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Collaboration, Critical Pedagogy, and Struggles Over Difference

Amy Goodburn and Beth Ina

A critical literacy situates itself in the intersection of language, culture, power, and history--the nexus in which the subjectivities of students are formed through incorporation, accommodation, and contestation. The struggle is one that involves *their* history, *their* language, and *their* culture, and the pedagogical implications are such that students are given access to a critical discourse or are conditioned to accept the familiar and self-evident as the inevitable.

Peter McClaren

I was trying to be the voice for the thousands of heterosexuals on campus that are sick and tired of the university giving special treatment to these immoral people. This is how the majority of people feel about this issue whether you accept it or not. I was neither attempting to start a dialogue, throw out a challenge, nor trying to persuade people.

Pat, a student writer

Introduction

Critical pedagogy asks students to interrogate difference in a politically transformative way by having them exercise self-reflection, usually through the telling of their narratives and the interpreting of these experiences in terms of social categories of difference (see Giroux, Lather, McClaren, Shor). Such a pedagogy, as Susan Jarratt suggests, invites students to view their lives as part of larger social negotiations with the goal of creating a more democratic society:

Motivating students to locate themselves socially and historically in relation to the subject of the class can mediate institutional (teacher) authority and create the possibility for counterauthority to emerge within students' own discourses. This process takes place

when students are led to describe their lives, especially their educational experiences, as socially and historically embedded--to articulate the self in history. (36)

Critical pedagogy, with its emphasis on the ways that discourse participates in constructions of identity and perceptions of society, has begun recently to influence composition studies, particularly in terms of how collaboration can be used in writing classrooms (see, for example, Bizzell, Fiore and Elsasser, and Jarratt). Most scholarship assumes that collaboration can enact some of the same goals as critical pedagogy by enabling students to explore multiple approaches to issues, develop a sense of community through group negotiation, view composing as an inherently social and dialogic act, and take responsibility for their own learning (see Hurlbert, Smit, Trimbur).

As two graduate students committed to the goals of critical pedagogy, we believe that the classroom is a space where the social construction of difference should be recognized and examined, and we believe that collaboration is one possible way to achieve these ends. Our beliefs about the value of collaboration have been shaped by an ongoing discussion taking place in our own department of English. Many of our faculty in rhetoric and composition studies are heavily invested in examining the theoretical and pedagogical implications of collaboration. There are also many workshops and seminars designed for teachers that describe how collaboration can be incorporated into our writing courses. Furthermore, staff training for the English Department's Computers in Composition and Literature program provides strategies on how to implement collaborative writing activities in computer-assisted classrooms. At Ohio State University, the impetus for much of this movement toward collaborative writing stems from a desire to value the differences that students bring to the classroom and to the production of their texts.

Our experiences in teaching, however, have often led us to question whether collaboration is the best means for interrogating and valuing difference in writing classrooms. Although many of our colleagues have had positive results using collaboration, some of us have felt so much frustration when teaching collaborative writing assignments that we have jokingly referred to the need for a group called "Collaborators Anonymous," where teachers could share their collaboration "nightmares." Some of our frustrations stem from not having research that focuses on practicing collaboration within actual classrooms. Much of the scholarship about the value of collaborative writing has focused either on solely theoretical implications or on collaborative practices within business writing classrooms, where the goal is to create a product that meets the demands of a corporation. In business writing paradigms, issues of difference are used as a resource but then minimized in the collaborative text itself (Forman and Katsky; Lay). It is often difficult for teachers who wish to use collaboration as a means of creating a polyvocal classroom to find descriptions of such collaborative pedagogies.

In *Singular Texts/Plural Authors*, Andrea Lunsford and Lisa Ede pose provocative questions about what types of collaboration should be incorporated into writing classrooms. Arguing that teachers need to be aware of how their practices are embedded in social, political, and ideological contexts, Lunsford and Ede ask several questions that

have yet to be addressed in current scholarship about collaborative writing: "How does--and should--collaboration challenge or re-situate the attitudes, values, beliefs, and ideological assumptions students and teachers bring to the writing class?" and "How do issues of gender, race, and class impinge on collaboration?" and "To what extent can--or should--collaborative activities attempt to highlight or address inequities of gender, race, and class?" (125). Such questions cannot be fully answered until actual classroom practices become privileged as a site of inquiry. In this essay, we want to start such a discussion about the role of collaboration for critical pedagogy by examining how collaborative groups in Beth's writing class negotiated the terrain of difference in their group interactions and in the production of their texts. Our goal is to highlight how issues of difference affected and/or created some of the problems these groups had in producing texts and to suggest issues that teachers need to reflect upon when they use collaborative writing.

