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DISRUPTING FAIRY TALES AND UNSETTLING STUDENTS

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We actually thought it was going to be easy. With Wendy teaching the class and Bill taking an active participant-observer role in it, we thought students would respond to the relatively low-risk venture of comparing different versions of the “Cinderella” fairy tale and analyzing the story’s possible role in acculturating children. Wendy had used a similar assignment previously and felt the students had been able to relax and have some fun exploring the ways in which the changes from version to version influenced not only the intended moral but the meanings that could be read into it. We both believed the readings were less difficult than the ones accompanying the assignments that had preceded the “Cinderella” segment of the class: Stanley Milgram’s “The Perils of Obedience” and a series of articles that focused on the decline of America and the role of women in the country. Surely, this assignment would have to be perceived as a break.

But we had not counted on something important: the relatively comfortable relationships students had with fairy tales as contrasted to the increasingly uncomfortable relationship they were experiencing with the university and its discourse. Not only would we be turning the fairy tale on its head to reveal how it mediates gender and class tensions, but we would be disrupting yet another icon of the students’ lives, so many of which had already been challenged through their courses in history and science. On top of that, we would be doing it in a first-year writing course, a class in which their peers in other sections seemed to be held less accountable for the type of critical thinking being demanded here. Yes, we thought the assignment could be both fun and challenging. We believed that by using something familiar to the students, a certain comfort zone could be reached. They then could experience the sensation of criticizing an object they were deeply invested in, thus exposing to scrutiny the contradictions abounding in our postmodern world (see Sells’ 1995 critique of *The Little Mermaid* for an example of the tensions that can surface when examining a fairy tale). We ended up engaged in more resistance than we had encountered in any of the other assignments for the course.

In constructing this research project, Bill was looking to uncover student reaction to English courses in which the professor carried through with a political agenda. While practitioners over the past fifteen years have reported favorably on their own classrooms or programs (see, for example, Bauer, 1990; Berlin, 1991; George and Shoos, 1992; Shor 1996; Thelin, 2000; Beech, 2004), notable recent studies (Durst 1999; Seitz 2004) have suggested that instructors have not taken their students' needs into account in devising pedagogies that include politicized material. Through the participant-observation method, Bill hoped to glean information that would not contain the bias of the instructor but avoid the detachment present in an outside observer. He approached Wendy and explained that he was looking to study a teacher who used political readings to create uncertainty in student convictions. He wanted to see how this uncertainty manifested itself in student texts and classroom decorum. Wendy's pedagogy contained many political elements, as one of her goals was to try to disrupt complacency in her students through her writing assignments. She agreed to allow Bill to conduct a semester long participant-observation in one section of her writing course.

Our conclusions on the issue of resistance to the "Cinderella" assignment are derived mostly from Bill's data, including notes from all the class sessions, interviews with the students, analyses of their essays, and end-of-semester student evaluations. In coming to our conclusions, we focused on the atmosphere of the classroom during this essay assignment, the students' opinions as expressed during the interviews, the implicit and explicit attitudes towards the topic as forwarded in their essays, and references to the topic in their evaluation of the course.

The "Cinderella" paper was assigned in the middle of the semester, immediately before and after the Spring break of that year. The university is located in a small Pennsylvania town, northeast of Pittsburgh, with a population of predominately white, working class, first-generation students. Wendy's class, however, was more diversified than the average first-year writing course at the university. Five of the 21 students who completed the course were African-American, and many of the students, based on information given during the interviews, were probably from upper-middle class homes and had at least one parent who had attended a college or university.

The course, called "College Writing," is required of all students, unless they test out of it through an entrance exam taken during the summer. Wendy composed a syllabus that required five essays, along with summaries, quizzes, a group project, and other activities designed to ensure the students were engaged in critical reading. Assignment #4 was the one that involved comparing five versions of the "Cinderella" story.

