflict with social constructivism.

Results

Maria's Research Agenda: To Explore How She Could Become More Bicultural

Maria, a Puerto Rican student torn between Puerto Rican and American cultural expectations, came to the class with her own questions about her cultural identity, which she could explore within the framework of the social constructivist curriculum. Before Maria even came to class she was asking such questions as she negotiated her way between the two cultures. She brought with her the often-conflicting autobiographical identities of "Puerto Rican," and "dedicated student." She said in her interview that she had been "drifting apart" from her Puerto Rican culture and identity as she strived for success in academics. The pressure to assimilate coming from her parents and her teachers was explicit, but the "pride" of being Puerto Rican in her family was "more understood" than talked about. She explained:

> It's [cultural pride] just kind of there for you to pick up if you want to or not, but you kind of have to know, you kind of know you should have pride for it, should be a part of it because you know you'll feel left out…I almost rejected my culture and now I realize that. You need to have pride even though I was never told to.

Maria had read the book *When I Was Puerto Rican* by Esmeralda Santiago (1993) and was influenced by Santiago's use of Puerto Rican symbols and discourse in her work. She extrapolated from Santiago's work that a bicultural identity could be forged in one's writing through incorporating cultural references and language into her work. Maria said in her interview:

> I think I might have gotten that [the idea to include Puerto Rican cultural references] from reading *When I was Puerto Rican* because after I read that I heard so much about Puerto Rico and the culture and I guess how she felt about it, and I would never incorporate things like that into my papers because I wasn't really into my culture and I think I might have gotten that because I literally added "Latin beat" because I wanted people to know what kind of music we listen to. And I think after I read that book is when I really decided to write like she does when she incorporates her culture into her outlook.

The line Maria cites here is from her essay *Flowers Always Bloom Before They Die*. The essay is about her cousin, Maribel, who, like Maria, faces

cultural conflict between Puerto Rican and American culture. Maria wrote: "Maribel has become completely Americanized living in the U.S. all her life that she does not seem to fit in the picture among the older women who have the traces of Puerto Rico in their blood."

Maria was influenced by other discourses from inside and outside the course. She drew on the optimism of liberal humanist discourse to assert that hard work, education and patience can make things turn out well. She also drew upon values of expressivism when she wrote about feelings like those she associated with dancing to the "Latin beat." However, through her own words in her interviews, and through her actions, i.e., her writing, she showed herself to be most concerned about detailing and examining her relationship to Puerto Rican culture.

As Maria wrote observations about her family as an ethnographer would, creating a thick description of culture, and observing from a distance, she began to see the conflict of values and power relationships between Puerto Rican and American cultures as they are played out among her own family members. This autoethnographic style was suggested by the course's emphasis on deconstructing cultural stories, a process that inherently involves examining cultural assumptions and conflicts. This autoethnographic style was more specifically modeled by the memoir *Silent Dancing* by Cofer (1990), in which Cofer wrote about cultural conflict embodied by her family, achieving observational distance by describing her family's interaction as a series of home movies.

An example of Maria's use of autoethnographic writing was an excerpt from *Flowers Always Bloom* where Maria described a family scene that represented cultural tensions concerning assimilation. While academic accomplishments, which can be seen as a marker of *middle class* aspirations, are lauded in Maria's family, it is clear that any attempts to use such accomplishments to become *white* are not praised. Maria noted that she feels like a hypocrite accepting her mother's praises for being accepted to a good college after hearing a condemnation of Maribel's assimilation to white American culture by her mother:

> I cannot block out the conversation, instead I find myself getting sucked into it and contemplating what I have heard. My mother is irritated at the fact that Isabel had specifically asked for a cup of milk instead of orange soda my mother was serving to the rest of the children, and how she insisted that her daughter should not get any candy because she would not want her to get jumpy and start running around and getting dirty, and what got her the most furious was that Isabel would not answer her back at all in Spanish knowing my mother has trouble with her English. She felt that Isabel thought she was too good for everyone in the family.

