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Research Notes: Karl Schnapp and Ruth Hannon

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RESEARCH NOTE

Although research studies demonstrate that no single method of teaching writing to college students is significantly superior to any other, many composition practitioners are recognizing that "cultural studies" may help students become more critical thinkers, stronger readers, and better writers. Karl Schnapp, who joined the English faculty this year, has developed an approach for teaching composition that aims at helping students develop a critical consciousness of power and its mechanisms -- how some interests are empowered while others are marginalized. He made a presentation on his classroom practices in April at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, the country's largest gathering of composition professionals. The conference was sponsored by the National Council of Teachers of English.

In his course, Schnapp focuses students' attention on higher education for two reasons. First, schooling is something that all students have experienced, but all of them understand differently. These shared experiences make the composition class an ideal site to investigate the beliefs about education that students have grown to see as "natural" as well as the values and goals that drive higher education systems. Second, it is possible to see power at work everywhere in the educational system -- admissions procedures, the structure of academic communities, course offerings and content, classroom methods, student-teacher relations, and so on. Students engage in a critical examination of their own experiences and their assumptions about the purposes and practices of education.

The course opens with a reading of Brazilian literacy educator Paulo Freire's critique of the traditional teacher-student classroom hierarchy. For their first

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writing assignment, students invent a "problem-posing" writing class -- a course that makes students "critical coinvestigators in dialogue with the teacher," as Freire suggests. Further readings for the course represent both traditional and radical positions (excerpts from John Dewey, Henry Giroux, Barbara Herrnstein Smith, Alfred North Whitehead, E.D. Hirsch, and Jerome Bruner), focusing on particular methods, contents, and purposes of education. Furthermore, students investigate surface features of education -- content, methods, degree requirements, etc. -- moving progressively closer to the assumptions and ideologies underlying education. Writing assignments ask students to explore the readings carefully, to reflect on their own experiences in light of the readings, and to speculate about courses and classrooms suggested by the readings.

In his conference presentation, Schnapp argued that this approach to teaching composition not only makes students better readers, thinkers, and writers, but also creates a classroom dialectic through which teachers and students can strive for "critical intervention" in the reality of the classroom and teaching and learning.

RESEARCH NOTE

Women are entering the workforce in record numbers and a large percentage of these women are also mothers. It is estimated that mothers who work full time are also doing seventy-five to eighty percent of the household chores, a phenomenon known as the "second shift." Overall, the demands and expectations for women are tremendous. The notion that women can and should "do it all," perfectly, and without negative impact on health or well-being, is the "superwoman myth" which is perpetuated largely by the media and is clearly visible in advertising directed at women. Professor Ruth Hannon of the Psychology Department is currently researching the myth of the superwoman. Hannon's investigation of advertising finds that images of the superwoman ultimately create dissatisfaction with whom one is by stressing perfection and by holding up standards of appearance and behavior which few can meet. One women's magazine recently urged women to "Thrive Under Pressure" and devoted thirteen pages to teaching women how to do this by choosing the right clothes to wear, particularly making wise color choices. Other articles describe how to prepare gourmet meals in half the time for working women who want to keep their husbands happy. Still others

promote the art of doing two or three tasks simultaneously like learning a foreign language while biking twenty miles on the exercycle.

Hannon feels that it is important to separate myth from reality. Women are engaging in multiple roles and research indicates that these women derive major benefits in the form of greater self esteem. The problem lies in the fact that while women feel better about themselves if they have varied roles, they also experience greater stress and anxiety, particularly if they have not renegotiated household chores.

In Hannon's view, solutions lie in greater support for working women, both in terms of community resources and corporate programs, as well as in support for women as they renegotiate roles within the family. As women and men address these issues openly, the superwoman myth loses steam.

Hannon suggests that for those interested in exploring the superwoman myth and its implications for modern day society, the book by Linda Sanford and Mary Ellen Donovan, *Women and Self Esteem* and Arlie Hochschild's *The Second Shift* will be most helpful.

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