



Stasis and Theory of Mind for First Year Composition: A Transdisciplinary Exploration

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Abstract: An intentional composition pedagogy of Stasis and Theory of Mind (SToM) is deeply social-epistemic, moving beyond the obdurate individualism of both postmodernity and traditional Stasis Theory to create something more reminiscent of Vygotsky's "social theory of mind." The idea of teaching composition with a hard link to SToM may well offend a few instructors, particularly those expressivists in the Romantic tradition whose creative vision for First Year Composition is deeply inward-looking, or the odd leftover current traditionalist whose formalist approach to college composition rarely goes beyond the textbook, the digital "learning environment" or the classroom door. The potential benefits of a SToM-based pedagogy go far beyond simply creating a more persuasive classroom composition. SToM can help student writers to clarify, understand and competently address others' seemingly "false" beliefs that arise from differences in social, cultural, political, and economic backgrounds and to develop critical adult negotiation skills in some of the issues they will face in the classroom and afterward.

Keywords: Theory of mind; stasis theory, contact zone; exigence; audience; delivery

Introduction

Something that "a growing number of literary scholars consider the most exciting area of new research" (Cohen, 2010, p. c1) is "theory of mind" [ToM], cognitive terminology originally introduced to human cognitive psychology by Premack and Woodruff (1978)

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from the field of animal cognition. ToM is quintessentially rhetorical: the ability to understand and manipulate the mental states of others. In this study we argue that ToM is necessary for the successful application of rhetorical audience and stasis theories. We propose a stasis-linked ToM or SToM (Stasis Theory of Mind) that has the potential to empower composition students to better address real audiences with real differences from themselves.

Although there is an extraordinarily vast recent literature on ToM, mostly in the fields of psychology, philosophy and artificial intelligence, little has yet been published specifically relating ToM to the discipline of rhetoric and writing studies. While Scholar Google, consulted July 21, 2013, lists “about 17,900 results” for “Theory of Mind” published since 2009, the Comppile.org composition and rhetoric disciplinary search engine, consulted July 21, 2013, lists only one (!) entry for “Theory of Mind,” i.e., Williams (1989). Representing current rhetorical scholarship on ToM, both Parrish (2012) and Fahnestock (2013) offer deeply reductive considerations of ToM based primarily on the use of the concept in evolutionary criticism (literary Darwinism). Meanwhile, as Fahnestock (2013) points out, “rhetorical concepts like cooperation and reputation are addressed by other fields, creating a competing discourse” to that of rhetoric and writing studies, (p. 2), an immensely rich parallel field of discourse that has immediate relevance to rhetoric and composition but one still unfamiliar to or ignored up to now by most scholars in our discipline.

Writing in the field of psychology, Wellman, Cross and Watson (2001) define ToM in very rhetorical terms: “Seeing oneself and others in terms of mental states—the desires, emotions, beliefs, intentions, and other inner experiences that result in and are manifested in human action” (p. 655). Heal (2003) calls ToM “the process, the heuristic route, by which we arrive at our views about what is going on in others’ minds” (p. 2). Cognitive scientist A. I. Goldman (2012) writes of “the cognitive capacity to attribute mental states to self and others” (p. 402), while Apperly (2011) defines ToM as neither more nor less than “mindreading.” In this discourse community, the term “theory” is most often employed in its popular sense (that is, as a guess or supposition) rather than its strict scientific or philosophical meaning: i. e., while no one can truly read another’s mind, one can draw a provisional, contingent inference or “theory” of what is happening in others’ minds.

Unsurprisingly, there are multiple aspects of ToM, some of which can be grouped in familiar rhetorical categories: Pathos (empathy, which according to Astington, 2003, p. 34, and Corradi-Dell’Acqua, Hoffstetter & Vuilleumier, 2013, functions quite separately from other forms of ToM); ethos (theorizing about another’s personal character, reputation and possible power-relationships with oneself—see Morton, 2003, pp. 175-185), and logos (theorizing the content of other’s thoughts and beliefs, the aspect of ToM that is probed by “false belief” tests—see Slaughter & Repacholi, 2003, p. 8).

Theory of Mind harshly interrogates postmodernity’s doxa of the radical, incommensurable privacy of otherness, a now-hoary trope that, Zahavi (2007) points out, actually dates all the way back to Sartre and the Existentialists. Heal (2003) argues that in order to make any sort of sense of intersubjectivity we must “start by rejecting ... [the] radical privacy of the mental and take it instead that mental states are a part of the public natural world and are manifested in the observable complex behavior of the

human body” (p. 139), thus neatly answering Ong’s (1975) rhetorical question, about how writers might “give body to the audience” (p. 10).

Apperly (2011) argues that embracing what Zahavi (2007) describes as “the transcendent, ineffable and elusive character of the other” (p. 198) is not at all the typical human state, but rather a key distinguishing characteristic of autism spectrum disorders [ASD], and is something that cognitivists typically refer to as “mind-blindness,” (e.g., Apperly, 2011, p. 196). Apperly contends that processes of “everyday mindreading” (i.e., ToM) are essential for ordinary human life in society “mak[ing] it possible to operate successfully in a world of agents who have perceptions, knowledge and beliefs” (p. 5). Recent neuroscience research (e.g., Beckes, Coan & Hasslemo, 2013) has found that interpersonal familiarity actually creates “increasing levels of overlap between neural representations of self and other” (p. 670). Ultimately, “familiarity involves the inclusion of the other into the self ... from the perspective of the brain, our friends and loved ones are indeed part of who we are” (p. 676).

Nonetheless, Spolsky (2002) contends that cognitive theory in general and ToM in particular must still be regarded as “species of post-structuralism,” because contingent, “analogical or metaphorical use of data from cognitive science” rather than positivistic analysis preserves the “good-enoughness and instability of meaning” (p. 60) that are key to the poststructuralist vision.