Before analyzing how students wrote collaborative papers in this class, however, we would like to explain briefly the roles we played throughout this project. We are both white females in the Ph.D. program at OSU who teach a variety of writing courses and who are interested in theories of critical pedagogy. While conducting research for her ethnographic dissertation, Amy adopted the role of participant observer in Beth's computer-assisted upper-level composition course entitled "The American Experience through Literature." This course, charged by the university's new general education curriculum with giving "significant treatment to the pluralistic nature of institutions, society, and culture in the U.S. with special attention to issues of race, gender, class, and ethnicity," fulfills the social diversity requirement at our institution and thus seems an especially suitable site for studying how students write and talk about difference. In this course students read short stories, essays, and a novel about issues of difference, and wrote two individual papers, a collaborative paper, four response papers, and journals and an evaluation about the collaborative process.

During this ten-week quarter, Amy audiotaped all class sessions, took field notes, collected all student texts, and interviewed students. We also met frequently to discuss day-to-day issues and concerns about the class, to share perceptions about student and teacher positions in small-group and full-class discussions, and to help Beth in formulating strategies for responding to individual and group texts. Our interest in this essay stems from the fascinating and often troubling dynamics we observed when the students wrote collaborative papers midway through the quarter. Our readings of the collaborative group negotiations raised questions for us about how critical pedagogies operate within collaborative groups. We realized that it is important for teachers and researchers committed to critical pedagogy to question their assumptions about and expectations for the ways collaborative processes can engage students in conversations about difference.

The Collaborative Assignment

The theme for the collaborative unit and paper was defined as "Gender and Society." The paper assignment was presented to the students as deliberately "open ended." Beth gave

them several types of papers they could choose to write, but without exception, each group in the class chose the following:

Figure out a way to use personal stories and to talk about gender issues at the same time. Your paper might be structured like a collection of stories with a collaborative introduction and conclusion. You might all write on the same theme (on communication problems between men and women, for example), then use the theory and the essays we've been talking about to draw conclusions, to compare/contrast your stories, to analyze why theyre different, etc.

Beth prepared the students for collaboration through a series of discussions about trust and commitment. At the beginning of the quarter, she asked students to sign a "collaboration contract" in which they agreed to share work with their group members and to be graded as a group. She also gave students a handout entitled "Making Collaboration Successful" that discussed different forms that the collaborative paper could take (for example, single or multivocal, and so on), urged them to consider the complex role interpersonal dynamics play in the collaboration process, and asked them not to ignore conflict in their groups. Each group was also required to write a "Bill of Rights" which explained how they would deal with the issues mentioned in the handout. The students had approximately three weeks (including five hours of class time) to complete their papers. Beth responded to a working draft of each group paper, and there was one in-class group peer responding session. When asked to explain why she used collaboration for this assignment, Beth wrote the following informal response:

I decided to use collaborative writing in my classroom because I hoped that it would invite students to consider the notion that socially determined differences influence and construct the ways that they can relate to each other and to society. I also envisioned collaborative writing as a means of encouraging students to assume more responsibility for the production and interpretation of their own texts.
In composing the "personal stories" prompt, I hoped that through sharing personal narratives, my students would realize that their experiences were not universal. I wanted the students, who had been asked to read essays on the social construction of gender roles and on the portrayal of gays and lesbians in American culture, to consider their own differences in perspective and experience as having been affected by culturally constructed concepts such as "masculinity," "femininty," "normalcy," etc. Furthermore, I assumed that the students would be willing to speculate about the roles that social class and race may have played in creating the differences in their narratives.

When first reading the group papers, Beth felt that the students had ignored or refused her assignment to compare and analyze the differences reflected in the narratives. However, as we studied these groups negotiations, we realized that some of the students "refusals" to analyze their narratives within larger social contexts might have stemmed from the following beliefs: (1) the students valued collaboration for other reasons than Beth did, and (2) they defined several terms crucial to the project-personal writing, opinion, interpretation, and so on-much differently from how she did. Student laxity or disinterest played, as usual, some part in the drama, but it was not as crucial a problem as Beth had

imagined. While the students didn't address issues of difference in ways that she expected them to, they did engage, through collaboration, in struggles over difference, even if these struggles were not foregrounded in their texts. They did not ignore her assignment because they were lazy; they redefined and reinterpreted it in their own terms and to achieve their own goals for collaboration.

