MAKING POSTMODERNISM AND CRITICAL THINKING DANCE WITH EACH OTHER

From: Peter Elbow
To: Chris Schroeder

Dear Chris,

Thanks for the invitation to respond to your interesting book. I think I have something to contribute to your project of seeking an alternative literacy that is more constructed and constructive than what now seems disappointing. For what strikes me as most eloquent in your book is your picture of students alienated from the rewards of literacy—and the more muffled tale of your own sour after taste after being such a loyal servant of literacy.

I build on four of your central terms: postmodernism, critical thinking, interlude, and constructed. That is, I think I'm talking about postmodernism and critical thinking, but I'm doing so obliquely by way of a dancing "interlude" ("interlude" means play sandwiched between other things) that is "constructed" (that builds rather than takes apart).

Let me begin the play by being very metaphorical. I propose to make postmodernism and critical thinking dance with each other in such a way that both are shaken up. By dancing with each other, they create a rhythm that violates the habitual rhythms each has become used to.

Am I questioning postmodernism? Lots of people do; you do—sort of. Postmodernism shouldn’t complain since it celebrates questioning. Critical thinking also celebrates questioning, but no one seems to question it—not you, not radicals, not conservatives.

Yes, you make fun of the homage that textbooks pay to critical thinking (for example in chapter one). And you criticize what you see as the goal or destination or dream behind critical thinking: a kind of enlightenment era, universal, homogenized, essentialized rationality. But you never question critical thinking itself. I want to question critical thinking itself; but I want to affirm its goal—or at least its goal as we might describe it more charitably and more concretely than you do.
Let me change metaphors from dancing to driving. I want to drive the "vehicle" of postmodernism toward the goal or destination of critical thinking. Let me explain. The vehicle of postmodernism is play, game, fun. But instead of driving it towards its usual deconstructive destination of detachment, skepticism, and alienation, we can hijack the playful vehicle of postmodernism in the direction of critical thinking. Not toward the abstract dogmatized goal of critical thinking (an essentialized universal rationality) but rather toward the more humanly concrete goal of critical thinking: helping people assess new ideas and get unstuck from what they take for granted, thereby becoming more intellectually flexible. This is one of "your" main goals too. Interestingly, it's also a goal of postmodernism, but is largely unrealized.

What I'm interested in here—to be more blunt about my own agenda—is "the believing game". And I'll get down to cases: the concrete condition of your students. You complain (like so many others) that they assume too much; they take too much for granted; they don't question things. This sounds like a problem of "credulity." Lack of critical thinking. The traditional cure is more critical thinking, more questioning: the doubting game. This sounds logical.

But let's pause. There's an important difference here that gets overlooked. On the one hand, there's "not questioning"; on the other hand, there's "actually trusting, believing, or entering in".

Yes, students may not question what they take for granted. But that doesn't mean they really trust or believe or enter into what they take for granted. They "don't" really trust or believe it, they just take it for granted.

This is why the traditional cure—asking them to be distrustful and detached from what they take for granted—produces the traditional response: ho hum. They resist and get bored.

What's hard for students is belief, investment, trust, entering in, inhabiting. They may be great at "leaving" themselves in (taking things for granted), but that's not the same as "putting" themselves in—especially into what's new. So the literacy practice that I'm suggesting consists of push-ups in trusting, putting self in, caring, and believing. It's a playful practice, but it goes directly against the tendency of postmodernism to make people feel that nothing is worth trusting or caring about. And it speaks to the most difficult goal of critical thinking: to pry people out of what they take for granted.

Here are the paradigm steps for the believing game:

1. Start from some issue that people disagree about, feel confused about, or want to understand better. Ideally it's an issue that feels "real" to students—that is, not an issue students feel as "merely a teacher issue."
2. Invite everyone in the room to do some private freewriting to explore their responses to this issue. It's fine to invite low stakes, off-the-cuff writing (“Just follow your first thoughts and immediate responses”); or else to push harder for connected thinking (“Try to think your way through to some genuine conclusions”). Either way, people need at least ten or fifteen minutes of writing to let their thinking and responding develop. (This process can be accomplished through speaking rather than writing, but writing is much more effective—especially for the first few sessions with the believing game. People need a chance to explore their responses in private without fear of “getting it wrong” or “sounding stupid.”)

