4-1-2003

The Ethics of Representation

Robert Brooke
University of Nebraska-Lincoln, rbrooke1@unl.edu

Amy M. Goodburn
University of Nebraska-Lincoln, agoodburn1@unl.edu

From the Editors: The Ethics of Representation

Robert Brooke and Amy Goodburn

**You're in the mailroom after class, and you overhear a couple of your teaching colleagues discussing a student paper. "Amy, I think you were in my class this morning," says Robert. "I had this paper up on the overhead for workshopping—it's about this student's favorite teacher—and I think it was you." "Oh my," says Amy, "that sounds embarrassing—I hope she only wrote good things." "I don't know for sure it* was *you," says Robert, "This student gave me permission to share the paper in class, but then she wasn't there today." "And you used the paper anyway?" says Amy. "What's the point of that? Did you savage both this student writer AND me? In our absence?" "Oh no," laughs Robert, "In my class student work is only used as good examples!"*

**You're in your office two hours later, trying to finish up a review of an article submitted to a journal you read for. You've written a helpful critique, but have recommended against publication, and now you're wrestling with the identification question: do you sign this review or let the editor pass it on as from "anonymous"? You've been signing all your positive reviews for the last year. But this one's not really positive. You're feeling guilty: are you an ethical weenie if you don't sign the negative reviews, too? With all the debate over blind review, open review, dialogic review for your field's journals, how SHOULD you decide what's the right way to manage signatures?*

**We shouldn't even mention the department meeting you make yourself go to later that afternoon. Another debate on the status of non-tenure-track lecturers. As composition coordinator, you always feel in the middle there. Pressured to speak, on the one hand, as a sympathetic advocate "for" the non-tenured—after all you have direct experience with the many lecturers you coordinate, and you know the Wyoming Resolution. Yet, on the other hand, you yourself do have tenure, and that means you can't really speak "with" the lecturers (some of whom have let you know—with smiles of course—that you are Always Already a member of the enemy because of your institutional position). You feel a sense of ethical futility, and look almost longingly at that stack of student essays that might provide a reason for skipping the meeting.*

These stories represent, in broad strokes, many of the daily, ongoing ethical dilemmas we face regarding representation. We compositionists work in a field where questions about the ethics of representation confront us endlessly. In our teaching, in our research, in our service, we regularly must represent students, colleagues, and community members to others, often across great divides in power. In

response, across our profession there's been a growing sense of worry, and growing scholarship on the importance of ethical practices. In February 2001, CCC published the "Guidelines for the Ethical Treatment of Students and Student Writing in Composition Studies" designed to protect "the rights, privacy, dignity, and well-being of the students who are involved in ... [compositionists'] studies" (485). In our view, the CCCC Guidelines and the conversations they sponsor are concerned with a most basic question: How can we treat our students and our colleagues in ethically responsible ways across the various professional contexts in which we work?

The authors of the essays collected in this special issue speak from a variety of locations within the profession—as researchers, teachers, editors, and writing program administrators, to name a few—to consider how the CCCC Guidelines, and ethical issues of representation more broadly, might inform our relationships with students and colleagues as well as how we construct knowledge in our field. In keeping with the rich diversity of ideas and approaches in our profession, these authors do not take a common position on the uses and value of the Guidelines. Rather, they respond to them in a variety of ways. Some consider the historical exigency of the Guidelines in relation to broader debates about ethical research practices and human subjects (Mortensen, Cushman). Some describe how they have developed ethical research practices to collaborate with students in their own representations (Haswell, Sun). Others consider how the Guidelines might hinder and or limit opportunities to write about and learn from student work (Bloom, Wallace). One rejects the use of student writing altogether as a means of generating useful knowledge in composition (Hood), while others consider the ethical questions posed in editing collections (and student contributions to such collections) for the field's knowledge making (Tassoni and Tayko). Finally, one explores how our understanding of ethics can inform writing program administration and the concomitant work of developing curriculum and supporting the professional development of teachers (Duffey). What braids these essays together for this special issue is an abiding concern for the ethical obligations we have to students, colleagues, and/or community members as we construct and disseminate knowledge, and as we engage in our profession's many institutional and civic debates. These issues permeate our field in ways that go well beyond the professional guidelines captured in the 2001 CCCC document. We hope this special issue serves to sponsor ongoing conversation and deliberation about our work as compositionists and the ethical imperatives entailed in representing ourselves and others in the world.

Robert Brooke and Amy Goodburn teach at the University of Nebraska