The reasons Beth valued the collaborative assignment (it invited students to account for the differences between them; it would allow them to explore conflict in their writing) were not shared by her students. They, in our opinion, chose to keep negotiations of difference away from the fixity of text or from teacherly scrutiny. Beth's students seemed to value collaboration because it enabled them to form friendships and a sense of community by overcoming difference. These differing value systems led the students to "subvert" Beth's expectations: they dealt with issues of difference on their own time and in their own fashion rather than making it the focus of their texts as she had wanted them to. As interviews with group members and Amy's observation of their work methods demonstrate, they *were* negotiating and working with issues of difference, but they did not view their final papers as an appropriate place to represent these processes. They valued their papers as the culmination of hard work and negotiation rather than as chronicles of it or as responses to the questions that Beth had them consider.

Another reason that Beth and her students interpreted this assignment differently is that they did not share common definitions for many of the terms Beth used in the paper assignment. Her request that the students analyze or interpret their personal narratives within a larger social context was based on her beliefs that personal writing is a crafted representation of the self and that identity or subjectivity is a series of ongoing negotiations or performances along axes of gender, race, class, sexual orientation, and ethnicity (see Butler, de Lauretis, Martin and Mohanty). In their texts, though, the students defined personal writing as an unmediated expression of a self which cannot be questioned or interpreted. They did not interpret their narratives within larger social contexts as Beth had asked them to do because this type of interpretation seemed to the students to be an improper invasion of personal space and individual rights. Their personal narratives functioned, in our opinion, as presentations of selves which served the purpose of introducing them and their belief systems to readers and to each other. Their papers often seemed to function as "safe" spaces in which they could present themselves and their opinions without having to situate them in relation to each other or as part of a larger social discourse. Our readings of the following student texts will foreground how these student assumptions, reflected and constituted in the papers, challenged our own expectations of how difference could and should be negotiated in collaborative writing groups.

"Four Men, a Lady, and a Little Baby"

This collaborative group, comprised of three African American students (Staci, Vaughn, and Tommy) and two white students (Carl and Phillip), became close friends as the quarter progressed. "We were, real close. As a matter of fact, I told them after the break I'm inviting them over to our place," Tommy told Amy. The friendship between the

group members was in part facilitated by the unusual circumstances which beset them during the collaborative project: Tommy's girlfriend gave birth to a baby and Staci had to deal with the death of her mother;s fiancee. These events severely limited the amount of time the group could meet together. Tommy, in fact, contributed absolutely no text to the paper. Interestingly, however, the other group members were protective and supportive of him, even to the point of referring to his baby in their paper title ("Four Men, A Lady, and A Little Baby") and including his name on the title page. The group members eventually began to view themselves as a sort of alternate family and the boundaries between "real" family events and group family events sometimes became blurred: "Our situation I thought was a bit unique. We had a death in the family, a child being born" (Vaughn's Interview). It seems that due in part to the limited amount of time this group spent on their collaborative project, and to their expressivist beliefs about personal writing, they viewed forming friendships and having discussions as better ways to explore issues of difference than writing a collaborative text. Nonetheless, their paper did play an important role in the creation of the group dynamic. This group seemed to construct their collaborative text as a "safe" space in which they could express and analyze themselves. Furthermore, through sharing very personal stories, and then rhetorically creating "non-interference" policies about those stories, they gained trust for one another.

The group's essay focused on "difficult" relationships: Staci wrote of the trouble she's had relating to her abusive father after his divorce from her mother; Vaughn wrote a history of his mother's struggles against racism, including the fact that she was raped by a white military policeman; Phillip wrote about the difficulties he's had communicating affection for his dad and shared a poem he'd written for him in an attempt to do so; and Carl wrote about a grade school friendship which disintegrated because he and his friend felt uncomfortable talking about emotions. Sharing deeply personal thoughts and experiences became a rite of passage whereby this group developed confidence in each other.

Completing these "rites of passage" was not always an easy task. Each group member was dismayed when Vaughn consistently refused to write something revealing. His first few drafts for the paper were referred to as "impersonal," and the group had decided that the only way they could use his text was as a general introduction. On the night before the paper was due, however, Vaughn "opened up" and wrote about his mother's rape and her position as a role model for him. This was noted by each of the four other group members in interviews with Amy as being a significant moment for the group. As Carl said, "The best thing about working on this paper was showing up last Tuesday to find that Vaughn had finally written about something personal. . . . He was like a safe and the rest of us couldn't pry him open, until he finally burst last Tuesday and showed us what was inside." Vaughn portrayed his group members' ability to "open up" in their personal narratives as examples of "selflessness" that he felt obligated to emulate. Doing so himself (with their encouragement) enabled him to trust them all:

To be completely honest, I was a little embarrassed by the amount of selflessness and effort everyone else put into their own writing. So I tried harder and I put my feelings down for the whole world to see. It was very difficult for me, but I was pleasantly

surprised by the response I received from my peers. They all seemed to understand my difficulty and reluctance. It was at this point that I began to trust the other members of my group.

