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Comp 150, Winter 2007

### **The Threads of Thought: An Analysis of Conceptual Strands Between Texts**

Many philosophers, writers, and thinkers have addressed the interconnectedness of people, objects, or ideas. From the hypothesis of Six Degrees of Separation to the ecological connection between humans and nature to the theory of Intertextuality, the concept that objects (whether human or not) are connected appears in every sector of society and, to a greater extent, life. In much the same way, concepts resonate and pull from each other in the realm of academia (among others) to form conceptual strands or traces of a concept that link works that may or may not deal with the same concept directly (or explicitly), but do have resonances with each other through the implicit expression of thoughts and ideas.

Resonances occur in many texts, though, for the purposes of this paper, I will review only a few. The texts I will draw from include “Literacy, Discourse, and Linguistics: Introduction” by James Paul Gee, “Intertextuality and the Discourse Community” by James E. Porter, “Reading and Writing without Authority” by Ann M. Penrose and Cheryl Geisler, “Women and Ecology” by Carolyn Merchant, and “Ethics for Wildlife Conservation: Overcoming the Human-Nature Dualism” by Barbara Paterson. Though these texts do not all address the same conceptual strands, there each text will apply to one or more conceptual strand. On the concept of Discourse, Gee, Porter, and Penrose and Geisler hold a resonating conversation. Also, Gee, Merchant, as well as Penrose and Geisler all forward the concept of change. Finally, Penrose and Geisler, Paterson, and Porter resonate with each other as they tackle the concept of authority.

Discourse as a concept focuses on the “identity kit” (Gee 56) or set of tools an individual wields to accomplish the various tasks that accompany life. These tasks could include participation in a mixture of social, vocational, or educational environments and, to that end, allow the individual to participate in the conversation that group is holding. These authors all bring a unique perspective to

the conversation and though Gee is the only one whose primary focus is Discourse, the other authors utilize the concept of Discourse to further develop their own unique point of view and to address the factors shaping their unique rhetorical situation.

James Paul Gee's perspective on Discourse focuses on the role it plays in life as a whole. To Gee, Discourse is more than just language; it is the primary building block for all social interaction. Gee states, "A Discourse is a sort of 'identity kit' which comes complete with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act, talk, and often write, so as to take on a particular role that others will recognize" (Gee 56). This definition of Discourse expands upon the dictionary definition of discourse, which the American Heritage Dictionary defines as, "To speak or write formally and at length" (Discourse online). Gee further illustrates the uses of Discourse by placing it into different categories including "primary Discourse" (Gee 57), and "secondary Discourse" (57). Secondary Discourse contains "dominant" and "non-dominant" (57) Discourses. These categories also describe the contexts in which each form of Discourse is used. Gee explains that primary Discourse is used first and foremost in the context of one's first social environment, the family. Meanwhile, secondary Discourses are developed through the use of the primary Discourse and are used for social interaction in various groups and environments outside of the home. By showing the different applications of Discourse, Gee has shown the social applications of Discourse. Without the knowledge of how Discourse applies to an individual environment, the understanding and fluency within a given Discourse would be worthless.

While Gee addresses the impact of discourse on the individual person, James Porter looks at discourse as it applies to a text. Porter takes the post-structuralist point of view by shifting the focus from the author (or the individual) that uses the discourse, in order to place the focus on the text that resulted from a given discourse. This point is stressed when Porter says, "...by identifying and stressing the intertextual nature of discourse...we shift our attention away from the writer as individual and focus more on the sources and social contexts from which the writer's discourse arises" (Porter 70). This idea, while forming a clear distinction between the work of Gee and the work of

Porter, also shows a connection between the two authors; both authors focus on defining the uses and applications of discourse. Porter also deals with the social applications of discourse in what he terms a “discourse community.” Porter states “A ‘discourse community’ is a group of individuals bound by a common interest who communicate through approved channels and whose discourse is regulated” (Porter 72). This concept ties back to that of Gee as Gee discusses how a Discourse “... comes with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act, talk, and often write...” (Gee 56).

Another set of voices in the conversation is that of Penrose and Geisler. These authors contribute yet another unique point of view to the concept of discourse focusing on the use of discourse in an academic context, or utilizing the discourse with authority to create a text that is academically credible. Penrose and Geisler point out that an academic text should focus on knowledge-making rather than knowledge reporting. To accomplish this task the authors observe the way two college students write. The first, Janet, is a relatively new college student, while the second, Roger, is an experienced college student. Penrose and Geisler observe, “Janet’s approach illustrates the degree to which such personal authority is denied in school contexts. It is generally acknowledged that students enter college classrooms with extensive experience in, and often a strong commitment to, an information-transfer model of education which clearly clashes with current constructivist views of knowledge... (Penrose 31). This point shows how a Discourse has shaped Janet to follow certain guidelines and rules in order to be a part of the discourse that includes most high school students. Within this discourse, there is a clear clash with the notion of using, or taking, authority in writing. It is to this end that Penrose and Geisler add to the discourse conversation. They pull from the written application of discourse, yet qualify the way writing should be used in discourse. In this instance, Janet had been part of a discourse community that the writer to use the “information transfer model” and, therefore, lacked the understanding to take authority in her writing, while Roger, who has a great deal of experience in writing in college, is able to take authority in his writing and make knowledge rather than simply report on preexisting knowledge. In both cases, the discourse the stu-

dents Janet and Roger have been a part of have shaped what they are able to do at that given time as both discourses have governed what is acceptable.

