Bridging divides: New pragmatic philosophy and composition theory

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BRIDGING DIVIDES: NEW PRAGMATIC PHILOSOPHY
AND COMPOSITION THEORY

by

Eric Wallace Leake
Bachelor of Arts
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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the

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Bridging Divides: New Pragmatic Philosophy and Composition Theory

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ABSTRACT

Bridging Divides: New Pragmatic Philosophy and Composition Theory

by

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The growth of composition has led to competing rhetorical and pedagogical theories within the discipline. Pragmatic philosophy supplies a conceptual basis for beginning to reconcile seemingly disparate composition theories. I begin this thesis by surveying pragmatism and identifying key traits that characterize new and hopeful developments in the philosophy. Next, I review composition pedagogies, notably expressivism and cultural studies, as I begin to question their division. I then consider current work in composition theory to justify a pragmatic mediation of binary thought among competing theories, bridging the personal and the social in thought and action. I analyze The New Humanities Reader as an example of a pragmatic approach to composition coursework, and I note the classroom reading anthology’s strengths and limitations. Finally, I explore the implications of a pragmatic turn in composition as a means of beginning to bridge the theoretical divides that threaten the discipline.
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CHAPTER 1

THE INTERSECTION OF PRAGMATISM AND COMPOSITION THEORY:
AN INTRODUCTION

My introduction to the field of composition theory came during my first seminar as a graduate student in English. One of the seminar’s readings was Richard Fulkerson’s “Composition at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century.” In that article, Fulkerson surveys the pedagogical status of the field circa 2005, a useful though potentially disorienting introduction for a new student. Fulkerson identifies four major pedagogical approaches in composition: critical and cultural studies, expressivism, procedural rhetoric, and the current-traditional, though the last is without support in the professional journals (655). In Fulkerson’s taxonomy, cultural studies is primarily concerned with social context, cultural artifacts, and the accompanying discourse in a student’s life. Critical and cultural studies include a concern for social justice. Among the other approaches, expressivism is most concerned with the individual, current-traditional with the formal and material, while procedural rhetoric emphasizes the rhetorical context and genre-based action of a text. Fulkerson’s article is a strong survey of the field, and I tried to locate myself within it.

Charting that location was not easy. I mapped the various approaches and tried to identify the one that best fit me. None seemed to be an acceptable fit. The problem with any taxonomy, of course, is that it draws neat divisions where none actually exist,
complicating the correlation between an individual item and the taxonomical set. Trying to locate myself within Fulkerson’s survey was difficult because each pedagogical approach was appealing in its own way. I liked the social awareness and justice concerns of critical and cultural studies. I also liked expressivism’s attention to individual growth through writing. And I agreed that writing should be considered in light of its purpose and context, as dictated by procedural rhetoric. I was unable to find one approach that best fit me, and I did not know then how to justify coordinating aspects of one pedagogy with those of another to begin constructing a comprehensive position on composition theory and teaching. Unable to settle on one approach, I harbored my sympathies for each and left the central questions of how I think writing should be best considered, valued, and taught for the time answered.

I was still being introduced to the field—in many ways still am—and did not need then to identify exclusively with one approach. Identification could come later, but it needed to come eventually. Compositionists need to have some theoretical basis to justify their views of writing and their practices in teaching writing. As Hephzibah Roskelley and Kate Ronald write, “Teachers who do not know the roots of their own beliefs and methods cannot act as persuasively as they might if they recognized their connections to a richly complicated past and examined how that past is used in current contexts” (Reason to Believe 3). I set out to make those connections to a past, one relevant to the current state of composition studies and my own understanding of writing and teaching. In attempting to make those connections I turned to pragmatic philosophy.

All questions, taken far enough, begin to approach the realm of philosophy as they try to understand different conceptions and experiences of the world. This holds true for
questions about writing, which at its most fundamental level is an attempt to make order and create meaning through the written word. As James Berlin notes, “every rhetorical system is based on epistemological assumptions about the nature of reality, the nature of the knower, and the rules governing the discovery and communication of the known” (Rhetoric and Reality 4). Any conception of writing is based upon epistemological premises. Those premises also relate to the teaching of writing, so that, “in teaching writing we are providing students with guidance in seeing and structuring their experience, with a set of tacit rules about distinguishing truth from falsity, reality from illusion” (7). I sought to ground my views of writing in some epistemology, to locate the assumptions Berlin finds at the heart of any rhetorical system. Through that effort I discovered the rich tradition and renewed vitality of pragmatic philosophy. This thesis is the result of my investigation of pragmatic philosophy and its intersection with composition theory. This thesis does not answer all the available questions, but it does begin to develop a pragmatic approach to composition theory and pedagogy.

Before going much further, I must note that pragmatic philosophy is not easily defined. The philosophy has a long tradition in which pragmatism, because of its utility, has undergone many interpretations. In its vulgar sense, pragmatism is mere practicality. But that conception of pragmatism is only half right, acknowledging the connection of pragmatism to life as it is lived and experienced but ignoring the philosophical foundation of pragmatism. Pragmatism is widely considered America's most prominent contribution to philosophy. The term “pragmatism” was coined by Charles Sanders Pierce as he attempted to define belief in direct relation to action. Pragmatism is simultaneously concerned with ways of knowing the world and ways of living in the
world, grounding epistemology in experience, and elevating the intelligence embedded in action to the level of theory. Questions of what can be known then also become questions how anything may be known and what might be the consequences of that knowledge. These questions motivate concerns for how people may live and find reasons to believe in their ways of living. Life as it is lived demands through pragmatism that people recognize the limitations of abstract knowledge and the real implications of belief. To uncouple belief from action opens the door to hypocrisy. Pragmatism is an attempt to connect belief to action, one informing the other, so people may believe and act and find hope while recognizing the difficult circumstances in which they live.

I will build in the next chapter of this thesis a definition of pragmatism applicable to composition theory. I will survey generations of pragmatic thinkers, such as John Dewey and Cornel West, to better understand their work. My definition will highlight key qualities of current pragmatic thought: its emphasis on community, marriage of belief to action, recognition of context, and future-oriented sense of possibility. These qualities together characterize what I will consider new pragmatism, which builds upon the American pragmatic tradition by valuing hope and purposeful revitalization, ideas that the modern world and classroom seem so to need.

I arrived at pragmatism in a roundabout way through my readings in composition theory and pedagogy. The third chapter of this thesis will survey composition pedagogies, noting critiques of expressivism and cultural studies that relate to pragmatic philosophy. The importance of pragmatic philosophy to work in composition theory, particularly pedagogy, will comprise the fourth chapter of this thesis. I did not fully understand my arrival at this pragmatic junction within composition theory until I returned, after reading
pragmatic philosophy, to those pieces in composition which most resonated with me. I
had read compositionists such as Kurt Spellmeyer and Richard E. Miller in trying to
understand the field and my place within it. They wrote with a concern for the use of
composition and its relevance to individuals, society, and the classroom. Their concern is
one I share, and it was reinforced as I read works by Roskelly and Ronald. I will take up
the argument of these compositionists that pragmatic philosophy presents a fruitful
possibility for the negotiation of differences in composition theory. I will focus on how
pragmatism combines the personal with the social, work with theory, production with
interpretation, and a recognition of situation with a sense of hope. I will survey some of
the most recent work in composition theory, identifying a new pragmatic trend that
attempts to make composition relevant for personal and social transformation through the
use of pragmatic principles. This trend questions the division between cultural studies
and expressivist rhetorics. Moreover, it questions that division from within a
philosophical tradition that possesses deep American roots and great possibility for
reflective action in the discipline and classroom.

Because pragmatism demands attention not only in theory but also in practice, the
fifth chapter of this thesis will focus on the application of pragmatic thought in
composition coursework. It will attempt to answer basic questions of how writing might
be taught and how people might write in the pragmatic tradition. I will analyze
Spellmeyer and Miller’s The New Humanities Reader as an example of a classroom text
that employs pragmatic principles—addressing social issues, making connections, and
considering action—in the classroom. I will consider the shortcomings of such a
pragmatic approach, notably its treatment of the writing process, and how those

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shortcomings may be addressed. I chose Spellmeyer and Miller’s text because, since I
identified them with a new trend in pragmatic philosophy and composition theory, their
reader provides an opportunity to see that thought in pedagogical practice. My analysis of
The New Humanities Reader will demonstrate that the pragmatism is a renewed force in
the composition classroom through the text’s embodiment of pragmatic hallmarks. It will
serve as an example of how these pragmatic qualities may find a place in the composition
classroom to connect the project of writing to the simultaneous work of individual and
social development.

To return to the beginning of this introduction, identifying a particular rhetorical
approach to suit any individual is difficult. More difficult still might be finding a way to
bring elements of supposedly incompatible approaches together comprehensively.
Fulkerson resists identifying a preferred pedagogy in his survey, though he does seem
partial to the procedural in his arguments against cultural studies and expressivism.
“There is no ultimate ground, no empirical, dialectical, or Platonic basis, for proving that
one approach is proper,” Fulkerson writes (680). Epistemological justification then
becomes a personal act. The more important concern for a compositionist is that a
preferred rhetorical approach is grounded in some theoretical reasoning. Fulkerson
concludes, “At the turn of the twenty-first century, there is a genuine controversy—within
the field, not in the eyes of the public, the administration, or the legislature—over the
goal of teaching writing in college” (679). He ends with Gary Olson’s warning that
composition studies is on the verge of “new theory wars” (qtd. in Fulkerson 681). Having
identified the sides in these theory wars and warned of controversy, Fulkerson leaves the
reader and the discipline to strike a truce or, as I attempt to do in this thesis, look for a theoretical position that can begin to reconcile seemingly disparate pedagogies.
DEFINING NEW PRAGMATISM: A HOPEFUL PHILOSOPHY

Many introductions to pragmatism begin by noting that the philosophy, though once robust, fell into neglect. Compositionists Hephzibah Roskelly and Kate Ronald write in their study of romanticism and pragmatism, “As a philosophical system unique to the United States, it (pragmatism) has been, until recently, largely ignored in the twentieth century” (Reason to Believe 32). While pragmatism was ignored for some time, especially after the death of prominent pragmatist John Dewey, the philosophy is receiving more and more attention. The latest revival of pragmatic thought, led by philosopher Richard Rorty and rooted in the writings of Dewey, is enjoying a continued and ever-widening impact in many fields, including composition studies (Berlin Rhetoric and Reality 184). Interest in pragmatic philosophy is growing through the hopeful and humanistic influence of activists and scholars such as Cornel West and Roberto Mangabeira Unger, a social theorist and law professor. Though academia is still rediscovering pragmatism, the philosophy has remained vital if unexplored in common experience and thought. Explaining the prevalence of pragmatism, Unger writes that “pragmatism, though diminished and domesticated, represents the philosophy most alive today. It lives not among professors but in the world” (28). Part of Unger’s argument is that pragmatism is already a force in the world, one historically associated with the United States. By coming to philosophical and practical terms with pragmatism, Unger
argues, we will be able to better engage pragmatic thought and realize in our lives the best possible consequences of the philosophy.

In this chapter I will define major components of pragmatism, an expansive philosophy that is vulnerable to oversimplification yet resists capsulation. I will use those components to argue for the application of a revitalized new pragmatism that combines hopeful and humanistic concerns. I will begin with a brief overview of various American conceptions of pragmatism to gain a basic understanding of this multifaceted philosophy. I will then identify and elaborate upon the key qualities of pragmatic thought, tracing the philosophy’s roots as far back as Isocrates in ancient Greece and including the most recent pragmatic writing. My focus will be on developments in new pragmatic philosophy, and I will identify the qualities that characterize these developments, specifically an emphasis on community, the marriage of belief to action, the recognition and transcendence of context, and an experimental approach to realizing more hopeful futures. These combined qualities define trends in an increasingly hopeful and humanistic interpretation of pragmatism that is of value to the humanities and composition studies.

An American Take on an Ancient Idea

Pragmatism is a difficult philosophy to fully understand. Its difficulty results from the extensive history of pragmatism, the many interpretations of its principles, and its concern with practice as well as theory. A philosophy lived as much as conceptualized, pragmatism is not limited to ideas, making it resistant to strictly philosophical descriptions. Roskelly and Ronald note this difficulty when discussing the hallmarks of pragmatism:
Pragmatism, immersed as it is in practice, is not easy theory; it is neither ahistorical nor foolishly optimistic; it is not asocial or culturally naïve, and it is not a plodding series of procedures. It is instead a set of philosophical practices that promotes a rational, experience-bound, communal basis for belief and a method for connecting individuals and the societies they operate within so that each might act on beliefs they come to hold.

(Reasons to Believe 90)

Roskelly and Ronald’s definition of pragmatism is a good one and, like other definitions, directly ties action to belief. It demonstrates an attention to community and the role individuals have in society. As is already clear in Roskelly and Ronald’s definition, practicality and pragmatism are not the same. Pragmatism is more than an interest in application; pragmatism is a concern with theory that guides and is in turn informed by action. Other definitions of pragmatism, from its deepest roots in Greek philosophy to its most recent reinterpretations, likewise stress the nature of pragmatism as mediating different ways of knowing and acting.

In his critique of linear genealogies of pragmatism, such as that by Cornel West, philosopher Tom Cohen notes that pragmatism can trace a lineage as far back as Protagoras and his dictum on the metron that “man is the measure of all things” (97). The emerging democracy in ancient Greece and its emphasis on rhetoric and persuasion created an ideal environment for pragmatism as a civic-minded and reflective philosophy. This may be best demonstrated in the work of Isocrates. Indeed, rhetorician Edward Schiappa locates in Isocrates’s writings the earliest articulation of what would today be called pragmatic philosophy (33). Perhaps not coincidentally, pragmatism has been most
closely associated with the trials of democracies, namely those of ancient Greece and the United States.