Assignment #4 had been preceded by an assignment that asked the students to argue about the accuracy of Masters, Johnson, and Kolodny's description of the pressures teenagers and young adults face in becoming masculine or feminine. A second option had them focus on a handout from the *UTNE Reader* and argue about its contentions regarding male-female friendships. A third option, which none of the students chose, had them argue about the appropriateness of American morality tales and whether they amounted to self-congratulations or warnings about how far the country has fallen in following through on its ideals. The classes devoted to this assignment were quite lively and led some students to explore gender roles further in their group projects. While Bill noted the usual amount of student inattention during group work, he also saw discussions much more involved than is normally the case. Several students debated the impact of Barbie dolls on gender roles, for instance, while others tried to figure out what was acceptable for society in terms of socializing children into traditional gender values. The papers were stronger than the previous group for Assignment #2, and the students seemed to pay more attention to surface details as well as to content and form.

In constructing Assignment #4, Wendy tried to use the momentum from this gender paper to help the students analyze the sequence of "Cinderella" tales. Her assignment read as follows:

The one thing that people who study folktales agree on is that fairy tales like "Cinderella" appeal to some basic social needs. One of those needs can be seen as a means of acculturating children—that is, to familiarize

children with the roles expected of them in their culture. Write an essay in which you argue that the fairy tale “Cinderella” in the forms we are most familiar with contains elements that demonstrate either [emphasis hers] (1) acculturation of children in terms of gender roles, or (2) acculturation of children in terms of American values.

Her instructions further explained to the students that the assignment was meant to be a synthesis, so the students should refer to specific elements in more than one variant of the fairy tale. She also required them to refer to Jane Yolen's “America's Cinderella” or other essays assigned during class, including those used for the previous assignment.

The students had enjoyed the reading and had participated in the first group assignment in which they compared and contrasted five versions of “Cinderella”—Charles Perrault's, the Grimm Brothers', Disney's, Giambattista Basile's, and Tuan Ch'eng-shih's. They noted the absence of violence in the versions with which they were more familiar and listed obvious differences, such as the lack of a fairy godmother in the Grimms' version, the forgiveness Cinderella displays in Perrault's, the different names for Cinderella, and the cat characters in Basile's Italian version. However, our first clue that we would be meeting resistance also occurred in the second half of this session when Wendy asked the groups to discuss how these versions related to cultures and times. Bill stimulated some discussion in the groups he visited by asking about gender roles, but other than the feedback he received, the students waited for the synthesis of the group sessions to relate it to cultural lessons and values.

Wendy ended up leading the class discussion more than she normally did. One student, an outgoing woman named Mary, indeed saw the way the tales represented their cultures in the tales' perceptions of the aristocracy, the influence of World War II, and the role of magic. Aside from her, though, only two students spoke. Wendy asked many pointed questions regarding the role of religion and the varying beliefs regarding vengeance, the stepsisters' reward of marrying noblemen, and the role of the father. The students resisted all attempts at her incorporating the Chinese and Italian versions of the fairy tale into the discussion and did not respond to Wendy's specific citations from the text that they might have found relevant. Slightly frustrated, Wendy ended the session by instructing the students to read Yolen's article, then to reread the differing versions of the “Cinderella” tale for the next class session.

The dramatic drop in participation caught us off guard. In discussing it after class, we assumed that the level of difficulty had increased when Wendy asked them to construct a relationship to the cultures and times of the different versions. We wondered if they had understood the assignment or knew enough about the cultures surrounding the times to see a relationship. It was a cognitively much more sophisticated task than the previous ones. Later when looking back on the session, we found ourselves analyzing the students' sense of their place in the knowledge-making of the university. It seemed to us that the students were familiar with the comparison and contrast ritual that marked the first part of the class session. However, they were uncertain as to what the second task implied about the type of knowledge they were expected to generate. In their personal registers, comparison and contrast could be located and categorized as a tool for analysis. But what was taking a fairy tale and showing how it reflected the culture and times it was written in? It did not fit into any of their preconceived notions of how knowledge was produced. Without knowing it at the time, we had ventured into the crucial area where academic knowledge threatens the certainty of the models students had previously constructed.