Although these texts don't deal with the concept of discourse explicitly, each text contributes a new perspective on the use or application of discourse to a certain context. Gee lays a foundation for understanding what Discourse is, how one defines Discourse. Porter then contributes the concept of Discourses forming discourse communities which are self governing and regulate the use of their discourse. Meanwhile, Penrose and Geisler show how one can use a discourse to write effectively. Each text brings a unique piece to the conceptual strand of Discourse and each piece is just a small part in a greater conversation surrounding the topic.

Society in its entirety has many flaws and imbalances; the solutions to which are often difficult to find and implement. Regardless of the level of difficulty involved in a change, it is often the only solution to a problem. In some instances, a liberal or forward moving approach is essential in order to achieve the desired end result. Such is the case in the topics addressed by Gee, Merchant, and Penrose and Geisler. The authors each address the concept of change in order to correct in a flaw in the system or in the perception of their topic. Gee presents what he believes to be a misconception by society as a whole as to the true nature and implications of Discourse. He stresses "...what is important is not language and surely not grammar..." (Gee 56). By making this simple statement Gee is challenging the current social structure. Gee makes the point, "Beyond changing the social structure, is there much hope? No, there is not. So we better get on about the process of changing the social structure" (Gee 60). Though Gee's statement is simple in nature and assumes that you have read his preceding argument, the charge he makes is substantial. Gee asserts that in order to fix the flaw he has discovered and addressed, a complete overhaul of the *entire* social structure is needed, this is not a simple change, but rather one that requires a great deal of time, energy, and effort coupled with the willingness to embrace a *new* system.

In a similar way, Carolyn Merchant suggests another liberal change when she discusses her topic of women (feminism) and ecology. Merchant boldly states, "The contributions of such found-

ing 'fathers' of modern science as Francis Bacon, William Harvey, René Descartes, Thomas Hobbs, and Isaac Newton must be reevaluated. The fate of other options, alternative philosophies, and social groups shaped by the organic world view and resistant to the growing exploitative mentality needs reappraisal" (Merchant 348). This assertion on Merchant's part may be even larger than that of Gee. It is, admittedly, odd for a writer involved in the conversation of ecology, among others, to suggest that the foundation for modern science must be reevaluated. However, this sort of challenge is a shared trait between Gee and Merchant; both authors address the concept of change and the view the concept through the light of essentiality.

In yet another context, Penrose and Geisler also suggests a rather large change in the eyes of new post-secondary students. As the purpose of Penrose and Geisler's text is to show the importance of writing with authority, or joining the conversation, in writing, it would make sense that they would conclude that everyone needs to write with authority. According to Penrose and Geisler, "It is generally acknowledged that students enter college classrooms with extensive experience in and often a strong commitment to, an information-transfer model of education which clearly clashes with the current constructionist views of knowledge" (Penrose 31). With the information transfer model students simply report the facts while removing most, if not all, points of personal analysis and by so doing, are unable to participate in the conversation. Penrose and Geisler then assert that while using the information transfer model, individuals can only observe the conversation, not join it. To that end, Penrose and Geisler tie into the conceptual strand of change insofar as they discuss the importance of adaptation to the "knowledge-making" role rather than strict adherence to the "knowledge-reporting" method that has become the standard for most secondary institutions.

The three preceding texts all play on the concept of change in order to achieve their purposes. Gee uses the concept of change in order to further the notion that Discourse involves far more than just the use of language and therefore cannot be taught overtly. To that end, Gee suggests a complete overhaul of the social system to correct the problem. Merchant focuses on the similarities

between feminism and ecology, showing that both have had similar developmental struggles. As she progressed through her argument, she showed how feminism required a complete change in the point of view of most people before it was able to gain any level of influence. Through the comparison of the two movements Merchant moved on to suggest that the only way for ecology to attain influence is for the foundations of modern science to be reevaluated. Finally, Penrose and Geisler evaluate the use of authority in writing. From this base, they move to change the way students writes so that these students would be able to participate in the conversation.