Most histories of pragmatism, such as West’s *The American Evasion of Philosophy: a Genealogy of Pragmatism*, stress the American role in reinventing and theorizing modern pragmatic philosophy. As Unger notes, however, pragmatism includes many ideas that are shared with different philosophical systems; it is the cohesiveness of those ideas in the pragmatic approach that earns them the label of pragmatism (3). Ralph Waldo Emerson is generally considered the patriarch of American pragmatism. Emerson is positioned as such for his refutation of certainty, his cultural criticism, and his insistence on the agency of the individual, all early pragmatic concerns (West 36). Later philosophers inherited and expanded upon these pragmatic elements in Emerson’s work.

The creation of the term “pragmatism” is credited to logician and philosopher Charles Sanders Pierce, though William James and Dewey did more to popularize the philosophy. As Roskelly and Ronald relate the story, pragmatism was the product of the Metaphysical Club, a group of intellectuals who met to discuss philosophy in Cambridge, Massachusetts (“Untested Feasibility” 618). One of the club members defined belief as that which one is prepared to act upon. That definition became an integral part of pragmatic philosophy, which was first publicly described by Pierce and James in 1867. Pierce defined pragmatism as the imperative to “consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole conception of the object” (qtd. in Roskelly and Ronald 618). Pierce’s definition, like that of Roskelly and Ronald, connects belief to action through an appreciation of consequences. A similar attention to
consequences is exhibited in James’s definition of pragmatism as “the attitude of looking away from first things, principles, ‘categories,’ supposed necessities; and looking toward last things, fruits, consequences, facts” (qtd. in Roskelly and Ronald Reason to Believe 85). James’s definition exhibits pragmatism’s refutation of first principles, a denial of abstract truths.

The early definitions of pragmatism provided by Pierce and James immediately distinguish it epistemologically from other philosophies. In looking away from first principles, pragmatism begins to view truth as contingent and consequential. In this view it differs markedly with objectivist philosophies that propose an absolute and knowable truth. Pragmatism’s contingent view of truth has been considered a precursor to postmodern theories that similarly question the rationale for norms and the mechanisms that create knowledge. Unlike postmodernists such as Foucault, however, pragmatists work toward an identifiable idea of success and are “unashamedly guided by moral ideals of creative democracy and individuality” (West 226).

Pragmatism continued to distinguish itself as early definitions contributed to modern interpretations of the philosophy. One of the stronger modern definitions is offered by philosopher W. V. Quine:

Pragmatism could be characterized as the doctrine that all problems are at bottom problems of conduct, that all judgments are, implicitly, judgments of value, and that, as there can be ultimately no valid distinction of theoretical and practical, so there can be no final separation of questions of truth of any kind from questions of the justifiable ends of action. (qtd. in Roskelly and Ronald Reasons to Believe 90)
Quine connects judgments to value, theory to practice, and truth to consequences. The addition of value becomes increasingly prevalent as a humanistic quality of modern pragmatism. West also identifies a moral quality when, describing the return to pragmatism, he notes, “The distinctive appeal of American pragmatism in our postmodern moment is its unashamedly moral emphasis and its unequivocally ameliorative impulse” (4). He identifies pragmatism with ideals of freedom and hope when he writes, “I am convinced that the best of the American pragmatist tradition is the best America has to offer itself and the world” (8). These fundamental definitions of pragmatism by Quine and West identify many of the essential qualities of pragmatism, qualities such as a creative future orientation, the connection of belief and consequence, and an implicit hopefulness in human creativity. In addition, pragmatism stresses a sense of community and recognizes context as both a constraint upon and result of human action. The rest of this chapter will further develop these ideas in arguing for the realization and application of a new pragmatism that might begin to meet, at least in the composition classroom, the promise of this deeply American and hopeful philosophy.

Necessary Communities

Pragmatism is not a solipsistic philosophy. Though it recognizes the individual, pragmatism does so within the scope of community. This quality of pragmatism is rooted in the ideals of ancient Greek democracy and is particularly strong in twentieth-century American philosophy. Pragmatism is a philosophy that understands success is communal, not simply individual. That understanding begins through personal identification with community, an identification partially rooted in unsentimental love, and leads to action
within the community. In a political sense, this process is directly associated in pragmatism with democracy. Community in pragmatism is a necessary realization for any kind of meaningful advancement, personal or social, and is furthermore a quality intrinsic to basic humanity.

No pragmatist stresses the philosophical and real connection of individuals within a community greater than Dewey. His ideas form the foundation of a communal philosophy that is reiterated in the works of more radical pragmatists such as Unger. Dewey defines the idea of humanity as inextricably linked to the development of community:

To learn to be human is to develop through the give-and-take of communication an effective sense of being an individually distinctive member of the community; one who understands and appreciates its beliefs, desires and methods, and who contributes to a further conversion of organic powers into human resources and values. (“Search for the Great Community” 297)

To be a member of a community, then, is to recognize its values and contribute to its progress. Community, humanity, and individuality are dialectical in the sense that each reinforces and reinterprets the other. Dewey does not explain how the “individually distinctive member” of a community negotiates his or her distinctiveness in relation to the dominant values of a community. Dewey seems to allow the possibility that a member can be both distinct and part of a community, dodging some of the ideological questions raised by this relationship. Philosopher Stephen M. Fishman locates community as one of the central principles of Dewey’s philosophy. Fishman explains that Dewey saw
community as a necessary condition for individuals and society because “as strongly as he believed individuals can exist only in communities, he likewise believed communities can exist only through the actions of individuals” (322). Dewey criticized laissez-faire competition, Fishman writes, because he thought the results of unfettered competition would be disastrous from a communal viewpoint. Dewey argued that pure capitalistic theory was overly optimistic in consideration of what individuals could achieve independently, devaluing the role of community in making progress (Fishman 317).

Dewey’s criticism of capitalism is similar to that of Unger, who writes harshly of what he calls the idea of democratic perfectionism. Unger describes democratic perfectionism as a modern American heresy, the idea that an individual is entirely responsible for the conditions and performance of that individual’s success (20). Criticizing the predominance of an American hyper-individuality, Unger writes, “It is a view that radically and dangerously underestimates the extent to which our efforts at self-construction are at the mercy of blind luck, of the social order, and of what others may give or deny us, by way of intangible grace as well as tangible help” (50). Here Unger repeats Dewey’s principle that pragmatism must acknowledge an individual’s place in connection to others; Unger adds the relevance of “blind luck,” “intangible grace,” and “tangible help.” Unger and Dewey emphasize community because they believe that although change may begin with the individual, it finds its truest expression in the alteration of individual relations within a community. This cannot happen in isolation. As liberatory educator Paolo Freire similarly writes, relating community as necessary to humanity, “The pursuit of full humanity, however, cannot be carried out in isolation or individualism, but only in fellowship and solidarity” (85). Freire does not explicitly
identify himself as a pragmatist, but like Unger, a fellow Brazilian, his ideas resonate well with a humanistic interpretation of pragmatism. In the writings of Freire and Unger, the relations of individuals to communities are not destroyed through change but simply revised. This is the principle function of individual action within communities—the revision of relations. For Dewey, this communal idea is manifested in democracy. He defines democracy in terms of community, arguing that "regarded as an idea, democracy is not an alternative to other principles of associated life. It is the idea of community life itself" ("Search for the Great Community" 295). For Dewey, democracy was community, and pragmatism provided the theoretical foundation for individuals acting within a community.

In order for people to form communities, they must recognize shared beliefs, circumstances, and goals. This recognition takes the form of a common humanity and empathy approaching that of love. The idea of love may seem out of place and overly sentimental in a philosophical discussion, but it is noticeably prominent in humanistic readings of pragmatism. Pierce promotes a creative love in the Christian tradition for driving progress (West 46). He quotes Jesus, injecting ideas of love into the union of belief and consequences when he refers to Jesus's pronouncement that "ye may know them by their fruits" (quoted in West 50). Pierce's use of the New Testament creates opportunities for humanistic and pragmatic interpretations of belief and action, the formation of community, and hopes of personal transcendence. Freire also cites love as a centerpiece in his pedagogy, writing, "Love is at the same time the foundation of dialogue and dialogue itself" (89). Love becomes a communal quality of pragmatism when it links people together, enabling identification with oneself and another, the very
basis of a community. Love is a belief, a thought, but in its truest expression it is also a hopeful and pragmatic action.

With an emphasis on community, notably democratic communities, pragmatic philosophy demonstrates the importance of seeing individuals in relation to society. An awareness of community allows for individuals to affect their social and cultural structure. Belief and action are connected in those communities. An awareness of community recognizes the situated nature of those beliefs and actions without losing a sense of the creative possibilities for future change.

The Union of Belief and Action

More than a philosophy of ideas, pragmatism realizes its true potential in action and the theorizing that results from reflection upon that action. West considers the connection of theory and action to be a distinguishing quality of pragmatism. Noting the many variations of pragmatic theory, West writes, “American pragmatism is a diverse and heterogeneous tradition. But its common denominator consists of a future-oriented instrumentalism that tries to deploy thought as a weapon to enable more effective action” (5). The common denominator that West identifies is evident in the ancient Greek origins of pragmatic philosophy as well as the latest pragmatic writings of the new millennium. Thought becomes more than just thought, more than just exercises of the mind, in pragmatic action. It is given relevance in its impact upon people’s lives and the larger world.

The marriage of belief to action begins with the rejection of foundational views of knowledge and Platonic ideals. As Rorty notes, pragmatists do not propose new answers

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to Platonic questions but deny the validity of the old questions that philosophers have been preoccupied with for centuries (xiv). An early rejection of Platonic ideals is evident in Isocrates, Plato’s contemporary and rival teacher in philosophy and rhetoric. Isocrates allows that only practical philosophy, such as pragmatism, deserves to be called philosophy. In comparing his philosophy to epistemic studies, Isocrates writes, “I do not, however, think it proper to apply the term 'philosophy' to a training which is no help to us in the present either in our speech or in our actions” (Antidosis 333). He continues,

For I think such curiosities of thought are on a par with jugglers' tricks which, though they do not profit anyone, yet attract great crowds of the empty-minded, and I hold that men who want to do some good in the world must banish utterly from their interest all vain speculations and all activities which have no bearing on our lives. (335)

Isocrates is criticizing the “jugglers' tricks” of Platonic philosophy because they have no consequence in the lived world. In many of his comments on philosophy, Isocrates stresses the importance of relevance, that philosophy should have a “bearing on our lives.”

Dewey also rejects the Platonic conception of an ideal and knowable truth. He found the preoccupations of classical philosophers in the Platonic tradition to be obscure and counterproductive. Dewey gave no credence to conceptions of absolute values and distrusted attempts to establish philosophy upon unchanging a priori postulates (Kloppenberg 102). Indeed, Dewey considered the existence of ideal truth impossible because existence depends upon an actual context. Once an ideal is removed from the world, it ceases to exist even as an ideal. Dewey writes,
But an ideal that has no roots in existence has no efficacy or relevancy. It is a light which is darkness, for shining in the void it illuminates nothing and cannot reveal even itself. It gives no instruction, for it cannot be translated into the meaning and import of what actually happens, and hence it is barren; it cannot mitigate the bleakness of existence nor modify its brutalities. It thus abnegates itself in abjuring footing in natural events, and ceases to be ideal, to become whimsical fantasy or linguistic sophistication. ("Existence, Value, and Criticism" 93)

Throughout his writings, Dewey denounces the ideal as useless and nonexistent unless put into action, which necessarily provokes the alteration of ideals. He railed against the division and specialization of knowledge—the attempt to sort nature into "water-tight compartments" (92)—that result from philosophizing on ideals. Instead, Dewey forwarded a more holistic approach to philosophy and the complexities of life. Only such a philosophy could account for the diversity in continued variations of existence.

Dewey writes in "The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy" that professional philosophy has become dangerously disconnected from actual existence and is in need of reevaluation. Dewey believed philosophy should focus on the common concerns in the everyday lives of people rather than on esoteric classical questions generations of philosophers have repeatedly addressed in similar ways. He writes, "Philosophy recovers itself when it ceases to be a device for dealing with the problems of philosophers and becomes a method, cultivated by philosophers, of dealing with the problems of men" (68). Dewey's conception of philosophy is one engaged with practical problems and their real consequences.
The reflective marriage of theory to action in pragmatism continues to be a hallmark of the philosophy. Like West, Unger identifies the theory-action union as a primary philosophical attitude in pragmatism. He allows that the connection may be more or less direct, but he argues that the distance between belief and action does not change the necessity of the union. Unger writes, “We loosen the bonds tying ideas to action to give them greater generality, but we do not untie these bonds. There is no fundamental difference between the quality of our self-reflection in the grip of activity and the character of our speculation as we take a step back” (61). For Unger and other pragmatists, the thinking that precedes, coincides with, and follows action is the primary method of pragmatic inquiry. The union of theory and action may also be read in the idea of praxis, a concept central to the pedagogy of Freire. He defines praxis as “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (51). The resemblance of Freire’s pedagogical approach to pragmatic philosophy and its emphasis on reflection is clear. In these definitions, the reciprocal nature of reflection and action allows for a critical awareness that guides and is guided by efforts toward progress. Action and belief are directly connected. That connection leaves each answerable to the other, both as guides and checks against the hypocrisy that results when action does not follow belief and belief is unconcerned with consequence.

