Kenneth A. Bruffee

Social Construction, Language, and the Authority of Knowledge: A Bibliographical Essay

Until a very few years ago, I had never heard the term "social construction." Much less had I become acquainted with its implications for scholars and instructors of literature and composition, or its implications for those of us interested in broader educational issues such as the future of humanistic studies and liberal education in general.

During the past three or four years, pursuing some of these implications, I discovered that social constructionist thought can positively affect the way we address professional issues that increasingly interest many of us today. But I also discovered that attempts to address these issues in this way are limited because many of us—myself included—have not yet read deeply enough the relevant scholarly literature.

In this respect we are not alone. Although social construction has a venerable history in twentieth-century thought and although writers in a number of fields are engaged in an effort to develop the disciplinary implications of a nonfoundational social constructionist understanding of knowledge, that history remains largely unacknowledged and the effort fragmented. Terminology proliferates. The result is that in some cases positions not only similar but mutually supportive seem alien to one another. Writers find it difficult to draw upon each other's work to pursue their own more effectively. Many of the most sophisticated and knowledgeable texts that I discuss in this essay—not only work in literary criticism and composition studies but in philosophy and the social sciences—evidence a lack of awareness of fertile, suggestive, parallel work in other fields.

One cause of this situation is that there seems to exist no bibliographical guide that brings social constructionist texts together in one place, presents them as a coherent school of thought, and offers guidance to readers wending their way through unfamiliar territory. This is the need I hope this essay will fill.

An Introduction to Social Construction

Most of us have encountered the assumptions of social construction at one time or another under other rubrics: "new pragmatism," for example, or

Kenneth A. Bruffee is professor of English and director of the honors program at Brooklyn College. He was for four years a member of the editorial board of *Liberal Education*. His publications include *Elegiac Romance* and several articles in *College English*. His *Short Course in Writing* was recently published in its 3rd edition.

"dialogism," or even simply "Kuhn." Recent social constructionist thought was sparked some twenty years ago, in fact, by Thomas Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Kuhn is widely known for his controversial understanding of change in scientific knowledge. Scientific change occurs, Kuhn argues, in a revolutionary rather than an evolutionary way. Scientists don't add to an ever-growing pile of received truth. They trade in old "paradigms" of thought and adopt new ones. This in any case is the reading of Kuhn that most of us are familiar with. It is a highly domesticated reading, however, emphasizing the least challenging aspect of Kuhn's book. Considerably more challenging is the understanding of the nature of scientific knowledge itself that Kuhn's conception of paradigmatic change is based on.

Kuhn's understanding of scientific knowledge assumes that knowledge is, as he puts it on the last page of his book, "intrinsically the common property of a group or else nothing at all" (201). For most of us, the most seriously challenging aspect of Kuhn's work is its social constructionist epistemological assumptions. A social constructionist position in any discipline assumes that entities we normally call reality, knowledge, thought, facts, texts, selves, and so on are constructs generated by communities of like-minded peers. Social construction understands reality, knowledge, thought, facts, texts, selves, and so on as community-generated and community-maintained linguistic entities—or, more broadly speaking, symbolic entities—that define or "constitute" the communities that generate them, much as the language of the *United States Constitution,* the *Declaration of Independence,* and the "Gettysburg Address" in part constitutes the political, the legal, and to some extent the cultural community of Americans.

The publication and widespread discussion of Kuhn's book was seminal in the recent development of this line of thought. Since then, Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature,* synthesizing the ideas of Dewey, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein, has generalized Kuhn. Whereas Kuhn says that scientific knowledge is a social construct, Rorty says that all knowledge is a social construct.

Rorty's book demonstrates that although social constructionist thought has only recently been discussed beyond the rather arcane limits of academic philosophy and the history and philosophy of science, it has been responsible for placing the assumptions of the traditional cognitive theory of knowledge in serious question for almost a century. Thus, as a way of thinking that challenges traditional views, social construction claims a formidable modernist pedigree. This fact alone suggests the value of reading the central texts of social constructionist thought for literary critics and literary historians. An understanding of modernism and modernist literature that does not take social constructionist thought into account inevitably remains limited.

As any reader discovers right away, the contemporary scholarly literature of social constructionist thought is highly diverse. Some implications for academic disciplines of understanding knowledge as (in Rorty's phrase) "socially justified belief" are found in books and articles written in fields such as psychology, sociology, political science, and philosophy as well as literary criticism. But from

whatever disciplinary quarter they may reach us, some of the implications of social construction have the potential to lead English teachers to seriously rethink many of our disciplinary and professional interests, values, goals, and practices.

