



TOWARD A NEW
RHETORIC OF DIFFERENCE

Stephanie L. Kerschbaum



SWR
STUDIES IN WRITING AND RHETORIC



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Introduction: Rethinking Diversity in Writing Studies

DURING A PILOT STUDY INTERVIEW WITH Charlie,¹ a PhD student in his first year of composition teaching at a large public midwestern university, he described his current class in terms of students who participate “fairly actively on a regular basis,” students who on any given day may contribute to a discussion, and students who do not talk. After making these observations, he offered some hypotheses as to why some students are quiet in class: “I’m not sure if this is a difference, if it’s just a psychological phenomenon, that some people are shy, that’s why they don’t participate, or if this has something to do with their own conception of themselves as thinkers or writers.”² As we continued to talk, he parsed additional potential explanations, noting, for instance, that his more vocal students were also from large out-of-state urban cities, while many of his quieter in-state students were from small rural communities. Throughout the conversation, it was clear that Charlie cared deeply about working with his students and that he was eager to learn ways to reach those students he worried he was not reaching.

I have had many conversations like this one with teachers about their classrooms. In such talk, differences are frequently called out as singular or unusual, but they are not always examined alongside the (sometimes unstated or assumed) norms against which those differences are often cast. Why do these observations about everyday teacher talk matter for the teaching of writing? First, they matter because how teachers orient to students affects teacher–student relationships as well as students’ learning. Second, as a burgeoning ethnographic literature on students and student writing reveals,

there is much that teachers don't know or don't understand about their students (see, e.g., Chiseri-Strater; Fishman and McCarthy; Herrington and Curtis). Such ethnographic research has immeasurably enriched our field's knowledge and helped many teachers more effectively reach populations that have been underserved or misunderstood. Given that how teachers understand difference matters to the way they teach writing,³ how might Charlie work through his questions about reaching quiet students? One place to start is, of course, with the observations he has already made. But it is not enough for Charlie to conjecture that students' geographic origins might correlate with their classroom presence. His tentative explanations need to be put in conversation with other resources that can help him develop those hypotheses without relying on stereotypes or idiosyncratic experiences. As Charlie put it during our interview:

You ask the question why do certain people talk and why other people don't talk and then give an analysis based on differences in either gender or racial differences, class differences; I have a student who feels enfranchised to speak and who doesn't. And that's a really helpful analysis, but then on a certain level when you're in the classroom it becomes very personalized. You know that some of the generalizations, for example, that males will participate more often in classroom discussions than females definitely hold true in the classroom. They seem to hold true, right, [but] they don't always hold true.

Charlie wants to avoid orienting to his students by focusing on stereotypes that "don't always hold true," while at the same time acknowledging that there is something useful in understanding broader patterns of behavior and approaches to learning.

A great deal of writing studies research has focused on this dilemma, so there are many resources that might help Charlie. Research looking at quiet students and silence, such as Mary Reda's *Between Speaking and Silence*, Jane Townsend and Danling Fu's "Quiet Students across Cultures and Contexts," Bryan McKinley

Jones Brayboy's "Hiding in the Ivy," and Cheryl Glenn's *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence*, might help Charlie to understand why students are quiet and to learn from experienced teachers who have developed effective classroom strategies. Other resources that reimagine what it means to participate in class, such as Margaret Price's *Mad at School*, might help Charlie envision other ways of engaging students. Each of these texts suggests ways of approaching quiet students and highlights the rich variation within that classification. In addition, Charlie would benefit from ongoing conversations with fellow writing teachers, who all have different vantage points from which they perceive and respond to quiet students.

But how is Charlie to return to his classroom with these rich new resources in mind? He cannot simply assume that the students he has read about in the literature or heard about from his colleagues will explain the students he meets in his classroom. As Glenn and others have shown, silence is a richly rhetorical act. Therefore, being quiet in class must be contextualized and understood through both individual performances *and* broader representations. Even when "classroom silence" is framed as a rich, complex, and situated rhetorical performance, Charlie still needs resources that will help him translate between his own knowledge about quiet students and the unique moment-by-moment negotiations that lead to performances of silence. In other words, how might what Charlie already knows or what he comes to learn be brought to bear on his interactions with individual students? And, considered from another direction, how might these interactions help (re)shape his knowledge about types of students in his classroom?

These are questions about essentialism and determinism as well as about how individual identities and experiences intersect with broader cultural categories. As Helen Fox notes, cultural groups are often described as "'traditional' or unchanging, rather than as systems that blend and shift in response to pressures from the environment and their own members' ingenuity" (259). Such framing of cultural groups in relatively static terms highlights one of the challenges faced by contemporary writing studies scholars: that of using discourses about difference to attend simultaneously to

broad group characteristics and to instability within categories. To address this issue, many writing researchers have described their own complex relationships to language, identity, and knowledge (e.g., hooks; Okawa; Villanueva; Young). However, writing teachers—particularly those new to teaching, like Charlie—frequently express anxiety about bringing this nuance and richness into classroom practice. Such nuance is especially needed in contexts where issues of discrimination may make it difficult to recognize problematic patterns, omissions, and/or silences. It is also needed in this current era of data-driven policy, as Patrick Sullivan and David Nielsen point out in their critique of using predictive measures such as standardized test scores to determine access to higher education.