We must underline that the basic notion of ToM is by no means uncontested: Gopnik (2003) observes that for many, “the very idea that children could be employing the same learning mechanisms as scientists generates a reaction of shocked, even indignant, incredulity” (p. 246). Some critics (e.g., Costall and Leudar, 2009) vehemently dismiss ToM as anything from mere “folk psychology” to pathology, to “madness.” Hutto (2007) declares that “the label ‘theory of mind’ as a byword for folk psychological practice is highly misleading,” and “should be shunned in light of the bad effects it has had (and continues to have) on the imaginations of many [who are] working in this topic” (p. 60).

As discussed by Kerr (2008), one alternative to strict-sense ToM that is favored by phenomenologists and other ideological opponents of cognitivism is “Embodied Simulation” [ES] theory. Advocates of the latter approach (e.g., Gallagher, 2012; Capstick, 2012) “hypothesize that humans perceive the other’s state of mind by simulating his/her actions, emotions and goals in a ‘mirror neuron system’ in the brain” (Kerr, 2008, p. 205). Critics of strict ToM argue, often quite polemically, that “normal” humans’ perception of others’ mental states takes place well below the level of rational consciousness via an automatic, “online” sensitivity to others’ stance, gaze and facial expressions (“body language”), tone of voice or even pheromones. This view closely corresponds to Ong’s (1975) contention that “[w]ords are never fully determined in their abstract signification but have meaning only with relation to man’s [sic] body and to its interaction with its surroundings” (p. 10). And as Myles, Trautman and Schelvan (2005) observe, in some “high-context cultures,” such “nonverbal clues are more important than the words that are said. This is significantly different in low-context cultures, cultures where words, rather than nonverbal clues, express the real meaning” (np).

A number of scholars (e.g., Dissanayake & Macintosh, 2003; Miller, 2012) argue that ToM, if and when it exists at all, functions as a “hack,” a rare, inadequate, abnormal and even pathological “offline” cognitive workaround used by those who, due to

disability, distraction or situational limitations are unable to directly sense other's mental states in the "normal" manner. Thus, Hutto (2009) exclaims that "ToM rules, but it is not OK!" and Astington (2003) describes ToM as "[s]ometimes necessary, never sufficient" for social interaction. Goldie (2007) postulates that ToM allows us to avoid social offenses, and blithely suggests that "[w]e should all just *know* not to do things like that" (i.e., obvious *faux pas*) (p. 81). Williams (2009) rhetorically asks, "[w]ho *really* needs a 'theory of mind?'" and argues that "the postulation of a set of theoretical constructs or laws, however extensive and coherent, would not on its own be sufficient to allow us to cope successfully" (p. 161). Ratcliffe (2007) goes to the extreme of arguing that ToM "has no psychological reality and is instead an abstract philosophical systematisation of social life, the utility of which is unclear" (p. 224).

However, a vastly more nuanced and less polemic treatment of the ToM vs. ES debate is offered by Heal (2003). She argues that we "should not oppose simulation to theory, but rather should ask what is the appropriate realm for each and how they interact" (p. 45). As Davies and Stone (2003) concur, perhaps it is more convenient to define ToM "in a neutral and inclusive way," as simply "having an ability to engage in ... attribution, interpretation and prediction" of others' mental states, whether through use of a "substantive theory" or via imagination and simulation (p. 303). Rather than engaging in controversy, the latter, conciliatory view is the one we will embrace in the rest of this study.

As Vatz (1973) and Ong (1975) underline, the audience and situation (i.e., the readership) for most real-world writing, including first-year college composition, is most often a fiction, not a physically-present, familiar or "natural" audience whose mental state can be perceived "directly" by even the most sensitive of rhetors. The task of fictionalizing an audience is by no means trivial, as discussed at length by Lamarque (2007). Ong (1975) wisely observes that, in comparison with speaking to a live audience, "writing calls for different, and often quite mysterious skills" (p. 10), skills which, we suggest, must in all cases include a conscious and language-mediated ToM.

False beliefs

In cognitivism a standard measure of the presence and development of ToM is the degree to which one is aware that another person may hold a *false belief* (e.g., Goldman, 2012), something easily identifiable in rhetorical terms as awareness of stasis. An awareness of an audience's false belief is obviously crucial for the composition student to correctly define stasis, here broadly understood in the classical sense as "the place where two opposing forces come together, where they rest or stand in agreement on what is at issue" (Crowley & Hawhee, 2004, p. 53), or in Foster's (2005) contemporary sense as to "identify areas of disagreement, points to be argued, and issues on which cases hinge" (np). For student writers to first identify an audience's areas of disagreement from their standpoints ("false beliefs") is an essential starting point for proper argumentation as well as to anticipate, address and persuasively refute opposing points of view. Miller (2012) points out that "a persuasive message has the goal of implanting a belief in another, although in this case not a false belief but rather a belief congruent with that of the speaker. For such an attempt to be successful the speaker must take into account the initial belief of the listener, including

potentially different beliefs across different listeners” (p. 150). These observations are, of course, as applicable to readers as to listeners. In Foster’s (2005) terms, “the right question is the implicit goal of discourse and is a prerequisite to the answer that would constitute a resolution” (np).

Following an assumption that a typical child develops a fully-functional ToM by at least ten years of age Wellman, Cross and Watson (2001) cite no less than seventy-seven twentieth-century false-belief studies of ToM published over three decades, all involving children less than ten years old. However, more recent studies (e.g., Dumonthiel, Apperly & Blakemore, 2010; Apperly, 2011) have suggested to the contrary that “theory of mind use improves between late adolescence and adulthood [although] even adults have difficulty using theory of mind to guide behavior” (Apperly, 2011, pp. 331-332).