An example of the disciplinary and professional implications of social construction is suggested by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz in his 1983 collection of essays, *Local Knowledge*. Geertz observes that "the hallmark of modern consciousness" is an "enormous multiplicity" of cultural mores and cultural values. Most college and university instructors need only to look at the backgrounds of the students who populate our classrooms to see the truth of this observation. Modern cultural diversity or multiplicity being the case, Geertz regards as "a chimera" the traditional goal of liberal studies that most of us have been brought up on, to provide "a general orientation . . . growing out of humanistic studies . . . and shaping the direction of culture." He points out convincingly that "not only is the class basis for such a unitary 'humanism' completely absent, . . . the agreement on the foundations of scholarly authority . . . has disappeared" (161).

It is not hard to find illustrations of this profound and growing lack of agreement among humanists. One is the discussion by literary critics of the status of the received literary "canon." Those who challenge the traditional canon suggest that what we think of as "literature" these days already includes a diversity of texts that the likes of, say, Matthew Arnold would never have considered. Another illustration is the debate between textual critic Jerome McGann and those who hew to the position of Fredson Bowers. Those who challenge the strict empiricism of the Bowers approach to textual criticism argue that published works are more reasonably regarded as the product of a community made up of the author and the author's friends, editor, and publisher than they are of a single individual of genius.

From Geertz's social constructionist point of view, therefore, humanistic scholarship and liberal education must be modernized. To do this, he says, humanists will need to develop "a critical consciousness" that leaves behind what he calls "the epistemological complacency of traditional humanism" (23, 44). In its place, we must learn to conceive "of cognition, emotion, motivation, perception, imagination, memory . . . whatever"—entities we normally think of as strictly individual, internal, and mental affairs—"as themselves, and directly, social affairs" (153).

This statement, describing as social in origin what we normally regard as individual, internal, and mental, summarizes succinctly the social constructionist understanding of knowledge in general and, in particular, what we do as scholars, researchers, and college or university instructors whatever our field of expertise. Our scholarship and research and our role as classroom instructors are all themselves, and directly, social affairs. For many of us it is only when we see the implications of social constructionist assumptions spelled out in everyday professional life in this way that they may begin to seem, to say the least, exotic and perhaps downright nonsensical and dangerous. Asked to describe what we do by an on-the-street reporter, most of us would not be likely to characterize our scholarship, our research, and our performance as classroom instructors as "social affairs."

But despite this healthy skepticism, it seems to me of the greatest importance that scholars and teachers in English and in the humanities in general make an effort to suspend judgment and give some consideration to social constructionist thought as a potentially fertile conceptual resource. There are two reasons for making this effort, one disinterested, the other unabashed professional self-interest.

The first reason is the disinterested desire we all share to improve our understanding and expertise as scholars and teachers. Social constructionist thought offers a strikingly fruitful alternative to the way we normally think and talk about what we do. Normally, the language that most of us use to discuss and write about scholarship, research, and college or university instruction is cognitive in derivation. It is based on the foundational premises of traditional—mainly Cartesian—epistemology. This means that the way we normally think about our professional work as scholars and teachers derives from the epistemological tradition that every academic field of study has followed since at least the seventeenth century.

The depth to which we remain members of that tradition is evident in the degree to which the language we use to talk about knowledge, scholarship, research, and college or university instruction is saturated with visual metaphors. We find them all but impossible to escape. Even such a basic and almost indispensable term as "theory" implies a "viewing." "Theory" has the same etymological root as "theater." We "contemplate" (another "viewing"), we talk about "insights," we "imagine." We "admire" the "brilliance" of some people's work and deplore the "dullness" of others. And in this essay when I have "clearly" and "lucidly" explained my "point of view," I naturally hope that every reader will "get the picture" and exclaim, "I see!"

According to the social constructionist view, this visual metaphor, inherent and unavoidable in cognitive thought, accounts for the fact that so much of what we normally say about knowledge, scholarship, research, and college or university instruction is confined within a frustrating circularity oscillating between "outer" and "inner" poles of "objectivity" and "subjectivity." This polarity of cognitive language derives from the traditional epistemological notion that the human mind is equipped with two working elements, a mirror and an inner eye. The mirror reflects outer reality. The inner eye contemplates that reflection. Reflection and contemplation together are what, from this cognitive point of view, we typically call thought or knowledge.

The significance of this visual metaphor buried in our cognitive terminology may best be suggested by contrasting several aspects of our normal account of knowledge with the alternative offered by social construction. First, one of the important assumptions of cognitive thought is that there must be a universal foundation, a ground, a base, a framework, a structure of some sort behind knowledge or beneath it, upon which what we know is built, assuring its certainty or truth. We normally think of that ground or structure as residing either in the inner eye (a concept, an idea, a theory), or in nature as mirrored in the mind (the world, reality, facts). The social constructionist alternative to this foundational cognitive assumption is nonfoundational. It assumes that there is no such

thing as a universal foundation, ground, framework, or structure of knowledge. There is only an agreement, a consensus arrived at for the time being by communities of knowledgeable peers. Concepts, ideas, theories, the world, reality, and facts are all language constructs generated by knowledge communities and used by them to maintain community coherence.

