Critical Realism and Composition Theory

Donald Judd

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The field of composition theory has emerged as part of the intellectual turmoil and set of pedagogical debates which have beset higher education for the last four decades and is now revolutionizing the theory and praxis of higher education. As part of that program of scholarly self-examination, composition theorists have sought to establish the proper role of written composition in the overall goals of liberal education, as well as the best methods and means by which composition practices can promote the intellectual development and the expressive capacities of students.

This volume examines three of the dominant pedagogical theories within composition theory: expressivist, cognitivist, and social-constructivist. It builds its critique on the fact that much of modern composition theory has focused on epistemological concerns while neglecting the ontological foundations of that which is being discussed.

Critical Realism and Composition Theory offers an alternative approach to teaching composition. This problem-oriented alternative is designed to lead students beyond the abstract, contemplative description of a problem to an expanded understanding that shows that concerns for justice cannot be addressed intellectually without at the same time confronting the practical constraints that limiting powers of social institutions play in both defining a problem and its social solution.

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To my daughters, Heather and Sarah
May we find the wisdom to act responsibly and leave our children a world worth living in

Contents

Acknowledgements

1 Theory/practice inconsistencies and composition studies

In this study I will examine three schools of rhetoric in contemporary composition studies as demarcated by Lester Faigley (1986) and James Berlin (1988)—expressivist, cognitivist, and social-constructivist—and their claims about knowledge production, pedagogical goals, and the presuppositions undergirding each. The focus of this inquiry is to establish the model of reality each school presupposes. I use "presupposes" because every epistemology implies a particular ontology and vice versa. Thus, these schools' claims about practice and pedagogy will be contrasted to their presupposed models of reality in order to locate their respective theory/practice inconsistencies. I will be interested in discovering which pedagogical claims, if any, are apparently denied by the ontology used to support the epistemology of each rhetoric.

My goal here is not to blast holes in other people's work. Rather, in the long run, I hope to achieve a reconciliation among these different rhetorics, a reconciliation requiring some dramatic changes in our notions of epistemology and ontology. This project stems, in some part, from my own exploratory adventures in composition theory both in and out of the classroom. I have found all of these theories useful in my own writing and in teaching composition courses. They have each contributed to my understanding of what is involved in the writing process. But as I have become more acutely aware of the different theoretical grounds of each rhetoric, I have encountered a set of paradoxes. If I reject a particular theory's model of reality, must I reject that theory's pedagogical practices? And if I do not, how am I to know if my eclectic approach to teaching succeeds or fails? And, finally, is the practice theoretically untenable because the theory itself was faulty, or because its realizations in the classroom are not fully possible? As a teacher of composition courses, I must constantly remind myself to make sure that I understand why I am doing what I do in the classroom—in other words, to make sure that my classroom practice is consistent with my own theory of teaching writing. Otherwise, I have nothing against which to check my successes and failures and would be approaching my job of teaching in a serendipitous manner.

The consequence of confronting these paradoxes in the everyday life of the classroom has resulted in my attempt to research, salvage, and subsume various elements of these three pedagogical approaches under a different model of

reality that can accommodate them without resulting in theory/practice inconsistencies. But I cannot claim any originality regarding this "different model of reality" developed here, for this study is informed by the philosophy of Roy Bhaskar and his work in critical realism. Bhaskar's critiques of competing philosophies of the natural sciences and the human sciences also shape my own critiques of composition theories, as one might expect. The possibility of such a critical venture, situated as it is in a critical philosophy of science, is in the first place grounded in the fact that composition studies have borrowed widely from various disciplines, each with its own philosophy of science and presupposed ontology. That is, composition theorists have borrowed philosophies of science and their implicit models of reality from the very paradigms Bhaskar has so painstakingly and effectively critiqued. It was my growing awareness of these borrowed philosophies of science and their models of reality that first suggested to me how Bhaskar's work could be fruitfully applied to composition studies.

