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ABSTRACT

One of the most interesting controversies in the theory of teaching composition--and one that has profound consequences for classroom practice--is the debate over "ideological" or "radical" pedagogy. In the minds of most mainstream Americans, an ideological education is associated with dictatorship and state control of education. Every pedagogy, to quote James Berlin (1988) "is imbricated in ideology--a set of tacit assumptions about what is real, what is good, what is impossible, and how power ought to be distributed." Attempting to avoid all controversy and all political discussion can lead to textbooks and classroom atmospheres that are hostile to the values of critical inquiry. A composition instructor, noting the boredom his students showed with their standard collection of essays, created, along with his students, a series of essay topics drawn from the most important problems facing society. Students' essays written in this manner were better in form and content. Another composition instructor experienced a "teaching epiphany" during a discussion of an essay concerning what motivated people to risk their lives to help save Jews from Nazis. As the students discussed what they would do, they recalled Martin Luther King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail," which addressed that very issue. A passionate and heated discussion ensued, which lasted to the end of the class period and spilled out into the hallway after class. Political literature can play an essential role in motivating students to think deeply, in teaching them to write better, and in preparing them for the world beyond the classroom. (RS)

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Politics and the English Instructor: Using Political Literature to Teach Composition

One of the most interesting controversies in the theory of teaching composition--and one that has profound consequences for our classroom practice--is the debate over what has been termed "ideological" or "radical" pedagogy. In an article entitled "Ideology and the Curriculum: The Battle for Truth, Culture, and the American Way," Barbara McKenna gives an overview of the controversy, which includes the ongoing revision of the literary canon to include previously marginalized or ignored writers, and the conservative reaction against such revisions. Responding to the general tendency toward inclusion of works by women and members of racial and cultural minorities--a tendency that led to a much publicized revision of the core course in Western Civilization at Stanford University--conservative scholars such as Allan Bloom and Stephen Balch have objected to what they consider the "politicizing" of the curriculum (10). In response to the attacks of the conservative academics, George Levine, director of the Center for the Critical Analysis of Contemporary Culture at Rutgers University, asserted that "charges of ideological bias are themselves 'powerfully ideological and less open and flexible than the views of those being attacked'" (qtd. by McKenna 11).

Levine's reply and the conservative attack on the new

pedagogy are echoed in Donald Lazere's presentation of these issues. In his article "Literary Revisionism, Partisan Politics and the Press," he examines the conflict between the two extreme poles of the controversy quite clearly:

> . . . leftists attempt to show that claims of nonpartisanship in literature and scholarship, as well as in government and mass media, often are not only self-deluded but effective in delegitimizing views outside the ideological consensus. This attempt, however, gets stood on its head by conservatives . . . who claim that it is the leftists who are trying to impose *their* ideology to the exclusion of all others, rather than merely trying to counteract its exclusion and to point out the blind spots in the dominant ideology that impede objective, critical thinking about the status quo. (53)

It is easy to understand why most people outside the academy, and in many cases even academics themselves, dislike the term "ideology" when applied to the classroom. In the minds of most mainstream Americans, an ideological education is associated with dictatorship and state control of education. A recent review of Being Present, Willy Schumann's memoir of a German child's coming of age in Nazi Germany, makes the point that "young minds can be twisted for ideological ends" (Weir 12), and in summarizing the content of the book, the reviewer writes: "Born into an

apolitical, middle-class family in Schleswig-Holstein, Schumann was taught humanistic values by his parents and teachers. He was an enthusiastic student whose education became gradually more ideological as National Socialism flourished" (12). Note the contrast here between the "ideology" of Naziism and the "humanistic values" taught before the Nazis had taken over. Yet the humanistic values that the Nazis threw out are also an ideology--a more valid one. So it is not a matter of whether or not we choose to be ideological; it is a matter of choosing an ideology that expresses democratic values rather than the fascist values of militarism and racism. As McKenna stated, "we are committed to democratic education, but it would be absurd to say that the commitment is not ideological. The question is not should we be ideological, but shouldn't we understand what our ideologies are?" (10).