Once having presented these personal experiences, however, this group seemed unwilling to discuss them in terms of gender or racial difference in their collaborative text. Despite the injunction in the original paper assignment to analyze the narratives, this group's text presents four separate stories connected only by nominal transitions and an introduction and conclusion hastily composed on the day the paper was due. There was no space in the group text devoted to the explicit acknowledgment of difference between their stories. Vaughn's mother's rape was not politicized or interpreted in terms of gender or race, nor was the group's uneven racial and gender balances commented upon in the paper. In fact, there was a feeling among group members that since the group was primarily male, no "real" gender issues existed among them and that race could not be discussed along with gender: "Group diversity would have helped a bit, on the case of gender. I mean because we had the four guys and the one woman. If we would have had something on race, we would have been the group in the class" (Carl's Interview). Interestingly, Carl's writing about issues of difference outside of the safety of the group context portrayed it as being a potentially dangerous topic which could lead to "explosions." He entitled a paper about racism in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* "An Exploding Threat," and he talked about a particularly heated class discussion in which Vaughn and Tommy were angered by some of the comments another student, Pat, was making as a situation which almost "exploded." For Carl, discussion of difference (racial difference in particular) outside of the group structure was threatening.

This group's apparent refusal to openly textualize or "fix" the differences between them may indicate that they felt unwilling to "solidify" complex or contradictory issues which could have jeopardized the closeness between them. The deep importance or truth-value this group had attached to their texts may have caused them to feel hesitant about mentioning uncertain issues such as difference: given the confessional framework they had set up, to commit a "self" to writing meant the establishment of a protected space that others could not interfere with. Individual narratives became relatively safe spaces for self-analysis. Staci openly acknowledges in the group paper that, for her, writing is therapy: "When I get the chance, I write about it so I remember that it is there and that it must be resolved one day." This construction of the personal narrative as one's unmediated "body" or self transforms analyzing or editing the text into a violation of someone else's identity. To compensate for any danger which might result from such revelation, group members who wrote of particularly wrenching experiences subtly "protected" their narratives by rhetorically constructing their arguments and themselves as unassailable and their experiences as transcendent.

For example, in writing about being betrayed by her father and about the anger and suffering he caused her to feel, Staci sent a powerful message to any males in her group who might wish to abuse or interfere with her. Although she asks, "So, what do I do? Who do I turn to?" in her text, Staci also suggests that she is extremely wary about trusting or accepting advice from men: "There are many years of pain that go along with

the situation. I have not yet been able to forgive and forget. I'm trying, first, to forgive. I will never forget." Of course, this is fully understandable given the experience she has described. It must also be mentioned, however, that in choosing to share this story with her group and in constructing the story as she did, Staci sends an indirect warning to the males in the group. Another strategy that Staci employs to prevent any appropriation of her text is by admitting that she's using it as a therapeutic forum for working out painful and confusing issues. By openly identifying the issues at hand as "confusing," Staci exempts herself from having to make her text intelligible to readers and indicates that her primary interest does not lie in writing reader-friendly text. Thus, any interference with or interpretation of a text figured as the unmediated expression of the (confused) personal, as mentioned before, becomes a disrespectful transgression of personal boundaries.

Vaughn also rhetorically compensates for the exposure he felt by telling his personal story, although rather than claiming and protecting a space for the self (like Staci), he chooses to transcend the issues at hand and portrays the struggles and experiences of his mother as a disembodied lesson for all humanity rather than to contextualize the event in terms of his own life and experiences. This is particularly interesting given the fact that Vaughn's "transcendent" narrative directly follows Staci's grounded one and is consistent with the role Vaughn envisioned himself playing throughout the quarter. As an "older student" (he was twenty-four), he felt more mature and took the guise of "educator" of his classmates. Vaughn wrote his mother's history with these educative and transcendent goals in mind, even to the point of giving the reader the "moral" of his mother's story: "Despite the difficulty she had faced in her own life, she taught me that all *humankind* are equal regardless of race. She has instilled in me that women deserve respect and that love does indeed conquer all." The politics of rape and racism are transformed into a disembodied humanism and moral lesson. Vaughn also speaks in the narrative of the difficulty he's had relating to his mother and the way in which they have transcended this difficulty through "mutual respect." The following statement is particularly fascinating in that Vaughn refers to the smoothing over of differences between his mother and himself as a type of collaborative writing in which differences must be overcome: "In the end we made it over all the turbulent seas with love and mutual respect, because the alternative was too impossible to imagine. Together we have lived and grown knowing that in the end when the final page is written we always have each other." The "unimaginable," or open discussion of conflict between Vaughn and his mother (a further gender issue which remains embedded but not acknowledged in this text), is indicative of the general refusal in this group to discuss difference. The fact that Vaughn refers to this relationship as a type of writing indicates his belief that in "family" relationships (both "blood" family and collaborative family), difference is something that should be transcended in favor of closeness and bonding.