The concept of authority appears in many different contexts, from politics, to business, even the educational system. As humans, it has been deducted that in order to maintain some semblance of order and peace, there must be some level of authority in place. Often, this is a hierarchal structure such as a state or federal government, or it could even be a simple chain of command as is the case in most vocational fields. The authors Penrose and Geisler, however, choose to address authority in the context of writing. As Penrose and Geisler note in the study of two college students, Roger (a relatively advanced student) and Janet (a new freshman) they are able to observe the effects of writing without authority. Rather than come to some conclusion about the information she was presented with, “Janet writes the definitive text, a handbook for paternalists” (Penrose 32). Janet is faced with a dilemma, “she must find the truth... and, while she acknowledges no authority of her own, she must speak authoritatively” (Penrose 32). In order for a text to be considered credible, a writer must be able to take authority. This simply means that the writer must be willing to evaluate the evidence and take a stance on the issue. If a writer does not take authority, he or she is engaged in a conversation in which he or she simply repeats the evidence to a group that is already well verse in such evidence, however, if that same author takes a stance on the evidence, the author will be adding something to the conversation allowing for knowledge-making rather than knowledge-reporting. In the light of this point, the importance of authority in writing is quite visible. Without authority, writing will become redundant and pointless.

Similarly, Paterson implicitly addresses the concept of authority through the lens of the in-

terdependence of humans and nature. As Paterson illustrates, one of the key reasons humans are dependent on the environment (nature) is that we need the resources it provides. It is therefore logical that we would pursue a course of “sustainable development” or “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Paterson 144). In spite of the logical tie between humans and nature, there is much debate over whether the world is currently on a “sustainable” path. Environmentalists would say not and therefore move with several different methods to convince the world that the current path is not sustainable. The fact that humans are dependent on nature for resources and that nature can be destroyed by humans is a type of self-governing structure. There is certainly authority applied and though, in many cases, that authority is ignored, it is still present and will have to be balanced to ensure the survival of both humans and nature. As Paterson notes, “The modern conversation paradigm, conservation for and with people, requires that we overcome the dualism of human versus nature, which creates antagonism between conservationist and other people. This point illustrates a point of view that understands the importance of the authority structure between humans and nature, and strives to see the balance preserved and even made better.

A third author that discusses the concept of authority is James Porter. In his text, Porter discusses the various ways that texts are interconnected showing that no text is truly independent. Porter asserts that “All texts are interdependent: We understand a text only insofar as we understand its precursors” (Porter 70). If one assumes this level of interconnectedness, it is quite obvious that there is some level of implied authority. A text cannot be self-governing in this context, but rather is governed by all the texts that preceded it, and, in a sense, will be governed by all the texts that will follow it. Porter even evaluates the way a writer is able to write within a discourse community noting that “a ‘discourse community’ is a group of individuals bound by a common interest who communicate through approved channel and whose discourse is regulated” (Porter 72). Essentially, not only is there authority surrounding the texts themselves, but writers must submit to some level of authority within their given discourse. It doesn’t matter who the audience is, there are certain standards that

must be upheld in order for the work to be considered and classified as the type of work the author wishes. For instance, for an author writing a children's book it is generally assumed that the book should be able to be read by, and certainly understood by children. A discourse on uranium as it applies to the development of atomic bombs would hardly seem appropriate for a children's book, and is, therefore, a rare occurrence (if appearing at all). This same sort of standard is continued within every discourse community, though some discourse communities will have looser standards than others, there is still some level of authority present.

Porter, Paterson, and Penrose and Geisler, all illustrate the concept of authority. Though not addressing it for the same angle or even explicitly. Penrose and Geisler focus on the importance and benefits of taking and utilizing authority in writing. Upon analysis of writing without authority, it becomes clear that authority in writing can be very useful. Paterson considers the implications of the inherent authority structure governing humans and nature. Paterson notices that there is a sort of interdependence between the two, though nature could live without humans, humans cannot live without the resources of nature. And though nature can live independently, mankind processes the power to destroy nature, thus creating a governing force. Finally, Porter addresses the authority of texts showing that texts are not self-governing, but rather interconnected and governed by all other texts. Also, Porter shows the constraints a discourse community provides a writer. A writer will be governed by the rules and regulations of the discourse community, or the authority of the discourse community.

As one considers the various ways texts build on the knowledge of the preceding one, the ways that texts resonate with each other, a web of ties between conceptual stands emerges. With a seemingly infinite number of concepts to discourse the web is endless and the number of concepts a single text contains can vary greatly. In this paper I've addressed the conceptual stands of discourse, change, and authority. Within these strands the associated authors seem to hold a conversation as the different points of view are brought to life and illustrated in the different contexts the authors are writing from. Though the primary focuses of these texts are not the same, the different texts are still

able to discuss similar concepts and in so doing further the idea of the interconnectedness of texts. This idea provides yet another way to consider texts and allows the reader to build connections as they develop knowledge, while at the same time allowing the writer freedom from the need to “reinvent the wheel” every time, alternatively, the writer can pull for the preexisting pool of knowledge to achieve his or her purpose.

### Works Cited

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