Wendy gave a reading quiz the next class session and followed it up with an individual exercise for the students to summarize the main points of Yolen and then to react to her argument. During the second half of the class, Wendy started the synthesis of the exercise by discussing the different views of children in the stories. A male student, Jake, quickly brought up the passivity of women Yolen had referred to in her argument. Yet, despite some connections made to the American morality tales found in Behrens and Rosen, the students still seemed uncomfortable. When Wendy stated that the rags-to-riches story was false, everyone nodded their heads and seemingly agreed, albeit in a very passive way. Despite the fact that Wendy had made the claim to generate disagreement, nobody attempted to dispute it. Wendy continued to prod them until a student named Janet,

slightly off-topic, said that she would not want her children to read the Grimms' version of "Cinderella," called "Ashputtle." This prompted another fairly active student named Rachel to talk about the forgiveness aspect of one version and how she thought that it contained a positive message for children. Some head-nodding and murmurs indicated that several members of the class agreed with this assessment of the texts.

However, one student, a woman named Toni, ridiculed the whole notion of children learning from fairy tales. "Kids don't get into messages," she said. "They don't analyze stories. There's a moral at the end and that's it." Wendy's eyes widened, as the opportunity for a meaningful discussion had emerged; however, there was also the chance that Toni's comments could shut down further analysis. Wendy had to choose her words carefully.

"Do people learn whether they analyze a story or not?" she finally asked.

Some of the students seemed to consider this perspective, as Bill noted the pensive looks on many faces. Jake, however, turned the conversation back to the issue of raising children with the fairy tales. He liked the "Ashputtle" version, as he felt the morals of vengeance and justice were important. The stepsisters, having their eyes pecked out by doves on the day of Ashputtle's wedding, got what they deserved, according to him. Only two students, an often-disgruntled woman named Desiree and a frequently absent student named Mark, agreed with Jake.

Wendy was happy to have any feedback and said with some degree of hope, "All right. A fight." But instead, the students focused on the issue of violence in the text, contributing comments on how children would react to it, rather than what Wendy had hoped for, to examine what children were learning about the codes of their society. She mentioned how Yolen did not promote violence, but the class ended before she could turn the conversation towards American attitudes towards violence in society. Pre-writing for the synthesis essay was due for the next class period.

In constructing this narrative of the class, we were very aware of Maguerite Helmers' critique of how students are typically portrayed in composition research. Helmers (1994) argues that in most written testimonials of pedagogical insights, students are reduced to stock characters who are most notable for what they lack, whether it be grammatical correctness, the ability to use detail, or thinking in ways relevant to the instructor's agenda. Helmers claims that this construction of students enables the hero narratives of composition to unfold. Students are seen as deficient in an area, the instructor devises and implements a plan, and the result is the enlightenment or rescue of the students. Our narrative, we were afraid, was heading in this direction, as the students so far in our representation had appeared listless, bored, and unappreciative of the dynamic set up in the classroom. However, no rescue was imminent. Our goal, then, was not to turn the students into stereotypes and show how Wendy's pedagogy saved them, but rather to display the degree of discomfort they were experiencing and to try to explain it. Thus, we realized, our narrative necessarily at this juncture had to continue to show the students as they were, or at least how they appeared to be, and follow through as honestly as possible with the details of how the class proceeded. We feel the result does not elevate either Wendy as a teacher or Bill as a researcher/facilitator, but rather explores the complexities of the interaction between the students, the material, the historical moment, and us. And from our perspective, the students' resistance seemed to be getting worse.

The next class was complicated somewhat by the presence of a tenured professor conducting Wendy's bi-semester observation. As often happens, the students were wondering what he was doing there, whether Professor Carse was in trouble, and whether they should behave as they normally did. After the students shuffled the desks into a circle, the class started with Wendy asking about the types of arguments emerging from the students' prewriting. Dead silence was the response. To ease the burgeoning tension, Wendy explained that the students need not have complete arguments right then, but that they should have questions about key issues, based on their prewriting. After yet another palpable pause, a usually reserved student named Christopher said he had looked at the father to see if the many versions deviated from patriarchal expectations. A shy student, Christopher did not venture too much further into this area of analysis, not really saying what he had found. Wendy affirmed that looking at the father was a good starting place. She repeated Christopher's

observation and waited for the students to elaborate on it, as she saw many potential questions springing from this area of inquiry. The feedback remained minimal, however.

