

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Journal of the National Collegiate Honors
Council –Online Archive

National Collegiate Honors Council

Spring 2002

***Collaborative Learning: Higher Education, Interdependence, and
the Authority of Knowledge* by Kenneth Bruffee: A Critical Study**

James Kelly

Miami University, kellyjs@muohio.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nhcjournal>



Part of the [Higher Education Administration Commons](#)

Kelly, James, "*Collaborative Learning: Higher Education, Interdependence, and the Authority of Knowledge* by Kenneth Bruffee: A Critical Study" (2002). *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council –Online Archive*. 82.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nhcjournal/82>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the National Collegiate Honors Council at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council –Online Archive by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Collaborative Learning: Higher Education, Interdependence, and the Authority of Knowledge by Kenneth Bruffee: A Critical Study

JAMES S. KELLY

MIAMI UNIVERSITY

In his very readable book on collaborative learning, Bruffee tells us, “[f]or a decade or more, reports on the state of American higher education have complained that many undergraduates tend to be authority-dependent, passive, irresponsible, overly competitive, and suspicious of their peers” (8). Bruffee’s hope is to help overcome these ills by arguing that “knowledge is a socially constructed, sociolinguistic entity and that learning is inherently an interdependent, sociolinguistic process” (8). While I tend to agree with this characterization of the state of higher education, I shall argue that Bruffee’s postmodern turn, according to which knowledge is a social construct, is a theoretical dead end.

Despite some contrary advertisement, Bruffee is not merely calling for a change in the process of education by providing, for instance, more interdependent student-centered activities. In asking that we re-conceptualize our understanding of knowledge, Bruffee’s focus is not merely on method, for his concept of process is heavily theory-laden. In what follows, therefore, I examine not his many excellent techniques for encouraging interdependent student activities, but his postmodern assumptions. Unearthing these assumptions and their logical implications brings out the flaws in Bruffee’s view that his “pedagogy of cultural change” is an educational, social, or cultural improvement. My method in what follows is to embed Bruffee’s theoretical project in a larger context and distinguish, as he does not, between humanistic and materialistic needs. This will aid us in recognizing that educational woes are not due to a foundational understanding of knowledge, but to a faulty foundational understanding.

In classical culture there was a community of interdependent inquirers believing in and seeking a shared, objective common good, which we now seldom do. What dominates in our culture is an objective mode of knowing where the paradigm of successful explanation focuses on manipulation and control, a paradigm that has been described by E. M. Adams in *The Metaphysics of Self and World* and in an anthology entitled *Naturalism: A Critical Appraisal* edited by Steven Wagner and Richard Warner. This culturally dominant epistemological stance leads us to concentrate on materialistic needs, the

kind of human needs that can be satisfied by manipulatory action. It also forces us to seek the kind of knowledge that will increase our power to satisfy these needs. As a result there has been a shift in emphasis from humanistic to materialistic interests and values. Humanistic needs, human needs beyond the realm of manipulatory power, are thus ignored. Included among humanistic needs are the need for an identity, the need for inter-subjectivity, the need for self-respect, the need for meaningful relationships, the need for meaningful experiences and activities, the need for self-expression, and so on. What we should realize is that the satisfaction of humanistic needs does not result solely from the scientific mode of knowing that emphasizes the manipulation of factual structures aimed at the control of the material conditions under which we live.

For the satisfaction of our material needs, we seek knowledge that enhances our power to manipulate and control our environment. To rebuild a decaying neighborhood, for instance, we rely on the methods and procedures of the natural sciences to acquire knowledge of the factual structures in need of modification. Thus we bring in the engineers, the city planners, the architects, the demographic experts, and so on. But the methods that enable us to rebuild do not enable us to know whether we ought to do what we are able to do. Recognizing that we ought to rebuild our physical slums requires a well-functioning society intent on satisfying both our material and humanistic needs.

