

## ***The Usual Conflict, Controversy, and Debate***

### **Constructing Knowledges: The Politics of Theory-Building and Pedagogy in Composition**

By Sidney I. Dobrin; Foreword by Patricia Bizzell; Afterword by Gary A. Olson

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*Reviewed by Cynthia Fowler*

**A**s all faculty and staff in higher education know, academia is no utopia. It is replete with conflict and controversy, and debate sometimes so acrimonious that it divides departments, even an entire campus or an entire discipline.

Research versus teaching, tenure versus yearly contracts, free speech versus political correctness—and the list goes on.

One such division, currently attracting national attention, is the rift between literature and composition. The schism is evident in English departments across the country. But underlying this rift is a controversy common to most fields—theory versus practice.

Sounding the voice of mediation, Sidney Dobrin, in his new book *Constructing Knowledges: The Politics of Theory Building and Pedagogy in Composition*, provides a timely analysis of the theory/pedagogy debate in composition, a field long regarded as one of service rather than of scholarship.

Dobrin's intent is neither to take sides nor to resolve the dispute. Rather, it is to help remove the bitterness from the ongoing argument that "has turned ugly and, thus, counterproductive."

The site of the discussion is specific. But the questions he address-

es are universal: What are the essential tensions between theory and pedagogy? What is the role of theory in a field perceived to be valuable only for its service dimension? How can theory help change this perception?

Acknowledging that theory and practice are complementary forces that together create knowledge, Dobrin offers a bold thesis, easily misunderstood with only a cursory reading of the text: "Theory does not necessarily have to inform pedagogy" to be worthwhile. By this he means that theory does not always have to translate into tangible classroom application in order to have merit.

This stance does not mean that Dobrin disparages the crucial thrust of practitioners in the field of composition, the daily struggle of becoming better teachers and helping students become better writers and thinkers.

Rather, Dobrin understands what the relatively new and evolving field of composition studies must accomplish if it is to gain the recognition it deserves so that teachers of composition can be afforded the same respect as teachers of literature.

What composition teachers and scholars must do, he emphasizes, is continue to explore theory even

when there may not be directly derived lesson plans from theory. If compositionists turn away from theoretical pursuits, the field of composition will stagnate and be “defined within the narrow confines of a service organization.”

To comprehend this seeming paradox that theory need not inform praxis in a field whose thrust is praxis, we must understand what Dobrin means by theory.

As opposed to grand, universal, law-like explanations of phenomena—referred to as Theory with a capital *T*—he embraces theoretical speculation—theory with a small *t*. By this, he means serious discussion and debate about explanations that can be rethought and revised.

The real value of theoretical speculation, he claims, is its transformative nature, its “evolutionary, generative power, its ability to adapt and change over time and in the light of further speculation.”

What can we learn from such theoretical speculation? As it relates to composition, we can learn more about the operations of written discourse, the relationship between discourse and knowledge, between language and self, and between language and social institutions.

But we will not be able to translate all that we learn into concrete lesson plans. As Dobrin asserts, it isn’t necessary “to do theory” in order to derive value from theory.

Foucault’s work is a prime example, Foucault being the author of such diverse works as *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*; *The Archaeology of Knowledge*; and *The Discourse on Language*. Dobrin maintains that Foucault’s work does not have immediate classroom application.

Nevertheless, “our frequent reference to Foucault’s work suggests that we embrace his theory as important to our scholarship” and that “his work is one of the few projects that compositionists willingly accept without insisting on a direct tie to pedagogy in all scenarios.”

In trying to remove the rancor and restore the productiveness of the debate between the theorists and the practitioners, Dobrin provides another bold insight that may shed light on other controversies within the academy or on controversy itself.

Dobrin contends that we must not strive for either consensus or resolution. Doing so, he argues, would bring about intellectual stagnation and “inscribe a particular set of values.” We don’t want consensus, says Dobrin, “because consensus implies closure.”

Instead, we need “tension as much as balance in order to perpetuate constructive conversation.” We must continue to debate the various competing theories of knowledge, learning, language, discourse, writing, and literacy. But we must do so in respectful, constructive ways without fear of losing ground, without feeling threatened, and without privileging any particular school of thought.

This concept of not striving for consensus is only one example of the insight and depth Dobrin brings to the theory/pedagogy debate. Non-compositionist readers of this book will appreciate the extensive research informing the discussion and the keen perception regarding the role of theory and the role of the debate itself.

Readers of this book who are in the field of composition will relish in Dobrin’s description of the

changes taking place. The field of composition has transformed itself. Neither pedagogy nor theory can claim rhetoric and composition as entirely its own.

Compositionists have constructed, as Dobrin observes, an interdisciplinary field, making rhetoric and composition “one of the most exciting disciplines in the academy.” As for where it is going,

Dobrin affirms, “We are going everywhere.” ■

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