Throughout the class, Wendy showed great patience during the points that Bill observed as dead space. In fact, when she reviewed Bill's notes at the conclusion of the data collection, she was surprised at how often Bill had commented on the silences in the class, often in negative terms. Not as uncomfortable with silence as Bill, she felt that allowing the students to come out of the silence on their own was important for their development. Perhaps because of the professor observing the class, however, she also felt an added impetus to keep this class lively. She thus interrupted the silence with several questions about Cinderella's father. "What is the expected gender role?" she wanted to know.

No student responded. One did ask which version of the tale she wanted them to look at, but Wendy's question remained unanswered. "There's a lot that could be argued," Wendy said. "C'mon. What about the father's lack of active participation in raising Cinderella?" Many students took notes as Wendy referred the class to sections in the text, but students did not vocalize any agreement or disagreement.

"Let's talk about American values," she said, exasperated by their lack of interest in the gender roles' option. "How does 'Cinderella' participate in acculturating students into traditional American values?" No one responded. Wendy looked around the room, but students stared at their books or looked away. "Okay, let's take five minutes and write down what you're thinking and how you're interpreting 'Cinderella.'"

The class was evenly divided between those who diligently wrote during this period and those who did not. Wendy asked the students to put their names on the papers. She collected them and distributed them randomly among the class, asking students to comment on the ideas now in front of them. She wanted to pick up the strand started by Christopher and tried to find who had gotten his paper. No one volunteered the information, so she called on Laura to initiate a conversation.

The paper in front of Laura talked about "Cinderella" not reflecting the American value of hard work. Wishing hard was not the same as working hard. Wendy again thought she saw something to build on, but when she asked a question based on a comparison between wishing and playing the lottery, the students persisted in their silence. Jake finally broke the ice with a comment about the differences in the separate versions of the story. Instead of talking about working hard, though, he concentrated on the lessons about "rot at the top" and "guts and gumption," both terms coming from previous discussion of American morality tales. Jake believed that Perrault's and the Grimms' version reflected these while Disney's did not.

Wendy used these ideas to return to the issue of forgiveness versus vengeance, since that topic had sparked interest previously. She tried to correlate it to the "guts and gumption" tale and showed the difference to the "triumphant individual" moral. Yet again, nobody responded. Bill could see the frustration etched on Wendy's face.

"What do you think about some of Cinderella's actions that do show guts and gumption?" she asked. "If you want something, do you go for it, no matter what? Triumph is not necessarily ethical, you know. Do you think we need to explore what it takes to get to the top?" She was greeted with more silence. "Think about some of the morality tales surrounding the Wild West. Could triumph be explored?" She waited for response and received none. "Well, I think we have some ideas that could form arguments. Does anybody have anything else they want to talk about?" No one apparently did.

She collected the papers and passed them back to the students who had written them. She then asked for a paragraph on a separate piece of paper, explaining which option they intended to choose so she could review them over the weekend. She told them they could share ideas, and some students worked with each other to help in constructing their paragraphs. The class ended with Wendy reading out loud Rachel's paragraph about materialism and American values to help the others if they were stuck.

The resistance to analyzing “Cinderella” first appeared in this week of class time, but emerged as well in the writing of the papers. In trying to figure out the problem of lack of participation, Wendy speculated that perhaps the students had not done their reading, so she asked for re-readings and gave a pop quiz. She then thought the students were blocked and thus attempted various classroom workshops and freewriting sessions to stimulate them. What Bill noted through his interviews and his role as observer, however, was not that the students were blocked, but that they simply did not want to explore the connections between “Cinderella” and ideology.

As a student named Bob worded it, “‘Cinderella’ was the least interesting [of the paper topics]. I thought fairy tales were just there for entertainment...It [the assignment] was the hardest. It [‘Cinderella’] is not there to teach children values.” He claimed to have “no difficulty” in writing on any of the topics, though, so when he talked about Paper #4 as being the hardest, he seemed to be talking about his objections to analyzing “Cinderella” for its role in acculturating students to gender roles and American values. He was not saying that he didn't see the connection, but rather that he did not find it interesting to look too deeply into what was for him and other students only a form of entertainment.