Social construction does not of course deny the obvious, that, as Rorty puts it, "we are shoved around by physical reality." But it does stress that there is a difference between "contact with" something and "dealing with" something. The latter is what we call knowledge; the former is not. Furthermore, we do not generate knowledge, the social constructionist says, by "dealing with" the physical reality that shoves us around. We generate knowledge by "dealing with" our *beliefs* about the physical reality that shoves us around. Specifically, we generate knowledge by justifying those beliefs socially.

A second assumption we make when we talk in cognitive terms about knowledge involves reification of our unconfirmed and unconfirmable inferences about what happens in the "black box" of the mind. We assume that terms such as "cognitive processes," "conceptual frameworks," "intellectual development," "higher order reasoning," and so on, refer to universal, objectifiable, and perhaps even measurable entities. Social constructionist thought does not make this assumption. It assumes, on the contrary, that such terms do not refer to anything universal, objectifiable, or measurable. Rather, they are a way of talking about a way of talking. Social construction assumes, that is, that thinking is an internalized version of conversation. Anything we say about the way thinking works is conversation about another conversation: talk about talk. Social construction regards terms such as "cognitive processes," "conceptual frameworks," "intellectual development," "higher order reasoning," and even "idea" and "objectivity," as social constructs. They are representative terms of a particular vernacular language, a language that constitutes a certain community of knowledgeable peers of which, in fact, most college and university instructors, myself included, are confirmed members.

A third assumption we make when we talk in cognitive terms about what we do is that the individual self is the matrix of all thought: "I think, therefore I am." A great idea is the product exclusively of a single great mind. Each of us studies to make knowledge "our own." And so on. In contrast, social construction assumes that the matrix of thought is not the individual self but some community of knowledgeable peers and the vernacular language of that community. That is, social construction understands knowledge and the authority of knowledge as community-generated, community-maintaining symbolic artifacts. Indeed, some social constructionists go so far in their nonfoundationalism as to assume, along with the sociologist Erving Goffman for example, that even what we think of as the individual self is a construct largely community generated and community maintained.

A fourth assumption we make when we talk in cognitive terms about knowledge and what we do is that there is something inherently problematical about knowledge. The issue in this case is not that some things are complex or hard to learn, but that anything we might try to know is by its nature inaccessible. This

situation is familiar to many of us from Philosophy 1 as being the key to "the problems of modern philosophy"—problems of the relation between mind and body, subjectivity vs. objectivity, and so on.

The inherently problematical nature of knowledge from the cognitive point of view is that the visual metaphor of cognitive theory provides no necessary connection between the mind's two pieces of equipment, the inner mirror and the inner eye. There is a gap between them that cognitive theory offers no help in bridging. Worse, the cognitive metaphor describes those two pieces of equipment as being so different in format and operation that they seem unconnectable—as if one were made by Apple and the other by IBM. This difference and lack of connection between the two pieces of mental equipment plays an important role in modern scholarly and intellectual life. Most modern "skepticism" as a philosophical position trades on emphasizing the gap between them. The presumed coherence of most cognitive and developmentalist thought and research, and the presumed coherence of most of our discussions about scholarship, research, and college and university instruction depends on assiduously and self-defeatingly ignoring it.

The advantage of social constructionist thought is not that it provides some miraculous solution to the problems assumed by cognitive thought as inherent in the nature of knowledge. Social construction denies that the problems are inherent in the nature of knowledge, regarding them as inherent merely in the visual metaphor that informs cognitive thought. Begin thinking about knowledge as a social construct rather than a function of ocular equipment in a mental "black box," the social constructionist says, and the problems no longer exist. Naturally, new problems arise in their place. But it is possible to take the position that since knowledge is identical with language and other symbol systems, the problems presented by social constructionist thought are of a sort that humanists in general and English teachers in particular are especially well equipped to cope with, if not solve.

Obviously, then, the disinterested reason why English scholars and teachers and other humanists should examine the potential of social construction dovetails with our professional self-interest. For language, literature, and composition teachers especially, the cognitive understanding of knowledge has always been of limited value because it places language on the margin of knowledge as a mere medium or conduit—a set of "skills" by which "ideas" are "communicated" or "transmitted" from one individual mind to another. The social constructionist alternative identifies knowledge and language and regards them as inseparable. Placing language at the center of our understanding of knowledge and of the authority of knowledge, it thereby places reading and writing uniquivocally where (in my professionally self-interested opinion) it belongs, at the center of the liberal arts curriculum and the whole educational process.

