

# Review of *Toward a New Rhetoric of Difference*

TRAVIS GRANDY

Stephanie L. Kerschbaum. *Toward a New Rhetoric of Difference*. Urbana, IL: CCCC/NCTE, 2014. 187 pages.

The field of composition studies has interrogated questions of diversity, difference, and access for several decades. However, as institutions respond to calls to better include and represent people from backgrounds that have historically been excluded from higher education, we must continually revisit questions and contentions for how these power relationships affect our classrooms. How can we negotiate ways that university discourses construct student bodies and identities, how do we as educators understand differences in the lived experiences between us and our students, and how can we meaningfully engage with ways that difference and power are marked and enacted in our classrooms? Contributing to this conversation, Stephanie Kerschbaum's theoretical and methodological innovations in *Toward a New Rhetoric of Difference*, winner of the 2015 CCCC Advancement of Knowledge Award, provides us with a useful perspective to consider difference on the level of the microinteractions between teachers and students and how these are affected by institutional discourses about diversity.

For Kerschbaum, diversity is a much larger question than who gets a seat in the university classroom; rather, she is also concerned with how differences between teachers and students are enacted rhetorically and with how these interactions can be shaped by institution-wide discourses. Although composition studies has long debated the contact-zone as a model for negotiating difference in the classroom, Kerschbaum warns that this may perpetuate contact as a trope for conflict, when in fact such interactions are much more nuanced and socially contingent. Her study builds upon previous research that shows how identity and group affiliations are articulated through writers' lived experiences (LeCourt, *Identity Matters*; Royster), how markers of difference are constituted and valued within structures of power (Gonçalves; McRuer; Price), and utilizes strategies of critical discourse analysis as a way of connecting public, institutional, and classroom discourses (Huckin, Andrus, and Clary-Lemon). Additionally, as I discuss later in this review, Kerschbaum's orientation toward interaction and discourse provides the field with productive ways to reimagine our engagement in writing across the curriculum.

Kerschbaum provides us with several lenses to reconsider the ways diversity discourses enter the composition classroom through teacher and student talk. Driving this research are two central questions: “How is difference identified within classrooms? What conditions or factors motivate engagement with difference?” (15). In particular, she holds that the way that teachers understand difference affects the way they teach writing and interact with their students. For this reason, Kerschbaum seeks to “encourage heightened awareness of systematic patterns of ignoring, suppressing, and denying difference as well as of recognizing, highlighting, and orienting to difference” (15). Although critical writing pedagogies suggest ways that teachers can influence talk about difference in their classrooms, she argues that “attention to students’ and teachers’ classroom discourse must be considered within the context of the discourses that circulate at [an] institution” (18). Kerschbaum wants teachers to consider how institutional discourses shape their perspectives and to approach classroom interactions as places where both students and teachers enact differences, often strategically.

The study site was a large research university in the Midwest that Kerschbaum gave the pseudonym “Midwestern University” (MU). Drawing on multiple research traditions including grounded theory, dialogic discourse analysis, and critical discourse analysis, she observed and analyzed the writing and classroom talk of a FYC course linked with a psychology seminar. Over the course of the 2003 fall semester, she observed every class meeting, made video recordings, recorded ethnographic field notes, conducted a demographic survey, and collected classroom documents and student writing portfolios. Additionally, thirteen peer review sessions were taped for dialogic analysis. Of the nineteen students in the course, Kerschbaum selected four focal participants for interviews as well as interviewing the course instructor.

Following her introductory chapter, Kerschbaum examines the texts that constitute MU’s diversity discourse, demonstrating how “diversity discourses reify and commodify race-ethnic difference” (32). In her analysis of texts such as university websites, brochures, and a ten-year diversity strategic plan, Kerschbaum finds three interdependent layers of this discourse: 1) diversity is linked to market values in ways that commodify “diverse” individuals; 2) definitions of diversity impact how students self-identify with their race and ethnicity; and 3) the discourse establishes relationships between who provides diversity and who benefits from it. For this third point, Kerschbaum analyzes the use of pronouns in MU’s ten-year plan for diversity, such as the outcome statement, “to increase the depth of understanding by the large majority of us who are not in those groups for their values, customs, and experiences” (51). The “us” clearly benefits from having diversity, but the text never identifies who they are explicitly. Similar to studies that point to how linguistic difference can be encoded and racialized in composition studies (Clary-Lemon), Kerschbaum’s analysis shows that

“white students are implicit throughout the document only through their absence” (53). Through her analysis, she traces how tacit ideological commitments enacted through discourse are one iteration of larger social formations that exist across institutions and communities. In this case, the commodification of “diverse” students and the value they add to white students’ educations demonstrates how neoliberal market values are intertwined with structural racism in education. These findings are in keeping with other discursive analyses of diversity statements and policies that demonstrate how “diversity” in university discourses is often structured to serve the social, cultural, and economic needs of middle-class white students (Ahmed; Iverson). This intersectional perspective can help teachers be sensitive to how institutions produce and maintain social inequality, especially when students are implicated by these discourses before they even enter a writing classroom.