The Basis for proposing a Stasis Theory of Mind (SToM)

The deep significance the above findings hold for teaching first-year persuasive composition should be evident: In order to participate in meaningful discourse at an adult level a student writer must be able to initially identify the real point or points at issue (stasis) in a given situation, a task that necessarily requires theorization about an intended audience’s existing beliefs and how these may differ from the student’s own. This is by no means a trivial task, since, as Ong (1975) correctly underlines, “the student is not talking. He [sic] is writing. No one is listening. There is no feedback. ... He has to make his readers up, fictionalize them” (p. 10). Miller (2012) suggests that this sort of fictionalization depends on “a capacity for dual representation, that is, the ability to represent something in two ways simultaneously” (p. 21), i.e., remaining aware of one’s own beliefs while simultaneously theorizing about others’ putative false beliefs or ignorance on the same question.

However, a pragmatic approach suggests that Ong’s (1975) “fictionalization” of the writer’s audience cannot be equated with free fantasizing—even though Aristotle, Marx, Einstein and even Ong himself wrote for fictionalized audiences, all succeeded in their respective writing tasks because each successfully theorized audiences with knowledge, attitudes and beliefs that correspond sufficiently well to those of their real readers. Nor, as Astington (2003) underlines, is it sufficient to simply fictionalize an audience’s intellectual state in order to persuasively communicate one’s point. Simply assuming someone is “ignorant or mistaken is insufficient to determine how to behave toward the person. One also needs to understand how they feel about the situation” (p. 34). Here the author is referring not simply to “how they feel” in terms of pathos or empathy, but rather to the other person’s biases, opinions or existing state of mind regarding the question at hand. Seeking such an understanding of one’s audience “becomes a context in which students engage an act in which they are empowered both to persuade others to change their minds and to simultaneously risk having their own minds changed” (Foster, 2005, np).

So, “[h]ow does the writer give body to the audience for whom he [sic] writes?” (Ong, 1975, p. 10). As Tomasello (2008) underlines, any successful communication between humans “requires that each of them sees, knows or attends to things that she knows the other sees, knows or attends to as well—and knows that the other knows this

about her as well” and so on, recursively *ad infinitum*. “We ‘share’ [a common ground] and we have various heuristics for identifying common ground with others” (Tomasello, 2008, pp. 94-95). The student writer must utilize precisely these heuristics to locate common grounds she shares with members of that intended audience as well as grounds for disagreement, i.e., where audience members’ “false beliefs” differ from the student’s own. (Were there no “false beliefs,” no persuasion would be necessary.)

This heuristic process is something that we here propose as a Stasis Theory of Mind [SToM].¹ Having, one hopes, a reasoned belief or standpoint about an issue, the student writer uses SToM to discover, infer, guess or invent *why and how* an audience, intended, invoked or fictionalized, might have come to different, “mistaken” beliefs about the issue at hand. Heal (2003) points out that whenever we deal with others, “[f]ew mistakes, whether factual errors or mistakes in reasoning, are just opaquely and blankly, completely unintelligible when reflected on. Some shred of justification can nearly always be found” (p. 44). Using SToM, the student’s task as rhetor is to find the point at issue, i.e., to theorize as to the origin of an audience’s mistakes (false beliefs) and justifications in an effort to “correct” these errors in the minds of the audience by using the most persuasive arguments available.

Unfortunately, as Heal (2003) underlines, to thoroughly catalog even one ordinary adult’s experiences, worldview, ideology, personal history, “tastes, values, ambitions, emotions and so on” would take “volumes and volumes” (p. 50). Creating or even imagining such an exhaustive catalog is “daunting to the point of impossibility” for an audience that is merely theorized, invoked or imagined (Morton, 2003, p. 13).

As Ong (1975) underlines, a writer’s “audience” (readership), is usually not a material collectivity, at least in the sense that a live orator’s audience might be (p. 11). Nonetheless, the student writer is still called upon to directly address a real or imagined audience’s shared “false” beliefs rhetorically by proposing a point of stasis before crafting any sort of persuasive composition. Morton (2003) points out, *contra* Ong, that an audience that is not a collectivity is be more manageable than one that is a collective interacting with one another and with the rhetor. A two-person relationship (i.e., writer and individual reader), or even a vast number of two-person relationships (writer to many readers) are relatively simple to manage compared to the exponentially more complex situation in which members of an audience mutually interact with one another in real time as well as with the orator. For this reason he warns us that “[t]hinking in terms of these multiply embedded propositions is inevitably demanding of time and cognitive power, and the risk of error is inevitable” (p. 18).

As may be expected, many students fail at this daunting task. In fact, it is common wisdom among first-year composition instructors that far too many traditional-age entering college students seem not yet to have developed any sort of solid or mature ToM at all, particularly with regard to “grown-ups” and those outside their own immediate life-worlds, or concerning the sort of serious public issues ordinarily addressed in college composition. Dumonthiel, Apperly, and Blakemore (2010) find that even “adults frequently fail to use their conceptual competence for theory of mind in ... communication ... in which they need to take account of a speaker’s perspective” (p. 332), while in young adults “the ability to take account of another person’s perspective to direct appropriate behavior is still improving in late adolescence, after working memory and response inhibition abilities recruited in this task have reached adult levels”

(p. 336). This appears to agree with Kerr's (2008) observation that "the ability to reflect on other minds [is linked] to related prefrontal executive functions of attention, inhibitory control, and the ability to plan" (p. 209). Morton (2003) argues that "to acquire a concept of mind ... one has to understand desire, intention, anger" (p. 24) and many other aspects of human behavior, all mature understandings that most young adults are still in the process of developing.

