

Review

Making Space to Engage Difference in the Classroom

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Kerschbaum, Stephanie L. *Toward a New Rhetoric of Difference*. NCTE, 2014. 185 pages.

Stephanie L. Kerschbaum's *Toward a New Rhetoric of Difference* comes at an important moment as composition studies grapples with ways to make first-year composition, and broader frameworks for postsecondary education, more inclusive. This movement toward inclusion has manifested in revised syllabi and reading lists that make space for a variety of perspectives and knowledges from traditionally marginalized populations, disciplinary statements that endorse students' various languages ("Students' Rights"), and assignments that interrogate relationships between language, power, and knowledge. While these efforts have been crucial to the field's commitment to diversity, scholars continue to call for more comprehensive approaches to course design that build difference into the curriculum itself (see Brueggeman and Lewiecki-Wilson; Coombs; Inoue; Price). Kerschbaum offers composition's disciplinary and pedagogic commitments to difference a critical and crucial examination of what it means—and what it takes—to weave difference into the fabric of pedagogic practice. This book challenges composition instructors and scholars and writing program administrators to adopt an orientation toward difference that enables a classroom culture founded on what she calls an "ethic of answerable engagement." Consequently, this book marks an important shift in how we as a field recognize, narrate, and value difference.

Readers who are familiar with Kerschbaum's work will recognize her definition of difference as *dynamic, relational, and emergent*, a definition that departs from traditional conceptions of difference as *static* or *self-evident* (56; see also Kerschbaum, "Avoiding"). Difference is always in-the-making, she argues, and it is through interaction that differences come to matter. To illustrate how differences are emergent rather than fixed, she

offers a personal anecdote wherein she details some of the ways she identifies (deaf, White, female, glasses-wearer, Midwesterner) and claims these features come to matter interactionally. She explains:

As I move in and out of different situations, some of them matter more at some times and less at others, and they take on different shades of meaning and nuance depending on who I am interacting with. That I wear glasses is inconsequential in most interactions, whereas the fact that I'm deaf matters significantly more often. But how these things matter is highly variable. (65)

Because certain features come to matter differently in different situations and interactions, she turns her readers' attention not necessarily to what makes a feature different but, more importantly, how a feature emerges as different. Extending this concept of difference as dynamic, relational, and emergent to the classroom, therefore, opens up possibilities for exploring how differences come to matter in students' interactions. As students recognize the "rhetorical cues that signal the presence of difference," they respond to these cues by asserting themselves in ways they want others to notice (57).

Kerschbaum recognizes that institutional discourses on diversity assume difference not as dynamic, relational, and emergent but as "something owned by individuals who have particular differences" (36). Through a textual analysis of her institution's diversity agenda statement, she finds that institutional diversity discourses, which reveal globalization and neoliberal influences and commitments (see also Gallagher; Slaughter and Rhoades), claim to value diversity because of what diversity adds to the university experience for students. As universities take action to improve diversity, real, lived experiences and bodies become reduced to categories of race and ethnicity, reminiscent of "add [race, ethnicity, gender] and stir" approaches to incorporating difference. While this method certainly improves the number of traditionally underrepresented bodies on campus, it functions as an institutional accommodation to difference rather than making an accommodating institution (see also Price). Kerschbaum's analysis of her institution's diversity agenda serves as an excellent model for how WPAs might analyze their own local institutional discourses that influence their programs and classrooms, and, more importantly, her analysis identifies the limitations of institutional diversity commitments that commodify diverse bodies as "stable, objectively real things that persist across time, rather than as historically and locally situated human creations" (39). Institutional discourses on diversity, therefore, fail to engage difference on a structural or

institutional level in any meaningful way yet, she claims, they continue to influence how others understand and experience diversity.

While she recognizes the limitations of institutional discourses that mark difference through race and ethnicity, she is careful not to dismiss category identifications; rather, she claims that category identifications allow us to “acknowledg[e] the way categories help us negotiate situations while holding those category identifications open for new interpretation and understanding” (92). That is, when difference is understood as dynamic, emergent, and relational, we shift our attention to how these markers of difference come to matter in a particular interaction. Rather than eliding difference or simply acknowledging difference exists, an ethic of answerable engagement calls on students and teachers “to identify how they are naming, conveying, describing, and articulating difference in everyday interaction” (78). Markers of difference, therefore, become the starting point of engagement as we pay attention to how these markers come to matter and how we position ourselves through the interaction.