With theory and practice unified, pragmatism is able to exert its influence in areas of philosophy as well as behavior. This unification is advantageous because it grounds belief and elevates action so that neither is disconnected from the other and both may work toward desired consequences. The realization of this effect is always situated,
creating somewhat of a paradox in a pragmatic philosophy that recognizes the importance of context while keeping a hopeful orientation toward the future.

Contingent and Mutable Truths

The rejection of an absolute and knowable truth generally allows for only contingent human knowledge. The degree to which a truth is contingent is debated among pragmatists as they navigate a fine divide between determinism and relativism. Their common ground in this navigation is a focus upon what is known in a given context, regardless of the existence of underlying truths that are otherwise unknowable. Pragmatists may disagree over whether an absolute truth exists—while Unger argues for such a truth in nature but not in the world of man, Dewey argues for no such truth—but they agree that if absolute truth does exist, man does not know it. The difference, in theistic terms, is between atheism and agnosticism, neither of which believes in an absolute God. Atheists deny the possibility of God’s existence; agnostics deny that man can know if God exists. The pragmatic understanding of a practical, experience-based truth, comprised of contextual and social knowledge, builds upon the knowledge of preceding contexts so that truth becomes contingent, cumulative, and revisable as new truths are found or created (Roskelly and Ronald Reason to Believe 91). As Roskelly and Ronald note, “The understanding of truth as partial and contingent is a key part of the doctrine of pragmatism and a key ingredient to its dynamic, non-doctrinal method” (85). This understanding of truth allows for disagreements over the existence of truth while pragmatists agree on the human dimension of truth and its consequences. Unger likewise identifies contingency as a central pragmatic theme. Pragmatists are left then with an
operational ideal of workable truth that is based upon their experiences within a context and the measured consequences of belief.

A pragmatic focus on context allows for a direct engagement and critique of that context. This dialogue with context assumes the qualities of social and cultural criticism. Emerson is remembered as a social critic, as are James and Dewey (West 54, 71). West also writes extensively about social and cultural issues, opening him to criticism that his more popular works have taken away from academic work. The objective of pragmatic social and cultural criticism is a change in the context that is being criticized. The criticism demonstrates a critical consciousness in first recognizing an individual’s place within a community and then relating the beliefs of individuals within communities to their actions.

The ability of individuals to engage and even transform their contexts, once they have acknowledged those contexts, is one of the paradoxes of pragmatism because it attempts to simultaneously avoid determinism and relativism. Individuals are influenced by the conditions in which they live but retain the power to change those conditions. Unger recognizes the personal influence of context when he writes, “Even the most intimate and basic aspects of our experience are colored by the dogmas of culture and the institutions of society. We cannot rigidly divide our experience into the personal and the collective, the transient and the permanent. Historical time seeps into biographical time” (39). Although personal and social histories begin to merge, Unger still finds an individual with retained agency at the point of merger. This is the idea of transcendence, creating hope in pragmatism and returning attention to the individual. The human agent, Unger argues, is more than the sum of cultural or social influences. “The human agent is
irreducible to any set of casual influences that may weigh upon him. He is incapable of being fully contained and governed by the social orders he develops and joins” (28). For Unger and other new pragmatists, recognition of the circumstances of existence is necessary for the transformation of those circumstances. Context may limit people but it does not define them. People must understand where and how they are culturally situated so they may begin to better exert their individual influence to affect change in future contexts. Through that method, context influences the individual, but collective individuals also determine their social context.

Creative Hope for Utopian Futures

Because it evaluates ideas by considering their consequences, pragmatism is a forward-looking philosophy. It does not look to preexisting truths. Dewey considers this future orientation a hallmark of pragmatism. He writes, in defining pragmatism:

Pragmatism, thus, presents itself as an extension of historical empiricism, but with this fundamental difference, that it does not insist upon antecedent phenomena but upon consequent phenomena; not upon the precedents but upon the possibilities of action. And this change in point of view is almost revolutionary in its consequences…. Pragmatism thus has a metaphysical implication. The doctrine of value of consequences leads us to take the future into consideration. And this taking into consideration of the future takes us to the conception of a universe whose evolution is not finished. (“The Development of American Pragmatism” 8)
As Dewey notes, pragmatism takes account of the past, but only to inform the present through the realization that the present was once an unrealized future and will become itself part of the past. Such an outlook allows for a conception of the future that is both contingent upon the present but also completely in the making. The future remains undetermined. Dewey’s definition notes this revisable view of the future and the resulting hope for a better future than the present. Pragmatism sees all aspects of life as an unfinished experiment that people may still affect. Unger similarly argues that we need to change our outlook of the future to see through the present to unimagined possibilities. He argues against what he calls the “spectral idea of possibility,” that possibilities are limited and in a quasi-existence even before they are realized (61). Unger argues instead for a view of the future as entirely of our making. Utopias become more than wishful thinking; they become alternative conceptions of the future, alternative ways of living that have only to be believed and realized through action. “What utopian thinkers have understood best is that if utopia is ‗nowhere,‘ so is everywhere else,” essayist Curtis White writes (40). White is arguing that utopias should be considered just as plausible as any other vision of the future. “‘Reality,’ whether defined by evangelical Christians or empiricists, is a form of disenchantment. The Real, on the other hand, is up for grabs,” he writes (40). If the real is up for grabs, anybody can realize it. Pragmatists attempt that realization through reflective and hopeful action.

In order to realize utopian futures, Unger identifies experimentalism as a pragmatic attitude. He argues that most social change is dependent upon provocation by an external crisis, such as war or depression or environmental disaster (42). Unger wants instead for change to become internal as an embedded attitude of experimentalism in human belief
and behavior. An internalization of change is built upon the view that the future is unrealized, that our belief in a better world and action based upon that belief may actually result in a better world (43). We may do this, Unger writes, by anticipating opportunities and working to diminish the difference between the present and imagined futures. We can gauge our progress by measuring consequences and revising our outlook. Unger’s experimental attitude may seem like a fantasy, but recall that Unger does not believe in an objective truth in human relations. The nature and physical limitations of our existence may be absolute, Unger argues, but the quality of our human relations and the nature or our communities are entirely open to possibility and informed experimentation as products of human imagination and interaction.

Imagination and work toward new and improved futures requires creativity and hope. Dewey located these pragmatic qualities in community, humanity, democracy, and education. Freire grounds his pedagogy in hope and argues that hope is necessary for dialogue, writing, “Nor yet can dialogue exist without hope. Hope is rooted in men’s incompletion, from which they move out in constant search—a search which can be carried out only in communion with others” (91). The very acts of forming a community, working through belief, and struggling toward better futures requires hope. Like love, hope can be more than a good feeling. Hope may also be critical, discerning of reality and the necessary work required of alternatives. Hope is personal and empathetic in the development of communities, as in education and democracy. Finally, hope is creatively pragmatic because it moves beyond what is presently in existence, transcending what is known at hand, and acts on belief toward attainment of the aspired. These actions and beliefs happen at the level of the personal and the communal.
A New Response to Crises

The qualities outlined in this chapter—an emphasis on community, the marriage of belief to action, a recognition of context, and a hopeful orientation toward the future—comprise a new trend in pragmatic philosophy. Unger calls it "radicalized pragmatism" and argues that such a philosophy should serve as a state of continuous revolution for positive change (57). This brand of pragmatic philosophy closely resembles the ideals of liberatory praxis and conscientizao, or critical reflection, as described by Freire. It has roots in the romantic tradition of individual transcendence and hope, notably in the writings of Emerson, earning it the label of "romantic / pragmatic rhetoric" by Roskelly and Ronald (25). It shares in Isocrates and Dewey a concern for community, especially as realized in a democracy. West calls such a humanistic and practical philosophy "prophetic pragmatism" and finds at its center human struggle, "a struggle guided by a democratic and liberatory vision, sustained by moral courage and existential integrity, and tempered by the recognition of human finitude and frailty" (229). West’s version of the new pragmatism is prophetic because it looks toward a future that it can imagine and bring into creation through reflective action. It is also discerning and imaginative, critical and creative. With qualities of hope and love, West’s prophetic pragmatism allows but does not require a hopeful sense of spirituality that pure criticism and determinism would silence.

These interpretations of pragmatic philosophy share the themes described in this chapter, which amount to a hopeful and humanistic concern for the future and people’s well-being, a concern lacking in too many other philosophies. For the purposes of this thesis, I refer to these interpretations of pragmatism under the label of new pragmatism so
as to focus on their common characteristics without endorsing any one interpretation. I believe the trend is greater than the philosophy espoused by any solitary pragmatist. New pragmatism should not, however, be confused with Rorty’s neo-pragmatism, which does not include the same humanistic and hopeful themes. The new interpretations of pragmatism also serve as a shared response to what their authors see as pressing concerns of inequality, oppression, failure, and hopelessness in societies where people have lost connection to one another and are uncertain the relationship of their actions to their beliefs.

Pragmatic renaissances tend to coincide with times of social upheaval, crisis, and questions about the function of democracy, as Unger and others have noted. Pragmatism’s deepest origins are in the early formation of Greek democracy. It flourished in the United States during the restless twentieth century. The current renaissance in pragmatic thought is occurring at a time when questions are again being asked of oppression, agency, and the relevance of belief in the world. Pragmatism is not an answer itself as much as a means to addressing these concerns. This revival of pragmatism is much more than an academic exercise. As West writes, “[Pragmatism] should be an attempt to reinvigorate our moribund academic life, our lethargic political life, our decadent cultural life, and our chaotic personal lives for the flowering of many-sided personalities and the flourishing of more democracy and freedom” (4). Attempts at recognition and transformation are risky and often uncomfortable, but no less is at stake than the future as we may imagine and create it.

Education is also a future-oriented endeavor, and all of the key pragmatists mentioned in this chapter—Isocrates, Pierce, James, Dewey, Rorty, West, and Unger—worked as
educators. Pragmatism has a strong relation to pedagogy. The nature of that relation, particularly in the composition classroom, will be explored in the next chapter.
CHAPTER 3

A BRIEF REVIEW OF COMPOSITION PEDAGOGIES

I began this thesis by mentioning Richard Fulkerson's taxonomy of composition pedagogies and the difficulties I had in locating myself among them. Much of this thesis is concerned with the relation of theory to action, and in composition studies that relation occurs at the site of pedagogy. Any taxonomy of pedagogies is inherently problematic because it draws distinct theoretical divisions that in practice may be blurred or nonexistent. Nevertheless, a review of such taxonomies is helpful in identifying the major trends in the field. In this chapter I will review various pedagogical approaches in composition as a foundation for arguing that pragmatic philosophy begins to mediate some of the tensions among them.

James Berlin and Fulkerson offer two useful taxonomies. Berlin, writing in 1987, divides approaches epistemologically into the objective, the subjective, and the transactional. The objective includes current-traditional pedagogies. The subjective includes expressivism, and the transactional includes the social-epistemic. Fulkerson, writing almost twenty years later, subdivides Berlin's transactional category into critical and cultural studies and procedural rhetorics. Hephzibah Roskelly and Kate Ronald have criticized Berlin's taxonomy for favoring an evolutionary view of the development of composition studies, a view that devalues expressivist pedagogies in favor of the social-epistemic approach as the latest and best in the field (Reason to Believe 34). Fulkerson's
taxonomy does not present a historical progression, but it does reinforce the taxonomical divisions that have become canonical since Berlin’s history of the discipline. Fulkerson argues that expressivism, though heavily criticized from a postmodern perspective, has been gaining ground (655). He sees a division growing within composition between cultural studies and procedural approaches.

An understanding of composition pedagogies and their epistemologies is important, Fulkerson argues, because an instructor’s work in the writing course needs to be epistemologically consistent (680). Berlin concludes much the same, writing, “The test of one’s competence as a composition instructor, it seems to me, resides in being able to recognize and justify the version of the process being taught, complete with all of its significance for the student” (“Contemporary Composition” 777). Notice that Berlin is stressing the importance of recognition and justification of a theory over the correctness of one theory versus another. If one can recognize and justify a theory, honest teachers may be left to disagree. Or, through that recognition and justification, perhaps they will come to a new agreement. That said, both Berlin and Fulkerson have favorite approaches, Berlin’s being the social-epistemic or cultural studies and Fulkerson’s being the procedural.

Berlin begins his taxonomy with the objectivist rhetorics that came to prominence with Scottish Common Sense Realism. Objectivist rhetorics, particularly current-traditional rhetoric, hold a continuing though mostly invisible presence in the field. As Fulkerson notes, current-traditional composition pedagogies are not represented in journals or conferences, but plenty of teachers still work from a current-traditional approach (681). Current-traditionalists believe in absolute and objective truths located in
the material world. The job of writing then is to relate and conform to these truths. Current-traditionalists stress arrangement and superficial correctness as the goal of writing instruction (Berlin Rhetoric and Reality 9). Writing is seen more as a formal product than as a process; language is sought to match experience rather than mediate it. The rise of current-traditional rhetorics coincided with the growth of the research university and its focus on objectivist science. Since then, however, current-traditional pedagogies have been under assault from process-oriented instructors and postmodern theorists.