Similarly, Mark said it was hard to progress as a writer “when you disagree with the topics...I never looked at fairy tales like that and I didn't take it too seriously. How could you? I mean, I saw her points, but come on.” He did not necessarily dislike writing about “Cinderella,” but connecting it to gender roles and American values disturbed him. “You kill the story by dissecting it,” he said.

A student who rarely spoke up in class, Jean, complained, ironically so in our perspective, that the class did not generate enough discussion about the connection to American values. She disliked the assignment and spoke to Wendy about it. She believed that Wendy “looked too deeply into things,” and Jean felt “funny” writing about “Cinderella.” “It's innocent,” she claimed. “Kids know the difference between reality and fantasy.” Toni simply said that “fairy tales are fairy tales.” She felt it was “hard” connecting fairy tales to gender stereotypes, “hard” here again signifying, we believe, a resistance to disrupting the innocence the students in general had attached to fairy tales. She, too, said that analyzing “Cinderella” took the enjoyment out of it. “I never had to analyze it [‘Cinderella’] the way we had to,” she said, admitting that she was not “true” to herself when writing her paper.

Wendy's class proceeded with draft workshops and peer group revision discussions the next week. Student attendance was spotty, and the atmosphere of the classroom did not return to its pre-Cinderella level. When the students turned in their papers, it was apparent that the resistance during class discussion had seeped into their writing. The quality of the prose and form of the papers was quite high, however, eight students earning “A's” or high “B's” with nine others receiving “B's” or high “C's.” The “D” and “F” papers, with one exception, were turned in by students who had struggled throughout the quarter on the other topics. The resistance we noted, though, surfaced in the blandness and what we feared constituted a lack of sincerity in the students' arguments.

Typical of the “A” papers was Toni's. During her interview with Bill, she said she hoped to write something that stood out from the rest of the papers, whether or not it reflected her beliefs. In her paper, she attacks the message that “Cinderella” sends to children, framing it through Margret Edwards' discussion of the “Little Woman” in her essay, “Is the New Man a Wimp?” Toni's argument is that girls today are being taught to take initiative rather than letting men run their lives. She contends that Cinderella's passivity and reliance on men might have been appropriate characteristics for women to possess “years ago,” but that “to try to feed them this message now would be a step in the wrong direction.” The dominant structure of the paper reflected this idea. Throughout, she makes broad generalizations about “today's woman” and compares it to places in the various versions of the “Cinderella” tale that denounce women's assertiveness and glorify the virtue of waiting.

This focus masks the lack of critical insight in Toni's paper. When she needs to get deeper to support her argument by more fully explaining the meaning of her comparison, she cannot sustain her thesis. When talking about the stepsisters, for instance, Toni compares their assertiveness in trying to win the Prince to Cinderella's helplessness in improving her lot in life. Toni astutely points out the punishment the stepsisters receive in the Grimms' version (which she mistakenly calls the original), but then switches her focus to obvious rhetorical

questions, such as, “Are these the type of lessons that we want our children to learn from fairy tales?” and “Do we want our children to grow up...helpless and passive?” Wendy's comment in the margin reflected her concern with this avoidance of analysis, as she wrote, “Why not come back to the point about assertive women?” Elsewhere, though, Wendy praised Toni for her clarity and use of supporting textual detail. Based on the features Wendy used on her grading sheet (Thesis, Organization, Sentence-Level Issues, and Readability), Toni had indeed written a relatively strong paper. Throughout the four pages of text, though, Toni succumbs to repetition or generalization when the opportunity for critical analysis presents itself.

Despite telling Bill in the interview that fairy tales were harmless, Toni states in the paper that “young children... will read fairy tales, such as ‘Cinderella,’ over and over again. This is what makes fairy tales an important part in shaping our children's attitudes about male/female roles and responsibilities.” Thus, her essay does not reflect her genuine thoughts on the subject. In fact, she said that she wanted her own daughter “to be soft and nice, to be a more traditional woman.” She went on to claim that she had no problem with traditional gender roles and had not paid attention to them prior to this course.