Furthermore, this relocation of reading and writing at the center of liberal education provides in turn a new way of thinking constructively about the purpose and practice of liberal education generally that makes its relevance to the life of future generations compelling. During the past 75 years the benefits of the debate in cognitive terms about education—with its ethnocentric emphasis on universals and absolutes, its endless circularity oscillating between the "subjective" and the "objective," its alienating emphasis on individuality, and its

need to continually ignore, suppress, or sidestep the unbridgeable abyss inherent in our cognitive vocabulary between learner and what is learned—has become increasingly dubious. It is arguable that pursuing this debate may in fact no longer be the best way to discover what, today, education must do—prepare us to live in the "enormous multiplicity" of our world that Geertz calls attention to. Social construction offers a language with which to cope with that diverse, rapidly changing world, a world in which relations between people and things has become subordinate in importance and long-range effect to relations among people and among communities of people. And on the latter, on relations among diverse—and frequently a good deal less than mutually sympathetic—communities of people, our very survival depends.

General Accounts

Readers just beginning to explore social construction will find a thorough introduction to the basic issues in Kenneth J. Gergen's "The Social Constructionist Movement in Modern Psychology." In this article, Gergen explains social constructionist principles and summarizes their history. Beyond this, as the title indicates, Gergen is interested in implications for his own field. He concludes, however, by speculating on the potential "variety of interesting changes [that] may be anticipated in the character of professional life" in general, with the further development of social constructionist thought (273). As a result, much that he says is readily applicable to English studies. Supplementing Gergen's outline, two articles of my own, "The Structure of Knowledge and the Future of Liberal Education" and "Liberal Education and the Social Justification of Belief," place social constructionist thought in the context of the ongoing debate on liberal education, offer a precis of Rorty's argument in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature,* and speculate on some possible curricular implications.

Readers who prefer to begin their study of social construction with primary sources may find the following sequence somewhat increases the accessibility of these texts: Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions,* Geertz's *Local Knowledge,* and Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature.*

Kuhn seems to be the father of current social constructionist thought insofar as direct influence is concerned. Behind Kuhn lies Wittgenstein, and behind Rorty (who generalizes Kuhn) lie Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Dewey. George Herbert Mead anticipated much social constructionist thought but had little influence. Kuhn's thesis, roughly speaking, is that scientific knowledge is a social construct, not a discovery of "what is really there." Knowledge is identical with the symbol system (i.e., the language) in which it is formulated. The community of knowledgeable peers constituted by that symbol system constructs knowledge by justifying it socially, that is, by arriving at a sort of consensus. Knowledge ceases to be knowledge when the community disbands or its members die.

I also recommend reading the debate over Kuhn's terms that occurred after the first edition of his book was published. The relevant bibliographical citations appear in notes 3 and 4 on page 174 of the second edition.

Clifford Geertz's essays are a useful companion to Kuhn, because Geertz shows how readily Kuhn's view of scientific knowledge applies to other fields. Geertz's recent collection of essays, *Local Knowledge,* may be read in light of the discussion of knowledge understood as a social construct that he develops throughout several chapters of his earlier collection, *The Interpretation of Cultures*. Geertz argues in anthropological language what Rorty argues in philosophical language: "Human thought is consummately social: social in its origins, social in its functions, social in its forms, social in its applications" (360). Geertz develops this line of thinking most explicitly in "The Growth of Culture and the Evolution of Mind," "The Impact of the Concept of Culture on the Concept of Man," and parts iv and v of "Ideology as a Cultural System."

In *Local Knowledge,* published a decade after *The Interpretation of Cultures,* Geertz takes the issue of a social understanding of knowledge beyond anthropology to other fields, in particular the humanities and law. The book challenges undergraduate liberal education as currently practiced, but the challenge lies submerged beneath tactful treatment of, among others, Lionel Trilling. Dangerous edges of the iceberg are visible only rarely, for example with reference to traditional views of the nature and value of the humanities such as those expressed by, among others, Max Black (160-61).

The core of the book is a polite and tactful debate between Geertz and Lionel Trilling that occurred at the very end of Trilling's life. For the fullest understanding of the implications of *Local Knowledge* for liberal education and literary criticism, I suggest reading the chapters in the order they were originally published:

1. Chapter 3, supplemented and developed in chapters 4, 5, and 6.
2. Lionel Trilling's unfinished, posthumously published reply to chapter 3, "Why We Read Jane Austen," not included in the book.
3. Chapter 2, Geertz's response to Trilling's reply.
4. Chapters 1, 7, 8, and the Introduction, which develop the argument sketched in chapter 2.

Because Kuhn and Geertz raise the main issues of social construction in readable ways, they provide background for approaching Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature,* the central text in the current discussion of the nature and authority of knowledge. Rorty's thesis is that "we understand knowledge when we understand the social justification of belief, and thus have no need to view it as accuracy of representation" (170). Portions of this book may be difficult for people lacking, as I do, fluency in the vernacular of twentieth-century Anglo-American analytical philosophy. But it is worth the effort. I recommend reading it backwards, Part III followed by Parts II and I, because Part III is especially accessible if you have read Kuhn.