To be morally aware of all the reasons why we ought to rebuild a physical slum requires that we focus our attention on the humanistic as well as the materialistic needs of those living in the slums; it is this dual attention that drives the moral decision to rebuild. It is this kind of attention that also prevents development of a social slum, which begins to root when societal structures fail to operate successfully to meet human needs. Humanistic needs, which are involved in the development and sustenance of self-hood, are tied to the categories of meaning and value. Rational selves, after all, seek to live meaningful and worthwhile lives. Traditionally it has been within the humanities that we find the home of value and meaning questions, and it is the humanities that have provided content to moral and civic education aimed at advancing society.

Unfortunately, the humanities, partly in response to the epistemological stance that subordinates humanistic to materialistic needs, are flirting with a postmodern view. In what follows, my argument against the postmodern turn will focus on Bruffee's *Collaborative Learning*. Bruffee makes clear many of the highly charged postmodern assumptions that those who identify with the postmodern turn often attempt to elude. This postmodern turn, despite Bruffee's contrary advertisement, will not overcome the ills that result when the community of interdependent inquirers seeking a shared common good is replaced with a discourse community of self-interested individuals seeking satisfaction of material or self-serving interests. This is because, I shall argue, the relativism associated with postmodernism, by pushing tolerance beyond rational limits, eludes questions of value and meaning and leaves the humanities barren.

Modern culture, whether enamored by the epistemological stance of the hard sciences or the flash of the postmodern turn, has for the most part replaced the sense of community concerned with humanistic and materialistic needs with the community of interest in which materialistic needs dominate. As one illustration of how this change in community manifests and promotes itself today, consider the following three contemporary educational assumptions. These assumptions indicate how the educational system evi-

dences and promotes a relativistic or nihilistic renunciation of engaged intellectual and political life that frustrates the goal of civic and moral education. This renunciation is not to be overcome by manipulation and control, by epistemological sleight of hand, or by the denial of epistemology, but rather by a rational process of critical, normative assessment.

First is the assumption that excellence is best achieved by competition among individuals. Albert Shanker has addressed the claim that increased competition in educational institutions would bring about excellence, by arguing that “[t]he experience of colleges and universities shows that competition can force achievement down rather than improving it” (1-3). Competition, as a dominant stance toward life’s activities, runs contrary to the human need for intersubjectivity and interdependence. This, I suggest, is why increased competition among individuals forces achievement down in the long run. Although there is a great deal of pedagogical interest and discussion afoot about these ills, meaningful educational transformation remains an uphill battle. Bruffee’s *Collaborative Learning*, for instance, offers a response to the competitive view of teaching by focusing on learning and its interdependent, social nature. This is a plus. Nonetheless, as I will make clear, his reliance on “nonfoundational social constructionist thought” serves to muddle rather than enlighten educational theory.

A second assumption our classrooms also, for the most part, have adopted is the empty bottle model of education in which students are the empty bottles and teachers pour in truth, which consists of empirically verifiable propositions about phenomena. This is perhaps the one assumption that has been most challenged in recent years, especially at the postsecondary level. But the postmodern turn in education, evidenced by Bruffee’s text, is far from satisfactory when it comes to overcoming faulty educational assumptions and their effects. Postmodernism, in the broadest sense, questions the logic of foundations. Postmodernists see all theories as historical and social constructions, and too often view the subject as constructed, but without responsibility for agency. There is a clear danger in adopting the view that, as Bruffee states, “reality, objective facts, subjective selves, minds, and inner worlds” are social constructs (222). Despite unsupported claims to the contrary, the postmodern turn encourages a very damaging relativism. Thus the empty bottle model of education is replaced by the nonfoundational social constructionist view in which there are no hard facts or objective values to be passed on. Neither model is acceptable.

Finally, more often than not it is assumed the universe is hostile and needs to be controlled by manipulation in order to satisfy human interests. Such an assumption has led many in the humanities to think we can build communities. But this language is troublesome for it still evidences an aggressive attitude that breeds habits inimical to community. Administrators may be tempted, for instance, to build a better educational environment by simply expanding the curriculum to include courses on cultural diversity while failing to integrate the themes of these courses into the remainder of the curriculum. As a result a small percentage of the students will actually be exposed to diversity. Similarly, cooperative education techniques may be instituted in classrooms while leaving underlying issues unchallenged and unchanged. The question that needs to be addressed here centers on the goal of cooperative education. Is it to discover or to construct truths?