Maria made the connection between her own choices concerning cultural identity and Maribel's. In the essay she tried to rewrite the story of these choices, so that she could have a more integrated identity than her cousin.

Although Maria ended the essay with the typical optimism of the liberal humanist idea that everyone will be able to achieve their potential, several social constructivist themes were echoed in her essay. Maria began to tease out cultural conflicts that were embedded in her everyday family life. At the end of the essay she held out hope for a "revised" story so that she could construct a different meaning from it. She ended with:

> I feel like I have only accomplished one part of my task in life because I too like Isabel am living in a world that cannot let a person be proud of their ethnicity and culture, but instead judge and label them. I feel like a rose bud that can only truly show off its beauty once it has bloomed. In fact, I know I can continue to have pride in my culture and continue with my success.

In her next essay, *Silencing Our Language,* Maria moved her discussion of culture from the personal to a wider social realm. She made a connection between the social constructivist perspective on language issues—bilingual education, language assimilation, and empowerment through native language use—and her own realization about the connection between language and identity. She credited moments like the one where as a little girl she gave the word "china" (Puerto Rican Spanish word for orange) when prompted by the teacher with the picture of an orange and was met with laughter from her classmates, as well as when a high school teacher reprimanded a student in her class for speaking Spanish, for her movement away from Spanish and toward language assimilation.

In her essay, Maria connected her own experiences with those of other Latino students in her school. While, she said, bilingual education aims "to prevent educational struggles and the loss of one's culture," the mainstream education message she received is that "acceptance in the English speaking community is most important." She wrote that from her own experience she felt that "bilingual education and mainstream education both have its (sic.) flaws." Working hard within the mainstream at a mostly Anglo-American Catholic High School where teachers did not allow Spanish to be spoken, Maria mastered Standard English and achieved academic success; however, Maria felt she drifted away from her language and culture. When she changed schools and attended a more diverse school she felt alienated from other Puerto Rican students in the school. She wrote, "I did not realize how much one's language ties into one's culture and one's identity until it was too late." At the same

time she saw that students in the bilingual program in her school were alienated from the rest of the school. She wrote, "bilingual education created a separate school within a school." In the excerpt below she reflected on how she realized there was something missing for her:

> Eventually when I began to understand that language is a representation of one's culture; I began to feel apart from the individuals within my ethnic group. This feeling was especially evident when I struggled to speak with peers in Spanish. Struggling with the language created a sense of isolation between my ethnic group and myself.

Maria joined the bilingual club of the school and found that this provided an answer to her dilemma. She writes, "As I continued to go to these meetings I felt acceptance into my ethnic group and was beginning to feel in touch with my culture and language in the school setting that I once needed to put aside for my learning English." From this experience, Maria began to see that she could bring her first language into her school life. She wrote: "This transition of the language into the school environment had convinced me that my native language was not constrain[ed] only for home with family." The bilingual club provided a place where Maria could feel connected to her Puerto Rican culture within the school setting. At the same time, the club offered students in the bilingual education program an antidote to their alienation from those not in the program. Maria feels that joining a bicultural club is empowering for bilingual/bicultural students. She wrote: "eliminating the idea that language is a just mere form of communication and emphasizing the cultural aspect of language enable[s] the Bilingual (sic.) students to feel a sense of acceptance among the whole student body."

In summary, building on the ideas of cultural conflict she observed in her first essay, Maria connected herself to other Latinos, moving beyond a conversation about individuals' cultural insulation or cultural assimilation to a conversation about power—the power of being part of a collective cultural identity—a concept stressed in the social constructivist aspects of the curriculum. Maria's autobiographical identity of a bicultural person led her to certain questions that were addressed by the social constructivist readings and themes of the course.

Job's Agenda: To Communicate Philosophical Ideas

Another student, Job, who had a complex ethnic background of French and Haitian, and spoke French, Creole, English and Black English, did not come with an explicit question that he shared with me about culture, as did Maria. Job did share with me that he was in-

terested in communicating his philosophical ideas to people through writing. In his interview he talked of wanting to "try and pass messages to people" through his writing. He said, "people can see that I want to say something; they have to really think about what I am saying" Job brought with him the autobiographical identity of "person interested in communicating ideas." After writing his first essay, Job got excited about one of his ideas, a concept he called "Life Dreaming," which got a strong reaction from his peers in a class publication. The concept depicted life as a "dream" and the dreamer is the "agent" of the dream, who despite being called "agent" often had little control over the outcome of the dream.