To more fully respond to questions about how awareness of broad identity categories matters when we stand in front of a classroom, talk one-on-one with students, or respond to student writing, what is needed is a flexible means for examining and re-examining the interplay between identity categories and the communicative performances and contexts in which those categories become meaningful. This interplay constitutes what feminist literary theorist Rosaura Sánchez calls a kind of self-reflexivity about identity. She explains, “In the absence of reflexivity, identification is not problematic and identity is a nonissue, as is often the case for Latinos/as who have been isolated in white communities of the Midwest” (41). In other words, their identification as “Latinos/as” is not something frequently called to their attention or held at the forefront of their awareness. However, when these midwesterners relocate “to the southwest or to a large metropolis and they are stopped by the police or are discriminated at work or at a coffee shop as people of color, . . . they become suddenly acutely aware of the identification process and of their designation as members of a particular group” (41). In this new context, being Latino/a has different meanings, and different consequences, for those who identify or are identified by others in that way. Thus, the kinds of things that people notice and the meanings associated with those noticings are highly contingent.

In turn, when Charlie notices his students’ quietness as well as their geographic origins, that noticing happens within a particu-

lar frame and is influenced and contextualized by many factors. These factors include the institutional setting as well as Charlie's identity and past educational experiences. Such identifications are made not only by those who ascribe identities onto people but also by individuals themselves as they realize how they are identified by others. The values associated with particular identities also influence people's willingness to claim or affiliate with them. This need for flexibility in moving between broad classification and situated performance, then, might lead us to examine how Charlie became aware that "quiet students" or "being from out of state" are things for him to notice and pay attention to, as well as what institutional, professional, and personal discourses circulate around "quiet students" and "out of state students." We might also ask how Charlie can learn from his students how particular categories are meaningful to them.⁴

Such questions have long been central to examinations of difference and diversity in writing pedagogy. Some researchers have addressed these questions by closely studying individual writers or groups of writers to help teachers understand the work these writers are doing and how they are positioned in various ways (e.g., Cushman; Dunn; Lieber; Morris; Purcell-Gates; Sohn); other scholars have built intersectional analyses of how particular group memberships are complexly articulated within writers' lives and discourses (e.g., Alexander; Fernheimer; LeCourt, *Identity*, "Performing"; Royster, *Traces*). In yet another vein of research, scholars examine the means by which individuals communicate across linguistic and cultural differences inside and outside of the classroom (e.g., Flower; Flower, Long, and Higgins; Glazier; Lyons). Taken together, this research on writers, populations, groups, and discourses offers sensitive and nuanced portraits of difference. Despite the many contributions of this body of scholarship, however, teachers like Charlie continue to find it difficult to use it to develop classroom environments sensitive to the ever-changing terrain of difference.

The difficulty teachers experience in moving from research to classroom stems in part from how difference has been framed in writing scholarship. The research described in this introduction urges teachers to develop deep knowledge bases about the students

they encounter or are likely to encounter in two primary ways: by becoming more aware of differences that have received little attention and by developing new insights on familiar differences. But at the same time that this research focuses our attention in particular ways, new points of analysis and inquiry are always emerging as significant. While many of us do not shy away from talking about quiet students, other categories, such as race and ethnicity or disability, are not always so easy for us to discuss openly (Brueggemann, White, Dunn, Heifferon, and Cheu; Lewiecki-Wilson and Brueggemann; Lewis, Ketter, and Fabos; Pollock, *Colormute*). What's more, many writing teachers work and live in communities and regions very different from those they are most familiar with. How, then, are teachers to orient to the differences that their unique interactions with students might reveal? Discourses of difference that fix individual writers or groups of writers in time and space can frustrate, rather than enable, the development of pedagogical resources that attend simultaneously to the broad categories that shape our perception of the world *and* to the highly individual encounters we experience on a daily basis.

In this book, my aim is to show how a specific focus on interactionally emergent and rhetorically negotiated elements of a communicative situation can enrich the study of difference in composition research. As part of this project, in this introduction I identify two strategies writing researchers use to forward new understandings of difference that take identity categories as a central unit of analysis and interpretation. These two strategies contribute to the problem of fixing difference in order to study it. The phrase "fixing difference" here refers both to the process of treating difference as a stable thing or property that can be identified and fixed in place as well as to attempts to fix—that is, improve—the way difference is understood.

To move away from this difference fixation, which pervades institutional diversity discourse, as Chapter 1 shows, I build on writing scholarship that takes as a central focus the articulation of change and argue that teachers and researchers should orient to difference as rhetorically negotiated through "marking difference."

When marking difference, speakers and audiences alike display and respond to markers of difference, those rhetorical cues that signal the presence of difference between two or more participants. My own identity as a deaf woman has contributed to the development of this theory, as I regularly find myself making minute adjustments in response to unfolding awareness of how others perceive my deafness and assume its relevance for our interactions.

I draw on my own experiences in Chapter 2, as well as analyses of classroom encounters in a first-year writing classroom in Chapters 3 and 4, to illustrate this perspective on difference, showing that even in the smallest moments of communication—as students debate the placement of a comma, tell stories about their high school writing experiences, try to explain their interpretation of a sentence, or write comments on peers' essays—markers of difference make visible the dynamism, the relationality, and the emergence of difference. Attention to marking difference, when performed in conjunction with attention to various identification processes, can help us mediate between broad conceptual tools for talking about difference and the unique qualities of individual moments of interaction.

Marking difference can reveal a way to simultaneously attend to the myriad resources available for working through our own and our students' classroom identities (i.e., the scholarly literature, our personal experiences, and our colleagues' and students' perspectives) and to the specific and situated classroom encounters in which we and our students bring differences alive. Markers of difference can provide a new set of tools for tracing and analyzing patterns in how we might understand one another.