Subjective pedagogies contrast sharply with current-traditional approaches. Though Berlin characterizes a variety of subjective pedagogies, the most influential of these has been expressivism. Expressivism focuses on the process of writing as an individual act of discovery. It is most commonly associated with Peter Elbow, James Moffett, and Donald Murray. In a subjective epistemology, truth is thought to be largely personal, something a student must arrive at through reflection and mediation of language. Writing is considered an art as much as or more than a craft. This presents problems for an expressivist pedagogy, Berlin writes, because “the student can discover truth, but truth cannot be taught; the student can learn to write, but writing cannot be taught. The only strategy left, then, is to provide an environment in which the individual can learn what cannot be taught” (Rhetoric and Reality 13). The expressivist instructor has been compared to a psychotherapist as one who primarily encourages and fosters personal development, and expressivism was heavily influenced by modern depth psychology and ideas of self-actualization (Berlin 13). Fulkerson writes that a central goal of expressivism is to help student writers find their voice (667). To that end, expressivist
composition classrooms tend to make substantial use of writing journals, personal writing, and peer editing groups. Berlin and others have criticized expressivism as a purely romantic ideal that, while helping students find their voice, does nothing to contend with the social context of that voice. Voice alone will not help student, they argue, and leaves students vulnerable to ideological domination. Berlin groups expressivism with subjective rhetorics that locate truth in or through the individual, but he recognizes that some elements of expressivism have begun to move toward the epistemic in considering the construction of knowledge from social and personal perspectives (*Rhetoric and Reality* 184). What defines expressivism is the emphasis on the individual over the social circumstances in which that individual lives. As Berlin writes, “It is this commitment to an epistemology that locates all truth within a personal construct arising from one’s unique selfhood that prevents these expressionists from becoming genuinely epistemic in their approach” (153). Expressivism remains an influential composition pedagogy that focuses on the process of writing primarily in relation to the individual writer.

The social-epistemic category of composition pedagogies is perhaps the widest and the most difficult to define. It is also one of the most influential and hotly debated. Berlin groups social-epistemic pedagogies within transactional approaches to composition. He defines transactional rhetorics through interaction:

Transactional rhetoric is based on an epistemology that sees truth as arising out of the interaction of the elements of the rhetorical situation: an interaction of subject and object or subject and audience or even of all the elements—subject, object, audience, and language—operating
simultaneously. (Rhetoric and Reality 15)

Transactional rhetorics view language as the medium that connects the elements of the rhetorical situation. Language is not seen as separate from knowledge. Rather, “Language, instead, embodies and generates knowledge, and there is no knowledge without language” (Berlin 167). Transactional rhetorics investigate the interactions between the elements of the rhetorical situation and how those interactions construct knowledge. They tend to focus on the social dimension of language and the construction of knowledge as it exists between elements of the rhetorical situation.

Fulkerson divides Berlin’s transactional category into the two distinct divisions of procedural rhetorics and critical and cultural studies. Procedural rhetorics often draw heavily from the classical rhetorical tradition. They demonstrate a concern for context and consider writing to be a craft. Fulkerson includes genre-based pedagogies, composition as argumentation, and composition as introduction to academic discourse among prominent procedural approaches (671). Procedural writing is assessed based upon how well it meets the demands of the rhetorical situation. The methods of research in procedural rhetorics include genre analysis and audience analysis, which inform the composition process. Although it is not value-neutral—no epistemology is—procedural rhetorics are generally not considered to be as politically charged as social-epistemic and cultural studies approaches.

Cultural studies takes as the focus of its pedagogy the cultural artifacts and discourses that surround a student and characterize that student’s knowledge, experience, and values. As Berlin and Michael Vivion write, “Cultural studies then becomes the study of the ways social formations and practices are involved in the shaping of consciousness, and
this shaping is seen to be mediated by language and situated in concrete historical conditions" (ix). They go on to include all cultural discourses and media within the realm of cultural studies, which is presented as more of a method than a subject area. "In other words," Berlin and Vivion write, "wherever signifying practices are shaping consciousness in daily life, cultural studies has work to do" (ix). Cultural studies has become a powerful force within composition. Berlin and Vivion acknowledge that there is a great diversity of approaches in cultural studies, resulting in a pedagogy that is difficult to define (viii). They even allow a somewhat expressivist conception of cultural studies pedagogies by giving some attention to individual agency within cultural contexts. Berlin and Vivion write that they regard "culture both as the signifying practices that represent experience in language, myth, and literature and as the relatively autonomous responses of human agents to concrete historical conditions" (viii-ix). They acknowledge that human agents have some autonomy within culture, but any autonomy is still conditional and merely relative. In cultural studies, cultural transactions and the medium of language—rather than individual experience or agency—are the sources of constructed truths. Coursework in cultural studies may include reading and interpreting cultural artifacts, examining the language used in the creation of culture, and critically questioning cultural assumptions. Cultural studies is heavily indebted to Marxist theory and the work of postmodernists such as Foucault.

Fulkerson criticizes cultural studies for being short on process. Much of the activity in a cultural studies course is reading and interpretation, Fulkerson contends, like that of the literature-based composition class (663). He suspects that cultural studies courses are the result of "content envy" on the part of composition teachers who would rather spend time
teaching social or political discourse than teaching writing (663). A cultural studies
course that focuses on interpretation over the creation of texts is essentially the same as
any other humanities course that includes a large writing component, Fulkerson argues.
He claims cultural studies courses also risk political indoctrination as instructors work to
awaken students to a particular reality.

Like Fulkerson, Kurt Spellmeyer criticizes cultural studies courses as too focused on
the reading of cultural texts and lacking adequate concern for the production of writing
and its function. Spellmeyer faults the interpretation exercises of cultural studies as
having no use. Linking cultural studies to the high theories that have dominated the
humanities, Spellmeyer writes:

To escape the fate of theory and the “movements” preceding it, cultural
studies would need to do something more than send another avalanche of
words tumbling down on an indifferent world. It would need to change, if
only in some modest way, the dynamics underlying the production and
reception of culture itself. But failing at that, the innumerable readings of
MTV will have to take their rightful place beside the arguments about
intentional fallacy and whether Shakespeare really was a Christian or not:
arguments, in other words, that mattered once to us but had no real-world
consequences. (“Out of the Fashion Industry” 425)

Spellmeyer is looking for a composition course of consequence that allows students to
simultaneously read and affect culture. His approach is akin to cultural studies in its
subject matter but different in its method. Too much of cultural studies focuses on people
as the products of culture rather than the producers of culture. Spellmeyer focuses on
human agency within culture. In an attempt to return attention to the individual, he questions the idea of culture as a social invention, writing, “If we want to salvage human agency in some coherent way, then we may have to dispense with the idea of culture itself, understood as a total mechanism that makes people do the things they do” (“Out of the Fashion Industry” 432-433). He wants more credit given to the power of students and the experience of their daily lives.

The conflict between cultural studies and expressivist pedagogies, as indicated in Spellmeyer’s criticism, is the artificial division established between personal and social discourses and actions. Pragmatism offers a theoretically sound opportunity to begin to bridge that divide. Berlin notes that after 1975 his rhetorical taxonomy begins to breakdown. He credits that breakdown to “the tendency of certain rhetorics within the subjective and transactional categories to move in the direction of the epistemic” (Rhetoric and Reality 183). He specifically mentions “the reawakening of philosophical pragmatism as led by Richard Rorty” as beginning to mediate between subjective and social-epistemic pedagogies (184). Pragmatism conflates the personal with the social by focusing on individual actions within a social context. It combines the subjective with the social-epistemic by allowing a reciprocal relationship between people and society. The nature of that relationship provides the new pragmatic hope that individuals may influence society as they are simultaneously influenced by society. Like cultural studies, pragmatic pedagogies take the discourses and social issues surrounding students as the courses’ subject matter. Much of Spellmeyer’s critique of cultural studies is in the vein of new pragmatism. Pragmatism returns a sense of agency to cultural studies, one revitalized from the emphasis on the individual in expressivist rhetoric. Pragmatism is also a
forward-looking pedagogical approach that is contemplative and active. Pragmatists attempt not only to critically read culture but to change culture through their reading, writing, and actions. In the next chapter I will explore further how new pragmatism works in this direction to begin mediating binaries among composition pedagogies.
CHAPTER 4

NEW PRAGMATISM AND COMPOSITION THEORY:
MEDIATING BINARIES

The division among composition pedagogies is symptomatic of larger problems of fragmentation and isolation within the humanities. Long at the heart of a college education, the humanities have lost ground and face the threat of irrelevancy. English and composition courses have held their position as remnants of liberal ideals and as utility courses for academic and career writing. Their position, however, is not guaranteed. Kurt Spellmeyer warns of “the most fundamental problem of the humanities in our time—their profound social isolation” (Arts of Living 17). That isolation is due at least in part to the division of belief and action, school and life, the personal and the social within the humanities and composition pedagogies. Parker Palmer blames fragmentation on the binary logic so firmly established in popular culture and the university. Parker writes that although binary logic has produced technological progress, “either-or thinking has also given us a fragmented sense of reality that destroys the wholeness and wonder of life” (62). Students who receive an education strictly in “either-or thinking” may be left with a sense of disconnection. The most hopeful future for the humanities, and composition in particular, lies in bridging that disconnection and beginning to unify supposedly incompatible modes of thought for a more holistic way of understanding and acting.
New pragmatism offers a strong philosophical foundation in practice and theory to address problems of fragmentation, isolation, and hyper-specialization in composition studies and the rest of the humanities. Pragmatism functions to collapse binary divisions by offering a reflective practice that establishes connections. Binaries, such as those that divide expressivist and cultural studies pedagogies, can be useful ways of thinking, but they fail to recognize the connected nature of experience. As Roberto Mangabeira Unger argues, “Dualisms are indeed hallucinations” (47). Binaries are better thought of as tools, not as absolute representations of the lived world. To question the divisions erected by binaries among composition pedagogies is to allow richer, more holistic opportunities for thought and action within and outside the classroom.

In this chapter, I will examine how new pragmatism in conjunction with composition theory may begin to merge four prominent binaries—the personal and the social, work and theory, production and interpretation, and hope and situation—that hamper the writing classroom, divide composition pedagogies, and impede education in general. My argument is not that binary thought should be completely discarded but that possibilities for pragmatic and connective thought deserve at least equal consideration. New pragmatism provides a theoretical justification for a turn to holistic thinking in composition theory to bridge binaries and seemingly disparate pedagogies. Like Palmer, I will embrace “a richer, more paradoxical model of teaching and learning than binary thought allows” (64). To address the problem of incompatible composition pedagogies, I will examine the key binaries separating pedagogies, particularly expressivism and cultural studies. I will base my examination upon new pragmatic philosophy and current work in composition theory, both of which attempt a more holistic appreciation of theory.
and work, the personal and the social, circumstance and change. I believe that attempts at 
holistic appreciation may be more successful through the combined efforts of new 
pragmatism and composition theory. To explore the possibilities in composition 
pedagogy, I will briefly consider in each instance how the collapse of binaries might 
impact the composition classroom. In this chapter, I am working toward a goal similar to 
that of Richard Miller, who has tried to “produce an idea with which we can think anew 
about writing as a place where the personal and the academic, the private and the public, 
the individual and the institutional, are always inextricably interwoven” (31). I believe 
that idea could do much to reconcile composition pedagogies and is achievable through 
new pragmatic philosophy.

Personal and Social

Unification of the personal and the social begins with the argument that, at the most 
fundamental level, knowledge is personal. The creation of knowledge certainly has social 
dimensions, but when people think about something they are engaging in a personal act. 
All knowledge is subjective; there is no objective position in the discourse of knowledge. 
Palmer criticizes an emphasis on objectivism for distrusting modes of personal 
knowledge (53). The recognition and even trust of personal knowledge in writing is a 
quality of expressivist pedagogies. James Berlin notes that expressivist pedagogies have 
been criticized for a naïve solipsism that does not critically question context (Rhetoric 
and Reality 145). Some personal writing may be solipsistic, but personal writing also 
offers a mediating alternative to the assumed objectivity of current-traditional approaches 
and the assumed enlightenment of some critical and cultural studies pedagogies.
While identifying expressivist rhetoric with an emphasis on the personal, Berlin also notes that certain branches of expressivist rhetoric blur the boundary between a personal and social-epistemic view of meaning and writing (Rhetoric and Reality 184). Such is the type of writing I wish to promote because that personal writing may be critical, hopeful, and humanizing. Peter Elbow grants personal writing social significance in his argument that the personal is the political; there is no division between individual and social issues. Berlin writes that Elbow and other expressivists believed personal improvement leads to social improvement, “the underlying assumption being that enabling individuals to arrive at self-understanding and self-expression will inevitably lead to a better social order” (Rhetoric and Reality 155). Berlin also criticizes the expressivist emphasis on the individual as an ideal easily co-opted by a dominant capitalistic culture that rewards entrepreneurship and suppresses collective action (“Rhetoric and Ideology” 487). The argument for the personal in connection to the social is taken up by Hephzibah Roskelly and Kate Ronald, who write, “Individuality is always part of group behavior; the individual is never alone because his actions always have public consequences” (Reason to Believe 42-43). Without beginning at the individual, the social consequences of personal actions may never be realized because all actions have to function at least in part as individual actions. At the same time, a pragmatic stress on the understanding of the consequences of individual actions lifts personal writing out of the merely autobiographical and into the creative realm of knowledge construction and social possibility. Miller identifies even the genre of the memoir with having the power to allow a person to make sense of the past for a better future (20). If personal writing leads to no
more than a better sense of self, that progress may eventually lead to action and contribute social dividends.

