

APPENDIX 2

SOCIAL ASPECTS OF COLLABORATIVE KNOWLEDGE-MAKING

In their overview of dialogue in educational settings, Nicholas Burbules and Bertram Bruce conclude that “environments” in the largest sense of the word shape teaching/learning exchanges [12; 14-16]. Communication takes place within a “complex net of interactions” [4] that engages, among much else, history, culture, power and language. In considering peer responses produced in a specific program or course as one aspect of dialogue, then, or as one knowledge-making dialogue among many, it would be simplistic to understand them as “only a means of transmitting information or an overlay on cognition” [4]. Much is happening beyond the eye.

On my first project read-through of paper responses from *Sport and Society*, I realized that the students had been very aware that they were responding to a real person, and within a social matrix. The frequency of what seemed at first to be “making nice” comments astounded me, as did their placement. Only three responses did not begin with a direct statement of agreement or enjoyment in relation to the paper the responder had read -- observations on the order of “I really liked your paper” or “I found your critique to be right on in many respects” -- and just two responses recorded actual disagreement. These superficially positive comments (as I first thought of them) struck me as responders taking the easy way out, by refusing to engage seriously with the content of what they read.

Kathleen Geissler’s article analyzing peer responses in her own classroom helped me recast “making nice” into a strategy directly related to knowledge making. Geissler notes that in her own students’ peer responses, these “introductory expressions of praise” seemed to “serve a ritual function . . . a fulfillment of one’s social obligation to be polite” (268). Geissler’s students were responding to each others’ writing as communication (not as ideas), but the problem of engagement with a relative stranger one soon would encounter in person was the same. While I will revisit below her conclusion about politeness, Geissler’s understandings that responses are a “complex speech act” occurring within a specific classroom community (274), and that her students were grappling with issues of their own authority in relation to another student’s work as they wrote them (269-271), helped me look at my own students’ work more carefully.¹

On analysis, *Sport and Society* responders’ positive reactions fell into four rough categories:

- ❖ Acknowledgement of Paper Writer’s Work (Primarily Through Its Effect on Reader)
Example: “I really enjoyed your critique.” 16-#1
- ❖ Peer Responder Claims Insight From Paper Writer’s Work
Example: “But after reading your critique, it opened my eyes a little more. . . .
After reading your piece, and thinking about the book, I now understand what that

¹ In his report of research exploring relationships between collaborative learning and computer-mediated communication, Qing Li notes that numerous studies indicate that “appropriate social skills” may be necessary for success in collaborative learning (504).

[restrictions on active sport participation by girls and women] was like for Doris Goodwin and the other females . . .” 11-#1

- ❖ Responder Used Assessment Language to Respond to the Paper or the Paper’s Content
Example: “I thought your paper was clearly written, interesting and easy to follow. . . . Great job!” 1-#1
- ❖ Responder Claims Agreement with Paper Writer (stated or strongly implied)
Example: “I agreed with Rebecca’s observation that ‘the sense of both her beloved Brooklyn Dodgers and Goodwin’s personal life was sweetly uplifting as well.’” 15-#1

The frequency of responder comments in each category appears in the chart below. I included “appraisal language” comments here because only two of the 30 papers contained a suggestion for improvement of the associated paper. All other appraisals were laudatory, primarily focusing on the writer’s handling of her material, or her successful identification of main ideas in the reading/s. They seemed to me to serve a purpose other than, or in addition to, evaluation as such.

Number of Positive Response “Tactics” Used in Selected Sport and Society Peer Responses

R #*	Week 3 Responses					Week 9 Responses				
	Positive effect on reader	Insight for reader	Positive appraise. language	Agree with writer	# of types of positive tactics per response	Positive effect on reader	Insight for reader	Positive appraise. language	Agree with writer	# of types of positive tactics per response
1	1		1		2				1	1
2	1	1		2	3	1	1		1	3
3				1	1			3	2	2
4	1	1		1	3	1		1	1	3
5	1			2	1	1				1
6	1				1			1		1
7	2		1	1	3					0
8				2	1					0
9			2	1	1			2	1	2
10			1		1	---+	---	---	---	---
11	2	1			1				2	1
12					0				1	1
13			1		1				2	1
14	1	2		1	3			1	2	2
15	1		1	1	3				3	1
16	2		2		2	---	---	---	---	---
	9 responders used multiple tactics; one none					5 responders used multiple tactics; 2 none; only one person increased the number of tactics used				

*The R # is the coded student identifier. +Indicates that the student did not post a response this week.