By "refusing" to write about difference, this group was able to keep their negotiations about difference in a more nebulous or unscrutinized context and to avoid having to give definitive answers to questions they were still negotiating among themselves. The realm of friendship and discussion was a site where they *did* feel comfortable discussing difference: this group devoted one class session designated by Beth as a group writing workshop to a free-ranging discussion of politics and social issues. Interestingly, they felt

comfortable including Amy in this discussion and allowed her to tape it. This type of interaction was never graded, never evaluated, and never scrutinized by the teacher. A disappointing grade on the collaborative paper further contributed to this group's belief, we imagine, that Beth most likely did not understand them or their negotiations and caused them to bond more closely in reaction to her misreading of them. In speaking to Amy about the C+ they received, each group member mentioned that Beth had not understood or acknowledged the amount of work that had gone into the project. However, since they had kept their relationships and discussions with each other out of their text and since they had rhetorically "protected" the selves they did reveal in the paper, teacherly evaluation seemed less a comment on the group's negotiations than a reading of a text which no longer seemed to matter. It had served a certain purpose (the formulation of group trust), but no longer seemed to matter.

Not surprisingly, then, this group was able to retain their sense of closeness even after the collaborative project had ended. They sat together during class sessions for the rest of the quarter (something none of the other collaborative groups did) and functioned as the spokespersons for "liberal" views in the classroom. Their participation as a political unit caused some of the other students to feel uneasy; at the very least, it overtly positioned both the group and the many students who disagreed with them as having different political interests in the classroom. Due to this group's presence as a unit, the classroom became much more overtly politicized. In fact, it was they who led perhaps the most fruitful class discussion of the quarter about race relations. On this particular day, the students became so intent upon discussing racism in America's judicial system that Beth scrapped the plans that she had had for the remaining hour and allowed students to continue their discussion. This group's positionality, we believe, caused the class as a whole to become more aware of how differences between them accounted for the ways that they responded differently to the issues discussed in class. In addition to working together in class, this group continued their friendships beyond the quarter. Post-quarter interviews with Amy revealed that Vaughn and Philip had become good friends (Phillip even helped Vaughn move to a new apartment) and Tommy had contacted Staci more than once.

"Homophobia in Our Society"

The second text that we read mirrors the first by not analyzing or comparing differences but for seemingly different reasons. Unlike the first group, these students did not function as a family or view writing as unmediated inner-truth. But this group did view writing as an extension of their individual right to have an opinion (which they did not view as operating within a public realm of discourse) and thus they allowed differences to coexist in their paper without commentary. Their text, entitled "Homophobia in Our Society" and produced by three white self-identified heterosexual females (Sheri, Stephanie, and Teri) and two white self-identified heterosexual males (Pat and Will), combines five personal narratives describing group members' varying experiences with homosexuality. These stories include responses Pat received when the student newspaper published his letter about the immorality of homosexuality, Will's experience visiting a gay bar, Sheri's experience of a gay couple buying a house in her neighborhood, and Stephanie's and

Teri's experiences of responding to gay males in their respective workplaces. In the paper the students described and ordered these stories as two "homophobic" narratives, one "unsure" narrative, and two "non-homophobic" narratives respectively. Although different opinions about the topic of homosexuality created contests over language use in the text and in their groups, the text itself reached what John Trimbur identifies as "premature consensus" by acculturating and assimilating all of the disparate views into a compromise (612).

None of these group members referred to writing as "therapy," nor did they articulate expressionist truisms about their writing. Instead, they stressed the ways in which their narratives functioned as "opinions." The students' right to have an opinion was collapsed with the notion that all opinions are equally valid and therefore cannot be challenged. They viewed their opinions as existing externalized in the public sphere of discussion without any connection to their own identities. Because none of the students identified themselves as gay or lesbian, they represented their views on homosexuality as "other" to their own personal investments. With the exception of Pat, who considered himself an advocate for "oppressed heterosexuals" and a spokesperson for the "silent majority" of heterosexuals who feel that homosexuality is wrong, these group members viewed their narratives as "opinions" about which they felt strongly but not as "truths" about their experiences.

