



The Politics of Literacy Across the Curriculum

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Is There a Politic in the House?

I return to school after all the years in the Army, my GED in hand, and walk into my first-year composition course, taught by a South Asian woman, Ratna Roy, who speaks of her maids back in India, tells of her literacy test that awarded her a scholarship in English at Oxford: the Rhodes scholar wearing a sari at Tacoma Community College. There is a politic here—in the life she once knew and discussed, in the surplus value gained in having a Rhodes scholar teaching first-year comp at a community college (which is not to denigrate first-year comp or the community college, only the combination of money and power and national origin or race or racism). I know there is a politic. But I can't make sense of it.

Her assignments are open. I write of race, of my "existential situation." Get accused of plagiarism, though I'm vindicated through a timed writing in her office.

At the university, my first assignment concerns Spenser: a 36 out of a possible 100—for my imagination, the professor writes on my paper. Success depends on researching the publications of my professors. Mimicry. My politic suppressed—suppressed until the first time I write of the political exigencies of my existence as an academic, as an academic of color, of poverty, as I write in narrative. As I write within the conventions of the acad-

emy, my suppressed politic festers, a dream deferred while another pursued, but not deferred indefinitely.

I'm a skeptic when it comes to writing across the curriculum. I have no problems with the WAC idea of literacy across the disciplines or even of sharing the responsibility of literacy instruction (as outlined by McLeod and others), and I long ago accepted writing as epistemological, as a way of knowing. But for just as long, I've accepted writing and the teaching of writing as inherently political. And WAC, it seems to me, has tended to be assimilationist, *assimilation* being a political state of mind more repressive than mere accommodation:¹ we begin by having students invent the university, perhaps, then move on to having students invent the disciplines.² This isn't the politic I'd prefer. We in composition studies might assume a closer connection between language and epistemology, but "writing to learn" doesn't go far enough, doesn't historicize our conceptions of language and knowing, keeps us tied to a Platonic mind-set.

That Platonic mind-set is embedded even in our discussions of politics. Our conversations are quick to blur distinctions between culture, ideology, and politics. The political involves more than culture. Culture can be kinship and community (as one category) and aesthetics (as another). And there is culture as the material (particularly the economic).³ But this last is often absent from our discussions. We stay aloft, away from the material. And that has something to do with WAC. So I want to argue for a reconsideration of what happens in WAC, maybe suggest a way to a culturally sensitive and politically conscious edge in how we approach literacy, even as students of color and others venture into the conventions of academic discourse—now—during the time it takes for us all to reconceptualize the discourse of the academy.

The Platonic Mind-set

Not all at once, not just in that first class on rhetoric, I discover some things about writing, my own, and about

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the teaching of writing. I find some of modern composition's insights are modern hindsight. I don't mind the repetition. Some things bear repeating. The repetitions take on new significance and are elaborated upon in a new context, a new time. Besides, not everyone who teaches writing knows of rhetoric, though I believe everyone should.

VICTOR VILLANUEVA, *Bootstraps*

The curriculum we write across prides itself on being a “higher learning,” something above the day-to-day. We are still “the academy,” tied to Plato and to his epistemology in one sense or another. We know that in his *Republic* and in the two dialogues dealing directly with rhetoric he draws a distinction between true arts and forms of flattery, “flattery” as a pleasing deception. Rhetoric falls under the heading of a form of flattery for Plato, insofar as its concerns are decidedly tied to the temporal and to the material. This is even more true for literacy, since there is no talking back to the text (a matter Volosinov will take issue with centuries later). For Plato, rhetoric can be salvageable, can be a true art, if it works in the service of dialectic, potentially liberating the mind from the temporal and sensorial to the plane of the infinite, the Idea of the Good. The academy might have grown to be a huge megaversity, but it remains rooted in the Platonic liberal arts, so much so that our discussions of rhetoric or literacy and surely composition studies remain to a great extent apart from the material. Even our opening discussions on class tend to remain tied to class as culture but not to class as political economy, an uncomplicated notion of class as socioeconomic status rather than as a relationship between economic systems (material) and political processes (temporal).⁴

It's little wonder that literacy, after so long a legacy, could so easily be set aside as an academic responsibility even while being touted as essential to the historical base of the academy. We are steeped in Plato.