For the purposes of non-philosophers, Rorty's book is perhaps most interesting as an essay in the history of ideas in the tradition of A. O. Lovejoy's *The Great Chain of Being*. I cribbed Rorty's argument earlier in this essay in saying that the controlling metaphor in "modern philosophy"—that is, Western philosophy since Descartes—views the human mind as a locale furnished with two pieces of equipment: a "Mirror of Nature" reflecting external reality and an "Inner Eye" comprehending that reflection. Rorty deconstructs this metaphor, in

the sense that he takes it apart and leaves the bits and pieces around to be swept away or rust. He does so, he says, because the metaphor locks thought about knowledge (including theory of knowledge, cognitive psychology, and the philosophy and psychology of education) into a futile circularity. It leads to unresolvable problems about an irreducible inner something (variously called the self, subjectivity, feelings, reason, form, intellect, transcendent reality, and so on) and an irreducible outer something (variously called the world, things, reality, objectivity, nature, facts, and so on).

That the two pieces of metaphorical mental equipment are unrelated and unrelatable is the third element in the post-Cartesian mental equipment package (seldom directly named but sometimes referred to obliquely as an abyss, alienation, sin, anomie, the indeterminacy of knowledge, the inability "really" to know, and so on). Attempts to make the connection almost always turn out to be band-aid operations, although sometimes highly celebrated ones. Rorty suggests that we put behind us circular efforts to explain knowledge driven by this cognitive apparatus and talk instead about what is involved in knowledge understood as a social construct, about which we still have a great deal to learn.

His argument has three main tributaries, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Dewey. There is not yet to my knowledge a secondary source that explores social constructionist aspects of Dewey's thought in a way that gives non-philosophers much help beyond Rorty's explanation. There is some help to be had with Wittgenstein and Heidegger. In *Wittgenstein: A Social Theory of Knowledge,* David Bloor explores one aspect of Wittgenstein that Rorty's argument draws on. Bloor also derives a useful set of categories for developing Wittgenstein's notion of language-game communities from the anthropologist Mary Douglas.

Charles B. Guignon takes on Heidegger in a similarly helpful way. For members of the huge, diffuse community loosely defined by adherence to the British tradition of empirical, analytical thought, as most of us are willy-nilly, Heidegger is at first a more difficult nut to crack than Wittgenstein. Guigon gives a ready explanation of the historical and conceptual relationships between Heidegger's masterwork, *Being and Time,* and the cognitive epistemological tradition.

Community Specific Accounts

It is tempting to regard the material in the sections that follow as offering practical applications of theory developed by Kuhn, Rorty, and Geertz. 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. The categories "theory" and "practice" implicitly

express, therefore, what Stanley Fish calls "theory hope" (Mitchell 112). "Theory hope" is 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.

I would argue, however, that the categories used in this essay, "general" and "community specific" accounts, do not imply "theory hope." The distinction between the community specific texts that follow and the foregoing general accounts is not vertical or hierarchical, but horizontal. For the sake of convenience I use the term "general accounts" for texts that state and explain assumptions of nonfoundational social constructionist thought. I use the term "community specific accounts" for texts that make those assumptions tacitly and, as Fish puts it, "put [them] to work as an interpretive 'window'" for a particular knowledge community (Mitchell 130).

An example may clarify how social constructionist assumptions can be put to work as an "interpretive 'window.'" Michael Ignatieff's *The Needs of Strangers* does not, as it happens, fit neatly into any of the categories below because the knowledge community it addresses encompasses several disciplines. Drawing on sources in literature, religion, and philosophy, Ignatieff begins an important effort to account in terms of the history of social and political thought for what has brought us to think of ourselves and our knowledge in nonfoundational social constructionist rather than Cartesian foundational or cognitive terms.

Ignatieff's book quietly assumes that political, social, and emotional (or "spiritual") "needs are historical" (138). It also assumes that "human nature is historical" (14), and that, as a result, from time to time as languages and the communities they constitute change, some human emotional needs may "lack language adequate to their expression." When this happens, Ignatieff says, these human needs "do not simply pass out of speech: they may cease to be felt." This inability to express, and thus possibly the inability even to feel, certain basic human needs may be a serious, socially and personally disrupting affliction. As the title of the book suggests, words that particularly concern Ignatieff, "words like fraternity, belonging and community," have become for many of us today "so soaked with nostalgia and utopianism that they are nearly useless as guides to the real possibilities of civic solidarity" (138). To the degree that we are unable to use such words seriously, we have in effect dropped them from the vocabulary of the vernacular language that constitutes us as a community of civilized human beings. Lacking the language, we tend to lack the feelings as well.