To develop her concept of difference, Kerschbaum examines students’ interactions and how they recognize and respond to emerging differences during peer review sessions in a first-year composition course. As a frequent research site since the process movement, peer review has contributed significant insight into how students engage with their own and other’s writing, and Kerschbaum contributes to this larger conversation “a complex dynamic in which relationships and positions, the very material of identity formation, emerged during interaction” (18). For example, in one of several interactions she analyzes, Kerschbaum discusses how two students, Blia and Choua, read each other’s differences and position themselves within their interaction as they debate the placement of a comma. This interaction, Kerschbaum claims, “addresses not just whether a comma should appear, but also who gets to claim authority regarding the comma use” (94–5). The manner in which these students talk over the other, use first-person plural or first-person singular, and invoke proper grammar rules or previous writing instruction all speak back to “how students mark their own and others’ differences to marshal authority in the midst of disagreement” (98). In other words, through each exchange in an interaction, students come to recognize differences, and in light of how they interpret these differences, (re)position themselves as the authoritative figure in the exchange.

While this moment of disagreement could serve as an opportunity for students to explore how they are marking each other’s differences and how they are positioning themselves in response to these emerging differences, Kerschbaum finds that none of the exchanges she observed led to meaningful engagements with difference. This finding speaks back to what many

composition instructors may recognize as students' often contradicting views on difference. While many Millennial students claim to value differences, they also often claim, perhaps in an effort to appear colorblind, that differences don't matter (Pew). These contradicting views make engaging with difference in the classroom particularly challenging. In this study, for example, students decide to move on to another topic instead of engaging their disagreements. In the end, disagreements "did not seem likely to lead to long-lasting change in perspective or orientation to a text" (98). Adopting an ethic of answerable engagement, however, can bring into relief these contradicting views on difference by promoting individual responsibility to account for how differences come to matter without presupposing differences as always already existing.

Analyzing students' interactions during peer review allows Kerschbaum to tacitly remind her readers that opportunities to engage with difference are already prevalent in our classrooms and that adopting her conception of difference doesn't require a revised curriculum. Instead, recognizing these rhetorical performances—or how students position themselves as differences come to matter—requires us to shift what we hear in the classroom and how we hear it. To adopt an ethic of answerable engagement, then, requires what she calls "flexible listening," an approach to learning with students that pushes back on prescriptive ways of knowing about students. Echoing Ratcliffe's rhetorical listening, flexible listening challenges us to reconcile that what we have come to recognize and know about students rests on experiential, disciplinary, and institutional narratives *about* students (see also Price). To open up what we listen to requires us to shift from "learning about" students to "learning with" them, which also leads us to ask questions such as "How are individuals positioned by others?" instead of "What groups do individuals belong to?" (74)

By focusing on the how instead of the what, Kerschbaum invites reflection and consideration on the ways we articulate what we as composition instructors, scholars, and administrators do and value. For example, explaining to students that the goal of peer review is to improve a peer's writing has effects on how students approach this particular activity. This articulation opens up possibilities for engagement—namely, for students to figure out ways to make the paper better—but also closes off other possibilities for engagement. To promote an ethic of answerable engagement, she claims, requires significant reflection on and accountability for how we narrate our work and our students to each other. Therefore, while what we do in the classroom might not necessarily change, how we articulate what we do shapes the classroom discourses and how students structure their interactions.

Toward a New Rhetoric of Difference is a pivotal text that will shift the standards on disciplinary and pedagogic engagements with difference. For WPAs, this book invites critical programmatic reflection and serves as a cautionary tale for how institutional discourses on diversity structure others' orientations toward difference. For composition instructors both seasoned and novice, it illustrates the robust opportunities to engage difference in our classrooms. For scholars, it's a crucial reminder that how we narrate students in our scholarship has effects on what we as a field do and value. This book is required reading for those who are committed to pushing back on neoliberal logics of difference and embracing ethical and responsible engagements of difference.

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