“From Someone to Anyone to Me: Narratives of Identity in the College Writing Classroom”

Johannah Rodgers

What does it mean for students to locate places for themselves in an academic discourse community and what factors contribute to this process? Based on a qualitative study of ten undergraduates from The City College of New York, I investigate the different stages of development involved in the foundation of an authoritative identity in the college writing classroom, the pedagogical tools that propel the advancement through each stage, as well as how the names that are used to refer to oneself in the act of writing, i.e., author, writer, and the stories one tells about oneself as a writer facilitate the construction of such an identity.

The issue of why a student’s ability to locate or re-locate a place of authority for him or herself in an academic writing context is dependent on the narratives he or she constructs inside and outside the writing classroom is discussed in the context of work on social conceptions of subjectivity and the writing subject by composition theorists David Bartholmae, Susan K. Miller, and Karen Burke LeFevre, as well as work on the socio-genetic formation of identity by psychologists Dorothy Holland and William Lachiotte.

The findings from the interviews suggest that a student’s ability to establish an authoritative identity in the writing classroom is a socially situated act dependent on, rather than independent of, a specific discourse community. The implications of this finding are varied. However, in the near term, they suggest that by moving away from a reified notion of writer as identity in rhetoric and composition theory and pedagogy, we may further a student’s ability to establish a position of authority in the writing classroom by encouraging them to engage with multiple subject positions and to understand that a successful academic writer is not who one is, but a role that one becomes comfortable playing.

Johannah Rodgers is an Assistant Professor of English at CUNY’s New York City College of Technology. She holds a Ph.D. in English/Rhetoric and Composition from The City University of New York Graduate Center and her dissertation, which she completed in 2006, was entitled “The Social Construction of Authorship: An Investigation of Rhetorical Authority and
Identity in the College Writing Classroom.” Her book, *sentences*, a collection of short stories and essays was published by Red Dust in 2007 and her chapbook, “necessary fictions, was published by Sona Books in 2003. Her short stories, essays, and reviews have appeared in *Fence, Bookforum, Fiction, CHAIN Arts, Pierogi Press*, and *The Brooklyn Rail*, where she is a contributing editor. In addition to her work at the CUNY Graduate Center, she has studied writing, literature, and philosophy at Stanford, Oxford, and Yale Universities and completed an M.F.A. in Fiction Writing at The City College of New York. Johannah Rodgers Asst. Professor Department of English New York City College of Technology 300 Jay Street, N503Brooklyn, NY 11201 Ph. 718.260.4358