James Berlin, in an essay entitled "Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class," puts it this way: ". . . a way of teaching is never innocent. Every pedagogy is imbricated in ideology, in a set of tacit assumptions about what is real, what is good, what is possible, and how power ought to be distributed" (492). This statement occurs near the conclusion of an essay that examines the relationship between different views of rhetoric and the ability of an instructor to provide an analysis of society that exposes various types of "false consciousnesses" (to use his Marxist term) that may mislead working-class people. But one does not need the Marxist analysis of society to accept Berlin's view that "A rhetoric cannot escape the

ideological question, and to ignore this is to fail our responsibilities as teachers and as citizens" (493). For the same point is made in some detail in a recent issue of American Educator, the journal of the American Federation of Teachers, in an editorial entitled "Education for Democracy: A Statement of Principles." A portion of the statement is as follows:

> . . . we are convinced that democracy's survival depends upon our transmitting to each new generation the political vision of liberty and equality that unites us as Americans--and a deep loyalty to the political institutions our founders put together to fulfill that vision. As Jack Beatty reminded us in a New Republic article one Fourth of July [1981], ours is a patriotism "not of blood and soil but of values, and those values are liberal and humane."
>
> Such values are neither revealed truths nor natural habits. There is no evidence that we are born with them. Devotion to human dignity and freedom, to equal rights, to social and economic justice, to the rule of law, to civility and truth, to tolerance of diversity, to mutual assistance, to personal and civic responsibility, to self-restraint and self-respect--all these must be taught and learned and practiced. (11)

Far from being the statement of left-wing ideologues, this non-partisan call for the inculcation of democratic values in the classroom was followed by a long list of signatories, including

former President Jimmy Carter; President of Notre Dame University,Theodore M. Hesburgh; Senators Bill Bradley, Claiborne Pell, Orrin Hatch, and Paul Simon; and the columnist George Will--though, no doubt, those people would disagree considerably upon classroom methods and materials that might teach students "human dignity and freedom" and "social and economic justice."

So we arrive at the point where we must turn from theory to practice. It is on this point that the overly theoretical tendency of the left has been criticized (Cain 85)--sometimes, in fact, by the left itself (Freedman 77). There are, however, some interesting approaches to the politics of the classroom, such as those discussed by Ira Shor in his Critical Teaching and Everyday Life, which "describes a method that develops critical thinking through the curriculum of an expository-writing classroom" (Paine 568). Further, the attempt to "restructure the classroom situation in non-authoritarian ways" has been practiced by many radical teachers (Freedman 70). Methods that allow the practice as well as the communication of a non-authoritarian world view that challenges or critically examines the status quo while affirming democratic values may involve establishing an egalitarian relationship between the students and the instructor, introducing collaborative methods of writing, editing, and discussing, and choosing educational materials that can teach good writing while allowing a critical look at the politics of society. Because time is short, this presentation will now focus on just one of these elements--the instructor's choice

of material to be used as the basis of class discussion and the essays the students will write.

Most instructors of composition are aware that students write best when they are *moved* by the material they are asked to discuss. For that reason, political literature may provide a means by which many students, even those who enter the class with the feeling that they "hate to write," may be drawn into the content of the course and may participate enthusiastically. Defining "political," as George Orwell did in "Why I Write" in "the widest possible sense" as the "desire to push the world in a certain direction, to alter other people's idea of the kind of society that they should strive after" (1.4), the teacher of writing and rhetoric can use political literature to stimulate thought, discussion, and, of course, effective compositions.

Those who might object that politics should be kept out of our classrooms should remember that if we adopt Orwell's use of the term "political," i. e., in its widest possible sense, then keeping politics out of the classroom would severely limit the curriculum--and thus the horizons of our students. One might also apply another quotation from Orwell's "Why I Write": "The opinion that art should have nothing to do with politics is in itself a political attitude." If we substitute "education" for "art," the statement remains true and is unfortunately all too descriptive of a certain type of political attitude, as we have seen earlier, that self-deceptively ignores the *impossibility* of escaping ideology.

According to Harriet Tyson-Bernstein, writing on "America's Textbook Fiasco," such a self-deceptive attitude has resulted in the blanding of the American textbook (23) and the dulling of the American mind. If we improved our textbooks, she writes, "Controversy--so essential to both democracy and intellectual growth--would be embraced rather than avoided" (23).