Since at least the early 1960's the study of audience and its relation to composition has preoccupied rhetoric and composition studies. Scholars such as Ong (1975), Park (1982), Ede and Lunsford (1984), and Porter (1986) concur that teaching first-year composition students about stasis and audience is not only desirable, but essential. Asking writing students to carefully consider their intended audience even if it appears that "no one is listening" (Ong, 1975, p. 11) helps students to write with focus and meaning. Even though Ong (1975) correctly argues that a writer's audience is almost always fictionalized, rarely if ever will beginning college writers be called upon to fictionalize an audience that is completely unimaginable to them (e.g., self-aware artificial intelligences, space aliens, or post-humans fifty thousand years hence).

Much more often the problem is the opposite: most students typically fictionalize an equally fantastic "general audience" who are clones of themselves, confirming Strawson's (2007) observation that "Almost all of us assume that other people are more like ourselves, psychologically, than they are" (p. 90). Yet even if the notion of audience in writing may be elusive (Park, 1982, p. 257) or even completely fictionalized (Ong, 1975), it is still necessary to ask students to imagine a realistic audience different from themselves. Here, Mann (2011) ironically observes that being on the autism spectrum "confers some benefits to college writers... [among them] an advantage in not assuming that other people think the way [they do]" (p. 66).

Teaching SToM

Is it even possible to successfully teach SToM, particularly to neurotypical students of traditional college age? Harkening back to Aristotle's well-known definition of rhetoric as an "art" to be learned rather than an inborn skill or gift, "ToM views intersubjectivity as the product of a sophisticated cognitive operation" (Kerr, 2008, p. 207), one that is learned and not simply genetic; e.g., it has been noted, e. g., by Peterson (2003), that deaf children of normal intelligence but who have experienced less linguistic interaction with others than their hearing peers typically score significantly below average on tests of ToM.

Goldstein and Winner (2012) report robust empirical evidence that ToM as a cognitive technique can indeed be successfully taught, at least to older adolescents and adults if not to younger children. Strijbos and de Bruin (2012) concur that by teaching formal heuristics and sharing information it is indeed possible to teach ToM, offering learners a conceptual "scaffolding" to theorize others' mind states, with the immediate goal of creating a "shared practical inferential pattern" (p. 153). The latter authors underline that the aim of such teaching is not necessarily to seek to construct "interpersonally valid" (i.e., objectively true) inferences about other's mental states, much less to make the learner agree with what the teacher thinks a third party might believe. Instead, the objective is to facilitate development of students' own good-

enough, intrapersonally-valid inferences by “giving and asking for reasons,” i.e., teaching a conscious heuristic, perhaps one like that offered by -, Trautman and Schelvan (2005), in order to foreground and raise ToM to a conscious level in students’ minds. According to Stribos and Debruin (2012), ToM as sense-making “is a cooperative enterprise that usually starts within a factive context, but which can proceed in non-factive, particularized forms that can be made explicit in terms of propositional attitude ascriptions” (p. 156).

The four traditional “stases” of rhetoric (fact, definition, nature or quality, and action) offer at best only a reductive and mechanical heuristic for attitude adscription, in spite of the fact that some enthusiastic scholars, e.g., Prelli (2005) go so far as to claim that “the constituent categories of stasis doctrine [q.v.] are universally applicable and exhaustive of the kinds of question susceptible to controversy” (p. 304). Nonetheless, as a practical heuristic these classic stases remain far more useful for the courtroom or the classroom than for everyday life—even Prelli himself finds it necessary to multiply them into a cognitively unmanageable “120 possible ways in which two discussants can address different kinds of questions and, thus, find themselves at cross purposes” (p. 308).

Yet philosopher Martin Heidigger (n.d.) argues that “[c]ontrary to the traditional orientation, according to which rhetoric is conceived as ‘the kind of thing we learn in school,’ this work of Aristotle must be taken as the first systematic hermeneutic of the everydayness of being with one another” (p. 138). In fact, Book Two of Aristotle’s (1959) *Rhetoric*, with its long list of emotional states, can be best understood as a tool for ascribing mental states to others (teaching the functions of ToM), and as such has a surprising resemblance to contemporary guides intended for high-functioning autists and their instructors, e.g. Myles, Trautman, & Schelvan. (2005).

Heal (2003) points out that “inasmuch as we both exercise the same intellectual and conceptual capacities on the same subject matter [we] may move through the same sequence of related contents to the same conclusion” (p. 49). She notes that such a hermeneutic usually works even if the audience is “perverse,” i.e., self-interested, wrong-headed, evil-minded or deceived, because even “[t]o be reliably perverse requires one to have some grip on the real structure of the issues” (p. 136).

A practical heuristic of ToM

One possible open-ended classroom stasis heuristic that functions much better as a practical cognitive scaffolding for ToM than the traditional stases might be constructed on Heal’s two proposed (2003) schemata for processing false-belief awareness (pp. 134-135). Broadly paraphrased, these schemata describe two ways a writer can “non-believingly” theorize another’s false beliefs in order to see where these may lead.

Heuristic 1

- 1a. My intended audience cares about question Q and wrongly believes in conclusion Yq (for me, a false belief, perhaps the antithesis of my own standpoint).
- 2a. I assume my audience and I are at least somewhat alike in mental functioning.
- 3a. “For the sake of argument,” I consider what it would be like to believe false conclusion Yq.

4a. I conjecture that the only way I could ever come to false conclusion Yq is if I were to first believe in false premises a, b, and c (This step can involve either a conscious, logical ToM analysis, or an imaginary simulation, “placing myself in the shoes” of a typical member of the audience).