What led to this situation, Ignatieff suggests, is that in the Enlightenment we lost irretrievably one of the two freedoms human beings had treasured. The one we kept and enhanced was the political and social freedom to choose. The one we lost, except in a restricted, local sense, was the freedom implicit in what Ignatieff calls the sense of having chosen correctly: the freedom we derived from certainties of religious belief that were obviated by the Enlightenment.

Ignatieff does not counsel trying to regain this pre-Enlightenment freedom; it is for most of us most of the time, as he says, quite irretrievable. Instead he explores the results of the loss. In chapters on *King Lear,* Augustine, Hume, Rousseau, and Adam Smith, Ignatieff defines what he sees as the immediate task. The

challenge for him is social and political, growing, as it does for Geertz, out of the "enormous multiplicity"—the vast cultural diversity—of modern life. "Modern society," Ignatieff says, "is changing the locus of belonging. . . . We need justice, we need liberty, and we need as much solidarity as can be reconciled with justice and liberty. But we also need, as much as anything else, language adequate to the times we live in" (139, 141). The language Ignatieff seeks is a community vernacular that in some world-encompassing way will delineate a "home" for our "claims of difference," so that "our common identity" as human beings together can "begin to find its voice" (131). Robert N. Bellah's *Habits of the Heart* develops a related theme by documenting the difficulty Americans have translating individualistic "freedom from" into commitment to consensus and cooperative action.

Most of the texts listed below are clearly more discipline-specific than Ignatieff's book, and the communities they address are more clearly defined. The value to scholars and teachers interested in literary critical texts, composition studies, and undergraduate education generally will be apparent. The value to us of the texts addressed to academic psychologists, sociologists, political scientists, and philosophers may be less obvious. In my view, these are useful because they offer us language we can in many cases adapt to discussion in diverse fields, including English studies.

Literary Studies

There are currently two lines of social constructionist thought in literary criticism and literary history. One of these follows the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, a mid-twentieth century Soviet social constructionist literary critic and contemporary of the Soviet social constructionist child psychologist, Lev Vygotsky. Throughout Bakhtin's work, as in for example the essay, "Discourse in the Novel," Bakhtin stresses the "voices" in literary language, especially the language of fiction, that are traceable to a diversity of social groups and that result in what he calls the "dialogic" quality of literary language.

The other current line of social constructionist literary criticism follows Rorty's synthesis. Rorty himself, in "Criticism without Theory," especially in its "MLA Version," and in his contribution to Mitchell suggests that literary critics should assume no general or a priori truths about the nature of literature and language and no "grounds" underlying the critical discussion of literature. They should maintain that literature is a social artifact, but they should not assume that that understanding of literature is the "real truth" from which certain "consequences" inevitably follow. Literary criticism, Rorty suggests, should adopt the position that to regard literature in a social constructionist way opens some interesting, intellectually and aesthetically rewarding lines of conversation that literary critics may not have taken before. That position, Rorty says, will lead us to "an Homeric, narrative, style" of critical discourse (Rorty, "MLA" 1), a style that sketches a certain context, puts some texts in that context, and then describes the advantages that seem to accrue from having done so (Mitchell 134).

An approach related to Rorty's, calling itself, following the name Rorty uses for his philosophical critique, the "new pragmatism," is most clearly stated in the work of Stanley Fish. Fish argues in *Is There A Text In This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* that "interpretive communities" construct authoritative interpretations of literary texts through a process similar to Rorty's social justification of belief. The relevant section of the book is Part Two, pages 303-71. The views of Rorty and Fish together have provoked a dispute over the nature and value of theoretical discussion in literary studies. These views challenge some of our most basic assumptions not only about the nature of interpretation, but about the profession of literary criticism and literary history, and, indeed, about the study of the humanities in general. The "new pragmatist" position on relevant professional issues has been most provocatively stated in an essay by Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels. Both the Knapp-Michaels essay and responses to it are conveniently collected in Mitchell's *Against Theory*.

Jerome McGann's social constructionist view of textual criticism in *A Critique of Modern Textual Criticism* follows the lead of Rorty and Fish. In doing so, it pointedly documents Geertz's remark in *Local Knowledge* that "agreement on the foundations of scholarly authority" in the humanities "has disappeared." McGann's argument attacks established empirical doctrine and methods based on the work of Fredson Bowers, which is epistemologically cognitive in its assumptions. McGann takes Fish's position that the meaning of a text is a social construct a step further by arguing that the very text itself in its final hard copy version is a community generated artifact. The "'mode of existence of a literary work of art,'" McGann says, "is fundamentally social rather than personal," since "'final authority' for literary works rests neither with the author nor with his affiliated institution [in most cases, the publisher]; it resides in the actual structure of the agreements which these two cooperating authorities reach in specific cases" (8, 54).

Composition Studies

Most work done today on composition tends to be either empirical or rhetorical. Almost all of it is cognitive in its assumptions. The difference between saying that language has a social context and that language is a social construct defines a key difference between cognitive and social constructionist work in composition. Cognitive work is based on the assumption that writing is primarily an individual act. A writer's language originates within the inner reaches of the individual mind. We use language primarily to express ideas generated in the mind and to communicate them to other individual human minds in the "social context."