3. Now go around the group and hear each person briefly give his or her main thought or a central thought. A couple of sentences at most. *No one may respond*. We are just listening. And help everyone realize that the goal is to hear the widest variety of responses.

   The “final” step is to play the believing game with all the positions or responses that emerge, but there may be a need for intermediate steps because of too many views and too little time. (If the issue is important, though, the game should stretch over a number of class sessions.)

4. Intermediate step: select those positions or responses that seem most promising or useful or interesting to explore. The opinions of participants play a role here, but everyone needs to know that the whole spirit of the believing game is to work *against* the tyranny of majority rule. When most people are annoyed or dismissive of one person’s strongly held view, this is often just a situation where that view needs to kept in the pot. As teacher, I sometimes jump in and pick the most diverse and interesting positions. When in doubt, choose those that are least like “common sense” or “orthodoxy” or “what’s sensible.” In a sense we are looking for views that are hardest to believe—though only if someone cares about them.

5. Playing the believing game itself. It's important to be explicit about rules and goals: we’re outlawing all criticizing in order to foster two neglected intellectual activities: listening and entering in. I could call it the moral imagination game.

   Work with one position at a time. Start with the person who stated this view—who believes it. Get that person simply to talk more about how he or she sees things through the lens of this belief.
Most people can’t do this well unless we’re scrupulous about enforcing the no-criticizing rule. Then invite others to join in and help flesh out and enrich this view or position by “putting on” this lens and trying to see the world through it and telling what insights emerge. Others often have fresh insights that the originator never thought of. It can help for people to pretend to *be* someone who holds this view. This kind of role taking serves as leverage for seeing differently. When people try to enter into a view they find alien, they sometimes fall into a kind of playful and unrealistic exaggeration. This can be fruitful if done in a supportive spirit. But try to avoid hostile or parodically “positive” versions of the view in question. One sometimes has to interrupt participants when they instinctively start to criticize or object to thoughts they experience as a nutty or dangerous.

6. Then simply repeat the process with the next position or response. The process of playing the believing game with a position or point of view doesn’t always have to take too long.

Needless to say, this can be a scary game for some students—and for many intellectuals in our culture. There is a fear of entering into or believing wrong or noxious beliefs. The crucial thing to remember is that the believing game involves a promise of intellectual mutuality—a contract: “You have to do your best and try to enter in or believe the views of others, but in payment, others have to try to enter into your point of view.” We may have to try to enter into views we find noxious, but *everyone* has to agree to play it with views counter to those noxious views.

The nitty gritty question is this. What’s so awful about having to try to enter into a racist, sexist, or violence-loving view—when in fact *everyone* in our culture is already awash in those thoughts, and feelings? Those thoughts and feelings may be *unstated*—especially in our classrooms. But for that very reason, students tend to experience those views as hovering and powerful—yet nevertheless difficult to see or analyze very clearly. The payoff is that everyone has to play the believing game with views that are *counter* to racism, sexism, violence-loving—to hear and try to enter into the world as it is experienced by someone who is hurt or bothered by racism, sexism, violence—and actually try to enter into the intellectual and felt experience of such persons.

Let me close by calling attention again to the link between my use of the believing game and your goals. We are both seeking to engender a constructed literacy. The believing game can help students get unstuck from the views they take for granted (but aren’t even all that invested in), and to
enter into views that are different from their own. Even more important, we are both trying to help students get unstuck from the very stance or mood of alienation, distrust, and fear of commitment that currently traps so many of them.*

* I’ve written at length about the believing game:


To: Victor Villanueva
From: Christopher Schroeder

Here’s what I’m thinking about now—maybe it’s a good place to start.
I’ve been rewriting the introduction, talking about the conditions of literacy in society, particularly in light of GWBush’s recent call for a Republican response to what he says is a pervasive literacy crisis. What I’m suggesting is that _ReInventing_ doesn’t pretend to do away with any cultural hegemony, as if cultural hegemonies can be effaced, but wants to participate in the process of re-establishing a new cultural hegemony within the academy, one that is local and context-specific, one that reflects collaboration among students, teachers, and institutions, one that constructs itself out of the conflicts between the cultural capital of the academy and of the worlds of students and teachers.
What say you to that?