It is incumbent upon us here to explain what we feel are the differences between Toni's apparent insincerity in her paper and Maxine Hairston's (1991; 1992) claims that politicized classrooms silence dissenting opinions, reduce creativity, produce writing blocks, and force students to mimic the teacher's belief when that belief conflicts with their own. Throughout Bill's interviews, the students consistently said that Wendy's opinions were not forced on them and that they felt free to write what they wanted. Toni emphatically stated that “Professor Carse never grades on her opinion.” Wendy's fairness in grading is clearly seen through the grades she gave students who felt “Cinderella” embodied a positive message.

Mavis, for example, believes that Cinderella was a good role model because of her virtues of patience and determination. Mavis shows that Cinderella acted intelligently and even “took things into her own hands” by going to the ball. She compares the tale to the “Triumphant Individual” morality story and says that Perrault's version, at least, shows a generosity of spirit lacking in today's society. Mavis' ultimate belief is that “Cinderella” teaches children to work hard to allow good things to happen. Wendy believed this was a very clichéd argument, but she admired Mavis' support for her position, including relating it to her own life. Mavis received an “A-” for the assignment. Students obviously, then, were willing to risk opposing the professor's opinion and were not punished for doing so.

A further piece of evidence from our data that counters Hairston's assertion is Toni's statement that she “had fun doing” the paper on “Cinderella” and that she did not change her opinion from fear of a bad grade. She made a rhetorical decision to try to stand out from the crowd. In other words, she was experimenting with a different voice, a voice best facilitated by an oppositional stance to her own beliefs. Toni, thus, certainly did not have a block that hindered her development as a writer and was demonstrating creativity.

This is not to say that we are unconcerned with her resistance to looking deeper into the issue. Rather, we feel that the resistance was not as debilitating as Hairston would lead us to believe and that the political nature of questioning gender roles and critiquing American values is not at the root of the resistance. Our concerns were instead located in why analyzing fairy tales specifically seemed to produce this sort of resistance. The next assignment focusing on advertisements, highly political in itself and moreso with the twist Wendy gave it, did not produce nearly as much resistance, nor had the previous assignments, as the students seemed to be more willing to scrutinize the subject matter. It was only with the “Cinderella” papers that we noted on the whole a lack of depth.

Mavis' paper was perhaps the most superficial of the ones receiving high marks, but others showed similar tendencies. Janet and Jake, taking opposite positions on the issue of vengeance, avoid the crucial question of the assignment: how does the fairy tale acculturate children in terms of gender roles and American values? By doing so, they did not have to tackle the more difficult ideological issues inherent in analyzing “Cinderella.” By claiming what amounted to “‘Cinderella’ is good for children” and “‘Cinderella’ is bad for children,” both students keep their distance from a more substantial analysis by simplifying their themes. Janet bases her analysis on the

Christian value of forgiveness, quoting scripture throughout her paper and saying that the Disney and Perrault versions of “Cinderella” give a “new magic” to the fairy tale. She assumes, apparently, that Christian values equal American values, although no such interpretation was discussed in class nor can be found in the reading. Jake tries to work his appreciation of the punishment and justice features of the Grimms' versions into a discussion of gender roles, but as Wendy reminded him in her comments, he loses his focus, claiming that the Perrault and Disney versions substitute “wonderment and magic” for the more valuable lessons of “realism and responsibility.”

In and of themselves, these analyses have some substance, but it is telling that both students seem to ignore Wendy's prodding in class to think about the value Americans attach to vengeance and justice and how that value connects to American morality tales or concepts of femininity. The deeper dissection of “Cinderella” never takes place in either of these papers. Both merely compare versions of the tale to their personal belief systems and remain relatively safe.