5a. I theorize that the best way I can undermine the audience’s false belief in Yq and persuade them of my thesis Xq is to invalidate their false premises a, b, and/or c (the true point of stasis).

Or, alternatively,

1b. My audience cares about question Q but wrongly believes in conclusion Yq.

2b. My audience is radically different from me, entirely fictionalized, or even unknown as in the case of a grading committee or anonymous grader/referee. However, I can still assume they are rational enough that if they do not believe in my conclusion Xq it may be because they believe false premises a, b and c.

3b. Therefore, I theorize that the only way I can undermine their false belief in Yq and persuade them of Xq is to invalidate (refute) their false premise a, b, and/or c (the true point of stasis).

However, as Miller (2012) underlines, a serious drawback to this sort of approach is that questions of stasis (i.e., about another’s beliefs) are much “better when a question about knowledge or ignorance precedes the question about belief” (p. 49). In fact, this author argues that although it is relatively simple to realize that another person knows more than oneself, “the more difficult task is to realize that someone knows less than the self” (p. 120), which may be why children [and, we must add, far too many entering college students!] “typically operate as though the listener already knows everything that they are attempting to convey” (p. 154).

We can use Miller’s insight to create a more compact, manageable and practically teachable SToM-based classroom heuristic of stasis for first year composition as follows:

Heuristic 2:

Either:

1a. My intended audience and I are similar enough in attitudes, emotions, background and mental functioning that by mentally “placing myself in their shoes” I can theorize what their knowledge, beliefs, feelings and premises might be on the question at hand;

Or,

1b. My audience is unlike me, unknown, or even entirely fictionalized, but I can at least assume that they are sufficiently intelligent and rational for me to theorize about their probable lines of reasoning on the question at hand;

Or,

1c. I have to assume that my audience is radically unlike me: Either deeply irrational, “invincibly ignorant,” ideologically, emotionally or materially invested in their false

beliefs, or otherwise impervious to reason on this issue. (Which means that if I can ever hope to persuade them at all it will probably be by appeals to pathos or ethos.)

And then, **either**:

2a. My intended audience knows virtually nothing about the question I am addressing and has come to no firm conclusions about it, so my persuasive task is primarily one of informing and educating;

Or,

2b. My audience is aware of the issue at hand but does not care enough about it to form any firm opinion. In this case my task is primarily one of raising their consciousness as to the importance of the issue;

Or,

2c. I know my audience, whether informed or uninformed, has already either come to firm “false” conclusions (i.e., beliefs that differ from my standpoint) on the question at hand, or holds certain false premises that must inevitably lead them to false conclusions. In this case my two main tasks are, if possible, to invalidate (refute) the audience’s false premises that lead to “wrong” beliefs, and to prove that my standpoint is better than alternative conclusions.

This latter heuristic can easily be simplified into a classroom handout or worksheet. However, in order for the process to succeed the instructor may need to function as what Myles, Trautman and Schelvan (2005) refer to as a “Safe Person,” someone to whom students who have trouble with ToM can come to for answers without ever fearing dismissive responses like “Everybody knows that...,” “It should be obvious that...” or “Simple common sense should tell you that...” (np).

Even when severely reduced in this way, an intentional composition pedagogy of SToM is deeply social-epistemic, moving beyond the obdurate individualism of both postmodernity and traditional Stasis Theory to create something more reminiscent of Vygotsky’s “social theory of mind” (Williams, 1989). Even though Ong (1975, p. 11) argues that a readership (a writer’s “audience”) is not a collective, Tomasello (2008) underlines that “human collaboration for building skyscrapers and creating universities, for example, is unimaginable without [shared, usually written] communication for setting the shared goals and subgoals and formulating the coordinated plans to achieve them.” He underlines that shared texts necessarily create “shared intentionality... some jointly focused entity that we know we share but are viewing from different angles” (pp. 343-344).

Just as importantly, Tomasello (2008) points out that the “cooperative infrastructure of human communication, including conventional linguistic communication” (p. 344) is learned, not innate, opening real possibilities for a learned SToM that successfully addresses collective audiences (even those that are fictionalized) and can be taught in the composition classroom. A caringly directed pedagogical heuristic that requires students to construct a SToM in order to address a chosen audience interrogates and demolishes students’ familiar infantile fantasies of audience as “everyone out there” or “anyone who reads this” (the “casting bread upon

the waters” theory of audience) or as “anyone who is interested” (which carries a strong silent subtext of “I’m not at all interested in this subject but am reluctantly going through the motions just to get a grade.”).

SToM and bullying

A SToM-based composition pedagogy offers remarkable potential for “comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable” in the classroom. The crude bully, the egotistical “driven genius” or the immature but highly-privileged individual who is accustomed to “getting what s/he wants when s/he wants it” may have no interest whatsoever in exploring what others believe or wish, and might even resist such explorations as uncomfortable, meaningless or irrelevant. Yet, for some of these students a pedagogy of ToM might serve as a healthy eye-opener.

Considerable recent research (e.g., Sutton, Smith & Swettenham, 1999; Shakoor et al., 2012; Keenan, 2003, p. 138) supports common wisdom: certain bullies and predators do develop a “nasty” ToM for their own manipulative purposes because, as Repacholi, Slaughter, Pritchard and Gibbs (2003) warn, “being able to accurately read another person’s mind is useful for knowing how to effectively hurt someone” (p. 72). These authors note that manipulative bullies “frequently outperform” non-bullies in “experimental situations that require participants to steal, lie, or cheat ... or to persuade others to engage in these behaviors” (p. 74), surely the very definition of dysfunctional and unethical rhetoric.