In her subsequent chapters, Kerschbaum builds a model of difference as an interactional and rhetorical phenomenon through examining key moments from classroom observations. Her second chapter theorizes difference as a rhetorical performance and “resituates the problem away from *learning about*, and thus needing to know students, toward *learning with*, and thus always coming-to-know students” (57). As an example, Kerschbaum criticizes ways educators can rely on categories of student difference, such as the diagnosing of students on the autism spectrum, and how these can lead teachers toward making problematic assumptions about students’ abilities and needs. Instead, she argues, differences should also be interpreted by how they emerge relationally in the unique social situation of the classroom and be interpreted as rhetorical performance. In her third chapter, Kerschbaum looks to classroom interactions, including peer review sessions, to appreciate how members of a classroom mark difference through their talk, noting that these processes “can help us recognize ways that we take up and respond to our own and others’ positions” (80). For example, in an episode from a peer review session, a student, Blia, offers feedback on her peer Choua’s writing, and each woman contests the change through how she constructs her authority through narratives about past education. Because this marking is always relational, individuals have agency “to contest or challenge identity constructions because personal experience is not generally treated as material available for disagreement” (111). Kerschbaum’s fourth chapter distinguishes that even when teachers prioritize meaningful engagement with difference in their classrooms, “[r]ecognizing markers of difference can also be painful, especially when we acknowledge the values accorded to different ways of moving in the world” (118). To demonstrate this, she looks to moments of communicative failure to illustrate how individuals develop an understanding of identity in relation to others and may not always negotiate difference in productive ways. In a different peer review session, Timothy and Emily have a significant disagreement over one of Timothy’s sentences, and in their talk about his

writing, they “identify and signal differences between themselves” (120). From these moments of rupture that occur during student peer review sessions, she suggests the importance of accountability and engagement, fostering a learning space that is supportive of learning from mistakes, and “listening to conflict, difficulty, and resistance for the sense-making behind others’ acts and responses” (149).

In conclusion, Kerschbaum suggests three key recommendations for how we conceptualize difference in the writing classroom:

1. Attention to markers of difference can help us resist simplistic generalizations about students (113).
2. Practices for marking difference can help us identify opportunities for rhetorical action and dialogue (115).
3. Attention to markers of difference can encourage us to recognize and revise how we engage with students in our classrooms (116).

While Kerschbaum illustrates her argument through several examples of student to student interactions, her case study does not provide similar detail for the course instructor, Yvonne. Illustrating the social conditions of the class through interactions with the instructor and other teaching moments, such as how the instructor facilitated peer review, could serve as a way to connect student interactions to their classroom or institutional frame. Kerschbaum’s analyses of student interactions shows the promise of framing difference as rhetorical interaction and “attends to difference as it is performed during the moment-to-moment vicissitudes of communication” (67). Her choice to emphasize peer review episodes does not undermine her argument but rather leaves open further productive lines of inquiry for classroom interactions and discourses.

I admire how *Toward a New Rhetoric of Difference* helps us reread everyday interactions in the classroom to better understand what is at stake when we or our institutions talk about diversity. In particular, Kerschbaum offers a productive reformulation of identity politics in the classroom that emphasizes the dynamic and dialogic ways identities and social relations are produced and negotiated through everyday interaction. More broadly, she opens methodological approaches for composition studies to reexamine the relationship between classroom discourses and the institutional discourses that provide their frame. As Kerschbaum identifies in connecting MU’s diversity discourses to values of neoliberalism, the influence of institutional discourses can pose significant challenges for critical writing pedagogies and their translation to teaching practice.

I find striking resonances between *Toward a New Rhetoric of Difference* and conversations in writing across the curriculum. Although WAC literature provides us with numerous ways to frame and engage with classroom discourses, it would benefit from more meaningful engagement with ways power and difference have social and

material significance for WAC classrooms. To extend Kerschbaum's contributions to how we can frame difference as relational and iterative, I suggest two possible directions to further develop this line of research. First, WAC's literature on academic discourse communities should account for how power tied to difference influences how students enact academic literacies and acquire the worldviews of particular disciplines. Although scholars have productively explored these dynamics through genre studies (Carter; Clark and Hernandez), the field would also benefit from further naturalistic studies of students negotiating these literacies in classroom talk. Kerschbaum's positioning of classroom discourses alongside institutional discourses suggests composition researchers should account for this broad, if often tacit, ideological influence in the framing of writing pedagogies. WAC classrooms can function as a productive space for students to negotiate and criticize the discourses and power structures they encounter at school (LeCourt, "WAC as Critical Pedagogy"), and engaging students in discourse analysis can further learning goals already valued in composition studies (Huckin; McRuer; Powell).

Second, Kerschbaum's approach to discourse analysis provides a generative perspective on reinterpreting the ideological work of WAC programs. In their model of WAC as both location and momentum, William Condon and Carol Rutz suggest that we differentiate where we locate WAC programs from what programs impact through their work. This is especially useful in framing programs in relation to the unique conditions of institutions and broader interactions with institutional and public discourses. For example, the IWAC "Statement on WAC Principles and Practices" (2014) acknowledges how institutional, state, and national discourses on "accountability" are one of the drivers for assessment in WAC programs (6). These discourses operate in the background of reform work being undertaken by WAC programs (such as general education or faculty development). Attending to the relational and strategic dimensions of these discourses could help researchers identify ways WAC initiatives are influenced or appropriated by other discourses. For example, we could explore implications of these dynamics in discourses about transfer, accelerated curricula, and internationalization of WAC. The ways WAC programs take up or interact with these discourses have implications for how they construct the WAC classroom and possible identities and power relations for both teachers and students.

To conclude, Kerschbaum urges us to be critically engaged with ways identities and ideologies are enacted both through microinteractions in the classroom and through institutional discourses: "When social institutions create and perpetuate particular forms of language, that language is never disinterested" (29–30). As WAC programs adapt to the changing landscape of higher education, and as we seek to build classrooms that are supportive of the learning of *all* students, we must remain attentive to how our own talk and the talk between students are pivotal moments where

identities are enacted, contested, and even silenced. Taken as relational phenomena, diversity and difference are not problems to be fixed, but rather points of contact with which we can engage. Kerschbaum leads us to a praxis of how we might try to learn alongside our students.

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