To: Christopher Schroeder
From: Victor Villanueva

okay—
what i have to say i’m saying right off the top: no revisions, giving myself five minutes to type and then give this closure for now (since i’ve been home about two hours after having been gone for a week). two things occur to me—
the lure of locality and the myth of the counterhegemonic. I’ll begin with the second, since “counterhegemony” is a term I have used myself but have since had to rethink. I like the idea of a counter to the current hegemony, a resistant or revolutionary enterprise that occurs within what Gramsci called the war of maneuver, but Gramsci is not hierarchical or maybe I should say not evolutionary in the way Marx was.

That is, while Marx believed that one thing was superceded by another, even if dialectically (feudalism to capitalism to socialism, say), Gramsci describes a process in which new hegemonies gain advantage but with prior hegemonies never quite disappearing (sedimentations), like the existence of religion still, despite the secularization of the current hegemony. That being the case, there’s no guarantee that the new hegemony will be any better than the one prior, just different, reflecting a new historic bloc. So effacing or coming up with a counter are both problems. The best we can do is affect—and mainly through language.

Now it seems that the only change we can affect is local. But look at what happens at the local when it comes to education, say. Schools have community control—which means that a dozen folks who know nothing about education and education theory decide what will happen in the schools, rather than national professional organizations. So I’m always suspicious.

A student of mine speaks of the glocal—a global sensibility and reality that is affected locally. That is—there must first be something of a global goal in mind (like a war of maneuver) and then consider the local action that can affect the local alone is like Western medicine. Chinese medicine would stick a pin in a local area so as to affect the entire body and the area surrounding the body. I’m not saying I prefer acupuncture to a prescription; but I am saying that the analogies are suggestive. And that’s what I got to say to that (seven minutes).

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From: Christopher Schroeder
To: Victor Villanueva

Thanks for the comments, and I’ll respond, off the top, with no revisions, etc. What’s wrong with that notion of the counterhegemony? Who actually expects that the counterhegemonic is any better than the current-hegemony? What makes it more appropriate (is that the same way as saying better? I’m not sure) is that, with constructed discourses, it will reflect the cultural capital of the students—the specific students from specific classrooms each semester and the student body, such as it is, in the ways that constructed literacies demand change-responses from the institution. The notion of sedimentation is perfect, I think. Never will a particular cultural capital be
completely lost. However, what we’re looking for, particularly when we assess students, will require changes.

As for the lure of locality, . . . yes, local officials do screw up education, in ways that are worse, I think, than the ways of federal and state agencies. However, the problem, as you astutely identify, is the locals who are making the decisions. Those who usually make the decisions are those who shouldn’t be, and those who should be (I.e. teachers in the classroom, etc.) are those who are not. Why not? That’s the interesting question, I think, but not one I’m prepared to answer. What I am prepared to say, though, is that we need more Gramscian-Giroux-Bizzell public intellectuals, more of us who do what we do in the academy also outside the academy, which brings us back full circle, huh? I’m always suspicious when anyone talks of the global and/or the universal, which is the opposite of you, and my first question is always, who will be falling through these cracks? Who will be elided in our efforts to generalize/theorize the global/universal?

What about local leaders having conversations with other local leaders?

(again, off the top of the head-ly)

From: Victor Villanueva
To: Christopher Schroeder

Glib retort.

To wit: the global ain’t the universal.

The universal is a scientistic discourse.

The global is an economic/power discourse.

From: Christopher Schroeder
To: Victor Villanueva

The glib is taken seriously.