While none of them could remember who actually initiated the idea to write about homosexuality, four of the students said that they originally did not like the topic. One student, Will, said "No way. I hate homosexuals." Their only reason for going forward with the topic was that they couldn't think of any other topic about which they felt strongly enough to write a paper. Sheri described the group's decision in this way:

Well, we all thought we've all got such strong opinions. We've all interacted with someone who's been homosexual. We all thought we could write about experiences. . . That's how we came to it. We all just kind of compromised and said yeah, this topic is kind of a yucky topic for a lot of people, but since we all have our views, we thought it would come out good.

The text that the students produced further highlighted the contradictory beliefs that Sheri identifies and which remained unchallenged by others throughout the course of the project. Rather than foreground the differences that the students felt about the topic, they took a rhetorical stance that valued all individual opinions, thus allowing wildly divergent belief systems to exist in "harmony" in the text. The paper's introduction begins by justifying the presence of all the students' opinions:

The following stories reveal individual aspects of homosexuals and homophobia. They will state that it is all right to be different in your opinions, but society needs to accept the fact that homosexuals are here to stay and homophobia is something that everyone has to deal with no matter how other people react.

By emphasizing their narratives as opinions rather than social commentary, the students allow their stories to stand in isolation from one another, without contradicting, challenging, or engaging one another. This rhetorical strategy of viewing each narrative solely as opinion is further used to prevent the reader from judging the stories or, in this case, to prevent Beth from evaluating any of the statements in the text. The introduction ends with the statement, "The opinions stated will explain one person's example of dealing with homophobia. They are opinion, though, and they are to be respected not judged." Clearly, the students felt that prefacing their narratives as "just opinions" meant that Beth had no right to evaluate or judge the content of their narratives. Teri also emphasized that while the group members didn't share the same opinions, they elided their right to have an opinion with the notion that all opinions are of equal validity, a move which obviated any critique of each others' positions and eliminated any need for contest among positions. Teri described the group's process saying, "We accepted their opinion, the guys' opinion, as their opinion. And hers (Sheri's) was hers. So, I mean, there wasn't really any conflict." Cast as individual opinions, the narratives are not to be judged, either by the presence of the other stories or by the reader, nor are they to be negotiated or placed in a larger social context where difference is a site of struggle and negotiation.

This absence of contest among the narratives also allows what group members identified as the "thesis" of the paper to paradoxically value both homophobic and homosexual views: "Therefore, although your opinion will vary from others, you should try to respect others' beliefs, homosexual or homophobic." From the beginning the students were very concerned with writing a "coherent thesis" for the paper. While Beth had talked about ways that they could make their text polyvocal (by engaging their differences with each other), the students seemed invested in formulating a thesis that would accommodate all of their divergent opinions. The students recognized the contradictions inherent in such a thesis, but they were unable to reconcile these divergent narratives with their belief that all opinions have equal validity. Throughout the project, several students commented that they didn't understand what points they were trying to prove, and more than once Pat said that he was concerned because the paper didn't have a thesis. On the day that the papers were due, the students had an hour to finish revising and proofreading their drafts. During this time, Pat told Will that he didn't think Beth would understand the conclusion. Sheri said she was also confused by the "thesis." As she was saying to Will and Pat, "They exist everywhere; you're going to see them. You don't realize there are people . . ." they turned their backs and finished typing at the computers. After writing the statement that people should respect homosexuals and homophobes, Pat said, "I finally found our thesis! It's the last sentence. Now I know what our thesis is." Sheri's resistance to this thesis was ignored, and the paper was turned in. Later, Sheri reflected in an interview on why she felt uncomfortable with the thesis of their paper:

I thought the point of our paper was . . . homosexuals . . . exist everywhere and any person in the United States is going to have to interact with them at one point in their lives, whether it be in work or if they move in your neighborhood, etcetera, etcetera, and so how you choose to deal with those is going to, well, you know, sum up something like, our conclusion could be well, we've all interacted with them . . . so you can't be

homophobic or if you choose to be homophobic, you have to choose to be in an eloquent way or something. I don't know. . . . I thought that was the whole purpose of our paper. Well, it didn't turn out that way. Everyone else seemed to have their own ideas.