> One major factor about human's soul is that eventually at a point during your life you will think back about certain things that occurred in your past. I believe and will profoundly believe that every one on this planet who perceives their lives through experiences, mostly about the past, is an agent of life dreaming. Whether it is about incontestable events or antagonistic events, what really counts is how you view these episodes in your present lifetime and how you deal with them perpetually.

He said in his interview about his peers' reactions to the idea of life dreaming, "I spoke to a lot of people and they don't understand it—they are oh—where did you get that kind of idea—it is such a good idea."

Job's quest for "passing messages to people" was better served by elements of the curriculum that drew on ideas that are associated with expressivism, such as expression through writing, creativity, and the relationship between the writer and the reader. The aspects of the curriculum that drew on social constructivist ideas did not acknowledge the satisfaction of reaching people with one's creative ideas. Expressivist elements, on the other hand, affirm people's ideas through the use of class publications, and through asking students to give positive feedback in response to their peers' writing.

A second concern of Job's, how he could be more comfortably assimilated to American life, could have been addressed by the social constructivist curriculum, but Job did not draw on the social constructivist ideas presented to pursue his concerns about assimilation. Although Job had a complex ethnic Haitian-French background and spoke about moving back and forth between English, French, Creole and Black English, he did not want to talk about cultural conflict or ethnicity. When I asked him about his background he was vague:

> I don't think I am Haitian. I am not French. I am not Haitian...
> but what I think is like I guess in a way I came from Indians or

> French in a way because these guys, they are the one to land first
> before black(s)…from Africa. So as far as ethnicity I don't really
> think I am, my background was, it's really back back back then.
> But when people ask me sometimes I do say I am Haitian or I
> am French….or sometimes when they ask me where you from,
> like I am half Haitian, half French. Sometimes I say I'm Haitian,
> but I don't think really I am, so.

It is hard to know whether Job was being metaphorical or literal when
he talked about "Indians" being his ancestors. From researching Haitian
history, I found that native people ("Indians") referred to as "Arawak"
did inhabit Haiti, before the French colonized the island. I don't know
if Job was intentionally vague about his background, but I do know that
his cultural ethnic identity is complex.

When Job touched on his identity as a non-native English speaker in
his essay *The Importance of Standard English* he focused only on assimi-
lation. He showed himself in confusing and uncomfortable situations
where he is not understood by teachers, but he did not analyze these
moments in terms of power dynamics the way a social constructivist
perspective would suggest:

> Growing up in New York for a few years, I learned Black English,
> and I used it inside of my conversations. I guess that was the rea-
> son why some of my teachers could not understand me when we
> conversed sometimes. After a couple of years, I started to learn
> Standard English because it was meaningful. My communication
> ability afterwards became much better.

The solution Job pointed to for the discomfort he felt was simply
assimilation. He moved from his own story to generalize about the
importance of assimilating to "standard languages."

> Good communication, which emphasizes on "public language",
> is usually used in various environments like: offices, hospitals,
> clinics, courthouse, etc. In order to operate systematically within a
> country, you have to know the Standard Language of the country.
> Standard English is the language spoken in most part of United
> States, consequently, it is very important to speak the current
> language, instead of "private language."

In summary, Job did not draw on social constructivist ideas to examine
the power issues embedded in his own experience with language issues.
Instead, he focused on the positive aspects of assimilation. Like Maria
he drew on assimilation discourse, which puts learning English above
other needs, such as feeling comfortable or maintaining connections
to one's native culture. He also pursued the more expressivist goal of
communicating creative ideas.