The merger of the personal and the social should be manifest in the classroom in the role of the teacher. At its best, teaching is a personal endeavor. Palmer writes that good teaching cannot be reduced to practices or pedagogical theory; “good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher” (10). The best teachers teach from who they are. By this I mean they do not lose their personal identities within their roles as classroom authorities and otherwise impersonal sources of knowledge. Teachers who teach personally make explicit connections between their lives and their work, and they relate personally to their students as teachers and fellow learners, as members of society.

A pedagogy that merges the personal and the social begins with the teacher and impacts nearly all composition classroom practices. In such a classroom, personal writing that is reflective and constructive acquires a place through a variety of genres, such as the personal essay and journal writing. Social issues are examined from a personal and community perspective. Objectivity is understood as a rhetorical construction, allowing students to better analyze works that assume objectivity and to navigate the line between objective and subjective rhetorics in their own writing. Student development in such a classroom implies not only the acquisition of writing skills but also personal development by mastering personal knowledge for its social significance. Students work in writing groups, an interaction in which they do not lose authority over their writing but learn how that writing may be read and understood by others. Anecdotes have relevance in such a classroom, and a variety of instructional methods are used since learning is a personal and sometimes idiosyncratic process. The course is expressivist in recognizing the
personal but also aligned with cultural studies by critically relating the personal to the social. For social issues to be meaningful, they must connect to the lived lives of students. Those connections are necessarily personal, and they may become manifest simply by employing first-person writing. The merger of the personal and the social in the composition classroom allows students to regain control over their words—and through that perhaps their lives—while also forcing them to recognize the wider consequences of personal action, in the composition classroom and elsewhere.

Work and Theory

The division between work and theory is likely the most prominent of composition binaries. Commonly referred to as the difference between practice and theory, or in pragmatism as the separation of action and belief, this binary functions to divide how composition is discussed and how it is engaged. Too often practice, or work, is devalued in this calculation. Roskelly and Ronald write that theory seems reserved for scholarly seminars and practice for the classroom (Reason to Believe 15). The preferred alternative, suggested through the pragmatic tradition, is a reciprocal unification of work and theory that requires a reconceptualization of both. Spellmeyer argues that the humanities are too preoccupied with ideas as abstractions. He turns the debate toward work when he writes, “The point of thinking is not just to change ideas but to change our actual lives” (Arts of Living 15). Time spent tinkering with ideas will not result in progress unless those concerned with ideas also do some of the work suggested by the ideas. Work likewise provides its own contribution to knowledge in reformulating ideas.
The current privileges theory possesses over work have produced forms of schooling that Spellmeyer calls “instruments of alienation” because they estrange students from the world they know (*Arts of Living* 116). There is an important difference between schooling and learning, and our educational system has largely chosen schooling. James Gee identifies the same binary in respect to student experiences with discourses. Gee writes that knowledge of a discourse through acquisition, or actual practice and work, should precede schooling in the conception or logic of that discourse (114). Both learning and schooling have their advantages—learning in performance and schooling in analysis—and both deserve a place within the classroom (Gee 115). Gee’s emphasis on the value of practice as well as learning is partially reflected in the expressivist view of composition, which holds that writing is an art that can be learned but not taught (*Berlin Rhetoric and Reality* 152). An extreme expressionistic position that writing can not be taught is no better, in pragmatic terms, than the current-traditional perspective that writing be taught simply through theory and grammar. As Gee suggests, the solution to this binary is a perspective that recognizes both schooling and learning, that recognizes writing as subject and as practice. Writing could then be better appreciated in a pragmatic sense, not simply as good or bad, but, as Elbow suggests, writing that either works or does not work (80). A pragmatic perspective on composition theory provides justification for viewing writing as what is thought and what is done. Both writing in theory and the work of writing would then have mutually supportive places in the composition classroom.

Pedagogy is an ideal site for the merger of work and theory. As scholars, academics are concerned with theory, compositionists with the theory and pedagogy of writing.
Academics also must engage in the real work of the classroom—coordinating and creating lessons, managing class sessions. Sometimes educators are aware of sophisticated theories but are unable to apply them in the classroom. Sometimes they have favorite practices but cannot explain why or how those practices work. Palmer argues that the role of work and technique is to compliment our personal and theoretical conception of ourselves as teachers (24). Work and theory combined in pedagogy allow each to reinforce the other so that classroom work is guided by theory, and theory is in turn revised by successful practices. Bruce Horner locates in the composition tradition a possibility for bridging theoretical and lay knowledge. Horner writes that composition has always been identified with tradition and work, which led to the historic marginalization of the field. By returning to the best in that tradition, Horner writes, “We can take tradition in Composition as also a site of resistance, a means of recuperating the wholeness of our work as it mediates academic and nonacademic knowledge. We can take tradition as a site, not of acquiescence, but of radical possibility” (394). Horner is looking for possibility in past composition practices, a search which rejects the notion that resistance is strictly a modern idea. He is stressing the unification of ways of theorizing and engaging in the work of composition. By bridging pedagogical tradition and work with theory, the entire composition field may be elevated.

Curtis White also argues for a return to tradition to revitalize the classroom and society. He advocates transcendentalism, that American root of pragmatism, as a middle path between binary modes of thought. White writes:

Our question is whether we any longer know how to retrieve our own traditions from their institutional entombment. This can’t be done teaching
"Walden" in high school. "Saved" in the American literary canon, Thoreau is a mere dead letter. Thoreau can only be retrieved if we find a way to integrate his thought into the way we live. (36)

A return to tradition for White requires an activation of thought. White is critical of pedagogies that would simply present literary material without questioning it. Teaching remains lost and dead if it is not connected to the lives that people live, he argues. In this way, theory, such as the transcendentalism espoused by Thoreau, is connected to work in life for real pragmatic consequences.

Compositionists who combine work and theory might do as Horner and White suggest and investigate the composition tradition to help guide their research and teaching. Such an investigation requires a postmodern conception of history as other than a linear narrative of progress in which the new is always superior to the old. Compositionists could look to the most useful of practices within the pedagogical tradition to revitalize current composition theory. Recognition of the value of work supports a continued emphasis on process in the composition classroom. Teachers might look to the expressivists for some of their best practices in this area, such as freewriting. Teachers could also look to their students and their students' writing practices to formulate an understanding of writing in a digital age. Composition teachers should strive to instill habits of work in their students so that they might learn practices to keep writing in their everyday lives. If work is given value and afforded a degree of intelligence comparable to that of theory, then students and teachers will be better able to understand writing at the level of ideas as well as the simultaneously pragmatic level of personal and worldly consequences.
Production and Interpretation

Berlin writes that rhetoric and poetics share a similar ancestry in education. Their relationship is dialectical, he writes, “the one’s function being defined and determined by the other’s” (Rhetoric and Reality 1). In Berlin’s history, rhetoric is identified with the production of texts and poetics with their interpretation. The rhetorical and the poetic begin to split as the university specializes, and their dialectical relationship is extended into the modern fields of creative writing, literature, and rhetoric. Creative writing deals with the production of texts, specifically literary arts; literature concerns the interpretation and analysis of those literary texts; and rhetoric occupies a middle ground of composition instruction that addresses the analysis and production of rhetorical texts, which are supposedly less creative than those produced by the creative arts. All three branches are part of the English disciplinary tree.

The division of writing into the productive and the interpretive did not occur without resistance. Ann Berthoff, who Roskelly and Ronald identify as a pragmatist, argued that to divide language, such as was proposed at the Dartmouth Conference of teachers in 1966, is to exclude expressivist writing and art from the world of practical affairs (Berlin Rhetoric and Reality 149). Berthoff found that division to be false. Pragmatism, through its consideration of theory and action, offers an opportunity to undo the division of language into the productive and the interpretive. Since pragmatism assists in mediating binaries, and because composition theory already occupies a middle position, both are well suited to refocus attention on the holistic roots of the production and interpretation of texts. Elbow argues for at least parity in production and interpretation, or what he defines as the believing and the doubting games. Elbow acknowledges that doubting a
piece of writing may display critical intelligence in the process of tearing down meaning and possibility (xii). But he argues that believing also displays critical intelligence by requiring the mind to entertain possibilities, create alternative meanings, and identify with other perspectives.

Unifying production and interpretation in composition requires a manner of understanding art that legitimizes it as a primarily creative activity of which all people are capable. Creative activity is pragmatic in the sense that art allows people to explore alternatives and imagine reality as it otherwise might be. Art takes ideas and puts them into action in new and challenging ways. Unger equates art with freedom and enlightenment, necessary qualities in democracy and personal as well as social development (12). Roskelly and Ronald recognize force in art and liken it to the force of technology for its ability to usher transformation through its implementation (Reason to Believe 82). Spellmeyer argues that art should be understood less as an object and more as an action or an experience, as something done (Arts of Living 167). The result of artistic experience is a new way of connecting with and living in the world. As an experience, art is democratic. To summarize Spellmeyer’s argument, anyone can experience art just as anyone can hear or feel or see. Art is productive and significant in the way it allows people to alter their experiences and imagine alternative ways of experiencing and creating. Art produces connections. As Spellmeyer argues:

What matters most about writing, painting, or performing is not the technical virtuosity of the product—and certainly not its fidelity to somebody’s politics—but the ennobling, constructive quality of the practice itself. And if this is true, then the real product is not the poem or
the painting, but the generous, grateful relation to the world that art
making dramatizes and renews. (Arts of Living 172)

Art then becomes not only an idea, or the interpretation of an idea, but a creative action
that democratically fosters imagination and produces holistic ways of knowing.
Spellmeyer writes that ideas need to have consequences if they are to work for the
improvement of our world. He finds such a possibility in art, writing, “The work of the
arts and humanities in our time is to imagine—and create—alternatives that are more
satisfying, just, and beautiful” (Arts of Living 25). The execution of imagination in
production, as ideas in action, is a hallmark of pragmatism.

Applied to the composition classroom, the merger of production and interpretation
contributes to the view that all writing is creative writing. Writing is then an experience
as well as a process and product. Literature and other traditionally creative writings find a
place in composition classrooms that merge the poetic with the rhetorical. Work
traditionally considered the domain of creative writing, such as fiction and poetry,
functions in the composition course to help students explore ways to experiment with and
use language. I believe many students would respond positively to the opportunity to
write with the freedom that creative writing allows, and that freedom is put to productive
use if they are writing about issues of significance. If writing is viewed through a creative
as well an interpretive lens, teachers responding to student writing would focus on the
creative possibilities in the writing as much as they would critique the qualities of that
writing. I am not arguing that the composition class be turned into a poetry workshop or
literary analysis course. I am arguing instead that because all writing is creative and all
writing works on numerous levels, composition may make use of some literary and
creative ways of viewing and teaching writing to pragmatically merge production and interpretation.

Hope and Situation

The situated quality of writing is prominent in modern rhetorical theory, and rightly so. The function of a piece of writing, its success or failure, depends largely upon the rhetorical context in which that writing is produced and consumed. Recognition of rhetorical conditions thus aids in both the act of writing for a purpose, which is a pragmatic activity, and the analysis of that writing, which is a critical activity. But too much emphasis on the context surrounding a piece of writing reduces the role the writer plays and makes the writing almost exclusively a product of circumstances instead of a product at least partially of the writer. When the writer in the middle of a context is eliminated, so is any sense of hope that writer might have of being an effective agent of action. New pragmatic philosophy allows for critical recognition of the situation that informs writing as well as the hopeful position of the writer acting in that situation, perhaps to transcend or change it.

The idea that truth arises out of the interaction of situational elements is central to transactional rhetorics, social-epistemie pedagogies, and cultural studies, as described by Berlin (Rhetoric and Reality 15). Berlin offers transactional rhetorics as an alternative to objectivist rhetorics, which see truth as absolute, and subjectivist rhetorics, which view truth as largely personal. Berlin considers Dewey to be a pioneer in transactional rhetorics, and he shares with Dewey the pragmatic understanding that individuals act in connection with discourse communities to create knowledge and further discourse (47,
Pragmatic philosophy includes an emphasis to varying degrees on the social nature of knowledge. Berlin admits that pragmatism after the resurgence led by Richard Rorty complicates the taxonomy of objectivist, subjectivist, and transactional rhetorics because pragmatism can incorporate elements of each (184). A transactional view of rhetoric is part of the social turn in the discipline. That turn becomes problematic when it keeps turning away from the individual writer and entirely to the social. The social turn can be restrained and also retained through pragmatic philosophy.

Roskelly and Ronald are among those who believe the social turn has gone too far, verging on nihilism and despair. They look to pragmatism and romanticism to revive a belief in hope and the possibility of composition because “that belief seems to us lost, or at least hidden, gone underground in the current ‘social turn’ in composition and the move to postmodern critical theory in English studies” (Reason to Believe 1). Spellmeyer likewise believes that if we put too much credence in the power of context we become prisoners of context (Arts of Living 11). The humanistic quality of new pragmatism counteracts the despair that recognition of situation may provoke by also recognizing hope in an individual’s ability to work simultaneously within and against a situation. Pragmatism in composition allows writers the necessary hope and agency to attempt to imagine alternative possibilities and then work toward realizing those possibilities. As Roskelly and Ronald write, the possibilities are not guaranteed, but “change must come from the choice to lean toward unsettling, imperfect possibilities, despite the weight of history, tradition, and system” (Reason to Believe 80). The ability to alter context is established in the transcendental roots of American pragmatism as a means of mediating entirely objective and subjective philosophies. As Palmer writes, “Openness to
transcendence is what distinguishes the community of truth from both absolutism and relativism” (106). Pragmatism suggests the middle path that Palmer and others are working to find.