In contrast, social constructionist work in composition is based on the assumption that writing is primarily a social act. A writer's language originates with the community to which he or she belongs. We use language primarily to join communities we do not yet belong to and to cement our membership in communities we already belong to.

Rigorously nonfoundational social constructionist research and writing in composition studies is not easy to come by. The search is made easier by John Trimbur's annotated bibliography, "Collaborative Learning and Teaching Writing." Some of the most suggestive social constructionist work is by the mid-twentieth century Soviet social constructionist student of child development, Lev Vygotsky, whose *Thought and Language* and *Mind In Society* are books that many composition teachers are already familiar with. James Wertsch's *Vygotsky and the Social Formation of Mind* develops further implications of Vygotsky's thought. Vygotsky demonstrated experimentally the socio-linguistic process by which children learn to think analytically. His thesis is that we learn to use language instrumentally, "talking through" our tasks with another person and then internalizing that conversation as thought. In this way writing re-externalizes the language of internalized conversation. My "Writing and Reading as Collaborative or Social Acts" and *Short Course in Writing* make tentative gestures to explore the possibilities of this way of thinking about composition, some of the implications of which I have discussed in "Collaborative Learning and 'The Conversation of Mankind.'"

Perhaps the most scholarly social constructionist work in composition that I am aware of is Greg Myers's, "The Social Construction of Two Biologists' Proposals." This essay explains in detail how changes occur (or fail to occur) in scientific knowledge through gradually negotiated changes in the language of what scientists write. A related essay by Myers traces the career of an article by each of two prominent biologists through comment by five journal editors and rejection by four of them (both essays were published on the fifth submission), together with the authors' revisions in response to comment. Myers demonstrates the extent to which what these scientists actually knew gradually changed as the community of knowledgeable peers they belonged to demanded change in the language of the articles they were writing. Myers's work complements a growing body of social constructionist work on scientific knowledge, much of it being done in Britain. An example that treats scientists' conversation as well as their writing—including scientific jokes, "proto-jokes," satire, and other forms of humor—is Gilbert and Mulkay's *Opening Pandora's Box*.

Myers and Gilbert and Mulkay document modern instances of the principles developed historically in Anderson's *Between the Library and the Laboratory*. Anderson accounts for changes in language used in talking about physical matter in eighteenth-century France during the period in which the vernacular of the phlogiston theory began giving way to the recognizably scientific vernacular of modern chemistry. Anderson shows how, during this transitional period, Lavoisier's arguments introduced a new category of inquiry using the same rhetorical manner and, with few exceptions, the same vocabulary the phlogistonists used. "The real field of inquiry" involved in the new category of study, Anderson argues, is "not primarily the laboratory; much of the difficult work is performed first through [the] process of refining the language in which the question is asked" (96). Thus chemistry became in the eighteenth-century what Myers shows that biology is today: a language exercise or, more broadly speaking, a

symbol-system exercise. "The real difference between the work of [the phlogistonist] Macquer and Lavoisier," Anderson says, "grows out of [a] shift of emphasis away from seeing science as an individual operation performed on a language to one in which language sets the parameters for the writers"—that is, in which the language they write determines what they know (23).

Social Sciences

It is perhaps inevitable that social scientists should have been among the first to understand the importance and pursue the implications of social construction. Their work is of interest to English scholars and teachers because it offers terms and ideas adaptable to social constructionist approaches in literary criticism, literary history, and composition studies. John Shotter's *Social Accountability and Selfhood* is an example of this adaptability. What Shotter calls the "accounts" of human action that communities "give of themselves in their everyday social life" are roughly equivalent to Rorty's social justification of belief. Much that he says about these "accounts" might be applied directly to the study of, say, narrative fiction. The book's history of social constructionist thought from Vico to modern times in Chapter 8 is also of value.

Kenneth Gergen's *Toward Transformation in Social Knowledge* and Rom Harré's *Personal Being* both develop the case for a social-constructionist understanding of knowledge in the social sciences. Harré argues in particular that "the self" is a social construct. From the point of view of English teachers and other humanists interested in exploring implications of social construction, an especially useful feature of Harré's book is the "research menu" at the end of each chapter. Collectively, these demonstrate how very much we still have to learn when we adopt social constructionist assumptions. They also offer valuable suggestions for future study.

In *The Social Construction of Mind,* Jeff Coulter considers the implications of social constructionist thought for the social sciences in general, but especially for sociology. Much as Rorty argues that "we understand knowledge when we understand the social justification of belief," Coulter argues that we understand best other people's "subjective" states and processes (such as understanding, intending, remembering, being "high" on drugs, and being "mentally ill") not by postulating "mentalistic elements or psychological constructions of the individual" but by understanding the "socially available resources furnished by the culture," that is, by understanding ordinary linguistic and other symbolic usage (34).