Brian's Research Agenda: Individual Freedom of Expression

Brian, a third student in the class was of European-American background and interested in creativity and personal—freedom, who cited comic book creator Stan Lee and controversial singer Marilyn Manson as people he admired. Brian, who was a reserved but absolutely cooperative student, was quietly alternative, coming to class with pink hair for a while and wearing alternative band tee shirts. Brian's focus on creativity, personal freedom, and alternative style embodied his autobiographical identity of "individualist." Like Job, Brian did not directly tell me of a personal project he was working on, and did not embrace the social constructivist ideas presented in the course, but unlike Job, Brian's tone in his writing was somewhat hostile when he wrote about language issues and feminism.

Writing creatively was something Brian talked about wishing he could do in high school. He talked in his interview about admiring the often emotional poems and short stories in the high school literary magazine. He read the writing in the magazine and really admired the work, but felt as if he could not write like they did. He said, "I was never really confident about my writing...I had just seen it [the literary magazine] and a couple of my friends would submit stuff and I would read what they wrote and then I would see what I wrote—and I didn't think much of it." Like Job, Brian's concerns were served more by the expressivist elements of the course.

Brian came to English 111 occupying the autobiographical identity of a sub par writer. His teachers told him that his writing was not up to academic standards. Brian talked in his interview about how he became discouraged by his teachers' comments when he "would usually get only Cs and sometimes Ds." He explained, "They would say that I needed to expand more on everything and I really didn't have much fact." Brian seems to have interpreted teachers' comments in terms of development and creativity.

Brian was resistant to social constructivist ideas presented in the course, such as those forming the basis for a belief in empowerment through native language use and non-sexist language. He instead took up conservative discourses that assume non-native speakers and women need to bend themselves to fit in with the dominant approaches to language.

Although Brian seemed to understand that a person's first language is more comfortable than a second language, he seemed to resent when non-English languages were spoken around him because it made him feel alienated. He writes:

It is no longer uncommon that children in America are bilingual.
It's not the white kids that are bilingual its everyone else. These

> Spanish, Cambodian, Chinese, French or whatever speak English
> as well as their native language. They may be able to speak both
> languages, but they'll always (at least I think and have been
> taught) feel more comfortable with their own language. I know
> that I have had six years of French and am in no way ready to try
> to converse with a French man. I wouldn't feel adequate.

He did not move to an understanding of cultural empowerment
through language use, but instead saw the issue mostly in terms of
his own comfort and discomfort. The social constructivist curriculum
stressed that language is important for people's identity, but Brian
focused mostly on his own discomfort and did not draw on social con-
structivist notions about language.

> I worked at Larry's Comics, located right in the middle of Lowell,
> Massachusetts. Kids would come in and out of there all the time.
> There was a certain few I could remember, but there were groups that
> I always knew when they came in. It was like a fog scurrying down the
> stairs to the basement-like setup of the store. They would blow in and
> they'd speak these fast languages (mainly Spanish, and what I think
> was the Cambodian language). I'd feel strangled in the way I couldn't
> understand what they were saying. At the time I thought it was rude.
> I knew that they could speak perfect English and then they'd just
> speak Spanish to each other.

Brian objectifies these teenagers by referring to them as "These Span-
ish, Cambodian, Chinese, French" and by depersonalizing them in his
description of them as "fog scurrying down the stairs." Brian is dominated
by his focus on his own individual comfort. Although he may draw on
social constructivist ideas to connect these language issues to larger
cultural issues, he constructs his reality only based on his experience
as a native English speaker.

While Brian did not embrace social constructivist ideas here, in the
next essay he wrote, *Women Are Weird Folk,* he actually resists social
constructivist ideas, which are related to feminist ideas about non-sexist
language. He argued against making changes to the English language to
eliminate some biased expressions, such as "mankind." He supported
the status quo, saying

> Some women talk about how they need to be more accepted and
> involved in society, but some of these women are radicals. These
> groups of women rally together for women's rights. Have equal rights!
> Have a women's (sic.) equal rights cake walk through Tian'anman
> Square, but don't be the radical girl that wants to change a language.
> Who takes radicals like that seriously? No matter what they may
> say, people will be turned away by their extremist ways.