Sport and Society was an intensive weekend program; students met as a large group on one Saturday and three full weekends during the quarter. Week 3 responses were posted to Blackboard after the students met only once face-to-face; this may have contributed to nine of the responders relying on more than one “tactic” for expressing positive response to the paper (and by extension, positive response to its author). Geissler’s “politeness”, strongly signaled, may have seemed a social necessity when responding to a relative stranger’s paper. By Week 9, after five full days in class together and a fair amount of electronic interaction, the number of students whose positive comments fell into multiple categories had dropped to five, and positive responses held steady compared to Week 3 in just half of the categories: “positive appraisal language” and “agree with writer.” The total numbers of positive responses dropped from 39 in Week 3 to 28 in Week 9.

It could be argued that the content of these peer responses as a group focused more on the responder (“I enjoyed,” “I understood,” “I agree”) than on the knowledge made in the paper responded to, or on making new (divergent) knowledge. But to stop there would be to miss two important aspects of the group’s knowledge making.

The first and most unequivocal is that by using the word “I,” responders inserted themselves into the knowledge-making conversation. As Penrose and Geisler point out, personal presence in one form or another in academic work can be a tactic in the vein of feminist theorists, who

. . . have questioned the validity of the adversarial, “monologic” mode of argument that dominates academic discourse, offering alternative models which value connection and negotiation over confrontation, the personal and contextual over the impersonal and abstract. (514)

The *Sport and Society* responders did not absent themselves from the knowledge-making process; on the contrary, they were personally present to it – and to their colleagues, the paper writers. They identified connections and spoke from their personal reactions to the writing.

What responders did not always do was move ideas significantly forward in a risky, coherent or connected way, in most single responses. (At least not in this reader’s opinion.²) In discussing how a student’s perception of his or her authority influences reading and writing practices, Penrose and Geisler describe a student whose view of her work as a scholar was that of “reporter rather than creator” (512); the student wrote to transmit facts, not make knowledge. Another student Penrose and Geisler worked with, who understood himself to have authority in his scholarly work, could “be playful, tentative, exploratory”; knowledge to him was something constructed that properly can be contested (516). On the whole, *Sport and Society* responders operated somewhere in the middle. They went beyond reporting, to engaging personally with papers written by their peers, and most responses included one or more collaborative knowledge-making strategies. Responders generally failed (as a group), however, comprehensively to explore, to contest, to create.

But that does not mean that they failed as collaborative knowledge-making agents. After all, expecting attention to the requirements of both civility and creativity may be slightly unrealistic,

² This observation is purely intuitive; I did not attempt to assess formally the quality of knowledge made in the responses.

in an assigned 250 words! Responders clearly positioned themselves as supportive colleagues, in what we have seen to be a social process. And – this is the second key aspect of their work -- by identifying areas of agreement with the paper writer's product, responders achieved what I would suggest is a vital aspect of non-adversarial knowledge-making – that of mapping concurrence (Odell 225). This was more than “making nice,” as the following example (admittedly unusual in that it also maps disagreement) illustrates.

I am not so sure that [the] Jackson view on leadership in general is one that is unique in the realms of leadership and management but I agree with you when it comes to Professional Sports and spectator sports he is the Zen Master and pretty much the only one that I can think of that use[s] these philosophies on the basketball court. (R#3)

In every case, where responders indicated agreement with the paper writer, they also stated specifics. And very often, as above, they relied on statements of agreement as evidence to make a point of their own about the text, or to support a more general comment of their own either of insight or application to a situation outside of the text.³

In the absence of meta-narrative written by the responders about the role these areas of agreement (and the social aspects of their work in general) played in their knowledge-making, and in view of the brevity of the response assignments, I hesitate to go any farther here in analyzing the social aspects of collaborative knowledge making.

³ I found analysis of the ways in which response writers used their statements of agreement the most difficult of the project; my sense is that another researcher would have come up with results differing at least somewhat from my own. For this reason, I make only general comments here, and this is the only place in this report I refer to this particular analysis.