The contradictions inherent in such a "thesis," that homosexuals should respect other people's homophobia, ignores how homophobia affects gays and lesbians in material and psychological ways. Such tensions were caused by the students' contradictory and competing views over the types of rights homosexuals should have in society rather than just a problem with an "unclear" thesis statement. Collaboration was especially problematic for these students because of their perceptions that the individual narratives were solely their property and not part of a larger text. Stephanie's description in an interview of how Sheri changed her text reflects this view: "She like went through a part of mine and part of Teri's and just like totally changed two paragraphs. She like said what we wanted to say but like changed our words around and everything, made it her way and I just, I didn't like that. It was *my* part of *my* paper, so don't touch *my* part of *my* paper." By viewing the five narratives as the individual domain of the original authors, the students felt unable to challenge each others' statements or even their word choices. Even those students who recognized that the assignment called for dialogue and critique between and among the narratives seemed unable or unwilling to engage in such an act:

I don't think she [Beth] even wanted us to have a point that was all similar. . . . She was the one who I think in the beginning or on the handout said that you can write as personal narratives and we're like, "oh, that'd be great," you know? And then she had suggested that we conclude by having different voices interact with each other, and so we tried to do that, but it was too hard. And we, we couldn't do that, and I wish we would have tried or something. (Sheri's Interview)

The contradictory positions that the students held about homosexuality also affected their group negotiations. Even though Teri and Stephanie wrote the two "non-homophobic" narratives about homosexuals in the workplace, comments they made to Sheri about homosexuals suggested that they were not as open-minded as they initially identified themselves. Although Sheri's narrative was labeled "unsure" about how her neighbors and parents related to the gay couple in her community, she positioned herself as more tolerant: "I was surprised that two gay people would want to live in a neighborhood like ours, where there were no other homosexuals. But I am a very non-homophobic person, and I didn't have a problem with it." Consequently, the group members tended to view Sheri as an outsider who did not share their views:

She didn't kind of fit as well as the rest of us did. I don't know. And the topic we wrote our collaborative paper on is, it was on homophobia, and a lot of things we discussed when we got together were really funny. Like, I mean, we made a joke of it and stuff. A lot of things that we discussed . . . she just never seemed willing to joke about. (Stephanie's Interview)

Some of the "jokes" that the group shared within the class included a statement by Pat saying that if a genetic test were ever developed to detect sexual orientation, he would

want to abort any fetus destined to be gay. The rest of the group laughed while Sheri remained silent.

Students' differences in perspectives about the topic also created contestations over the language used within the collaborative text. During one class session, as the group members were proofreading their draft, Pat asked Teri if she thought that Beth would consider the term "abnormality" a "buzzword" in describing gay lifestyles. Teri said, "Maybe, some people don't consider it an abnormality," and then she asked Pat, "What's a good word for differences?" Pat said "freaks of nature," and all the group members except Sheri laughed. Teri suggested "diversity" and Pat replied, "I hate that word. I fucking hate 'diversity.' But 'diversity' is good here," and he replaced the term "abnormality" with "diversity" in the text. Another contest over language can be seen in how the students defined their positions about homosexuality in the text as a dichotomy between homophobia and non-homophobia. The creation of the term "non-homophobia" allowed all the students to distance themselves from the position of advocating gay rights. In other words, to be non-homophobic was not to support the gay rights movement but rather not to say anything negative about homosexuals publicly or, as Sheri described it, "to be eloquent" about one's homophobia. This term allowed students to talk about the issues involved with homosexuality in society without describing themselves as "promoting" homosexuality. These negotiations of words within the text became a political struggle for group members. Collaborating over words became a contest over whose views about homosexuality would be privileged. Constructing new terms allowed students to deal with their differences in opinion in a non-threatening way.

The negotiation of word use was also affected by the views that group members had in general about compromise and the right for individuals to hold contrary opinions. In the collaborative text, Pat describes his view of how opinions operate in society: "I still fume when I witness the intolerance of the homosexual community in a democratic society when the majority's opinion outweighs all others." With a view that majority opinions are necessarily privileged over minority ones, Pat is clearly not invested in a project designed to foreground an appreciation of differences. Interestingly, while in the paper he positions himself as representing the majority viewpoint, within the class discussions he viewed himself as being a lone dissenter. In a response paper to Beth he wrote, "While everyone seemed to be agreeing during discussions, I took it upon myself to stimulate and educate by giving a different viewpoint. I made a lot of enemies that way, but it is something that I am used to." Like Vaughn, Pat viewed his role as an educator of others in his group and in class discussions. His authoritarian stance within the group may have worked to suppress discussions about differences despite the stated goals of the assignment.