Other students strayed even farther from the assignment. Jean very forthrightly argues against the assumptions of the topic, as she claims that fairy tales provide a needed escape from the hatred found in the world. She believes that fairy tales are “innocent, imaginary worlds that we may enter and leave without effecting [sic] our everyday lives.” The purpose behind them is to “entertain, not to project a blueprint of life.” Therefore, she does not discuss how fairy tales acculturate, but rather narrates a fond childhood memory of “Cinderella” and defends dreams against the analysis of Yolen. Another student named Carl also wrote off-topic, but without directly confronting the assignment like Jean did. Championing the role of men as rescuers, Carl compares his mother's life to Cinderella's. His mother was saved from a dismal life by the intervention of Carl's father and now lives a successful life, full of love and happiness. Nowhere does Carl analyze gender roles or American values, nor does he make any reference to the assigned readings. Carl seemed to feel the impact of fairy tales could best be felt by showing how their patterns could come true if men behaved gallantly and women were appropriately submissive. But he was unwilling to explore the “Cinderella” tales and never makes an explicit argument.

Another type of resistance could be seen in some of the students in the lower half of the class. They unearthed some lessons from “Cinderella” but rejected the conclusions they had found. A student named Natalie, in a paper she titled “‘Cinderella,’ Good or Bad?”, isolates many separate lessons that can be learned from the tale but fails to compare it to any of the other readings from the book. After a point-by-point discussion of what the fairy tale could teach children, such as passivity in women and the vulnerability of the family unit, she concludes by saying, “We must remember that it is just a story and it is meant to be read for fun and enjoyment.” In her interview, Natalie said she was not interested in feminism or in discussing “America in decline,” which might account for her unwillingness to extrapolate a conclusion from her analysis.

Christopher, who had definite insights regarding the absence of a father figure in “Cinderella,” also explores the story, showing how the many versions give misleading and outdated accounts of “realistic family roles.” Yet, he, too, denounces his own analysis by saying that fairy tales are “not meant to be picked apart and scrutinized.” Instead, they are “meant to be bedtime stories for children,” something that will “foster their imagination.” Taking an antagonistic turn in his concluding paragraph, he again reverses course:

...fairy tales should be left as is, and not [be] seen as examples of “sibling rivalry” or “misleading family roles.” For the purpose of this essay, however, a sacred fairy tale had to be examined under a microscope. This examination has proven certain facts; that “Cinderella” is outdated in many ways, especially in its view of women, and it shows a confusing male/female role reversal. Young children may be confused by these elements, but most children will not think about it that much because it is, after all, just a fairy tale.

Christopher's devotion to “Cinderella” stunned us, especially since he was so subdued during class discussion.

Clearly, the assignment had made him do something he considered profane, and he could not do it without comment, which muddled his focus and made us wonder what he actually believed.

But within Christopher's conclusion lies a tension that nearly all the students felt. They were not amazed by the paradox of how a person could critique an artifact of culture to see its ideological implications yet still feel deeply invested in that artifact's preservation. And they certainly were not having fun finding meaning in explorations of culture in this assignment. They were, instead, sensing a danger of losing innocence. The university, as is part of its function, was already distancing the students from some of their childhood beliefs and expectations. One line the students appeared hesitant to cross was the sense of idyllic simplicity they felt with fairy tales. For them, morality in fairy tales was not a guessing game and the way to pursue happiness was not complicated. Implicating "Cinderella" in the oppression of women and the reproduction of jingoistic American ideology seemed akin to defiling a religious icon—notice Christopher's use of the word "sacred" when describing the "Cinderella" tale. Simply put, fairy tales' simplicity mattered to these students. Professors could complicate student lives when it came to issues such as gun control or foreign affairs. Students on some level knew they would have to question their beliefs and adjust some of their expectations in life. But professors could not enter the domain of childhood wistfulness. Such analyses went "too far."

Despite the students' resistance, we see great value in assignments that, in essence, cut to the core, as a critical pedagogy cannot function if it must restrict itself from the very ideological terrain professors and students must explore in order to pursue a democratic, just society. The question one might ask, then, is what should be done in order to cut through the resistance. How, in other words, can a professor get such an assignment to work? The answer is not so apparent.