However, in our own teaching experience we have found that the students who seem to show the most sensitive ToM are too often not bullies, but the bullied: Those who have been negatively affected by racism, bullying or discrimination, abused young people or battered spouses, children of disturbed or alcoholic parents, or economically-stressed working class students whose survival depends on the whim of the boss, the welfare worker, professor or financial aid officer. ToM is typically an essential skill for such students, who must necessarily watch those who control their fate “as the eyes of servants look to the hand of their master, as the eyes of a maidservant to the hand of her mistress” (Psalm 123, 2, ESV). Even though to our best knowledge this anecdotal observation has nowhere been subject to empirical research, it is useful to conjecture that it is precisely these students who might find a SToM-based persuasive composition pedagogy, one designed to weaken our tendency to view the world in ‘us versus them’ terms, to nurture positive emotional responses such as empathy and trust, and to diminish the potential for intergroup conflict to be most comfortable, fruitful, and well-adapted to their own needs and learning styles.

The potential benefits of a SToM-based pedagogy go far beyond simply creating a more persuasive classroom composition. Foster (2005) argues that a stasis-conscious pedagogy can turn the composition classroom into “a space that allows students to inquire into the multiple and competing *relevant* positions that characterize complex issues rather than to merely pursue ‘topics’ through pro/con mechanical investigations of the two most *prevalent* positions” (np). Morton (2003) points out that to use an overly dualistic argument (e.g., that someone was either angry or sad, with no other alternatives) “is to disavow any claim to be explaining why they got angry rather than dropping down unconscious or having an epileptic fit” (p. 86). As an analogy one may

suggest that to limit argument about abortion to “prolife” vs. “prochoice” is to foreclose a *priori* any serious consideration of an infinity of other possible positions on reproductive freedom, e.g., lesbianism, celibacy, *purdah* (strict seclusion of women as in some South Asian cultures), *coitus interruptus*, better birth control, significant public or private financial incentives (i.e., bribes) to encourage at-risk pregnant women to choose to carry their pregnancies to term, or (theoretically!) even legalized infanticide. A strict dualistic approach also eliminates serious discussion of hidden assumptions that underlie simplistic standpoints, in this case unstated premises like Malthusianism, misogyny, individualism, certain assumptions about the nature of human life, sexuality, and human rights, the limits of privacy and the propriety of imposing one’s own moral code on others.

Additionally, as Heal (2003) argues, in the process of exploring others’ possible states of mind “if I do not share [another’s] starting beliefs, I will at least come actually to believe something about connections in the world” (p. 141), i. e., that certain premises generally lead to certain conclusions in others’ minds. Helping students achieve this level of insight is a worthy pedagogical goal in and of itself. Suggestions by Astington (2003) that an improved “false belief understanding” might also allow for better interpersonal communication, imagination, conflict resolution, friendship, social competence, personal contentment, empathy and popularity (p. 32) and by Morton (2003), that knowing how to incorporate others’ reality into one’s own is the very foundation of ethics and morality would, if correct, address even the most idealistic goals for First Year Composition.

What is more, Slaughter and Repacholi (2003) tentatively suggest that just as “language is causally related to the development of false belief understanding... the development of false belief understanding brings about changes in real-world behavior” (p. 28), including improved language use (p. 30). Mizuno, et al. (2011) note a neural connection between problems with ToM and errors in deictic shifting pronoun shifting, particularly the excessive and inappropriate use of “you” (p. 2422), certainly a very common composition error among first-year composition students. Miller (2012) suggests that although firm data is still lacking, it appears that “theory of mind affects both language and executive function” (p. 34). If eventually validated, such a connection would close the causal circle linking language mastery as in composition proficiency and ToM. Tempting as such a prospect might be, considerable further empirical study is needed before proposing any such firm link.

Cautions

To be most effective in the composition classroom SToM will probably need to be foregrounded and not simply integrated into or added to an existing pedagogy. Miller (2012) reports that “theory-of-mind reasoning, even in adults, is not so effortless and automatic that it can proceed unimpeded and error-free when there are other demands on cognitive resources” (p. 120), strongly suggesting that simply adding a ToM heuristic to an already “busy” first year composition pedagogy full of cognitively-demanding writing exercises, academic research assignments and multimedia projects, all with high expectations for mechanical correctness, will probably fail. Instead, an explicitly rhetorical treatment of SToM should become a central pillar of first-year composition

pedagogy. Such a conscious SToM pedagogy should offer students the necessary time and the cognitive scaffolding required in order to learn to ascribe adult attitudes, desires and beliefs to others, particularly audiences outside students' own age-groups, cultures and subcultures, or immediate life-worlds.

Possible cautions and objections

A SToM-based pedagogy of composition is potentially powerful enough that familiar ethical cautions traditionally attached to rhetoric acquire special importance. Like any rhetorical competence, if misused "an increasingly sophisticated adult ToM can enable bullying," manipulative and exploitative behaviors, autocratic management styles and, in extreme cases, cultish mind-control over others. Our own informal classroom experiments with this sort of pedagogy have evoked occasional student complaints that such learning is "too powerful" for the first year classroom, and even that the instructor was trying to train students to be "con artists."

Interestingly, there are certain scholars associated with the Race Critical Theory movement who argue to the contrary, that in situations of power differential to encourage "outgroup" members to attempt to mindread dominant group members' beliefs, attitudes and goals "may also inculcate psychological responses that make it more difficult for the disadvantaged to perceive and challenge ... inequality." Indeed, there may be a certain pragmatic merit in this latter observation: An arch-traditional rhetorical tactic in time of war or antagonistic social conflict is to publicly foreclose ToM by dehumanizing opponents as "beasts," inhuman fiends, or mindless, incomprehensibly evil monsters who cannot be understood, only overcome.