The ultimate objective of new pragmatism within composition theory is to help students realize the necessary conditions of a better future through their writing. To work in hope for the realization of such improvements, students and teachers need to be active agents for social change and the reshaping of their world. Writing should then be social as well as personal, and it should suppose action. As Berlin writes, summarizing Berthoff’s argument for a pragmatic sense of composition, “Writing must be taught so that it is involved in students’ personal and social lives” (Rhetoric and Reality 176). Writing is then not only the formulation of ideas but also the plan for their implementation. This is a difficult objective to achieve and one where new pragmatism and composition may often fall short because action is difficult to define and initiate. The effort, however, is valid in itself and leads to revision. The idea of revision is central to both writing and hopeful pragmatic work toward a better future. Revision is the exploration of options and changes in creation, be that in writing or life. Miller writes that revision should be conceived “not as the act of tidying up past transgression, but as the ongoing process of entertaining alternatives” (50). To entertain alternatives is to entertain hope.

The composition classroom is an ideal location for the entertainment of alternatives and hope. Teaching and writing are both hopeful endeavors because they aspire to create meaning and affect better future situations. The nature of context should not be ignored, but it also should not be the only quality of composition theory considered important. To
critically and pragmatically recognize context is the opposite of bowing to context. A composition course that recognizes the influence of current conditions while entertaining a hopeful outlook gives students the best option for pragmatic action in their writing. Such a course requires attention to context and all the familiar elements of the rhetorical situation. It also examines how context is mutable and how writing informs and changes the circumstances in which it is written. The acknowledgement and examination of pressing social issues works well within a discussion of context and provides an occasion for critical and pragmatic work through writing. In a new pragmatic composition course, teachers pose problems to their students through class readings and discussions. They then allow students to attempt to transcend and solve those problems by recognizing situations and working to change them. They will not always be successful in their attempts at action and change, but they will always be unsuccessful if they never make such attempts. Writing and teaching in the new pragmatic composition course create opportunities for such attempts to begin.

A New Pragmatic Approach

I have argued in this chapter for the application of pragmatism, particularly new humanistic interpretations of the philosophy, for the mediation of binaries that divide composition pedagogies and hamper the unifying work of the writing classroom. I am not arguing that one binary element should be discarded for another. Rather, I am arguing that both sides of each binary have relevance to composition pedagogy and should be understood in how they relate to and define one another. To recognize connections rather than divisions between the personal and the social, work and theory, production and
interpretation, and hope and situation is to begin a reconciliation of composition pedagogies for a pragmatic collaboration between expressivism and cultural studies.

If composition is to address the problems of isolation and fragmentation facing the discipline and the rest of the humanities, it needs to find a way to mediate false binaries and bridge divides. Pragmatism presents a philosophically sound opportunity to connect otherwise incompatible ways of knowing and acting. Understanding is a networked process, and connections are ways of knowing that multiply knowledge. Composition can play the crucial institutional, personal, and social role of making those pragmatic connections so that people are better able to use writing in constructing belief and guiding action. Those connections then would allow teachers and students to respond with all of their personal and institutional resources to the hard demands of giving significance—personal and social—to their writing. Only in responding to those demands, a response grounded in a reflective pragmatic approach, can they begin to address the problems that composition and pragmatism have such promise to affect. To address those problems will take reflection, hard work, creativity, and hope. These are the same qualities that generally distinguish the best writing. The next chapter will address more directly the functional side of new pragmatic philosophy in the composition classroom by analyzing a humanistic and pragmatic reader.
CHAPTER 5

CONNECTIVE WRITING: AN ANALYSIS OF THE NEW HUMANITIES READER

Earlier in this thesis I drew from the work of Richard E. Miller and Kurt Spellmeyer in arguing for a new pragmatic approach to composition, one that incorporates critical questioning of context and consequences. In this chapter I return to their work to analyze how such an approach may begin to be implemented in the composition classroom. Miller and Spellmeyer collaborated on The New Humanities Reader, the central composition text at Rutgers University, where they teach. An analysis of The New Humanities Reader offers an opportunity to explore the influence of new pragmatism in the composition classroom. I will begin my analysis by briefly describing The New Humanities Reader as a classroom text. I will then read the introduction for humanistic and pragmatic themes—specifically a future-oriented focus on action, a recognition of personal perspectives, and an emphasis on connective thinking—as foundations for the text. Based upon those themes, I will analyze the reading response questions to determine how new pragmatism functions within the classroom while also recognizing shortcomings. I will end this chapter with a concluding argument for the viability of a new pragmatic approach to composition, as demonstrated in my reading and analysis.

The reader’s arrangement, introduction, and the questions it provokes are evidence of a pragmatic sensibility in what Miller and Spellmeyer call “the new humanities.” The reader and its accompanying materials are designed to be at the heart of the composition
course, informing the class discussions and guiding student writing. This analysis will locate at that level of the reader a pragmatic conception of what reading and writing should be—as means of making personal and social connections for thought and action—that remakes composition into a vital discipline for reading, writing, and acting in a complex and often disorienting world.

Introducing the Reader

The New Humanities Reader is unusual as a composition anthology. In many ways the reader is notable for what it does not include. It makes no mention of the modes of composition, which, though out of favor with progressive educators, still find a home in classroom texts and assignments. The reader does not group its selections into themes or genres. It is instead a collection of thirty-two readings arranged alphabetically. All the readings are current, the oldest dating to 1988. They are essays, articles, chapters, memoirs, and even a short story covering a wide variety of current social and political issues, including cloning, globalization, militarism, and environmentalism, to name a few. The authors generally eschew readings from popular culture for issue-oriented nonfiction. The readings are challenging, coming from magazines such as Natural History and Harper's, but not necessarily inaccessible to college students. Each reading is preceded by an introduction to the author, the selection, and its themes. Each reading is followed by discussion and writing questions.

The textbook is accompanied by a resource Web site. The site, www.newhum.com, includes additional questions, sample assignments, a teacher’s resource manual, writing tutorials, grading rubrics, sample student papers, and an index of links to supplemental
reading materials under the awkward title of the "Link-O-Mat." The teacher’s resource is extensive with sample lesson plans, daily activities, and assignment sequences. The Web site in general, and the "Link-O-Mat" in particular, demonstrate the authors’ emphasis on connectivity. Their attempt is to support the reader by creating a writing and teaching community on the Web. The focus of my reading and analysis, however, will be on the reader itself.

The reader opens with an introduction by Miller and Spellmeyer. They note that their collection is different than those most students and teachers encounter, and they immediately begin arguing for the connective quality of the reader, a hallmark of the text as well as of pragmatic philosophy. The reader asks students to write and make connections among diverse subjects, themselves, and their world. Explaining why they prefer an alphabetic to a thematic arrangement, Miller and Spellmeyer write that they want to enable "thought-provoking juxtapositions" (vii). In these juxtapositions, Miller and Spellmeyer are not telling students what to think but are encouraging connective thinking. They leave the process of association—usually provided through the thematic organization of reading selections—to the students. The connections the students make are then necessarily personal as well as based upon the readings. Miller and Spellmeyer understand reading, writing, and thinking to be essentially processes of making connections. "Whatever the form knowledge may take, it always emerges from a process we might call connecting," they write (xi). Connecting is a fundamental act in the creation of knowledge and a central focus of The New Humanities Reader.

Miller and Spellmeyer want the process of connecting to be based upon individual students. "Generally, the books taught in school tell students how to think, but ours has a
different purpose,” they write (vii). “We wanted to put in your hands a book that would compel you to make connections for yourself as you think, read, and write about the events that are likely to shape your future life.” The connections that Miller and Spellmeyer ask students to make are those among fields of knowledge, among ways of knowing, between themselves and the world, and between thought and action. This process of connecting is both pragmatic and creative. Miller and Spellmeyer write that the new humanities can and should teach “a different way of using knowledge, a way of thinking that synthesizes many different fields of study” (ix). As was argued in the last chapter, the mediation of otherwise disparate ways of knowing and thinking is pragmatic and helps to unify experience in reading, writing, and acting. Pragmatism takes on additionally humanistic qualities when it is hopeful, believing in the power of people to change their situations and alter the future, and when it demonstrates a concern for people’s well-being. As will be shown, The New Humanities Reader includes all these qualities and employs them to connect and engage students in their writing with issues that impact their lives.

Whereas some composition courses attempt to ban the personal from classroom writing, the reader provided by Miller and Spellmeyer clearly acknowledges the personal and uses it to provoke writing and action. Miller and Spellmeyer look to create a sense of coherence in the humanities. They conceive of the humanities as bridging knowledge, “not as a particular area of knowledge but as the human dimension of all knowledge” (ix). They rely on the human element to connect areas of knowledge, and in their attention they demonstrate a concern for the people at the center of all that knowledge. Again focusing on the personal, Miller and Spellmeyer recognize the individual in
arguing that readers and writers must rely on their experiences when they make connections, because “no expert can live our lives for us or define what our experiences should mean to us” (ix). The notion of turning to our lived lives is not only personal but also pragmatic in its use of personal experience to guide the creation of knowledge and the determination of action. The return to the personal is repeated throughout the introduction of *The New Humanities Reader*. Miller and Spellmeyer write that recognition of the personal allows students to incorporate knowledge into their lived lives, just as their lived lives inform their creation of knowledge. They argue that the personal should be at the center of education because “we must find in our own lives—our problems, values, dreams, and commitments—an organizing principle we will not find in a curriculum which is bound to seem disorganized” (ix). Organization comes though personalization, Miller and Spellmeyer argue. For the purposes of *The New Humanities Reader*, students are asked to make what they read and write personal because educational significance begins at the level of student lives.

For Miller and Spellmeyer, personal and connective thinking is also critical thinking. They reject the idea that students need to be awakened from a false consciousness. A false consciousness, after all, would imply the existence of a true consciousness, an idea that resembles objectivist thinking and would be denied by a pragmatist. Instead, Miller and Spellmeyer try to encourage both critical and unique thinking, thinking that breaks out of the usual paradigms, through the process of making disparate connections to create original knowledge. “When we encounter the limits or defects of knowledge, mimetic thinking cannot help us; instead, we are obliged to think connectively—to think *across* domains of knowledge rather than thinking from within in them” (xiv). For Miller and
Spellmeyer, connective thinking is liberatory thinking because it enables students to break out of constraints on thought. Miller and Spellmeyer do not suppose to know the truth or hold the consciousness to which students should be awakened. Rather, they allow students to discover their own consciousness, even turning to lived experience and daily life as a source of knowledge. In the process, Miller and Spellmeyer reject academic dogmatism for a more democratic approach, writing, "We should never forget that the greatest thinkers of every age have often been refuted later, whereas ordinary people have sometimes lived more wisely than they were given credit for" (xviii).

In pragmatism knowledge is tested by action. Education may likewise be measured by its function, not in a purely instrumental way but through its impact on people and the world. Much of the argument for personal recognition and connective thinking in The New Humanities Reader supports the pragmatic contention that knowledge is valuable only inasmuch as it may have an effect on people's lives. Miller and Spellmeyer distinguish their text from those based on more archaic conceptions of the humanities by arguing that "the humanities have seen their principal task as the preservation of the past rather than the creation of the future" (viii). This characterization contrasts "preservation" with "creation." One is passive and concerned with the past, while the other is active and looking toward the future. Miller and Spellmeyer make the comparison more explicit, writing, "Humanists have often left real-world activities and concerns to other fields, while devoting themselves to passive contemplation" (viii). They present traditional academic humanists as at risk of disconnection from the world in which they live. If the humanists are disconnected, so is their contemplative work. Worldly connection, then, is achieved through the implementation of action, based on and contributing to thought.
Miller and Spellmeyer align composition and the new humanities with this forward-looking, active, and optimistic approach.

"Knowledge alone is not enough," Miller and Spellmeyer write (ix). Like Isocrates millennia before, they criticize knowledge that functions as mere mental games. They write that "searching for symbols in a poem or a short story becomes a mental exercise on par with doing a crossword puzzle" (x). Though students can learn much through such exercises, they may still be unable to act upon that knowledge in realms outside of literary criticism. Miller and Spellmeyer instead argue for a different take on knowledge, "another kind of knowledge that we begin to create when we ask ourselves how our learning pertains to the world outside the classroom" (xi). This form of knowledge connects the classroom or the theoretical with the real or active world through reflective acts of composition. Knowledge then serves, like pragmatic philosophy, as a mediator between belief and action. Miller and Spellmeyer write that "knowledge by its very nature brings together disparate worlds of thought and action" (xii). They do not define knowledge as strictly theoretical. Instead, they include both thought and action in their pragmatic definition of knowledge.

Miller and Spellmeyer argue exhaustively for the necessary combination of knowledge with action. The purpose of making connections between readings and writing, they argue, is so "we can explore the different ways each discussion might fit together and then evaluate the real-world consequences of these combinations" (xv). They are asking students to evaluate their beliefs and actions by the possible consequences of those beliefs and actions, an optimistic and pragmatic ideal. To do such an evaluation students have to be creative—employing an imaginative leap to arrive at
ideas of alternative futures—and critical in discerning consequences of beliefs and action. Such consequences are inherently personal, Miller and Spellmeyer write, requiring that students consider the readings and then “ask how the issues they have raised might impact us personally” (xv). The personal then becomes a tool for evaluating the possible future and wider social impact of beliefs and actions.