WRITING RESEARCH AND DIFFERENCE

To understand more specifically some limitations in the way difference is addressed in writing research, I draw on representative examples from the scholarly literature that reveal two ways that teachers are invited to orient to difference in their classrooms: by taxonomizing difference and by performing categorical redefinition. Taxonomizing difference highlights intersections among various identity categories. These intersections enrich the study of

identity by acknowledging and recognizing the variety of ways that people can be identified and named. While taxonomizing tends to focus on individuals or small groups of very specific types of people, categorical redefinition focuses on broader groups (although sometimes by studying only a few representatives) to better understand the range and richness of that group.

The practice of taxonomizing difference is illustrated in Esha Niyogi De and Donna Uthus Gregory's essay, "Decolonizing the Classroom," which urges us to develop more complex understandings of students' relationships to academic discourse by considering additional categorical identifications and their intersections. For instance, at one point the authors note that "a rural white student may be further removed from university discourse than a Chinese American student whose parents are college educated professionals" (122). Thus, by naming students' race or ethnicity alongside their place of origin and their parents' educational backgrounds, De and Gregory resist a simplistic link between students' racial/ethnic background and their presumed competence in academic discourse. In pushing for richer understandings, they invoke not only gender, race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic class affiliation, but also religion, course of study, place of residence, patterns of migration, and experiences with formal education. The expansion of available categories refuses to treat racial and ethnic categories as monolithic or governed by stereotypes by recognizing the variation within these categories. In this way, taxonomizing difference complicates the assumptions that shape our first impressions of students. But these categories are presented as relatively static referents, as if there is some enduring stability tied to "white female art major" or "rural Vietnamese student" or "Latino student who grew up in an urban ghetto" (122–23) that we can consequently identify, unpack, and understand. This view is reinforced as De and Gregory refer to these factors as "determinants," effectively calling on inert categorical resources as a way of "determining" the positions available to students (123).

While writing research that looks at various (and increasingly specific) categories of difference takes seriously the need to consider

complicated interrelationships among the many factors that influence individuals' orientations to their world and to one another, the focus, as we see in De and Gregory's essay, tends to be placed on categorical identifications that get imposed upon a situation rather than on differences that emerge over the course of interpersonal interaction. By suggesting that differences emerge during interactions, what I mean is that any understanding of a student's academic preparation will be affected by who that student is interacting with as well as the backdrop against which those interactions are occurring. The influence such backdrops can have on students' learning is powerfully illustrated in psychologist Claude Steele's study of what he calls "identity contingencies—the things you have to deal with in a situation because you have a given social identity" (3). Steele finds that being aware of negative stereotypes held by others in particular situations adversely impacts an individual's performance. Therefore, even in the examples cited by De and Gregory of "white female art major" or "rural Vietnamese student" or "Latino student who grew up in an urban ghetto" (122–23), how those identities will matter to or impact a situation is contingent on different interlocutors with a range of orientations to, knowledge about, and personal experiences with those identity categories. Environmental and institutional contexts matter, too. At majority-White colleges and universities, for example, different stereotypes may be more prominent or more threatening than at institutions with larger populations of students of color.

Recognizing the contingency of identity and remaining vigilant toward our own orientations to difference is important for us as teachers because our vantage points lead us to see our students in particular ways—some of which can be harmful and damaging (see Dryer; Schroeder). In his ethnographic study of American Indian students at Ivy League universities, Brayboy points out that these students are noticed by the (mostly White) others on their campuses both because of their physical appearance and because of the ways they comport themselves. But, he notes, interpretations of these students are "based marginally on the ways they present themselves and more substantially on the background, experiences,

and visions of the seer, as well as the context in which they are being seen” (130). In pointing out the significance of others’ perceptions, Brayboy also reminds us of the power asymmetries involved in managing perception and self-identifications. Our ability to claim particular self-constructions and to have those self-constructions recognized by others is always mediated by the power dynamics influencing an interaction. In classrooms, power asymmetries between teachers and students as well as among students can make such negotiations complex and at times fraught. Therefore, it is not enough for us to simply seek out additional identifiers and cues that we can use to position or better understand our students.

As feminist intersectional analysts have shown, people’s relationships to multiple identity categories are not discrete, but instead intermingled, so that, for instance, as legal scholar Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw writes, black women’s lives cannot be “captured wholly by looking separately at the race or gender dimensions of those experiences” (358). This is precisely the point De and Gregory are encouraging: teachers need to consider their students not in terms of single identifiers but as the embodiment of a complex set of identifications that must be considered together, rather than independently from one another. The strength of this approach is that it broadens the range of interpretive possibilities. Rather than allowing any given classification to determine a teacher’s assessment of a student, the rich confluence of multiple factors holds open more potential directions for an interaction and enables greater consideration of the complexity of identity (see McCall). When identifying students using static determinants, however, taxonomizing difference also focuses from the outset on particular identity categories, which can make it difficult to identify other relevant, but not-already-taxonomized, factors influencing classroom interactions.

A second strategy proffered by writing scholars for encouraging attention to difference, categorical redefinition, also draws heavily on category language for orienting to difference. But unlike taxonomizing difference, which emphasizes multiple categories and their intersections, categorical redefinition focuses on producing more refined and careful interpretations within a specific category. An

example of categorical redefinition that reveals how strongly we can be bound by categories even when making explicit efforts to untangle category associations is Christina Ortmeier-Hooper's "English May Be My Second Language, but I'm Not 'ESL.'" Embarking on a study of second language writers in college classrooms, Ortmeier-Hooper notes that learning more information about students can help us better understand our students' classroom behaviors. Here she suggests the incompleteness of categorical understandings: simply labeling a student as "ESL" or "Generation 1.5" or "second language writer" or "bilingual" can lead us to make problematic assumptions about that student's language competencies or classroom needs. However, she asserts, those assumptions might be revised with deeper knowledge and better understanding of the variation within those labels. The bulk of Ortmeier-Hooper's essay focuses on challenging the boundaries of an institutionally ascribed "English as a Second Language" (ESL) label through careful profiles of three writing students, Sergej, Misha, and Jane. Through these profiles, she makes the claim that teachers and researchers need to consider a wider variety of factors relevant to ESL students' performances in the writing classroom, specifically urging us to better understand students' histories and to cultivate an "appreciation" for complexity in students' lives (414–15). With this personal knowledge of students as "whole individuals" rather than as "products of their native culture and language," we can challenge the limitations of traditional understandings of ESL.

