Optimistic Reciprocities:
The Literacy Narratives of First-Year Writing Students

Kiosk 2: Optimism, Hope, and Anticipated Reciprocity

Cognitive Neuroscientist Tali Sharot studies optimism, our ability to imagine and generate positive expectations for the future. Following brain imaging research that suggested that the neural systems in control of recollection and memory were the same systems in control of imagining a future (Addis, Wong, and Schacter), Sharot and her colleagues recorded the stories and brain activity of research study participants who were asked to describe imagined future events. They found that regardless of the event that participants were asked to describe, "even when given specific situations of the most humdrum kind (getting an ID card, playing a board game), people tended to fashion magnificent scenarios around them" (xi). These descriptions included greater vivid detail that occurred nearer in time and with higher probability (Sharot et al). Additionally, the functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) of the neural networks responsible for human optimism included in these stories showed great encoding of desirable information and less encoding of less or undesirable information (Sharot et al).

Further, in her studies on The Optimism Bias, our "inclination to overestimate positive events in the future and to underestimate the likelihood of experiencing negative events" (Sharot xv), Sharot asked participants to predict their likelihood of encountering particular kinds of events, both ordinary (stuck in traffic, late for an appointment) and extraordinary (sexual encounter, receiving a surprise gift). Overwhelmingly, participants predicted more positive experiences that would occur sooner over negative or neutral experiences that would occur later (xiii-xiv). In a forthcoming study, Sharot, Korn, and Dolan found that people's estimation of the probability that they would fall victim to crime was, on average, lower than the level suggested by data collected on crime:

> Thus, while people believe crime raters are high, they also believe they are somehow immune. While the economy of the country is in trouble, we believe *we* will endure. While health services are poor, and public schools are even worse, *our* local services and local schools are, fortunately, quite good. (Sharot 69)

People were willing to rethink their original expectations when presented with information, but only when that information was an improvement of the situation on which they were reflecting. In sum, Sharot argues that the optimism bias in humans developed to enhance and maximize pleasure (130) and that "humans do not hold a positivity bias on account of having read too many self-help books. Rather, optimism may be so essential to our survival that it is hardwired into our most complex organ, the brain" (xii).

I recognize that I run the risk here of over-simplifying complex theory and research in neuroscience. For example, Sharot's work also explores connections between memory and imagination (and that optimism is often fueled by the lessons we've learned from past mistakes), the differences in expectations in healthy people and those who live with depression, and the dangers of extreme optimism (and her belief that an understanding of The Optimism Bias can diminish the risk of danger).

I also recognize that, well, I am going to employ my own optimism bias to think about students and the work of writing instruction in optimistic ways. I believe this subject is worthy of our attention and that it provides a productive frame for seeing the teaching of writing.

Optimism is about expectation. Sara Bengtsonn's research has shown that our response to students' expectation does affect their learning. Bengtsonn, also a cognitive neuroscientist, primed students with words related to "smart" and "dumb" before asking them to perform cognitive tests and found those primed with a word such as "clever" performed better than those primed with a word such as "stupid," the result of students' expectations of themselves and their own performance having been altered (Sharot 51). More importantly, fMRI showed differences between the two groups in enhanced medial prefrontal cortex activity. When participants performed correctly, there was no enhanced activity in this region of the brain. When participants made errors, however, enhanced activity was found in those primed with "smart" words but not in those primed with "dumb" words. Expectations triggered by the words mediated their desire to fix the mistake (52-55).