Unlike sociologists, but like literary critics, political scientists seem only now to be taking up issues raised by social construction. What happens when authority regarded as a social construct is turned by political communities—that is, by governments—into power? What is the nature of that power, how is it wielded, how is it to be controlled, and how does it affect our everyday lives?

These issues are important because the assumptions and implications of nonfoundational social construction strike some people as politically dangerous. I

suggest in response to comment on "Collaborative Learning and 'The Conversation of Mankind'" that it is on the contrary foundational notions that have proven to be politically dangerous, a danger to which social construction is potentially a democratic corrective. A book that takes up this issue indirectly through close reading of several political theorists is Don Herzog's *Without Foundations*. Herzog fills a gap that critics have complained about in the work of Richard Rorty. He concludes that "the quest for certainty" makes many historically important "foundational political theories" quite "eerily apolitical" (243).

Undergraduate Education

Social construction has not yet made much impact on our thinking about undergraduate education generally. I have contributed a sketch of possible curricular implications in "Liberal Education and the Social Justification of Belief" and, elsewhere, some discussions of the place of collaborative learning in an undergraduate education. Collaborative learning is related to social construction in that it assumes learning occurs among persons rather than between a person and things. Some teachers using collaborative learning who have adopted social constructionist assumptions have found that they understand better what they are trying to do and, understanding it better, have a better chance of doing it well. Harvey Wiener's "Collaborative Learning in the Classroom: A Guide to Evaluation" suggests ways to tell when teachers are using collaborative learning most effectively.

Although to date there is not much research on the effects of collaborative learning in college and university education, recent work on its effects in primary and secondary schools is relevant. Surveys of research by David Johnson and by Shlomo Sharan support the experience of college and university instructors who have used collaborative learning. Students learn better through noncompetitive collaborative group work than in highly individualized and competitive classrooms. Robert Slavin's *Cooperative Learning* reports similar results. Jeannie Oakes's *Keeping Track* adduces evidence that vertically or hierarchically structured educational institutions and classrooms deliver inferior education to all students and suggests that this situation be changed by making institutional and classroom structure horizontal and cooperative. Bibliography relevant to collaborative learning in college and university contexts may be found in my *Short Course in Writing* and in John Trimbur's "Collaborative Learning and Teaching Writing."

The most far-reaching statement about the implications of social construction for undergraduate education is Rorty's "Hermeneutics, General Studies, and Teaching." His position is that we are mistaken when we tie our study and teaching of the humanities to a notion of "truth as something which exists and endures apart from" human beings. Abstract thought, archetypal figures, mythology, notions of Reason with a capital "R" and Truth with a capital "T," notions of established order, universals of sound reasoning, and other such structuralisms and consecrated stereotypes, Rorty says, are all forms "of what

Nietzsche called 'the longest lie'—the lie that there is something beyond mankind to which it is [our] duty to be faithful" (2).

In place of Platonic ineffables such as these, Rorty would have humanists provide students with "a sense of tradition, of community, of human solidarity" (3). Students should gain "a sense of [the human community] as standing on its own feet, choosing its own destiny" (6). One way to develop this sense of human community, he says, is to read the major humanistic texts not as accounts of people's "encounter with Reality or Truth," but as accounts of attempts people have made "to solve problems, to work out the potentialities of the languages and activities available to them . . . by transcending the vocabulary in which these problems were posed" (9).

From this perspective, the purpose of studying the humanities continues to be basically what most of us believe it is now, "to help us [rise above the language of the day] in order to become fully human." In Rorty's view, however, we rise above the language of the day not by learning to think and write abstractly or by appealing to "something higher—Reason rather than Prejudice, Truth rather than Convention." Instead, we rise above the language of the day by using it "as one option among others." We should therefore not regard the "liberality of mind and critical thought" that we try to develop in our students as capacities to deal in abstractions but as the capacity to seek out and understand "alternative perspectives." "Critical thinking," Rorty argues, "is playing off alternatives against one another, rather than playing them off against criteria of rationality, much less against eternal verities" (11).

Rorty expresses in this article, in the least compromising, most concentrated way, what a social constructionist position might mean in the long run to scholars and teachers of English and other humanistic subjects. As Geertz points out, furthermore, the implications for change in our work that Rorty suggests is matched by similarly far-reaching implications for change in the nature of our professional lives. For example, from a social constructionist point of view, literary critical discourse does more than define the mores of a disciplinary community. As Geertz says in "The Way We Think Now: Toward an Ethnography of Modern Thought" (*Local Knowledge*), one's discipline also defines "a great part of one's life": who, what, and where we believe we are (155). It is in the end something on that order of magnitude that is at stake when we begin to explore the implications of social construction.

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