But the language Ortmeier-Hooper employs to develop her argument makes it impossible to escape the ESL category for Sergej, Misha, and Jane, as well as for countless other students who may want to resist the predictive (in)validity of a particular label. Consider Sergej's case. He, like Jane and Misha, does not identify himself as "ESL" and resists being identified by others in that way. And indeed, Ortmeier-Hooper convincingly establishes that his cultural expectations of schooling, as well as his experiences with war and violence, more so than his status as an ESL student, shape his attitudes toward his teacher and his writing. But instead of working to identify how well—or not well—he fits the institutional ESL

label, we might instead consider the ways that Sergej himself made claims about what was important or salient to his identity: How did he display himself to the others in the classroom? How did he position himself—directly and indirectly—among fellow classmates and teachers? What cues did he identify as important or significant in doing this work? The question of what kinds of frames are most useful for understanding Sergej’s experiences is worth interrogating further.

Research such as Ortmeier-Hooper’s is motivated by a desire to understand and work with a particular group or category of students, not out of a desire to impose labels on students. Yet the line between imposing labels on students and understanding them better is not always clear. Ortmeier-Hooper herself sheds light on the problematic nature of ESL as a category as she writes, “Often, we fail to recognize that ‘ESL’ refers to a great deal more than language proficiency or placement” (394). She consequently urges broader acknowledgment of ESL’s vast array of identifiers and meanings.⁵ The result of this rhetorical move, however, is that students like Sergej, who claim to fall outside the label’s bounds, are ultimately brought back within its folds simply because we have redefined ESL to include considerations of how different cultural orientations influence students’ classroom performances. Despite Ortmeier-Hooper’s own recognition of the ESL category’s limitations, her response to the problem of the category that no longer fits is to redefine the category to give it new connotations and different institutional resonance.⁶

Thus, even as taxonomizing difference and redefining categories have enhanced the way we teach with and across differences, these approaches to studying and writing about difference still freeze particular subjects, details, and interpretations within the research literature. Yet this scholarship, which creates a more precise language for difference and offers nuanced portrayals of various identity categories, is not motivated by a desire to freeze differences in time and space, but instead by a desire to open up new interpretive ground and broaden the range of potential meanings within categorical frames. Indeed, writing researchers have taken numer-

ous approaches to documenting ongoing transformations of meaning, in many cases influenced by ethnographic research methods and methodologies (Brown and Dobrin; Lillis) and an explosion of writing research looking at writing in context (see Juzwik, Curcic, Wolbers, Moxley, Dimling, and Shankland for an overview). Key to these efforts is attention to flexibility and change. In *Rhetorical Listening*, for example, Krista Ratcliffe challenges the logic of Whiteness, which she defines as “a trope that fosters stasis by resisting and denying differences” (114), and urges her readers to employ a variety of means of rhetorical listening to resist such fixity. Listening is always situational, she notes, always in the moment. This emphasis on situatedness is also evident in performance-based analyses that focus on how individuals artfully use particular resources at particular times for particular audiences to create specific identities (Gonçalves). Numerous scholars have enacted such performances by narrating their experiences in order to counter or disrupt dominant interpretations (Craig and Perryman-Clark; Royster, “When”; M. Powell). Other writing scholars use revision as a trope for understanding the creation and re-creation of identity through writing (Herrington and Curtis; Jung; Lee; Young). In literacy studies, researchers such as Suzanne Rumsey and Gail Hawisher and Cynthia Selfe have examined how multimodal forms of literacy (e.g., quilting and online social networks) reveal identity building and literacy transmission as unpredictable and dynamic processes. Finally, some scholars have begun to incorporate time as a dimension for interpreting classroom activity in order to describe identity construction as an ongoing process occurring across different timescales (cf. Lemke) in classrooms and through writing (Burgess and Ivanič; Wortham, *Learning*).

Despite the acknowledgments made within this research regarding continual change, resistance, and transformation through language, there remain questions about how we might make best use of this research to improve our pedagogical practices. Taxonomizing difference and categorical redefinition are in many ways part of human behavior and sense-making. As sociologist and gender theorist Cecilia Ridgeway explains in *Framed by Gender*, “social re-

lations are situations in which people form a sense of who they are in the situation and, therefore, how they should behave, by considering themselves in relation to whom they assume others are in that situation” (6–7). But the details we notice and consequently use to define ourselves and others, as well as the associations and meanings we attribute to these noticings, are affected by a wide variety of factors, including personal and professional experiences and academic scholarship.

Our own positioning as teachers and its influence on what we “know” when we read student writing or work with students in the classroom is pointedly illustrated in an example from the scholarly literature. Janis Haswell and Richard Haswell describe the results of a study in which they asked sixty-four readers to respond to two student texts, provide suggestions for revision, and discuss their impressions of the students’ gender. They found that the respondents drew on broad gender stereotypes to interpret these texts and offer revision suggestions. Haswell and Haswell’s results dovetail with Ridgeway’s work on the persistence of gender inequality. Ridgeway shows how individuals negotiate new situations by framing them with cultural beliefs—i.e., stereotypes—about gender that consequently reinforce these beliefs and maintain gender inequality.

