

Toward a New Rhetoric of Difference, by Stephanie L. Kerschbaum. Urbana: NCTE, 2014. 185 pages.

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Diversity and difference are perhaps the two words that best describe developments in composition theory over the past decades. Our field has championed students' right to their own language, promoted translanguaging, engaged disability, queered pedagogy, and advanced comparative rhetoric. As a discipline, we believe that difference empowers students, enabling them to become more culturally and critically informed writers and citizens in the globalized twenty-first century. Aiming to redefine how we think about diversity, Stephanie L. Kerschbaum's *Toward a New Rhetoric of Difference* reconceptualizes normative understandings of difference in the writing classroom. Rather than seeing difference as merely fixed, observable identity traits, the book reconceptualizes it as discursive engagements within a rhetorical situation; that is, Kerschbaum shifts our understanding of difference from commonly taxonomized identity categories to "identity formation, emerged during interaction" (18). To illustrate this central argument of her book, Kerschbaum analyzes student interactions in a first-year writing class at a large research university in the Midwest (what she calls Midwestern University or MU) and through her compelling analysis, demonstrates how rethinking difference can foster a more reflexive pedagogy and more productive classroom interactions.

Comprised of an introduction and four chapters, the book opens by critiquing the inadequacies of existing research on diversity and detailing its research methodology. In the introduction, Kerschbaum acknowledges the importance of identity categories—race, ethnicity, sexuality, physical ability, nationality, class—but cautions that examining difference solely on these terms can lead to a monolithic understanding of students. Identity categories, she cautions, can fix students in time and space, potentially creating stereotypes in scholarly representation and student-teacher interaction. Kerschbaum specifically questions the generalizability of minority representations in empirical studies. As the context of each study is different, it may be misleading for teachers to rely on scholarly works about minorities alone to guide their knowledge of disparate student groups.

To develop a more fluid and situated understanding of identity and difference, Kerschbaum conducted an ethnographic study of a first-year writing class comprised of nineteen students belonging in the same living and learning community. The class included fourteen men and five women; thirteen were white, and six were minorities (Asian, Hispanic, or Black). Kerschbaum's

data consisted of daily class observations, video and audio recordings of class interactions, a survey of student demographics, interviews with the instructor and selective learners, and classroom handouts. She analyzes these data in the subsequent chapters to investigate how students engage and mark difference during small group activities.

As a university diversity initiative impacts the demographics of the classroom that Kerschbaum studies, chapter one analyzes diversity rhetoric at MU through the lens of critical discourse analysis. She demonstrates that collectively, university webpages, admissions literature, university planning materials, and administrators' diversity presentations commodify race and ethnic bodies as resources and properties that MU must accumulate to compete in a diverse global economy. Thus, ultimately, difference is framed as capital to propagate neoliberal ideology. This way of thinking about diversity, Kerschbaum contends, fails to help students and the school engage difference in a more productive and progressive manner.

Chapter two details Kerschbaum's alternative approach to difference. It redefines difference as "dynamic, relational, and emergent," instead of being conceptualized as portable, fixed traits across contexts (56). Otherwise put, difference is not merely out there to be found but emerges through dynamic interactions among rhetors. Kerschbaum uses her deafness as a case in point. When she encounters a student who does not recognize that she is deaf and another who notices it, each interlocutor is positioned to respond to her in a different way; s/he will adapt his or her communication style and make adjustments accordingly, impacting which differences might emerge during the interaction. Ultimately, heeding how difference develops through discursive interactions allows teachers to avoid overidentifying with or fixating on minority students. Instead of learning and making assumptions *about* students from scholarly sources and one's experience, Kerschbaum advocates learning *with* students through ongoing classroom exchanges and interpersonal interactions. To advance her call, she proposes "marking difference" as a framework for engaging students: communicative moments when rhetors and audiences display and respond to markers of difference using rhetorical cues that signal the presence of difference between them (57), and she offers the following heuristic questions to help rhetors mark difference: How do people situate themselves alongside others? How are they positioned by others? How do they heed similarities and differences? What differences are notable within the interaction? How are students and instructors learning with other people in the learning environment?