Beginning this study with a claim to the importance of theory/practice inconsistency is a little like sneaking in the back door in order to get a tour of the house. The legitimacy of theory/practice inconsistency, as I am using it, is predicated upon an understanding of critical realism, a philosophical project developed by Bhaskar. But rather than beginning with a thorough explanation of critical realism and then justifying the importance of theory/practice inconsistency, I will begin by claiming that identification of theory/practice inconsistency is important to any intellectual endeavor. So while I will be starting off in the pantry, so to speak, I will eventually get around to a tour of the whole house, or as much as is necessary in order to appreciate the function and placement of the pantry. As a result, I may make comments on and observations about theory/practice inconsistency in this chapter that may seem inadequately supported. I can only beg the reader's patience with the assurance I will adequately explain critical realism and justify the importance of theory/practice inconsistency in subsequent chapters.

Theory/practice inconsistency

Is it important that one's practice and theory are consistent? Or should theory be jettisoned in favor of a pragmatism whose foundations lie within the consensus of a particular discourse community? In "Social Construction, Language, and the Authority of Knowledge: A Bibliographic Essay" (1986), Kenneth A. Bruffee examined theory and the relationship between theory and practice as embodied in modern cognitivist work in composition. He writes:

> The tendency to classify our knowledge into "theory" and "practice" has its source in the cognitive understanding of knowledge. Cognitive thought assumes a vertical, hierarchical relation between theory and practice. It regards theory or concept making, products of the mind's

"inner eye," as the more privileged, more powerful level of thought. And it regards practical application, a function of the "mirror of nature," as less privileged and less powerful. Theory is said to "ground" and sanction practice. Practice is said merely to be ways of behaving or methods of doing things that are grounded and sanctioned by—that is, are the "consequence" of—theory.

(1986: 781)

The implications of such a notion of theory are that theory is somehow arrived at prior to practice and must necessarily be achieved through some form of idealism such as the Platonic forms or through a form of rationalism, where contemplation guided by the rules of formal logic is capable of delineating the foundations of knowledge. Citing W.J.T. Mitchell's book *Against Theory: Literary Studies and the New Pragmatism*, Bruffee goes on to point out that the categories of "theory" and "practice" express what Stanley Fish calls "theory hope." In a nice summing up of the problems associated with this notion of theory, Bruffee goes on to explain "theory hope" as "the belief that whatever a theory sanctions us to do is surely correct, whatever we learn under its aegis surely true, and whatever results we get using its methods are surely valid" (Ibid. 782). "Theory," under this description, is the sole master over "practice" such that any inconsistency arising between "theory" and "practice" is the fault of "practice" alone.

In a similar vein, Eric H. Hobson, in his article "Writing Center Practice Often Counters Its Theory. So What?" (1994), traces the primacy of theory over practice back to the Enlightenment. Drawing on Thomas Hemmeter's article "The 'Smack of Difference': The Language of Writing Center Discourse," wherein Hemmeter argues that either ignoring or explaining away theory/practice inconsistencies "is to fall into the structuralist trap of dualities," Hobson goes on to note that

> [s]uch is the dualistic nature of Enlightenment thought that holds hegemonic sway over the academy and requires us to discount as invalid any theory or practice demonstrated to be contradictory—that is, if we try to play by the rules of conventional theory building.

(7)

But Hobson goes on to explain that such a dualistic trap is fictional and can ensnare us only if we accept the philosophical rule of non-contradiction. Instead of accepting the Enlightenment project of rationalism and philosophical foundations of knowledge, Hobson contends that "a pragmatic perspective toward writing center knowledge accepts contradiction between theory and practice; we reject the 'logic' of dialectics" (Ibid. 8).

Both Bruffee and Hobson are not advocating a wholesale rejection of theory; rather, they are rejecting that particular version of theory reeking of an obdurate idealism and ignoring the social and, as such, interpretive character

of knowledge and knowledge-making. Moreover, both Bruffee and Hobson have articulated to greater or lesser degrees the importance of theory being informed by practice. Theory with a capital "T" is rejected in favor of a reflective and self-critiquing practice, and while neither writer offers a clearer explanation of an acceptable form of theory, a friendly reading of both writers can discern movement toward a new conception of theory.