Community must be allowed to emerge from a process of rational, critical investigation aimed at discovering the common good. Postmodern theorizing, as evidenced by Bruffee, leads us astray by frustrating the rational justification of the educational goal of critically evaluating and improving upon tradition. For how can we have criticism, political, social, pedagogical, theoretical, historical, or moral, without standards by which to adjudicate conflicts that arise in communities of diversity, or between or among conflicting discourse communities? What results instead is a politics-of-interest focused on material rather than human needs. Rather than think of the community project as one of constructing truths, as the postmodern turn advocates, we need to focus on discovering particular, contextually bound truths and the shared common good.

As a result of these three assumptions, the world studied is not the world lived in, for the world lived in is a world of experiences, not a world of propositions. It is also a world in which we must recognize our interdependence and our need for intersubjectivity and meaningful experiences and activities that stand up to a process of rational, critical assessment. Rather than think only of satisfying our own particular or group interests, we need to focus on satisfying humanistic as well as materialistic needs where those needs are not being met.

Active student participation in the learning process is often seen as a method for overcoming some of these educational assumptions since it focuses on the interdependent, social nature of education. Bruffee tells us that:

Collaborative learning is a reacculturative process that helps students become members of knowledge [discourse] communities whose common property is different from the common property of the knowledge communities they already belong to...We gain access to the common property of one or another community by reacculturating ourselves so as to acquire the special characteristics of its members. (3)

At first glance this sounds like an interesting way to overcome bias and increase tolerance for difference. Thus, for Bruffee, our job as educators is to “represent the knowledge communities of which [we] are members in a way that will most effectively reacculturate potential new members” (3). Although I applaud collaborative learning, that is, learning that involves students as active participants in an intersubjective process of discovery, my concern here is not with the mechanics of the classroom. My concern is that, even in the classroom that practices the postmodern version of collaborative learning, education as rational, cultural criticism is too often lacking. How can rational criticism, as opposed to persuasion, occur in a classroom context in which it is assumed there are no objective standards for normative decisions? I have suggested above and have argued elsewhere (in “Semantic Presence” and “Wide and Narrow Interdisciplinarity”) that education as rational, cultural criticism is also lacking where the dominant epistemological and metaphysical stance is that of the categorically impoverished natural sciences. But to take the postmodern turn in response to this stance leads to a dead end.

Education as rational, cultural criticism fails to root within the framework of either the postmodern turn or the epistemological and metaphysical stance of the scientific naturalist because there is a theoretical reluctance to rationally and critically appraise tough

moral, political, and social issues. These are issues springing from common features of humanness that, as Martha Nussbaum has discussed, cross discourse communities or arise within communities of diversity. Where there are conflicts within, between or among communities with competing interests and no standards upon which to launch a rational debate, there quickly arises a politics of power brokerage. What results is discussion centered on what degree various interest groups receive of their supposedly fair share as political consumers. The outcome of such wrangling is typically a set of thin procedural rules aimed at protecting competing interests. As the critical evaluation of value issues dissolves into the wrangling of interest-group politics, plurality of voice turns into cacophony. Too often our educational institutions merely add to the noise because many faculty have fallen prey to “nonfoundational social constructionist thought.”

Although the above is polemical for those encouraged by the postmodern turn, it does serve to set the framework of my concerns. My limited task in what follows is to examine the implications of this postmodern constructionist position and argue that they are devastating to the view of education as cultural criticism. Two questions immediately present themselves. (1) Why think a crucial aim of education is cultural criticism? (2) Why think “nonfoundational social constructionist thought” is inimical to this aim of education? If I successfully argue against “nonfoundational social constructionist thought” as a theoretical underpinning for educational theory, a third question arises: What is to replace it? Since my aim in this paper is the negative one of arguing against a trend in postmodern education, I will only glance at the third question.