The New Humanities Reader is not the only composition classroom text to use contemporary readings on social issues. It is not the only one to ask students to think of their futures, to combine belief with action, to write from a personal perspective, or to critically connect of disparate forms of knowledge. But in making all of these arguments in the text’s introduction, Miller and Spellmeyer align themselves with a new pragmatic philosophy that they believe can help reinvent the humanities to better function as the human dimension of all knowledge. Exactly how writing takes that comprehensive human dimension beyond Miller and Spellmeyer’s introduction will be examined in the next section, where I analyze the reader’s response questions.

Pragmatic Questions for Connective Writing

Other than the introductions and arrangement of selections, Miller and Spellmeyer’s only original contributions to The New Humanities Reader are the questions at the end of each reading. Even these demonstrate a humanistic and pragmatic sensibility in accordance to the themes of the introduction. In this section I will survey the general types of response questions. I will then closely analyze a particular set of response questions, those following selections from Beth Loffreda’s book Losing Matt Shepard, to
determine the extent of the pragmatic function of the questions and how that function might manifest itself in the work of a composition course.

The reading questions are based around the twin purposes of making connections and provoking writing. They touch on themes of the personal in relation to social issues. They ask students to examine the structures of texts, question the meanings of terms, and consider possible actions and consequences. The process of making connections is important if students are to realize the type of knowledge formation that Miller and Spellmeyer argue for in their introduction. The questions after each reading are grouped into three categories: "Questions for Making Connections within the Reading," "Questions for Writing," and "Questions for Making Connections between Readings."

There are two questions in each category, except for the first, which has three. The order of categories and number of questions are the same after every reading. The emphasis in all of the questions is on making connections; the questions have no right or wrong answers but ask students to make inferences. The questions are designed to provoke students to think synthetically, make obvious and not-so-obvious connections, consider consequences, examine terms, contemplate social issues, and measure their responses against what they already know, all while considering the author's argument and how that argument is constructed.

The questions explore possibilities for establishing connections among ideas within a text, student writing and the text, and different texts. Those connections are also established between people and issues in society, relating the personal to the social. Miller and Spellmeyer work to rescue the personal from anonymity, and they include individual students in that effort. The questions that most explicitly acknowledge the
rhetorical nature of the texts do so by questioning structure, function, terminology, and authorial intentions. For example, after Annie Dillard's environmental essay "The Wreck of Time," Miller and Spellmeyer ask how the sections of the essay are connected, if themes are repeated, and what it is "that Dillard would like her readers to see or understand when they've completed her essay?" (190). These questions ask students to address the ideas in the text and their relation to its composition and function. Miller and Spellmeyer ask students to examine language use when they question the significance of the terms "marginal redemption" and "ethological view" after Jonathan Boyarin's essay "Waiting for a Jew" and Ellen Dissanayake's "The Core of Art" (167, 219). These questions require students to begin to critically examine the meaning of language and its employment.

For all their connective and pragmatic functions, the reading response questions do not much address the composition process. There is little or no mention of the classic rhetorical canons of invention or revision. The questions do not explicitly ask students about the use of argument or rhetorical appeals. Because most of the readings are related in form, the questions do not address concerns of genre. To be fair, Miller and Spellmeyer rely upon an accompanying rhetoric textbook to fill in the procedural and rhetorical gaps in their reader. A lack of attention to writing process is a strong criticism of cultural studies pedagogies, a criticism made by Richard Fulkerson and applicable to the reader in the absence of a rhetorical textbook.

To examine more closely the function of the reader response questions, I turn now to the specific questions following Loffreda's reading selection. The first questions
following the selection are those under “Questions for Making Connections within the Reading.” Miller and Spellmeyer ask:

As Beth Loffreda works to unpack the significance of Matt Shepard’s murder, she finds herself confronting a wide array of prejudices, not only about gays, but about Wyoming, the West, and Native Americans. Create a chart that details all of the prejudices that Loffreda uncovers. What are the relationships among these prejudices? Does Loffreda have any prejudices or is her view unbiased? (447)

The focus in this question, as through much of the text, is on making connections. Miller and Spellmeyer ask students not to treat Shepard’s murder as an isolated event. The “wide array of prejudices” in the selection is expansive, including Wyoming, the West, and Native Americans. Miller and Spellmeyer want students to see prejudices against Shepard—anti-homosexual prejudices that are often socially permitted—as connected to other forms of prejudice. They ask that students describe “the relationships among these prejudices.” By implying that the prejudices must be related, Miller and Spellmeyer force students to see the connections between Shepard’s murder and other prejudices, those more and less accepted. Miller and Spellmeyer ask if Loffreda also exhibits prejudices or if her view is unbiased. This question presupposes that Loffreda may be biased. Miller and Spellmeyer here force students to question the motives of the author and to see all writing, all perspectives, as potentially prejudiced. The entirety of the question is pragmatic in that it attempts to destroy the division between types of prejudices. It connects the murder of Shepard with other prejudicial beliefs and acts, even the supposed
prejudices of the author. Prejudice is then seen as an outlook, a belief, which has social and personal consequences that can be deadly.

In the second question, Miller and Spellmeyer turn toward a more personal understanding of Shepard’s murder. They ask:

In detailing the responses to Shepard’s murder, Loffreda refers to many different individuals by name. Who are the most important people in the story that Loffreda has to tell? Which responses had more weight at the time of the murder? Which responses have the most weight with Loffreda?

With you? (447)

This question is concerned primarily with the individuals within the story. Whereas the last question examined prejudices as social forces, this question looks directly at the people implicated in those prejudices. Miller and Spellmeyer signal their attention to the individual by noting that Loffreda refers to “different individuals by name.” The description of the individuals as “different” asks students to recognize the unique character of each person in the reading. That the individuals are referenced “by name” further accents the uniqueness of their character. Once they have names, these individuals begin to have backgrounds, personalities, and stories of their own that may be realized by the student reader. Miller and Spellmeyer ask how those personal stories affect the reading as a whole. They then ask which responses have the most weight “with you.” By initially focusing the question on the story, then turning it to the author and the student reader, Miller and Spellmeyer are implicating each as part of the meaning-making process of reading. They are asking that students recognize the subjects of the story, the author, as well as themselves as part of a single reading and writing community built
around the murder of Shepard. Each element is impacted by the other and each contributes to the function of this community. In many ways this question is literary in its focus on characters and themes. It is open to criticisms of being more concerned with interpretation than with composition, and those criticisms are valid. The question retains a humanistic sensibility through its recognition of individuals—even if they are characters—as people with names who are given weight through writing.

The third question of the series focuses on the structural function of Loffreda’s piece. “How is this selection from Losing Matt Shepard organized?” Miller and Spellmeyer ask (447). “Does it have a structure? How does the structure that Loffreda has chosen influence what she has to say?” This question asks for a rhetorical sensibility in examining the organization of a piece. By focusing on a specific text, Miller and Spellmeyer are looking for an organic sense of organization. They do this without providing classical or procedural conceptions of arrangement, a weakness in the reader depending upon one’s rhetorical approach. Instead, Miller and Spellmeyer look for a sense of structure to arise through reading and recognizing the function of a piece. This idea of organization offers a pragmatic view of writing but lacks any awareness of genre. By asking how the structure “influences what she has to say,” Miller and Spellmeyer are linking organization to expression, and conceptualization to action. The connection of thought to action, and the recognition of how one influences the other, is a vital component of pragmatic philosophy.

The next two questions are under the category of “Questions for Writing.” Though all of the questions are essentially questions for writing, those in this section ask for more
extensive and thoughtful treatment through the process of writing. In the first of these questions, Miller and Spellmeyer ask:

One of Loffreda's arguments in Losing Matt Shepard is that Matt Shepard, the individual, got lost in the media frenzy that followed his murder: part of the shock of Shepard's death, Loffreda reports, was "to watch rumor become myth, to see the story stitched out of repetition rather than investigation." If the media got Shepard's murder wrong, what are we to make of how and why they got it wrong? What would it take to provide "better coverage" of such tragedies? Are the print and visual media capable of providing nuanced understandings of unfolding events? (447)

The most important pragmatic and humanistic action of this question is in reminding readers of the terrible death of the person at the center of this story. "Matt Shepard, the individual, got lost in the media frenzy," Miller and Spellmeyer write. They are concerned here not with Shepard as national victim of prejudice, or Shepard as a martyr, or Shepard as an issue in any number of culture wars. Instead, Miller and Spellmeyer ask that students look at Shepard as "the individual" in the middle of everything. Whatever larger significance Shepard's murder has, that significance begins with the death of an individual human being. By asking about the media's response, Miller and Spellmeyer cite the loss of the individual as a problem not unique to Shepard's death. They ask how the individual might be recovered in stories that take on national significance. "What would it take to provide 'better coverage' of such tragedies?" they ask. This question requires that students look toward ways of making positive changes. It is a future-oriented and creative question, one that begins to allow action for the recovery of the
individual. Both central actions of this question—the recognition of the person at the middle of the story and the contemplation of how to recover that person—exemplify the humanistic qualities of new pragmatism. The question provides a place for the personal within the social, even giving the personal primacy. Miller and Spellmeyer connect belief to hopeful action so that in considering Shepard as an individual students are also considering what may be done personally and socially to keep sight of such individuals.

The final question of the section concerns Loffreda's role as a writer and the function of academia. More explicitly than any other, this question pragmatically connects thought and writing to personal action and social consequences. Miller and Spellmeyer ask:

In describing how her colleagues at the University of Wyoming responded to Shepard's death, Loffreda records her own frustration at hearing teachers speak of their own "uselessness" and "irrelevance" in the face of such a tragedy. Such remarks struck Loffreda as "an appalling luxury, an indulgence in a kind of intellectual self-pity at a moment when the basic skills of education—critical thinking, articulation, self-reflection—could be so concretely valuable. I wondered about that, and I wondered too when we’d stop talking about how we felt and begin talking about what to do." What is it that teachers can or should do at such times? What role should secular institutions play in trying to shape the way their students see and understand the world? (447)

The pragmatic power of this question is its focus on action. By this point in the reading questions, Miller and Spellmeyer have acknowledged that there is indeed a specific death, that of an individual with a history and a name, at the center of this story. Now Miller and
Spellmeyer are focusing on what can be done to prevent similar deaths in the future. They characterize Loffreda as a person who wants not only to understand problems but to attempt to solve them. Loffreda is active in creating and implementing knowledge. She values educational skills for their potential to have an effect, and she takes action through writing by provoking a discussion and working toward a solution. Loffreda is impatient with teachers who lament their “irrelevance” and “uselessness.” Such teachers are seen as only discussing Shepard’s death and not considering what may be done about it. They do not recognize their own agency to change their situation and perhaps work to prevent future deaths. Loffreda says she has had enough passive reflection and wants to “begin talking about what to do.” Loffreda views thought and action in the same manner as Miller and Spellmeyer and other pragmatists. Thought for thought’s sake may useful as an exercise or tool for discovery, but in a larger sense it is meaningless when self-contained. Thought acquires meaning through action; that is where belief is manifest and tested. Miller and Spellmeyer ask students to take a similarly pragmatic view of the value of thought and action. “What is it that teachers can or should do at such times?” they ask. This is a question about how the highly developed discursive tools of academics may be put into action. Miller and Spellmeyer are asking pragmatically what can be done, though it is odd that they are asking students to consider the actions of teachers rather than their own actions. The question is also pragmatic in that it does not dispose of thought for action—Miller and Spellmeyer are not trying to incite a mob—but bases action on reflection. The question presupposes that something can be done, a position the other teachers in the story seem reluctant to accept.
Miller and Spellmeyer go on to ask two questions for making connections to other readings. The most pragmatic of these, and the final question I will examine, concerns the transcendence of the "limits of identification" (447). Miller and Spellmeyer ask:

This selection from Losing Matt Shepard closes with Loffreda's discussion of what she terms "the limits of identification." In a sense, Susan Faludi's "The Naked Citadel" could also be described as a piece centrally concerned with "the limits of identification." What are these limits? How are they covered? Can they be changed? (447-448)

The first part of this question—"what are these limits?"—asks students for recognition of situations. "The limits of identification" constrain how people understand themselves and each other. Miller and Spellmeyer ask students to recognize these constraints. Then, in a new pragmatic turn, they ask of the limits, "Can they be changed?" Rather than accept "the limits of the situation," Miller and Spellmeyer want students to consider how they might transcend those limits to create new possibilities for identification and even action. The act of recognition and transcendence is humanistic in that it emphasizes the value of people and their power to alter the circumstances in which they live. It is also pragmatic in relating thought to action and viewing contingent truths, those of the limits, as situational and mutable. Like all people, students may act to change the limits that constrain them. They are asked in The New Humanities Reader to explore those possibilities through their reading and writing.
Reflective and Active Reading and Writing

Though it is an anthology, The New Humanities Reader is evidence of the possibilities new pragmatism holds for the composition classroom and the humanities in general. The New Humanities Reader does not explicitly identify itself with pragmatism—much theory and pedagogy do not explicitly mention pragmatic philosophy—but upon analysis the connections are clear. Pragmatism is a continuing influence in the composition classroom, as seen in the text. New pragmatism asks for recognition of this tradition and its expansion in building on themes of action and hope. Through the tradition and possibilities in new pragmatism, in theory and practice, compositionists may best be able to realize the potential of the classroom as a site for the human connection and use of knowledge through reading and writing.