Yet Goldie (2007) warns to the contrary that "violence is never mindless" (p. 83), a contention Mills (2003) explores in depth in their discussions of the practical implications of ToM in military contexts. These authors concur that ToM becomes more and not less crucial in times of conflict, if only in order to "know one's enemy." ToM allows one to better anticipate, challenge, frustrate and possibly defeat opponents' offensive actions, as well as to foresee and neutralize their possible defenses even before they are raised. As Mills (2003) notes, "[i]f you can understand both your own and the adversary's discourse formation, you can better identify pivot points to reinforce, degrade or attack" (p. 33). What is more, as Morton (2003) argues, an acute awareness of enemies' states of mind can "allow us to anticipate and forestall exploitation, fake cooperation or cheating" (p. vii), and in fact, in many cultures "[t]he enemy's reaction if one did not pursue [such a tactical] advantage would not be moral admiration but contempt for one's stupidity" (p. 15).

In a situation of conflict promoting mass ToM may indeed seem dangerous from a purely Machiavellian leadership viewpoint because it "has been shown to lead to decreases in aggression and increases in altruism" (Miller, 2012, p. 157), thus dissipating people's "righteous anger" and, at least in theory, undermining popular militancy and fighting morale. However, as both McIlwain (2003) and Astington (2003, p. 34) observe, ToM is not always synonymous with empathy, much less "love your enemy." Corradi-Dell'Acqua, Hoffstetter and Vuilleumier (2013) report evidence that cognitive ToM and affective ToM (empathy) are in fact physically separate processes, each involving a different neural structure in the prefrontal area of the brain.

The reality is that for public leaders, social and political activists, military officers, fighter pilots, law enforcement personnel and anyone else who must take personal initiative in moments of conflict, developing and strengthening ToM seems to be essential. Offering our students, those whom we are preparing to step into precisely this sort of public leadership, an ethical SToM pedagogy offers vastly more potential to hone and strengthen than to disarm their critical consciousness.

SToM and Autism Spectrum Disorders

Composition instructors are not “clinicians” or therapists, and very few of us are even minimally qualified to function as such. However, a composition pedagogy designed to well address the needs of the majority but which privileges the position of student “autists” who experience an increasingly-common socio-cognitive difference must not be discarded out of hand. As Heilker and Yergeau (2011) warn, “there will soon be a rapid increase in the number of students coming to college whose identity is formed by and reflects a very different culture [autism], one with its own preferred forms of socialization and language use, its own diverse rhetoric” (p. 495). Our mandate as composition instructors is to serve these students and serve them well, while at the same time improving instruction for our more “neurotypical” students.

Thus, it is not unreasonable to conjecture that in a moment of “dramatic increase in autism prevalence” (Shed, 2013, p. 9) there is particular benefit in creating a first-year composition pedagogy that foregrounds, teaches and strengthens ToM (see Fox, 2012). No longer can autism be dismissed as simply another “disability” requiring accommodation in the composition classroom: Heilker and Yergeau (2011) argue that autism is a highly rhetorical and often very rich form of cognitive diversity, “a way of being in the world through language, through invention, structure and style” (p. 487). As Mann (2011) notes, “in some important ways, writing may be well aligned with the strengths of some of our students with Asperger’s Syndrome, and writing professionals should make sure their classrooms ... are as welcoming as possible” to students with autistic tendencies, diagnosed or not (p. 70).

Yet as Walsh and Olman (2011) warn, “Composition teachers should ... be aware of students with ASD [Autism Spectrum Disorders] may have difficulty empathizing with others; therefore they might have trouble performing audience analysis exercises intuitively. [Thus,] instructors may wish to include an overt analysis step” in the composition process, in which students write reference profiles (i.e., explicit theory of mind analyses) for intended audiences (p. 81). Here it is useful to recall that we and our students together constitute “a single, inclusive, broad [autism] spectrum representing all of human neurology” (Heilker & Yergeau, 2011, p. 496), and what can help students with diagnosed or undiagnosed ASD may well prove very helpful to other students as well, particularly those who may have ToM issues stemming from social inexperience or simple immaturity, qualities describing a majority of our traditional-age first year students.

As Walsh and Olman (2011) lament, “to date there has been no research conducted on [ASD-connected] educational interventions at the post-secondary level” (p. 80). However, a growing body of published research (e.g., Boucher, 2012) supports the idea that ToM is indeed effectively teachable. A ToM-conscious approach may also

teach those of us who may be, to a greater or lesser degree, “neurotypicals” to better “recognize autistic ways of knowing and empathizing as differences rather than neurological deficits, differences which can usefully complicate a host of normative and unchallenged assumptions in the field” (Heilker & Yergeau, 2011, p. 492)

Persuasive composition and intended audience

A SToM-based pedagogy holds the potential to become more realistic and effective than simply following the notion of audience addressed or invoked. Ede and Lunsford (1984) argue against the notion of addressed/invoked dichotomy because it fails to take into account “1) the fluid, dynamic character of rhetorical situations; and 2) the integrated, interdependent nature of reading and writing” (p. 156). These authors stress the need to examine audience in relation to the rhetorical situation and therefore to conceptualize audience as “complex series of obligations, needs, resources, and constraints” that both enables and constrains writers and readers (p. 165), here virtually defining a stasis ToM in different terminology.

Composition ideally creates discourse that is specific to a particular discourse community, and is “an attempt to exercise the will in which we must inevitably borrow the traces, codes, and signs which we inherit from our discourse community” (Porter, 1986, p. 41). Although audiences for written composition must usually be fictionalized, Morton (2003) underlines that it is awareness of shared community beliefs that “prepares one to handle ... problems in which one has little information about the dispositions of others, by providing defaults, criteria for the ascription of beliefs” (p. 69). Using ToM to write within the expectations of the intended audience’s discourse community allows for intelligibility, and “[w]hen you make yourself intelligible you gain a predictive hold over the behavior of others” (Morton, 2003, p. ii), those who “have been shaped by their membership in a community of belief-ascribers to act on thoughts that can be cooperatively understood by others” (Morton, 2003, p. 80).