To begin with the first question, as educators our concern is not only with the limited goal, even in vocational and professional education, of training students to develop the required competencies to be an accountant, carpenter, lawyer, architect, or the like. Our concern is with the education of human beings. A carpenter, lawyer, and so on, however competent, does not satisfy the goal of education if she practices her trade or profession in such a manner as to be open to condemnation as a person. Persons are, or should be, engaged in moral, civic, and economic activities. In our culture, however, the moral and civic enterprises have taken a back-seat to the economic since it is the latter that are most salient to the satisfaction of materialistic needs and interests. A major aim of education recognized by the founders of our democracy is to equip students so they may participate in a critical democracy by making sound moral and practical judgments and decisions in order to advance the culture. Teaching students to be members of a society where they make such judgments requires that educators ensure that students fully comprehend the context in which they live and have the appropriate tools for its critical appraisal.

The postmodern turn in education, however, brings with it the view that there is no foundational framework that constrains knowledge claims. Bruffee attacks the foundational understanding of knowledge where, according to him, the paradigm is the empty bottle model of learning. He claims that for his social constructionist view “[c]ollaborative learning assumes instead that knowledge is a consensus among the members of a community...something people construct by talking together and reaching agreement” (3). Nonfoundational education, as Bruffee calls it, does not assume that the teacher has a set of predetermined answers the teacher has decided are correct. This has a favorable ring to it since it appears antithetical to the “empty bottle” conception of education as merely

passing on empirically verifiable propositions or hard facts. While I take it that sensible educational theorists are not maintaining that there are no empirically verifiable propositions, many, like Bruffee, do waffle on just what ‘empirically verifiable’ means. Bruffee suggests that it amounts to negotiating toward an acceptable consensus which, when reached, constitutes “social justification.”

But if “reality, objective facts, subjective selves, minds, and inner worlds” are all social constructs, it seems that it is consensus itself, rather than consensus on truth, that is the theoretical underpinning of knowledge claims. Some enamored by the postmodern turn may wish to spare science from this social construction view of knowledge, but while the motivation is clear enough, this is not the path Bruffee and many others follow. According to “nonfoundational social constructionist thought,” all knowledge claims lack foundation. Lacking firm footing, knowledge claims, therefore, have given way to political maneuvering aimed at the satisfaction of material interests. With the new voices of those rightfully arguing that the texts and visions of dead white males no longer fully answer all the interests of all members of our diverse society, comes the politics of power brokerage. As a result the resolution of value issues between or among different discourse communities, or within communities of difference, typically becomes a matter of the negotiated satisfaction of competing interests, rather than a joint undertaking with the common goal of satisfying humanistic and materialistic needs. Rational moral and civic education have been replaced, for those with a “voice,” by interest group politics, or by silence for those lacking “voice.”

Bruffee promotes the view that “knowledge is a consensus: it is something people construct interdependently by talking together” (113). While the so-called foundationalists maintain that, according to Bruffee, “we justify our beliefs by testing them against reality,” the postmodernists “say we justify our beliefs by testing them socially, against other people’s beliefs” (115). Or to phrase this somewhat differently, Bruffee’s antagonist maintains that language involves a word-world relation, while Bruffee views it as a word-word relation in which the world, it seems, is well lost. The educational task, says Bruffee, is the reacculturation of our students, which involves “giving up, modifying, or renegotiating the language, values, knowledge, mores, and so on that are constructed, established, and maintained by the community one is coming from, and becoming fluent instead in the language and so on of another community” (223). Since there is no reality against which to measure the value of one community over another, this reacculturation takes place when “[a] community persuades outsiders...to accept one or more of the community’s beliefs, justified in the way the community justifies them” (222). And if the beliefs and so on are “socially justified” by, for example, being handed down by the rich and powerful, so be it. There is no theoretical room for rational, critical appraisal. As with Hobbes, I suppose, there can be revolution. But any revolution will be “justified” only if one discourse community is successfully replaced by another. Although we may wish to say that the beliefs and practices of one discourse community are better than another, without any standard against which to measure this, all that can legitimately be said is that the discourse communities are different. Once the postmodern turn is taken, we lose any method for the rational justification of objective standards grounding both moral judgments and the belief in a shared, objective, common good. What remain are the local “truths” of particular discourse communities and the impossible task of their rational integration.