In summary, Brian saw the social constructivist ideas about language as being socially constructed and affecting how people see themselves as "radical." This line of discussion didn't ring true for him. His individualistic perspective seemed to get in the way of his seeing connections between language and culture. He didn't frame individuals as affected by social forces, but rather he framed them as "free" to have all the "equal rights" they want to by their own individual will.

Implications for Writing in the Academy

This project focused on three basic writing students, all of whom brought some agenda that they were able to pursue in my writing class. Only Maria, however, as Goldblatt commented, felt "sponsored" by the social constructivist curriculum, which dominated the course. Maria's autobiographical identity as "bicultural" and her explicit questions regarding this identity made the social constructivist readings relevant for her. Her connection to autoethnographic writing through Cofer's memoir led her to a distanced observation that was compatible with a social constructivist view of reality as a constructed text that can be deconstructed and examined. Brodkey (1998) notes the transformational power of autoethnographic writing when she writes: "Autoethnographies are produced by people who acknowledge their multiple affiliations and realize they are strategically poised to interrupt the negative effect of what passes for common sense" (p. 28).

Perhaps Maria would not have been able to make the personal connection with the social constructivist curriculum if Cofer's piece had not reflected her bicultural identity back to her—what Herrington and Curtis call "twinship" (p. 371). Cofer's text achieves the infusion of Puerto Rican culture that Maria admired about Santiago's work. This finding supports the argument that has been made for including class readings written by authors of as many cultural and ethnic groups as possible.

Herrington and Curtis have challenged teachers to help students make a link between their own private concerns and public ones. They write:

> Discourse communities can function as sponsoring communities of people and discourses that help link a personal with a social identity and private and social identities by presenting students with an image of identity and possibility. Further, they can serve as sustaining, empathic audiences and mentors who affirm students and give them means to articulate and pursue their private interests in academic/public settings and texts. (p. 375)

The autoethnographic model Maria found in *Silent Dancing* helped her make this sort of private/public connection. This connection was precipitated by her autobiographical identity of "bicultural." The

autobiographical identity of "bicultural" predisposed her to be open to the possibility of exploring broader cultural conflicts, and possible solutions for herself and others. Job and Brian, however, were not as open to making these connections because their autobiographical identities took them in other directions. While Maria's story seems to point to the potential autoethnographic writing holds for helping some students make connections between their autobiographical identities and larger cultural issues, Job and Brian's stories show that it is not that simple. Neither Job nor Brian chose to write in an autoethnographic style although it was made available to them.

These student stories support what I'm sure many basic writing and first-year composition instructors already know, that students do not come to class with equal openness to particular perspectives, such as social constructivism. What their stories also provide is an explanation of why this is so. Job and Brian's autobiographical identities, when they entered the course, led them toward other discourses from inside and outside the curriculum, expressivist and assimilation discourse in Job's case, and expressivist and conservative discourse in Brian's case. From the expressivist elements of the course, Job found sponsorship to explore philosophical ideas he had in his writing and try them out on an audience, and Brian found sponsorship to be expressive and emotional in his writing. It was heartening to see by the positive way both students spoke about their favorite essays in their interview, that they did feel supported by the course as they wrote. For teachers who are trying to engage students in viewing material from a particular critical perspective, in this case a social constructivist perspective, these case studies point to the potential of autoethnography as a bridge to critical writing for some students.

Finally, professionals in the field need to continue to examine the relationship between our students and the perspectives we ask them to take up in the academy. In Job and Brian's cases, the connections may have been just under the surface waiting to be made. A connection could have been made between Job's multilingual experience and social constructivist ideas about the power and language use. Perhaps, we as teachers, need to be more tuned in to how personal stances of students might connect to larger social issues. Brian's interest in the subculture of comic books, an area ripe for a discussion of cultural production and reproduction, could have been explored using social constructivist ideas about how meaning is constructed socially through pop culture. If social constructivist ideas are central to the literacy instruction we are giving our students, then we need to work on building bridges for our students like Job and Brian, to help make a link between their private concerns and agendas and more social cultural concerns.

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