We can start by talking about the mistakes that occurred throughout this assignment, many of which should be evident by the narrative of the three classroom sessions. We clearly did not anticipate the students' rejection of fairy tales as agents of acculturation, despite the fact that Wendy had taught a version of this assignment before. Believing an examination of "Cinderella" would be fun for the students, we would have been much wiser to understand the rigors of the assignment. In Paulo Freire's (1970) terms, we were asking the students to "develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world [emphasis his]" and "to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation" (70-71). In having the students examine "Cinderella," we were investigating not just an acculturating feature of society, but an oppressive acculturating feature of society. In exposing oppression, we were obviously hinting at the possibility for change. In retrospect, we realize that we should not have expected the class to be full of laughter and merriment, and instead should have prepared for students to be thrown off guard by their discoveries.

We were also perhaps guilty of "frontloading" our desires as to the direction students took in critically approaching this subject matter. Ira Shor (1996) discusses the differences between the problem-posing method of critical pedagogy and the authoritarian model of preset subject matter. Shor believes that critical student discourse must evolve through a process of the professor speaking first in questions then "backloading" his or her comments based on student responses, rather than the more prevalent model of professors frontloading their beliefs through lectures and then expecting students to respond. Wendy's assignment did not really allow the students to explore whether or not fairy tales acculturate children into gender roles and American values. She instead asserted that the one thing the experts on folktales agreed on is how they fulfilled basic social needs, such as acculturating children, and took this as a given. Thus, her agenda was frontloaded. Similarly, throughout the three class sessions, Wendy tried to guide the students towards what we considered to be the more critical matters of fairy tales. She did not want the students to dodge difficult questions by steering classroom discussion towards easier analytic tasks.

However, Wendy's teaching methods during this period can hardly be described as authoritarian. Within the scope of the assignment, she tried to frontload their interests without ignoring her responsibilities as a legitimate teacher, one who has knowledge, experience, and authority. As Shor reminds us, a critical pedagogy differs from the "anything-goes class," where the teacher loses the respect and confidence of the students. In a critical pedagogy, the teacher intervenes to challenge the status quo and shares power in order to transform power

(20). To have succumbed to the students' wishes, to have let them off the hook, in other words, would have been to deny them the opportunity to engage in transformative critical discourse. Pressing students to think through complicated issues, then, is not the same as exerting an authoritarian discourse. Judging by the interviews, the students certainly did not perceive Wendy as an authoritarian, and her choice to grade them on what they produced rather than on what she wanted them to produce further argues against her implication in an authoritarian model. Still, more time devoted to the assumptions behind the assignment might have helped include a wider range of student voices in the classroom dialogue and have enabled the students to write more critically on the topic.

As has been already noted, though, the type of resistance we saw during this assignment did not crop up in the other four essay assignments. Bill's classroom observations confirm that Wendy did not teach the "Cinderella" topic any differently than the other four. The students, then, were probably not reacting against the teaching method or a perceived lack of choice. This brings us back to the question of how this assignment could be made to work. Our response, though, is that we need to problematize what it means for an assignment to work.

Resistance can take many forms. Beth Daniell and Art Young (1993) argue that resistance can be both healthy and unhealthy, delineating between resistance to abusive situations and resistance that springs from habit. The resistance we saw seems to lie somewhere in between, in that zone occupied by uncertainty and anxiety. Students did not play games here, but their resistance did not resemble the type of civil disobedience that leads to change, either. In an important sense, however, the resistance we saw may well be part of a process of incorporating new knowledge. Daniell and Young feel that blatant resistance in the classroom is an "opportunity to analyze the circumstances in which teachers and students now find themselves" under the new paradigm of writing instruction (233). Such resistance can be taken a step further, though, beyond merely an opportunity to a necessary step in resolving the conflict between the students' expectations upon entering the university and what the university deems as knowledge.

The students in Wendy's composition class will not be able to deny what they found during this assignment, even those whose writing seemed to show little exploration. Their uncertainty about the role of fairy tales in acculturating children to gender roles and American values is something that they will build on, one way or the other. We do not know whether it will lead to the type of critical consciousness Freire (1970) advocates, or a reaffirmation of more traditional values, or just a continual feeling of uneasiness when they come in contact with "Cinderella" or other fairy tales. We do know, though, that our role, and the larger role of the university, should be to urge students to question assumptions in the pursuit of a better society. This often means making them uncomfortable and dealing with the concomitant resistance we should see in their writing.

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