In what sense, then, can education help produce persons who will be engaged in moral and civic enterprises aimed at the advancement of culture and society? Consider the following from Bruffee:

The nonfoundational understanding of knowledge provides a language with which to redescribe and talk coherently about college and university education as an enterprise engaged in promoting change. It assumes that we construct and maintain knowledge not by examining the world but by negotiating with one another in communities of knowledgeable peers. (9)

As an educator, I agree with the desire to promote change. I want my students to become rational, critical thinkers who can engage in moral and civic enterprises for the betterment of the culture and society. My guess is that Bruffee would agree with me. But his theory involves him in a paradox if he does, for on his own nonfoundational social constructionist view, there is no firm place to stand, no foundation upon which to launch his value judgment that his approach is better. It is only different. Moreover, Bruffee tells us that the community of knowledgeable peers who construct and maintain knowledge are those who think alike, who share a common language and set of beliefs. This sounds like a recipe for maintaining the status quo. The tough integrative task of crossing the boundaries of different discourse communities grinds to a halt as a rational process. Postmodern theory does not allow for “social justification” to be a rational, critical process.

Rational appraisal talk presupposes an objective value structure as a causal force in the psychological realm. Thus reasons really do have a causal influence on behavior. Moreover if some reasons are to be justificatory as well as explanatory, then they must be good or correct reasons grounded in reality as opposed to merely a discourse community. So when we ask the question, “Why did Nora do that?” an adequate answer that allows for the rational appraisal of her action would not be a scientifically discovered causal condition, say a brain tumor or a certain pattern of neuron firings (or its functional equivalent). An adequate answer would be Nora’s reason for the action. Rational appraisal terms, that is, apply only where reasons are or may be causes of a person’s actions. Whenever we discover that reasons are ineffective in a person’s behavior—that what she experiences, thinks, and does are causally independent of and unresponsive to truth, logic and rational considerations in general—we withhold rational appraisal of her. Under such conditions she would be merely caught up in the non-semantic causal nexus where things simply happen to her. Or she would simply be “acculturated” into the prevailing culture as the result of being “initiated” into this culture where her “self” is constructed, partly by her teachers who stress the status quo of the particular discourse community. In this latter case, we are back to persuasive techniques aimed at causing students to adopt the practices and beliefs of the prevailing culture. Even reacclutration will be a process involving only scientific causality, as opposed to a rational process of instilling practices and beliefs.

Anti-foundationalists like Bruffee reject a particular view of what grounds language and symbol systems to the world. Scientific epistemology, which provides no epistemic weight to normative concepts, will not ground rational appraisal language. Rational appraisal language deals in justificatory reasons for judgments, beliefs, feelings, attitudes,

decisions, and actions. Talk of human attempts to know, for instance, presupposes an effort to get things right, an intention or inherent structure of meaning, on the part of the person making the attempt. This is not so for the description and explanation of natural events. It can't be: the categorial presuppositions of the scientific naturalist are minimal and do not allow for inherent meaning (see Kelly, "Semantic Presence"). But rather than reject only scientific epistemology, the anti-foundationalist rejects the possibility of any foundations. As a result, language is not tied to the world. Knowledge, for the postmodernist, is no longer tied to rationality. In fact, it is no longer clear what is meant by the term "knowledge."

All of this reflects upon the concepts of agency and responsibility. Anything that does not embody a structure of meaning, or does not respond to that which is semantically present, is not the kind of thing shaped and moved by reasons. Persons have an existential and a semantic environment. At home, I share the same existential environment with my wife, daughter, books, computer, pots and pans, and so on. These items in my existential environment are present with me. But I also have sensory experiences of the things around me; I think about them when I am away from home (at least some of them), and I can imagine what my daughter will look like in her new dress. Such items of my existential environment can thus be the semantic content of some mental state or act. It is through the semantic content of experience that language is tied to the world. So in the case of the rational appraisal of persons, reasons, which involve a semantically present end in view or purpose, are causes and often serve to justify as well as to explain human activity.