Thus, the attempt to avoid all controversy and all political discussion can lead to textbooks and to a classroom atmosphere that are actually hostile to the values of critical inquiry that we are trying to inculcate in order to, as de Tocqueville advised, educate for democracy (qtd. in "Education" 10). It can also create a classroom atmosphere that is profoundly dull. A recent article in The CEA Forum, "Maintaining an 'Ethical Center' in the Composition Class," by Thomas Brown, illustrates this point. In a passage that testifies to his frustration, Brown recounts his experience with what was apparently the kind of book discussed by Tyson-Bernstein:

> After two weeks of trying to use a standard collection of essays in an anthology as the basis for class discussions and models of writing, I faced students whose boredom was written across their faces with a clarity missing in their uninspired writing. Something had to be done--for their sanity as well as my own. (1)

That *something* turned out to be a radical, but effective

measure that revitalized the class: Brown "threw out the book" and created, along with his students, a series of essay topics drawn from a list of "the most important problems facing our own society; then a second list of those problems facing the international community" (1). Students could select the topics that most interested them and research them in the library. Then they discussed their proposed essays with the class while the other students sought weaknesses in the arguments and raised questions that the writer would have to address. When the essays were drafted, students worked together to help eliminate errors, and the rewritten essays were read aloud and discussed in class. Brown found that the essays written in this manner on topics that the students really cared about were better both in form and content (2). Thus, by empowering the students and by making the course content meaningful, he helped them to improve their writing significantly.

Brown's imaginative solution reflects the concerns of the authors of "Education for Democracy" referred to earlier. But it is a sad comment on anthologies meant to teach writing that he found it necessary to throw out the book that had been chosen as the classroom text. Books meant for use in college composition classes ought to address the issues that Brown's students wanted to write about. That is, writing texts ought to be, in Orwell's broad sense of the word, "political."

Many contemporary texts do, in fact, include such political

essays as Orwell's "Marrakech," "Shooting an Elephant," and "Politics and the English Language," which, though written in the thirties and forties, address issues of exploitation, racism, and the political manipulation of language, all of which are certainly germane to modern society. An instructor using an anthology containing these works might combine analysis of them with Brown's method of having students write on current issues.

Another political writer whose works are sometimes anthologized is Martin Luther King. The clarity of his style and the vital content of his writing help to interest students in the writing class. A freshman composition course might be organized around the works of King and Orwell, for many of the well-known essays by Orwell and sections of King's Stride Toward Freedom, Why We Can't Wait, and Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community? meet the needs of such classes. These writings exemplify political literature at its best, showing students the power of the written word to improve society and instilling in them a deeper respect for writing. By pairing these two engaged writers and by giving students more than just one or two essays by each, the course can help students to understand the real meaning of writing style and the really important purposes that writing can serve.

In our teaching we all have special moments--or perhaps special semesters, like the one described by Brown in the CEA Forum. Sometimes everything just seems to come together so well

that we know precisely why we are teachers. I call these experiences "teaching epiphanies," and I would like to end this presentation by sharing one with you.

It was the last day in class, and we were discussing an essay by Elie Wiesel called "The Brave Christians Who Saved Jews from the Nazis." In this essay--again, political in the broad sense of the word--Wiesel ponders the profound and disturbing question of what motivates some people to risk their lives to help the persecuted while others do nothing to prevent evil. Wiesel explains the dangers the righteous faced as they hid Jews in their attics and cellars, the dangers not only to themselves but to their families. The students were discussing what they would do in the situation faced by the German people and by people in occupied countries. The general consensus was that it was not possible to know, without actually facing the danger, whether one would find the moral strength and courage to do the right thing. But we had read, a few weeks earlier, Martin Luther King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail," which addresses that very issue. I suggested that we turn back to it and reread paragraph 22. We discovered that King had, in fact, answered --and with absolute certainty--the very question that the class was considering, when he wrote: ". . . I am sure that, had I lived in Germany at the time, I would have aided and comforted my Jewish brothers." The class was profoundly impressed, and several students made the point that King could make such an assertion because he had already put

his life on the line and knew what it was to live with danger. But what did that mean for the average person? A long and passionate discussion followed, which ended only when the period was over. (In fact, it did not actually end then, for it spilled out into the corridor. I could hear the students still discussing the issue as I returned to my office.)

I think it is safe to say that there was no boredom in the class that hour; there was no complaining over the length of the assigned essays. The feeling of total involvement that occurred in the class at that time was, I think, a reaction to political literature, using "political" in the best and broadest sense of the word. Such literature can play an essential role in motivating students to think deeply, in teaching them to write better, and in preparing them, especially in these days of racial tension at home and upheaval abroad, for the world beyond the classroom.

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