Yes, the universal was a scientistic discourse, and the global was an economic/power one, but . . . wouldn’t you say that, in the contemporary university, the lines between the two have been increasingly blurred. In Readings’s _The University in Ruins_, he argues for a shift in the mission of postsecondary education away from cultural training towards excellence, which, in spite of institutional claims otherwise, is defined in universal terms that are virtually indistinguishable from one institution to the next. If he’s right, and I’ve not made up my mind yet, but if he’s right, then the commodification of postsecondary education has used scientistic standards as a way of
naming the global. (maybe not, but hear me out.) i’m thinking of _st. martin’s guide to writing_, in which critical thinking—defined in universal-scientistic terms—is explicitly linked with economic, social, and personal success on the second page! as i’m reading these textbooks, there is an implicit connection between the universal and the global, insofar that global tropes and universal strategies are virtually indistinguishable (e.g. critical reading).

and what about a contingent cultural hegemony? and conversations among local-public intellectuals?

sorry about being so complicated—actually, my students make the same accusation, and i tell them that it’s life, not me, that’s complicated and that i’m merely talking about what is already complicated. i’m not sure they buy my response, but at least they don’t complain again.

so what do you want to do about your interlude? i’ve been thinking that it might be interesting for you to do a reading of the book from the context of gramsci and hegemony, sort of a deconstruction or a problematization of the book itself as part of the book, as a way of continuing the conversations and a way of resisting closure and monologic proclamations.

what are your thoughts?

the deadline i’ve been given to finish isn’t until mid summer, so there is some time.

hope the semester is concluding well for you.

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From: Victor Villanueva
To: Christopher Schroeder

Well, Chris, I have finally made it through your revised manuscript. And it’s quite a revision. I like the way you’ve situated stuff (even if I don’t think that folks tend to relate “literacy crisis” with not doing well in college; literacy crisis means not getting an option to go to college). I enjoyed reading and marveled at the gutsy way you allow for folks to disagree with you. Thanks.

So let’s continue our interlude, though I should say that while I’m always troubled by those who criticize what I write and say by what I didn’t write or say, in some sense that’s what I want to do here. I want to say something about what isn’t really said—and that is that your theoretical stance leans more to the left than you allow or might even recognize. It is clear from reading your book that the ideas that most catch your fancy are those written by folks who lay claim to marxisms (like Jameson or Bourdieu or in some sense James Berlin), are labeled as marxists (like Giroux or Freire), or who have argued for composition studies to come to grips with marxisms (like Berlin or Bizzell). Yet
it’s equally clear that you don’t know that stuff really well yet (with your labeling Berlin as “neo-Marxist” as the dead giveaway), that maybe because of the trends in composition studies and literary studies, you’re more comfortable in po-mo. But I’d say as time and curiosity allow, you should get immersed in that discourse. If nothing else, the turns of discussion are interesting and are tied to discussions of discourse and thereby to rhetoric, and if to rhetoric then to composition studies and pedagogy. What you’re doing in your classrooms wouldn’t change much, keeping all its troubles and its successes, still struggling with rearticulations of power and agency, but given a sharper understanding of contemporary marxisms in particular, you’d be able to work from a more thoroughly articulated body of theories.

Marxisms: classical, orthodox, neo, and post. There are revisionists (like Kaustky), radicals (like Rosa Luxemberg), and Austro-Marxists (like Max Adler)—all of whom are German Social Democrats. There are the Russians like Trotsky and Lenin or Bukharin (who Kenneth Burke seemed interested in in A Rhetoric of Motives). There’s Frankfurt (the ones usually labeled as “neo”). And there’s France. There are existentialists and revisionists and structuralists and poststructuralists among the French marxists. Perhaps the most recognized among North American marxists is Stanley Aranowitz, and he’s tied to Henry Giroux, though Giroux, somewhere, declares that he’s not a marxist. And I’m not even going to mention the Latin and South Americans (except Ernesto Laclau, though his theories are more French than Latin American) or the Indian Subcontinent or Angola or Southern Africa. Enough. You get the idea. Marxisms are rich and varied, a lot more than rantings about proleteriat and bourgeoisie and shouts that quote Eisenhower as if he were Lenin in pointing to the military-industrial complex.