Identifying categories and drawing on simplistic cultural beliefs or stereotypes to interpret those categories is not the only way students’ writing and experiences are fixed in time and space, however. A second problematic strategy is that of overidentification. This is a problem that Donna LeCourt describes in her work with working-class students, as she acknowledges how hard it is to avoid assuming or presuming to “know” her students. She writes, “I have to constantly guard against assuming that my own experience as a student from the working class will also explain my students’.” She continues, “Listening for difference, frankly, is difficult. I have to remind myself that being open and student-centered is not enough” (“Performing” 49). These are key challenges for all of us as we pay close attention to issues of identity and difference both in and out of the writing classroom.

The current focus on difference in writing studies has prepared teachers to attend to particular details, and it has reinforced the

need to continually become aware of new ones—that is, to hold open interpretations rather than presume understanding—but it has not yet fully articulated *how* such new interpretations might be built. This book, then, suggests a new rhetoric of difference through which we can cultivate awareness of new details, interpret and reinterpret those details, and contextualize them within specific moments of writing, teaching, and learning. This perspective complements broader identification processes and offers a means for carefully enriching those identifications through attention to the lived experiences that bring differences alive in the classroom.

Such mediation acknowledges the vital role categories play in the negotiation of everyday life. Individuals perceive categories as they make decisions about how to negotiate interactions. This work is not always done consciously, although various contextual factors and identity contingencies (Steele) affect the degree to which people hold particular identities at the forefront of their awareness during unfolding interactions. The research presented in this book aims to encourage heightened awareness of systematic patterns of ignoring, suppressing, and denying difference as well as of recognizing, highlighting, and orienting to difference. Such engagement is sorely needed among both teachers and students in writing classrooms.

STUDYING THE ENGAGEMENT OF DIFFERENCE

In designing a study aimed at better understanding how teachers, especially those new to the profession, might engage the differences they encounter between themselves and their students, I began with the concept of difference itself, asking:

- How is difference identified within classrooms?
- What conditions or factors motivate engagement with difference?

These questions concern not only teachers' interactions with students but also students' interactions with one another. If, as Paula Moya asserts, "a truly multi-perspectival, multicultural education will work to *mobilize* identities in the classroom" (96), then it is

essential for both students and teachers to engage one another in a variety of ways. Two theories prevalent in writing studies research articulate the importance of engagement with others to writing: dialogism (Dyson; Halasek; Nystrand, “Dialogic,” *Opening*) and contact zones (Pratt; Wolff). Both theories emphasize the centrality of writer–audience relationships. Dialogism is concerned with how written and spoken discourses respond to past utterances and anticipate responses from others, while contact zones take seriously issues of audience quality and exposure to diverse perspectives. These two bodies of scholarship deeply informed the following questions, which served as guides for the empirical study I designed. Choosing to focus on institutional diversity discourses alongside students’ interactions with one another in the writing classroom, I asked:

- How do students engage difference in higher education?
- What role—if any—does writing play in students’ engagement with difference?

To maximize the likelihood of observing substantive engagement with difference, I situated my study in a classroom I thought would be most likely to sponsor such engagement. The classroom I chose was a first-year composition course that involved students in processes of argumentation and orienting to multiple perspectives. Taught by a well-respected and experienced teacher, the class was also part of a university-wide diversity initiative that established living–learning communities. The increased familiarity among students due to three shared courses and proximate living arrangements, paired with the academic topics under discussion, would, I believed, make this classroom a fertile ground for observing sustained interaction and engagement among students.

I hypothesized that the study would reveal interactions that spoke to broader categories, such as conversations about gender, race, and ethnicity, or encounters that directly or indirectly invoked identity-related issues, particularly because of the content of the courses in which students were enrolled. However, attention to difference between students was far more subtle than explicit reference

to categorical identity signifiers. Students in the writing classroom I studied rarely publicly named their own or others' race, ethnicity, gender, disability, sexuality, or socioeconomic class affiliations. While people regularly use category identifiers to name their own and others' identities (see, e.g., DeFina; West and Fenstermaker; Pollock, *Colormute*), the use of such identifiers in students' classroom talk may have been tempered by the institutional setting of this study: a majority-White midwestern university. In her study of racial signifiers at an urban high school, educational anthropologist Mica Pollock notes the persistence of silence on racial questions and issues among the mostly White teachers and administrators at the school. For those teachers and administrators, talking about race was fraught with risk. These risks included the fear of being called racist, the fear of essentializing racial identity, and the fear of ignoring all aspects of race (or of being overly focused on just one). As Pollock writes, "With bystanders always ready to contest the accuracy or appropriateness of any proffered description of how race mattered, the overwhelming social complexity of race talk might stifle your willingness to analyze such stories in racial terms at all" (*Colormute* 213).

Whether or not identity categories are an explicit topic of discussion, such category identifications are nevertheless part of the classroom environment. As students perceive one another in the classroom through the sound of their voices, their physical appearance, material possessions, and classroom comportment, they also apprehend gender, racial, ethnic, and other group affiliations and use those identifications to help organize their interactions. That students did not explicitly name such categories during the classroom conversations I recorded may not be all that surprising. After all, despite the fact that college and university campuses are often promoted as free and open spaces for deliberation and engaging ideas, they have not traditionally been seen as safe places for race talk, especially at majority-White institutions like the one studied here. We need look no further than Kristen Myers's *Racetalk: Racism Hiding in Plain Sight* or Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's *Racism without Racists* to find examples of racist ideologies and discourses that are part of the fabric of contemporary college life.