In chapter three, Kerschbaum uses her heuristic to study how students recognize and negotiate difference during peer review and to further illustrate how difference is emergent and situational. She closely examines written and

oral comments in two peer response sessions among three female students to reveal that the ways students constructed their identities and differences was contingent upon the unfolding interaction and conversation within the group; differences in knowledge, identity, and authority emerged and shifted through the ongoing interaction. Kerschbaum then uses this key insight to advocate three reasons why it is important for us to learn to mark difference in our classes: doing so enables us to understand how students construct subjectivities and position themselves, identify and open up productive dialogues about needs and identity and how they impact classroom dynamics, and reflect and revise how we teach and interact with learners. In short, marking difference promotes productive reflection on our pedagogy and communication with students.

The final chapter demonstrates the limitations of marking difference as a heuristic. Kerschbaum analyzes two separate peer review sessions in which students failed to acknowledge or understand each other's differences, indicating that her call can be challenging for students to enact. For instance, in one peer review session, a gay White male debated his partner's decision to delete a phrase from his draft. Through a close analysis of the peer review conversation and a follow-up interview with the male student Kerschbaum illustrates how, in the end, both students failed to see the rationale behind each person's suggestions and interpretation of the phrase in question, which hindered a productive dialogue and revision possibilities. Similarly, in another peer response group comprised of two White and one Asian American women, Kerschbaum shows how the White students overlooked an important question the Asian student asked about her thesis and how, at times, the group saw discursive difference in their peers' prose as problems to be fixed, rather than another viable rhetorical option. Taken together, these two cases show how students failed to articulate and understand each other's differences and why/how differences emerged in the first place. Moreover, in her analysis, Kerschbaum demonstrates that factors such as race, sexuality, gender, languages, and class shaped how students positioned themselves, constructed their identities, and provided and interpreted feedback from peers—and that these factors are often overlooked by teachers training their classes to conduct peer review. Yet, the chapter does not offer concrete pedagogical interventions or activities for helping students productively engage and negotiate difference during peer response or classroom interactions, something that I suspect many readers would have appreciated.

Indeed, the book contains several gaps. While it convincingly demonstrates why a new understanding of difference is needed and why marking difference is necessary, it does not present specific suggestions on how we might teach students to mark difference in the classroom and in their daily communications. Considering that students in Kerschbaum's study had difficulties engaging difference, what pedagogical activities might we develop to ease this challenge?

Furthermore, the book does not explicitly address how, as a discipline, we might need to rethink, and better train instructors to conduct, peer review to help students interpret and engage difference in a more productive manner, while being mindful of how race, class, gender, language, physical ability, and so forth affect *difference* in peer review. What kind of teacher and student training models might we now need to encourage? Rather than seeing these gaps as limitations of the book, we ought to approach them as opportunities for further pedagogical and scholarly explorations to extend the significant work that Kerschbaum has begun.

As a whole, *Toward a New Rhetoric of Difference* offers a compelling, close analysis of how difference is marked and constructed by moving from examining institutional discourses about diversity to interactions about writing in first-year composition. The rich classroom data and complex research methods that Kerschbaum used allow her to present a detailed, sophisticated, and refreshing study to revise how our discipline thinks about difference, which can potentially transform how we teach, position, and understand students. Most significantly, Kerschbaum's heuristic of marking difference can help us approach and understand difference in a more contextualized and dialogic manner. It also challenges us to become more critically reflexive instructors and mentors. Given that diversity remains an important issue in higher education and that minority populations are expected to rise over the next decades, Kerschbaum's book is particularly timely and relevant. I recommend it as a useful professional development resource for writing program administrators and anyone who teaches writing. The book will also be of interest to scholars engaged in empirical research and cross-cultural and minority rhetorics. As a heuristic, marking difference can be adapted into a critical methodology to aid research design, data analysis, and engagement with marginalized communities and cultures. In sum, Kerschbaum has offered a transformative framework that allows writing scholars and teachers to create more pedagogical innovations to empower reflexivity and heteroglossia in the classroom and academy at large.

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