Optimism is not a new concept in composition studies. George Hillocks' 1999 monograph, *Ways of Thinking, Ways of Teaching,* uses optimism and non-optimism along with objectivist and constructionist notions of learning to create a taxonomy of expectation that teachers have for students. In his study of composition instructors, Hillocks studied how instructors formatted their classes, how they emphasized particular kinds of knowledge, and how they asked students to participate during class time. He found:

- optimistic instructors emphasize small group and individual work over frontal teaching;

- non-optimistic teachers spend twice the amount of time on syntax-mechanics than do their optimistic counterparts;

- optimistic teachers evenly distribute knowledge by mode across declarative, explanation of procedures, and procedural while non-optimistic teachers spend most of their time on declarative knowledge and explanation of procedures. (43-50)

Paula Mathieu's work on the public turn in composition studies, specifically in the area of service learning, draws comparisons between optimism and hope. She sees hope "as the concept that best describes the spirit of tactical relationships" (17) necessary to imagine and interrogate the possibilities of partnerships between institutions of higher education and communities. Distinguishing hope from wishing, Mathieu states, "To take on hope is to take on risk and responsibility while maintaining a dogged optimism" (17). For Mathieu, hope, like optimism, is about the future, but more importantly, about action, about doing, about making. In her review of the work of Ernst Bloch, who would define hope in part as "militant optimism," (132) she argues that a notion of hope that embodies desire, analysis, and action "mediates between the insufficient present and an imagined but better future" (19).

Mathieu writes:

> To hope, then, is to look critically at one's present condition, assess what is missing, and then long for and work for a not-yet reality, a future anticipated. It is grounded in imaginative acts and projects, including art and writing, as vehicles for invoking a better future. . . . Hope is the tension between reality and vision that provides the energy and motivation to keep working. (19)

(For a cognitive neuroscientific take on hope, see Tarot, *The Optimism Bias*, pages 59-71, in which she draws comparisons between Barack Obama's presidential win in 2008 and Shirley Temple's film career in the 1930s, making distinctions between private and public optimism.)

Compositionists whose work intersects with social media theory recognize anticipated reciprocity as the optimistic expectation that not only is someone there reading or listening or veiwing, but also after some kind of contribution to a conversation is made, someone will respond (Kollock). Social media technologies have typically rendered such expectations explicit and direct—participants will get into a heated debate about my provocative contribution to a forum's message board; readers will express outrage/sympathy/support/unity to my latest blog post; friends will continue a line of humorous comments to my tongue-in-cheek Facebook status update (or, at the very least, "like" it); someone will Retweet (RT) my live-Tweet from an event I'm attending. Within all of these communicative acts, I am optimistic. I can imagine and have expectations for a future communicative act. Even if I do not receive an explicit response, I expect that someone will have read/heard/watched what I said and will have made meaning from it. In most instances, anything less is unimaginable

I want to draw some distinctions among these ways of thinking about optimism, although I do think they share some characteristics. Whereas I think Sharot and Hillocks are often operating from similar understandings of optimism, especially in the area of expectation, Hillocks does not provide a working definition of the term, and I often feel that he uses the term interchangeably with positivity, enthusiasm, confidence, trust, and faith. These are, indeed, all concepts related to optimism and describe teachers' attitudes toward students in Hillocks' study, but they do not necessarily suggest temporality, specifically, a partiality to the future. Hillocks studied teachers' expectations of students. He was interested in categorizing a small sample of composition instructors to better understand modes of instruction and learning. I am interested in student optimism about their own writing, writing experiences, and writing instruction.

Mathieu's thinking about hope and a "future anticipated" is indeed conceived of temporally, and I am particularly drawn to her activist interpretation of the term framed in the public turn of composition studies, which will later become central to this project. For the moment, my questions feel smaller than Mathieu's, or perhaps my questions come earlier in the conversation in order to shape our roles and goals on the streets and in community/university relationships. Kollock's theory of anticipated reciprocity truly brings Sharot and Mathieu's work in optimism and hope close to the ways in which I want to think about writing.

As I consider collectively the work of Tarot, Mathieu, and Kollock, my interest in optimism lies with an emphasis on the future, but specifically, how do students imagine and generate expectations for the future when they think about writing and writing instruction? And, more importantly, what might student writing and writing instruction look like if we met students' optimism—their imaginations and expectations of the future —in our pedagogies and curricula?

Next: Optimism and Genuine Audiences