Within this huge mix of the marxist and the marxian there is Gramsci and his revisionists. Somewhere along the way, a dozen years back or so, I got into a study group with folks in Northern Arizona. We read The German Ideology and then the group broke down. But by then I wanted to know more. The more I learned, the more I was convinced that that word—hegemony—was being misused (or under-understood). Besides that, I was taken by Gramsci, for reasons I published about a while back now: it made sense, insofar as ideology as “false consciousness” never did resonate (as one subject to ideology but aware of the things I was subject to); the distinction between base and superstructure (now more and more described as political economy as separate from cultural studies) seemed false (given the indisputable ties between being of color and being poor); class as the overarching societal principle had problems (in that class ascendancy doesn’t negate racism or sexism). Gramsci messed with all of those assumptions yet maintained the kind of
cultural critique that was necessary for understanding certain things—like power positions in classrooms, say.

Gramsci was/is suggestive. So others have taken his ideas and tried to cast them in this time—the time of worldwide capitalism. Those who tried to “fix” Gramsci are the folks I find myself most interested in at the time (at least in coming to understand ideology; there’s another group I look to for understanding the whole idea of worldwide capitalism, a group that comes under the head of World Systems (or World-Systems, with a hyphen) Theory). The one immediately recognized for working with Gramsci’s not-fully articulated theories is Louis Althusser, of course. But you start to get at the other one who recasts Gramsci—Pierre Bourdieu. The main difference between Althusser and Bourdieu is that while Althusser tries to situate Gramsci with a large structuralist framework, Bourdieu tries to workout the large within the small—the glocal as my student, Azfar Hussein would put. Now, I’ve already written more than a mere interlude here, and I’m getting dangerously close to becoming a condescending jerk, but I’d ask that you get immersed in his Outline of a Theory of Practice. That book is loaded with stuff you’re struggling with: habitus, those ways in which we are situated with internalized norms that are reflected in particular practices, the rules we follow without being aware of the rules (critical unconscious in Bourdieu’s terms). That’s what you are struggling against in your dissatisfaction with academic discourse. That’s what your students are struggling with in your dismantling of your role as authority. Heterodoxy: the way in which you try to create a new orthodoxy of constructed classroom discourses, and the way the attempt has to deal with doxa—your own authority (even in asserting a breakdown on the authority). Field (though that might be Sociology in Question and surely in The Field of Cultural Production)—competition within social and institutional relations, a competition that functions under its own logic. Surely, you’re rubbing up against this and so are your students. And that puts you in a contradictory location (which recalls the Gramsci-influenced work on class by Erik Olin Wright). So though you’re right to try to lessen what Bourdieu calls the “symbolic violence” that arises in the attempt to negotiate cultural capital, the stuff’s really complicated, since students will leave your office only to be subjected by others’ assumption of cultural capital as the students try to attain the symbolic capital of whatever field the students decide to enter into. Got that?

Now, having said all that, let me point to one other pair of theorists I am sure would light you up and cause you to continue to problematize the kinds of issues surrounding political economy (like your objection to The St. Martin’s Guide) and culture. And that pair would be Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. They fall under the head of “post-marxists,” insofar as they don’t give
the same kind of almost essentialist attention to social or economic class that classical, orthodox, and neo-marxists, in all of their various manifestations do. I know you’ll like them because they argue that universal discourses are no longer tenable, that the very idea of “society” is an untenable universal discourse, that new social movements must be localized to deal with problems that continue despite class politics—movements concerning anti-racism, feminism, rights of sexuality, ecology, and the like. Laclau and Mouffe begin with Gramsci (the one book that I’m still grappling with but which is so very compelling, to the degree that I would even claim to “get it,” is *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*)—they begin with Gramsci, incorporate, explicitly, the most meaningful concepts of Derrida and others of that ilk, making for a marxism that addresses our more pressing concerns (or at least mine—bigotry of all sorts) while arguing the need for focussing attention on the micro-social.

And there are others. So though you said in one of our first exchanges that you are not thinking in terms of countering the hegemonic, your book flirts with contemporary leftist writers. Get this book out. But know it’s almost prewriting to ideas I would invite you to explore. And once explored, I’d also invite you to keep the conversation going with me. That would be fun.