So what is to be made of theory/practice inconsistency for the purposes of this study? While Bruffee and Hobson are correct in rejecting a Procrustean notion of theory, they are wrong in rejecting theory/practice inconsistencies as a means to refining our knowledge. For most postmodern philosophies the problem with the issue of theory/practice inconsistency stems from their focus on epistemology and their neglect of ontology. While practice is seen to have a workaday or procedural quality, theory or philosophy is seen as preoccupied with grand, abstract epistemologies or ways of knowing. But philosophy does not have to operate solely in such grand, abstract isolation—for itself, so to speak. It can serve other forms of knowledge, acting as an under-laborer for the sciences—both natural and human—as it did for Locke and as it does for Bhaskar (1997: 10). Bhaskar sees philosophy operating at a transcendental level as Kant employed the term. Kant asked "what must the mind be like for knowledge to be possible," and his answer was that the universal categories of understanding impose the mind's own order on the phenomena experienced. Rather than asking what must the mind be like in order for it to know an object, Bhaskar asks instead what must the world be like in order for the practice of science to make sense. In other words, while Kant made the "Copernican" epistemological turn, from which most philosophy has not escaped, Bhaskar has made the ontological turn in order to resolve some of the problems brought about by present-day philosophy.

With a restoration of ontology, philosophy and theory cannot only be vindicated, but can serve as existential under-laborers to the sciences. Philosophy, using a form of transcendental critique, can tell us, for example, *that* the world must be structured or layered and *that* some entities must have emergent powers—otherwise, the practice of science can make no sense whatsoever. Philosophy cannot tell us, however, exactly *how* reality is structured or exactly *what* emergent powers certain entities possess. In short, a transcendental critique of scientific practice can lay out the broad contours of valid scientific knowledge, but it cannot in and of itself deduce the details of the world itself. That is the work of science, and here is where theory comes in.

Typically in the natural sciences, the scientist, through the physical intervention of the experiment, identifies a phenomenon which serves as the empirical grounds for an unobserved mechanism which generated that very phenomenon. Theory is then used to propose possible models of the generative mechanisms, but it is only through the careful work of science that we can establish a particular theory as the truth or a particular mechanism as real. Bhaskar explains the issue thus:

in a continuing dialectic, science identifies a phenomenon (or range of phenomena), constructing explanations for it and empirically tests its explanations, leading to the identification of the generative mechanism at work, which then becomes the phenomenon to be explained; and so on.

(1989: 20)

So while there is no foreseeable end to the work of science, as each new identification of a generative mechanism sets the ground for the next thing to be explained, science must differentiate between competing theories and select the theory that, at the present time, has the greatest explanatory power or best approximates the truth. But let me be quick to point out that my use of "truth" here is not the foundational "truth" sought by Enlightenment thinkers or classical idealists. "Truth" is acknowledged as the product of social endeavor, subject to its historical specificity and material conditions of construction. Science, in this sense, always carries the mark of human labor and its material praxis. As such, scientific truth is always situated *vis à vis* human needs and the historical bracketing of those needs. Hence, "truth" exists in what Bhaskar calls the transitive dimension of science "in which experiences and conjunctions of events are seen as socially produced" because "truth" is always open to verification, falsification, or modification as new methods and new sense-extending technology are created (1997: 242). The transitive dimension of science is, in short, located in the historical parade of epistemologies which have guided human inquiry in its quest of understanding the world.

By introducing the transitive dimension, Bhaskar is acknowledging that humans cannot have foundational knowledge, whether spun from the work of rationalism or constructed from the agnostic presuppositions of positivist science. But such does not mean that truth can be done away with or that one truth is as good as another because ultimately we must decide which version of the truth is better to act upon, and such judgments are laden with vested interests and idiosyncratic needs.

We must judge competing truths. And judgment embodies a "*theoretico-practical duality* or function" in that theory/practice consistency "concerns consistency in a praxis in a process" (Bhaskar 1994: 65). Bhaskar means, among other things, that humans are always moving between theory and practice in a dialectical fashion, using each to help inform and advance the other. And embedded in theory/practice consistency are both theoretical and practical reason. "Theoretical reason," Bhaskar writes, "is concerned to adjust our beliefs to conform to the world" because if our beliefs are to have any value to us, they must have a practical adequacy; they must function as a kind of owner's manual for negotiating and guiding us through the material world. And practical reason "is concerned to adjust the world to our will," for if we are to survive, we must work with nature in order to procure the things we need, not just for survival, but for our social development as human beings (Ibid. 66). So when we are faced with competing theories, we do not choose one theory over another simply because it is popular, but because, ultimately, knowledge is not just