Yet, as Heal (2003) warns us, “[o]ther people are not devices which we try to operate, endeavoring to cause them to do this or that useful maneuver. Rather, they are fellow human beings ... with whom we seek to forge a jointly created and growing understanding” (p. 245). Teaching SToM as a strategy for awareness of intertextuality and intersubjectivity can help students overcome the problems that they encounter in composition class every day based on their age, gender, experience, and class, etc. And in turn, an improved awareness of audience and stasis helps student writers further develop and deepen their own ToM.

SToM and Diversity

While ToM, broadly understood, appears to be a human universal, the forms and expressions that it takes can differ significantly depending on a student’s culture (e.g., Bender & Beller, 2013, p. 47), gender (e.g., Krach et al., 2009), dominant or non-dominant racial group identification, age, and perception of in-group vs. out-group membership, as well as cognitive and ability differences as noted above. Instead of tolerating the notion of “universal audience” in the cross-cultural situation of the first-year composition classroom it is wiser for instructors to always consciously foreground

ToM because it can mean “recognizing the diverse natures and needs of both students and instructors rather than trying to homogenize their experiences, and, in turn, it can mean welcoming innovation and variation in our choices and plans for courses” (Gottschalk, 2002, p. 58).

Absent ToM, any attempt at homogenizing composition by sacrificing irreducible differences will likely alienate students who belong to a marginal category, whether this be that of culture, class, sexual orientation, or differences in health and abilities, communication style or language. As Gottschalk (2002) argues, “it is assuredly wise to recognize and take advantage of clashes between differing cultures, values, and disciplines, rather than pretending that they do not exist” (p. 63). And as Goldie (2007) warns, “it is highly dangerous to work on a default presupposition of identity of perspectives and of shared interests; better surely to assume that there might well be divergences,” and to be surprised and “gratified” if ever none emerge (pp. 78-79).

First-Year Composition classrooms in US universities are excellent examples of a contact zone where multiple discourse communities with asymmetrical power relations come together (Pratt, 2002). A First-Year Composition pedagogy of SToM can encourage (indeed, require) student writers to consciously foreground, acknowledge and address different values and belief systems, while at the same time lessening the egotistical tendency to privilege certain discourses while dismissing others in a cross-cultural contact zone situation. Mills (2003) suggests ways in which ToM materially enhances one’s power in extremely antagonistic situations, offering points that can be validly extended by analogy to marginalized writers who may find themselves in situations of open or overt classroom conflict. Even in situations of non-antagonistic power asymmetry SToM can help empower student writers to clarify, understand and effectively counter others’ initially more powerful false beliefs. SToM also allows students to develop critical adult negotiation skills in some of the issues they face in the classroom and afterward.

If the student fictionalizes (or is indeed materially addressing) an audience like herself it is relatively simple for her to imagine (mentally simulate) what she herself might believe, feel or do if placed in that audience’s “mental shoes” (Gallagher, 2013, p. 3). However, as Heal (2003) very reasonably asks, “How do we cope when faced with the problem of anticipating the behavior and thoughts of others who are unlike us...? Are we completely stymied?” Here she answers quite frankly: “Sometimes we are” (p. 145), arguing that “[i]f on reflection I am not prepared to endorse arguing from how it is with me to how it is with the other, and am also unwilling to credit the other with any positive cognitive competence,” the whole exercise of “forming beliefs about others” (and one must add, that of determining rhetorical stasis!) dissolves into “mumbo jumbo” (p. 136). Even so, as Gallagher (2013) points out,

It does seem possible, in some cases, to empathize with those who are not like us. We can even empathize with monsters or aliens from other planets, as portrayed in film, and we can empathize with humans who live in faraway lands who may seem to be very different, or at least are living in very different situations. (p. 4)

Morton (2003) argues that “[w]e are a mind-attributing species. We very readily think of one another in terms of emotions, desires, beliefs, thinking” (p. ii). Castelli, Firth,

Happé and Firth (2002) observe that neurotypical adults attribute mental states even to simple geometrical shapes moving around on a screen.

However, McIlwain (2003) argues that merely seeking to place oneself in another's shoes while attempting to "map intentional states, common to certain personalities, that we may never share," is not enough. Instead, "[w]here others are radically disanalogous to ourselves, we need a coordinated set of beliefs to understand their perspectives and predict their actions" (p. 63). Particularly for those student writers who may have grown up in a "small world" of shared peer and family culture, common goals, attitudes, prejudices and experiences, and unchallenged assumptions, a practical pedagogy of SToM in the lively contact zone that is today's composition classroom can offer useful lessons to writing students on how to persuasively address the beliefs, feelings and expectations of diverse audiences.

For all these reasons a conscious SToM-based pedagogy is desirable both for writing students and for instructors. "The most promising pedagogical response lies... in closely attending to what our students say and write in an ongoing effort to learn how to read, understand, and respond to the strange, sometimes threatening, multivocal texts they produce while writing in the contact zone" (Miller, 2002, p. 145).

Conclusion

The idea of teaching composition with a hard link to SToM may well offend a few instructors, particularly those expressivists in the Romantic tradition whose creative vision for First Year Composition is deeply inward-looking, or the odd leftover current traditionalist whose formalist approach to college composition rarely goes beyond the textbook, the digital "learning environment" or the classroom door. However, for the majority of first-year composition students who will only too soon face the meat-grinder economy of the early twenty-first century, a SToM-based pedagogy seems to be the best approach to teaching today's real-world composition.

Note:

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