Conclusion

Since critical pedagogy asks teachers as well as students to become transformative intellectuals in order "to rethink their experiences in terms that both name relations of oppression and offer ways in which to overcome them" (Giroux 54), we feel that theorizing these students' collaboration experiences as part of a broader politics of engagement with assumptions about critical pedagogy within composition studies is

fruitful. The extent to which these students could articulate and engage in discussions about difference was bound by their beliefs about their writing and their identities as unmediated by social forces. Because these students did not believe that the self is constructed in multiple, complex, and sometimes contradictory ways--one of the assumptions upon which critical pedagogy is based--they did not place their texts in dialogue with each other. Those students who did feel that their words had authority over others, like Pat, were more interested in persuading others to accept their own views than in engaging in a critical dialogue. As Sheri assessed the process: "I think the trick, the key to it, is just state what you believe in and don't let anyone else try to sway your opinion." While her statement might reflect a desire for protection in an often confrontational class setting, it also seemed to be a feeling shared among students that the value of public discourse and collaboration is in presenting non-negotiable, inviolable positions rather than entering into a conversation in which participants work to resituate their positions based on new knowledge and experiences.

Upon reflection, we realize that there are many ways that this particular assignment could have been constructed differently to achieve results more in keeping with what we expected to see. But this conflict between our expectations and the students' texts is even more fruitful, perhaps, as a scene which enabled us to do the following: to confront the assumptions we held about the "best" way to engage students with issues of difference; to transform our understanding of what it means to promote conversations about difference in constructive and empowering ways; and to realize that students might be interrogating difference in ways that we may not initially recognize or value. Student failure to "fulfill" teachers expectations does not always mean a reactionary refusal to confront social reality.

As critical educators, we aim to enable students to situate themselves along axes of power with the goal of transforming social relations, but we also need to question our own investments in such a project and constantly interrogate how our own language, assumptions, and expectations can blind us from seeing how students participate in alternative ways of discussing and struggling over difference. We are neither willing nor able to provide sweeping conclusions about how collaborative projects should be presented to students in writing classrooms. We can, however, offer insights about how we might reconfigure this particular assignment. First of all, we might establish working definitions, through class discussion, of concepts like "the personal," "conflict," "interpretation," "gender," and "difference." Such a session would hopefully allow students and teachers to name and explore any existing dissonance between their assumptions. This dissonance would not have to be "solved" through compromise, but rather could function as a starting point for teachers in understanding how their expectations about the assignment might be perceived by students. Asking students to identify and discuss explicitly the "loaded" terms they use in their writing might enable them to recognize these definitions as sites of struggle and to interrogate how these struggles function within larger cultural and social discourses of meaning. They might be asked, for example, to write a "glossary" to their collaborative paper which would list the terms that contributed to conflicts within their group and to describe the alternate meanings that these terms embodied for them.

Another way teachers might enable students to interrogate issues of difference is by having them write, individually or collaboratively, an analysis or follow-up text to the original assignment which would ask students to develop an interpretation of how difference operates in their various narratives. Or, as has been done in other writing classes at OSU, the collaborative papers could be bound in a "class book" and then used as a site for developing theories of how differences may account for the variety of narratives generated by the class. A similar assignment might ask students who felt disappointed wih their collaborative experience or paper to write an individual essay on how the collaborative process conflicted with assumptions they held about writing within academia or how it may have prevented them from sharing viewpoints they felt were not appropriate for the group text. We realize that these are just a few of the ways that we might re-envision this particular assignment. As critical educators often note, pedagogical strategies cannot be generalized beyond the context of specific classrooms.

If teachers desire their students to view their own texts as part of an ongoing conversation about difference, then they need to reflect upon and question their own assumptions about collaboration. Teachers need to recognize that, for some students, the value of collaboration is viewed primarily in terms of social interaction and not in the production of text. When evaluating students' collaborative texts, teachers are often not aware of the many negotiations and interactions that may have contributed to the text's formation but are not necessarily inscribed in it. Journals and collaborative evaluations of texts are one means of recovering these processes, but even these forms require students to "fix" ideas that they may not be ready or able to commit to text. Even the production of this essay, a collaborative text itself, has not allowed us to reflect upon or speak to the richness of Beth's students' negotiations, or the negotiations that we have gone through in analyzing such processes. While this essay was born out of the frustration that Beth felt about how her students completed their collaborative papers, the process of reading their texts and group processes has enabled us to re-value the struggles that her students went through to write these papers and to re-envision the ways that we might approach collaborative writing projects in the future.

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