In the context of these pervasive social attitudes, having public dialogues about race may seem an impossibility. That such dialogues are necessary, however, is illustrated by writing teachers and scholars who acknowledge the dynamics of campus discourse and the challenges students face in trying to productively intervene in racist discourse (Hoang; P. Powell). The public nature of classroom interaction, even within the relatively private realm of small-group peer review workshops (and perhaps especially in situations that students know are being recorded), may be an arena in which students are unwilling to take too many social risks with their discourse. However, although the students in this classroom were verbally silent on many issues of race and other contested identities, their interactions with one another were *not* silent regarding how they positioned themselves and others even if they did not—at least in the sessions I recorded—openly use category identifiers to accomplish such positions.

What students' interactions during small-group peer review did reveal was a complex dynamic in which relationships and positions, the very material of identity formation, emerged during interaction. Indeed, students worked hard during peer review to establish desirable positions alongside their classmates and to construct identities that their peers would find persuasive. These acts of identity construction took place against a backdrop of living and learning at a majority-White institution midway through a major diversity initiative. This institutional context powerfully oriented students and teachers toward particular ways of thinking and talking about race and other differences. While institutional discourses are created by social actors who operate within the institution, these discourses also influence and shape individuals' talk. Consequently, attention to students' and teachers' classroom discourse must be considered within the context of the discourses that circulate at this institution.

STUDY DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION

When I began this study, I wanted to learn from participants what differences were relevant to them and how those differences became apparent and meaningful. Toward that end, I took cues from ethnomethodologists' orientation to participants as "informants" who

can help analysts better understand how people participate in everyday communicative activities (Garfinkel). Communication does not just happen but is part of a process that is co-constructed by all participants. Further, because interactions are strongly influenced by the contexts in which they happen—e.g., in writing classrooms, at large majority-White public universities, in the Midwest—paying careful attention to how such contexts shape participants' orientation to an activity is important.

This study took place during the 2003 fall semester at a large midwestern university that I am calling Midwestern University (MU). Members of MU's entering class that fall had an average ranking in the 89th percentile of their high school classes and an average SAT score of 1260, both of which reveal MU to be a selective public institution. In the 2003–04 academic year, slightly more than half of MU's total student population was female (53 percent), and the racial/ethnic breakdown was 86.6 percent White/Other,⁷ 2.4 percent African American; 4.7 percent Asian American (including 1.2 percent Southeast Asian American); 0.5 percent American Indian; 2.5 percent Latino/a; and 3.3 percent international. At the time of this study, the university was actively working to change the composition of its student body through a large-scale diversity agenda.

As part of this agenda, the institution sponsored several diversity initiatives aimed at improving the representation of four under-represented student groups: American Indian, African American, Southeast Asian American, and Latino/a. The largest diversity initiative within the College of Arts and Sciences, a First-Year Experience (FYE) program, established living and learning communities in which students enrolled in a shared set of courses and lived near one another in proximate dormitories. The year this study was conducted was the third year the FYE program was in operation; it included 470 students participating in twenty-four different course clusters ranging broadly in topic and content.⁸

FYE students, like MU students generally, were an accomplished group. The 2003 FYE report noted that the composite ACT score of FYE participants was 27.2 and that nearly half—43.6 percent—of the fall 2003 FYE cohort graduated in the top tenth of their

class. These numbers were nearly identical to the composite ACT of 27.3 for the incoming MU class, of whom 42.9 percent graduated in the top tenth of their class. Where the FYE program's demographics diverged from MU's general first-year population was in gender, race, and ethnicity. While MU's incoming class had an overall gender distribution that was 54 percent male and 46 percent female, the FYE cohort was more than two-thirds female (68 percent). The FYE cohort was also composed of 16 percent ethnic minority students, whereas MU's first-year cohort was 11 percent ethnic minority (although which groups "ethnic minority" designates is not defined in the FYE end-of-semester report from which these data are taken).

MU's First-Year Composition (FYC) program is housed within the English department, administered by a faculty director and two graduate student assistant directors. At the time of this study, the core of the program's approach to teaching composition was a model syllabus based on philosopher Stephen Toulmin's theory of argument.⁹ All first-time teaching assistants were required to use the model syllabus, and even when given independence in syllabus design, many continued to draw from its approach as they developed their own syllabi. The three major essay assignments in the model syllabus asked students to move from analyzing arguments to producing lengthier research-based arguments of their own. Each paper assignment involved two rounds of peer review, and approximately one-quarter of the class sessions in the model syllabus course calendar were devoted to peer review activities.

In fall 2003, ten sections of FYC were linked to FYE course clusters. I approached several instructors teaching these courses about participating in my study, and Yvonne, a White graduate student with five semesters of experience teaching First-Year Composition, responded eagerly. Yvonne's FYC course was linked to a small psychology seminar led by a faculty member and a large sociology lecture with graduate assistant-led discussion sections.

The class was populated by nineteen students, fourteen women and five men. Thirteen of the students were White, one was Asian American, and five were members of one of the four ethnic groups that were the focus of Midwestern's diversity agenda—one African

American, two Hispanic, and two Southeast Asian American students. Fifteen students indicated their age as eighteen at the start of the semester, three were nineteen, and one left that question blank.¹⁰ Sixteen students came from Midwestern's home state, and three came from other states in the Midwest. Of the seventeen students who indicated their high school ranking, all finished in the top half of their high school graduating classes. Fifteen of those seventeen placed in the top 20 percent of their graduating classes. Nine students came from a high school with between 300 and 500 students in their graduating class. Three graduated with classes of less than 100, six had graduating classes consisting of between 100 and 300 students, and one had a graduating class of more than 500 students.

Data Generation

Over the course of this study, I generated a wide range of data.