A new pragmatic classroom, as implied by the reader, functions to ignore boundaries of disparate forms of knowledge, a pragmatic action that eliminates binary modes of thought and classification to allow the realization of new and more meaningful connections. Such a composition classroom recognizes the individuals and students at the center of discourses rather than forcing the eclipse of the personal under postures of objectivity. Recognition of the personal may be as simple as that in the The New Humanities Reader, a re-centering on individuals as people with names, histories, and their own stories and motivations, people writing from their own perspectives. Personal recognition may also be based on the acknowledgement that in order to be meaningful, reading and writing must connect with the lived lives of students. This is not to say that all writings should be personal narratives. But the connections made between readings and writing should find root in the experience of student lives. Simply asking how
reading and writing connect to the active and future world of students allows that rooting to begin.

The New Humanities Reader also demonstrates some of the weaknesses of new pragmatism. Critics may contend that such an approach is weak on process since it makes little or no use of classical and procedural rhetoric. There is no reason that new pragmatism could not consider procedural rhetoric. Indeed, its focus on the consequences of theory provides an opportunity for implementation of rhetorical approaches that emphasize the function of a text within a context. By revitalizing expressivist pedagogies through its attention to the personal, new pragmatism may also use the rich tradition of process embedded in those approaches. Critics may also claim that new pragmatism risks indoctrination in its focus on social issues—the same criticism made against cultural studies—and is too optimistic in encouraging hopeful student action. Given that writing must be about something, new pragmatism would suggest that the most important social issues be that something. As Miller and Spellmeyer write in the teaching materials that accompany the reader, “The point of writing is not writing for its own sake—Why would anyone want to do that?—but to write about something. And that ‘something’ is always a problem or contradiction in the actual world” (‘Teaching the Action Horizon’ 4). Any writing, reading, or pedagogy that is about something is open to ideological critiques. And, to the claim that new pragmatism it too optimistic, one response is to argue that all meaningful action begins with hope, if only the hope that such actions may be successful and are worthwhile; the alternative is inaction and despair.

Perhaps most importantly, a pragmatic and humanistic classroom looks toward consequences and possible futures. Like the selections and questions from The New
Humanities Reader, such a classroom is not content to quietly contemplate the significance of things. Meaning is instead created where contemplation meets action. Asking students to imagine different possibilities is a creative and hopeful act. Once they have imagined those possibilities, new pragmatism asks students to recognize the individuals at the center of discussions, and it requires that students think reflectively through their reading and writing so that they may better recognize, affect, and transcend the limitations of their own situations. The New Humanities Reader, with its selections of readings on pressing contemporary social issues, is an example of how pragmatism can harness the best in cultural and critical studies pedagogies to help students critically consider issues in a social context. By asking them to personally connect with that context and work toward transcending limitations, pedagogies such as those embodied in the reader also draw from the best of the humanistic and expressivist tradition to prompt students to write creatively for a future still in their making. The combination of the cultural studies and expressivist approaches, as embodied in new pragmatic philosophy and as seen in The New Humanities Reader, may offer the best option for beginning to unify and act within the complex worlds of universities and society.
CHAPTER 6

THE PROMISE OF A PRAGMATIC TURN IN COMPOSITION: A CONCLUSION

My favorite class in high school was “Contemporary Problems and Multicultural Themes,” taught by Rob Nielsen. I remember that class better than any other, and I remember Nielsen as an extraordinary teacher. I took the class my junior year, the first it was offered, after having taken Nielsen for world history. The course was designed to address social issues, ideas of multiculturalism, and the role of citizens within a democracy. But the class was about much more than that. Nielsen asked us to think critically about the issues that impacted our lives. Then, he asked us to think about what we could do to affect those issues.

The readings and lessons of that class stuck with me. We read about and discussed the meat industry. We then considered how we are connected to that industry through what we eat. We read about human rights. We then worked in groups to address specific human rights issues—my group focused on child pornography—and constructed informative booths for a human rights awareness fair. The entire school attended the fair in the gymnasium, and the local news interviewed us for a report on the event. Instead of passively contemplating the dismal state of human rights, our class undertook reflective action to change awareness of the issues and hopefully contribute to a future in which those rights are no longer dismissed.
I also remember the course because, more than any other, the class was a community. Nielsen made a place in the course for students as individuals with unique histories and concerns. The class raised travel funds so that a student could visit her father over the holidays. I remember a session in which we were discussing child abuse. A female student confessed that she had been molested by her uncle. She was crying. Nielsen handed her a box of tissue, and he took a couple for himself as he also cried. The class listened as she shared her story. We offered support. I remember my sense of disbelief that a student would share such a difficult and personal story in a high school class; I also remember my simultaneous sense of appreciation that I was part of a class where that kind of conversation could happen. The student’s story changed how I thought of and treated my classmates since I realized then the depth of their lives, lives of which I was largely unaware. I think Nielsen was effective at building the class as a community because his teaching was personal. We all knew that Nielsen had worked as a night clerk at a convenience store to get through college and become a teacher. We knew his stories, and he knew ours. I know he presents a romantic ideal, hopeful to a fault, but Nielsen was an inspired and unique teacher.

Nielsen never said that he was teaching from a new pragmatic or humanistic approach. As I reflect on the course now, however, I can see just how pragmatic it was. Nielsen asked his students to think critically, though often liberal politically, about their situations and then act creatively and optimistically to change those situations. A human rights fair had never before been held at the school. I credit Nielsen’s course with helping me to look at people and issues differently and to consider the possible consequences of hopeful and personal actions, be they a starting vegetarian diet, engaging in grassroots
political organizing, joining the Peace Corps, or teaching composition. I believe the same sort of pragmatic principles that Nielsen used in his course, principles developed throughout this thesis, hold promise for the humanities, particularly in composition studies, where writing becomes a site and impetus for reflective action. The promise of new pragmatism is in providing a philosophical foundation, rich in tradition and possibilities, for beginning to bring together otherwise disparate approaches to composition. The benefit of the promise is in finding a way, through writing and reflective action, to ensure that composition matters.

The theory wars mentioned in the introduction to this thesis threaten a division of composition studies into opposing ideological camps. With its strong philosophical foundation, pragmatism offers the potential to help reconcile expressivist and cultural studies pedagogies. Pragmatism recognizes the importance of a critical awareness of context. Simultaneously, it emphasizes the individual within that context as one who can act to alter and transcend context. Expressivist and critical and cultural studies pedagogies both acknowledge the interaction between individuals and their situations to varying degrees, but neither recognizes that interaction as clearly or as coherently as new pragmatism. The result of this recognition is the connection of thought and action, and the personal and the social, both hallmarks of pragmatism. Reflective action breaks pragmatism out of the passive archival tradition associated with the humanities. Instead, composition finds in new pragmatic philosophy a return to a sense of possibility in considering and acting to affect the future. Writing and knowing find meaning and use through this reflective action.
In addition to changing the composition classroom, a new pragmatic turn alters the role of the compositionists as a teacher and an academic. Pragmatism argues for the value of the generalist. This is not to exclude specializations, so much now a feature of the university, but to reconsider general knowledge as itself a form of specialization. As academic knowledge becomes more and more specialized, compositionists, located at the center of the curriculum, are in an ideal position to connect different areas of knowledge and find new meaning in the classroom as well as in writing. Knowledge is of greater value and use through connections. As Roskelly and Ronald note, “Knowledge is extended as it is linked to other kinds of knowledge” (Reason to Believe 141). Connected knowledge—that which mediates binaries—promotes coherence rather than estrangement. It allows for interesting juxtapositions. The personal meets the social, work informs theory, production merges with interpretation, and hope arises within the constraints of a situation. For too long connective knowledge has been largely devalued in the university. A new pragmatic turn, one that transcends areas and ways of knowing, allows for compositionists to claim the increasingly important function of acting as a connective center in ways of knowing and acting.

To follow in the pragmatic tradition and pair belief with action, compositionists might become more active themselves as organic intellectuals working in academia and the community. Scholarship, service, and teaching are certainly constructive forms of action that guide and build upon theory. But compositionists can extend those realms of action outside of campus. Cornel West defines the organic intellectual as a modern pragmatist, “one who revels in the life of the mind yet relates ideas to collective praxis. An organic intellectual, in contrast to traditional intellectuals who often remain comfortably nested in
the academy, attempts to be entrenched in and affiliated with organizations, associations, and, possibly, movements of grass-roots folk” (234). For fear of losing status or position, compositionists and new pragmatists may be reluctant to set out upon the organic intellectual route that West charts. West himself serves as an example of how administrations may negatively react to work considered outside the realm of academia. By attempting to combine outreach with traditional academic scholarship, however, pragmatists in composition and other fields may be able to slowly win respect for organic intellectuals while simultaneously working to resolve the estrangement between academia and society.

The greatest impact of a new pragmatic turn in composition is, of course, on pedagogical theory and classroom practices. The scope of such a turn’s effect has been developed throughout this thesis, most personally in the example of Nielsen’s class. Early in this thesis I identified the central qualities of a new pragmatic philosophy, one that values community, unifies belief and action, views truth as contingent and mutable, and employs hope in the creation of better futures. This philosophy draws upon the pragmatic tradition and radically employs it for critical understanding and hopeful action. I reviewed composition pedagogies and examined how new pragmatic philosophy in conjunction with current composition theory begins to question and collapse binary modes of thought about acting, thinking, writing, and teaching composition. I analyzed The New Humanities Reader as an example of such a pragmatic effort. Despite its shortcomings, the reader serves to help students make connections through their writing, a necessarily creative and personal act. New pragmatic philosophy combines elements of expressivist and cultural studies composition pedagogies by making the social relevant
through the personal. Students understand and care about issues through the context of their own lives. Once they make those connections, they are able to begin thinking and acting pragmatically within the world, starting at the site of their writing.

To draw on the pragmatic tradition and its newer humanistic interpretation, composition courses may expand upon what are already some of their most effective practices in otherwise estranged approaches. Writing should remain the central activity in the course while also engaging important social issues. Students should use writing to address the issues that may affect their futures. In their writing they should combine reflection and analysis with exploration of consequences and possible action. I am not arguing that every writing assignment be a proposed solution to a contemporary problem; most problems do not lend themselves easily to solutions. Instead, the goal of the new pragmatic composition classroom is to help students find their place in an often complex and confusing world. Once they have found that place, they may use writing to understand and act in connection to it. The writing in such a classroom is personal, drawing from the expressivistic tradition, in that it recognizes the individual at the center of the issues, the individual who is writing and is written about, one who may act to change the issues under consideration. The writing draws from cultural studies because it asks that student consider critically the issues that impact their lives. The writing is pragmatic in that it asks students to connect beliefs to actions—making the best of humanistic ideals in the pragmatic tradition—and to see past the limits of their situations while evaluating consequences. Such qualities distinguish some of the most important writing happening within and outside of academia today.
I make many claims for pragmatism, perhaps claiming too much. The flexibility and versatility of pragmatism allow it to be overextended. New pragmatism and composition theory, as I have outlined their intersection, do not adequately address concerns of ideology or questions of process. Perhaps pragmatism could revive and incorporate the process legacy of expressivism, focusing on the growth of the individual as a result of growth in writing. The relation of pragmatism to procedural rhetorics could also be explored and would almost surely produce fruitful results. If new pragmatism is to fully inform composition pedagogy, it needs a solid perspective on process. As a philosophy engaging current issues, pragmatism is also open to questions of ideology. It may answer those questions in the same manner that cultural studies has, by rightly responding, as Berlin notes in “Rhetoric and Ideology,” that no pedagogy is ideologically neutral. Pragmatism will be in a stronger position to do this once its own ideological associations have been fully explored in relation to composition theory. Questions of technology and access need to be considered in relation to a pragmatic pedagogy. And, finally, there remains the question of action. The truth is that only a fraction of all writing can lead to the sort of action new pragmatism calls for. The opportunity for that action is important; it is a hallmark of the philosophy, but as a requirement it would ask too much. Pragmatism is a robust philosophy. I expect it offers answers to these questions and will supply them in time should it continue to increasingly influence composition studies.

During the process of researching for this thesis, I read a question that resonated with me and began to change how I thought of this thesis and my work in composition. Hephzibah Roskelly and Kate Ronald repeat the question of Mary Rose O’Reilly, a teacher—and a Quaker—who asks, “Is it possible to teach English so that people stop
killing one another?” (Reason to Believe 147). At first this question seems too wide and even naïve. Like ideas of love and hope and possible futures, like the human rights fair in my high school gymnasium, the idea of peace seems out of context in a discussion of composition theory. Upon consideration of the answer and implications, however, the question proves vital. If the answer is no, people continue killing each other just as frequently as always, and the teaching of English is useless except as something to do in the time between killing or being killed. If the answer is yes, English works toward becoming a hopeful way to think about the world and to act within it to improve it. I would happily welcome a future in which people killed each other with less regularity. I would be proud if the teaching of English and composition contributed to the creation of such a time and place.

O’Reilly’s question is at the heart of the humanities. Richard E. Miller repeats her concern when he asks, more specifically, “Can secular institutions of higher education be taught to use writing to foster a kind of critical optimism that is able to transform idle feelings of hope into viable plans for sustainable action?” (27). I underlined “writing,” “critical optimism,” and “plans for sustainable action.” Pragmatism, specifically new pragmatism as I have defined it, brings these ideas together in a way that allows people to reflect and act upon their world toward the realization of better worlds. This is the type of reflection and optimistic action that Nielsen proposed to my high school class. The same could be proposed, I believe to even better use, in composition courses through the tradition and possibilities in new pragmatism. If O’Reilly and Miller’s concerns can be answered by any philosophy or pedagogy, I believe the active hopefulness of new pragmatism may offer such an answer.
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