According to Bruffee, the self and "intention too" are socially constructed. But if one's actions are not the result of one's intentions, one cannot be held accountable, that is, one cannot be rationally appraised. If what are thought of as one's intentions are actually socially constructed through a process of acculturation or reaccluturation, then there really is no self to be rationally appraised, no self to assume responsibility. For Bruffee, we are entirely the products of the non-justificatory causal process of social construction, where reasons not framed by one's particular discourse community do not serve as causes. As with the epistemological and metaphysical stance of scientific naturalism, postmodern theorizing leaves no room for thick rational activity on the part of persons, for there is no theoretical room for the critical assessment of frameworks of thought, including one's own. We are back to relativism and the view that, although discourse communities may have different practices and beliefs, their rational appraisal as better, advanced, worse, or evil is not an option. As a result, an educational system based on postmodern theorizing fails in its effort to promote engaged intellectual and political life aimed at improving upon tradition.

While some teachers focus on the culturally diverse learning strategies of our students (a very worthwhile goal), all too often many teachers fail to also reflect on what we are teaching or modeling to students. Educators are too often caught by the flash of the postmodern turn because it offers much needed criticism of the dominant metaphysical and epistemological stance of the scientific naturalists. But when content is focused upon, given the confines of the postmodern constructionist view, critical assessment skills are typically used as persuasive tools of power brokerage rather than as tools for the rational assessment of value issues. Critical thinking, that is, becomes figuring out how to satisfy one's interests in the most efficient manner.

Instead of a rational investigation of what our societal goals and educational image ought to be, discussion and decision making too often focus on the means to the satisfaction of community interests. Given the constructionist stance, this is our task as educators as we reacculturate students. As a result teachers and students are more likely to refrain from the critical and rational assessment of our present moral commitments and to instead substitute the popular trends found in our local discourse communities.

What is needed to promote community, to allow for participation and involvement centered on the rational discussion of substantive societal goals and educational images, is a vision that will avoid relativism and will ground moral language, let alone factual language, in reality. But as long as our ontological categories are thought limited to the categories in terms of which the scientific naturalist must delineate reality and our epistemological access to reality is restricted to sensory observation, resolution of value disputes will be logically tied to Hobbesian power brokerage. Recognizing this, those enthralled by the postmodern turn have simply denied the relevance of epistemology and metaphysics. But in so doing, they have instituted an avenue that circumvents knowledge. For, as I have argued, if the dominant view is to become the postmodern view that there are no objective values, it will follow that decisions about the structure of society and its institutions are to be based on a politics of constricted rationality rather than knowledge.

How are we to prevent cacophony as all the voices from diverse discourse communities vie for an equal hearing? I assume that reliance on blind faith in a benevolent evolutionary process without conscious design, or faith that the “politically correct” group will gain power and by force or deception impose their will on the rest of society, is not acceptable. Rather, we need evidence that persons have epistemic powers enabling them to appropriate normative reality, thereby showing that persons have the capacity for goodness—the capacity, that is, to know, through a process of deliberation and critical assessment, what is required in particular situations. And we need to do this without a return to the grand narrative that promises metaphysical guarantees.

REFERENCES

- Adams, E. M. *The Metaphysics of Self and World*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991.
- Bruffee, Kenneth A. *Collaborative Learning: Higher Education, Interdependence, and The Authority of Knowledge*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993.
- Kelly, James S. “Semantic Presence.” In Edmond Wright, ed., *New Representationalisms: Essays in the Philosophy of Perception*. Brookfield: Avebury Press, 1993. Pp. 153-75.
- “Wide and Narrow Interdisciplinarity.” *The Journal of General Education*, 45: 2 (1996), pp. 93-113.
- Nussbaum, Martha. “Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach.” *Midwest Studies In Philosophy, Volume XII*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988. Pp. 32-53.
- Shanker, Albert. *Excellence* 6: 1 (Fall 1993), 1-3.
- Wagner, Steven and Richard Warner, eds. *Naturalism: A Critical Appraisal*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993.

* * * * *

The author may be contacted at:

Department of Philosophy
Miami University
Oxford, OH 45056

kellyjs@muohio.edu
513 785-3037