- I attended and audiotaped every class session and took field notes.
- I video- and audiotaped at least one peer review workshop group during each of ten peer review sessions, for a total of thirteen recorded peer review workshops.
- I collected students' demographic information through a written survey.
- I collected or photocopied all curricular materials distributed in class.
- I collected and photocopied all of the students' paper portfolios at the conclusion of each of three units. These portfolios included Yvonne's feedback and at least two sets of drafts with peer review comments.
- I conducted two sixty- to ninety-minute interviews with four focal students, for a total of eight audio-recorded interviews.¹¹
- I conducted and audio-recorded two ninety-minute interviews with Yvonne.
- I collected institutional documents related to MU's diversity agenda, including websites and data reports.

Data Analysis

All the audiotapes of classroom talk, peer review, and interviews were roughly transcribed immediately after each class meeting or interview by a stenographer. These rough transcripts showed the words that were spoken but did not provide full interactional data, including overlapping speech, starts and stops, pauses, or volume. I reviewed these transcripts in between class meetings while writing up field notes and in preparation for interviews. Through this review, I identified moments to play on audiotape for simulated recall during the first round of interviews with focal students in order to garner additional insight on puzzling or difficult interactional moments. The second set of focal student interviews asked students to talk about specific pieces of written feedback as well as to reflect on their participation in the FYE program.

As I worked with the rough transcripts of classroom discourse, I quickly realized I needed much more detail in the transcripts: I needed to know where students were interrupting and overlapping, when they decided to speak, when they remained silent, and how they organized their talk with one another. Because I am deaf, I could not add this detail to the transcripts myself, so I worked with a graduate assistant trained in transcription methodologies to add this detail to the thirteen recorded peer review sessions. She also reviewed the rough transcripts of interviews and class meetings to ensure accuracy and fill in any words or utterances not already transcribed, but she did not add full interactional details to those transcripts. I have some residual hearing that, when amplified with hearing aids, enables me to follow audiotapes and videotapes along with a written transcript in front of me, so once I had a detailed transcript, I verified each line of transcript through my own careful listening. In cases where I had trouble following or disagreed with a particular stretch of transcript, I held meetings with the transcriptionist to conduct reliability checks. In this way, we worked together to arrive at agreement on the transcript's representation of the audio data.

To trace patterns of talk and interaction within the transcripts, I employed transcript conventions developed by conversation analyst

Gail Jefferson (as described in Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson) for representing overlapping speech, interruptions, pauses, and other verbal cues. I did not, however, ask my transcriptionist to record some prosodic elements of talk, such as changes in pitch, largely because these were not cues I could verify through my own review of the audio data. Other cues, such as speed of talk, I represent through attention to elongated sounds and the division of transcript lines into “breath units” (Scollon and Scollon). In this structure, each line represents what was said within a single breath, with a slight modification: I also broke lines according to pauses, measuring all pauses that lasted longer than half a second. So a line could be broken because a speaker took a breath or because there was a pause (more than half a second) that punctuated the talk. This organization for transcripts was the most effective for drawing attention to the ways that students patterned their talk (see Chapter 3 for transcript conventions).

Tenets of grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin) guided my initial orientation to the range of data I collected. I began by looking for where and how students called attention to difference in their peer review interactions, interview data, and classroom participation. The first layer of coding revealed two genres of interaction in which students displayed difference most prominently: telling stories and disagreeing. In subsequent rounds of coding, I extracted narratives and episodes of disagreement from the data for closer analysis (see Chapter 3 for more detail on these genres and their identification and analysis).

In performing these more fine-grained analyses of students’ peer review talk, I drew on a variety of tools for performing dialogic discourse analysis of classroom talk (Nystrand, “Dialogic,” *Opening*; Rex and Juzwik). Central to developing my analyses were methods of studying indexicality, contextualization, and positioning developed in sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology (Bamberg, “Positioning”; Duranti and Goodwin; Georgakopoulou, *Small*, “Styling”; Silverstein and Urban; Wortham, *Narratives, Learning*). Attention to these resources helped me to understand how students used their talk to point to or make relevant various elements of the

surrounding talk and interactional context in order to communicate how their utterances should be interpreted. These resources also illuminated what students were cueing as significant in their own and others' self-presentations. Complementing the linguistic tools I used to parse the interactional data, I employed methods of critical discourse analysis (Gee) to unpack institutional talk about diversity that circulated at MU.

Incubating the Study

The preceding description of the various methodological and analytic steps I have taken in my data analysis and writing represents only part of the picture of the development of this book. The fact is, writing this book was a long time in the making. In the ten years that have elapsed since conducting this study and the emergence of this book, I have come to a much richer, more nuanced, and more complex articulation of difference than the one I started with when I designed the study. This has by no means been a linear trajectory: my experience writing this book has been as filled with bumps and setbacks as it has been with movement and development. I have come to recognize in my early writing on this topic a stance shaped as much by the audiences engaging with my research as by my own thinking. The more audiences that have responded and spoken to my thinking, the more my writing has taken up new and richer nuance. Perhaps the most significant step I took in developing this work, however, was to seriously examine my own orientation to thinking about difference.

From the outset of this project, numerous readers asked me to address my deafness and its relationship to the work I was doing. I resisted that move, for a variety of reasons, but one of the most significant was that I didn't think I was conducting a study about myself. But that sense of detachment was the very thing—or one of the main things—that kept me from really understanding that my experience of deafness was not just something that happened to me, but also something that others took up in various and complicated ways (Kerschbaum, "On Rhetorical"). Until I did this work, I did not fully recognize how my own interactional preferences

gave me a stake in the findings I was sharing and disseminating. As a deaf woman who is often the only deaf person in the room, I routinely encounter others who have relatively little knowledge about what my deafness might mean for our interactions. Therefore, like countless others, I want my interlocutors to take my accommodation needs and interactional preferences seriously. Above all, I want them to avoid assuming that they know better than I do how I prefer to communicate and be identified. But in my desire for self-autonomy and self-identification, I failed to consider the significance of others' identifications of me. This is reflected in an early stance I took that privileged students' claims about identity while attending less to the work teachers do in identifying students in productive—and yes, at times unproductive—ways. Indeed, as teachers we are sometimes wrong in the identifications we make of our students, but we are not *always* so.

A second shift I made in my thinking came out of an early emphasis I placed on inexperienced teachers as an audience for this research. When I began this project, I was not focused on the ways that experienced teachers have deep knowledge bases that enrich their ability to respond to and engage students. However, as I myself have gained experience teaching writing at three different institutions in different parts of the country, my thinking about markers of difference in the classroom has changed. In embracing the work of experience, I have cultivated ways of listening to the various pedagogical stories and teacher narratives told by teachers across our profession. These stories illuminate the variety and richness of markers of difference, and they suggest ways that markers of difference can be a powerful pedagogical resource for experienced and inexperienced teachers alike.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

The chapters of this book move from broad context to local situation to examine how difference is experienced in higher education and in writing classrooms. Chapter 1 shows how institutional diversity discourses treat difference as a thing or property. Within higher education, diversity tends to be framed as a goal to work

toward or a commodity to accumulate. To illustrate the impact of such commodification, this chapter uses critical discourse analysis to examine Midwestern University's diversity discourses. While diversity discourses are pervasive throughout the academy, such language does not offer university administrators or writing teachers effective tools for imagining pedagogical and university environments sensitive to the situatedness of difference, and it contrasts with the lived experience of difference, to which Chapter 2 turns.

Chapter 2 argues that what is needed is a resource for understanding how differences are negotiated within everyday moments of classroom interaction, as well as how this experience of difference connects with knowledge gleaned through life experience and professional training. Drawing on the ethical writings of Mikhail Bakhtin (*Art, Toward*), this chapter highlights three characteristics of difference—relationality, dynamism, and emergence—that challenge the notion of difference-as-property articulated in institutional diversity rhetoric. Within this framework, individuals are seen as using rhetorical cues, markers of difference, to position themselves alongside others, thus showing difference not as a possession but as an emergent and continually shifting relationship that is constructed through the use and display of markers of difference. This theory is illustrated with personal narratives related to my deafness. This theoretical apparatus enables us as teachers to envision difference rhetorically and thus has promise for renewing our attention to ways that we move and interact with others in the classroom.

To show markers of difference at work, Chapter 3 analyzes two brief moments of student interaction between three women—one White and two Southeast Asian American—during a peer review workshop. The analyses examine minute shifts that occur as students display markers of difference in response to unfolding dialogue. One conversation, about the placement of a comma, foregrounds the interrelationship between personal identity and writing and raises questions about the possibilities of rhetorical agency. The second conversation, an exchange of stories about students' past experiences with writing papers, involves a complicated interplay of

sameness and differentiation. Taken together, these analyses show markers of difference as rhetorical resources that are used to construct identifications, project identity categories onto others, and challenge and resist undesirable ascriptions of identity. The chapter concludes by describing three ways markers of difference can improve writing pedagogy: by enabling us to resist simplistic generalizations about students, by helping us identify possibilities for rhetorical agency and open up dialogue, and by providing a means for recognizing and revising ways of interacting in the classroom.

While Chapter 3 emphasizes the possibilities of markers of difference as well as their performative dimensions, Chapter 4 examines two moments of classroom discourse that evoke the limitations of marking difference: what happens when individuals do not openly acknowledge significant differences or when they cannot understand others' markers of difference? The chapter opens by unpacking a conversation between a White woman and a White man in which they perform conflicting readings of a sentence but fail to recognize the other's interpretation. The second analysis looks at how three women in a writing group differently respond to one another's essays, focusing in particular on a Southeast Asian American woman's query to her two White group members about her thesis, a query that is dismissed by the group despite the author's explicit concern. These analyses reveal that markers are sometimes disregarded or misunderstood and gestures toward reasons why some markers are readily identified while others are ignored.

In *Toward a New Rhetoric of Difference*, Stephanie L. Kerschbaum establishes a critical niche, a new front line, in our ongoing efforts to understand how our students can make use of difference in their lives—especially as difference continues to thicken at every turn of their lived experience both in the writing classroom and out.

—Juan C. Guerra, University of Washington at Seattle

Unlike much current writing studies research, *Toward a New Rhetoric of Difference* addresses conversations about diversity in higher education, institutional racism, and the teaching of writing by taking a microinteractional look at the ways people define themselves and are defined by others within institutional contexts. Focusing on four specific peer review moments in a writing classroom, Stephanie L. Kerschbaum reveals the ways in which students mark themselves and others, as well as how these practices of marking are contextualized within writing programs and the broader institution.

Kerschbaum's unique approach provides a detailed analysis of diversity rhetoric and the ways institutions of higher education market diversity in and through student bodies, as well as sociolinguistic analyses of classroom discourse that are coordinated with students' writing and the moves they make around that writing. Each of these analyses is grounded in an approach to difference that understands it to be dynamic, relational, and emergent-in-interaction, a theory developed out of Bakhtin's ethical scholarship, the author's lived experience of deafness, and close attention to students' interactions with one another in the writing classroom.

Toward a New Rhetoric of Difference enriches the teaching of writing by challenging forms of institutional racism, enabling teachers to critically examine their own positioning and positionality vis-à-vis their students, and highlighting the ways that differences motivate rich relationship building within the classroom.

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