From the fifth century B.C.E. to the nineteenth century, rhetoric and its literacy have been central to education, particularly within the liberal arts, those kinds of knowledge that will elevate

and in some sense free the mind. Though the English literary arts tend to be concerned with the politics which surround their authors and poets, these politics are necessarily abstractions, calls for contemplation more than calls for action, the contemplation having value, certainly, but in that sense proffered by Quintilian: as a means of forming better folks down the line.

By the nineteenth century rhetoric had lost its centrality. The center of the academy belonged to the new sciences. In some schools, the social sciences became aligned with the liberal arts, rhetoric and literacy becoming defined as an introductory course or two on writing for college, until a convergence of circumstances (Woods Hole, Dartmouth, Janet Emig's study of writing as a mode of learning) returned rhetoric and literacy to a reconsideration of language and psychology, language and epistemology, if not literacy as political—a move more difficult to make, given the Platonic in our midst.

This realization of literacy as epistemological, as ways of learning about the self, the context in which the self is oriented, and the context as defined by an academic discipline, captures WAC through the “second stage”—literacy as accepted across the disciplines as a way of learning. The third stage, to some extent the call of this volume and invoked by Donna LeCourt (“WAC as Critical Pedagogy: The Third Stage?”), would have us look more closely at the need to reform pedagogy, taking into account the rise of new technology; the question of WAC and writers whose primary literacy is in languages other than English; and politics, particularly (for me) as reflected in racism.

Multicultures—and One Dominates

Excerpt from a note to an editor concerning a reviewer's comments, maybe 1993: “The reviewer wants me ‘to avoid the charge of bias, of raising the British-French-Americans to a level of behavior unparalleled in history.’ I really do think American imperialism has attained ‘a level of behavior unparalleled in history.’ I’m with Fernand Braudel, Noam Chomsky, Karl Polanyi,

Immanuel Wallerstein, and the rest of a long list (of which I have not mentioned one Marxist) who think so too. So I skipped the fairness task." Why pretend to the scientific notion of objectivity in discourse when such a thing is unattainable, even within the conventions that precede us, since language and dialect are always steeped in convention?

For all the sympathy inherent in multiculturalism, it tends to fail because by and large it tends not to be antiracist. As I argue elsewhere ("Rhetoric," "Reading"), the problem with multiculturalism is that it relies on a conception of cultural pluralism, an ideal (a Platonic "Good"), but given the political economy of the day (no matter what the school of "political economy"), the idea of all cultures living together in mutual understanding is not yet practical. So we do an injustice in our acting as if a mutuality already exists. Further, there is a political economy in the conception of cultural plurality historically, as when Glazer and Moynihan argue that the United States is the melting pot, assimilation is the norm, and failure is a cultural fault, not a matter of racism (Omi and Winant 17–21). Cultural pluralism will not be achieved by pretending it already exists or can exist by simple avowal.

Rhetoric, composition studies, the third stage in WAC—all of us concerned with language and discourse and the desire for a more equitable society—will need to move beyond the cultural to the relations among discourse, the cultural, the political (not only as ideology but also as political power more broadly conceived), and the economic. Gayatri Spivak begins to approach this as she writes not only of epistemology in poststructural terms that give credence to the power of discourse as ideological, but also as she writes of the epistemology of other politically economic forces, what she calls an episteme of violence.

In terms of racism, we can stand to learn from those other disciplines while we inform them of the ways of writing pedagogy. That is, the third stage, as I see it, will be the stage of a true dialectic between the disciplines we work with. We can learn from folks in business who have economists among them, from histo-

rians, from political scientists, from sociologists, as well as from the literary figures and critical theorists we have grown accustomed to learning from. We give something to the disciplines—matters of literacy and rhetoric grounded in the sociopolitical; and they give us something—their considerations of the political and the economic. It's time. And it's bound to succeed, since the old resentments of the “missionary” would simply pass, given reciprocity.

If we are to proffer our understanding of the value of cross- and interdisciplinary literacy, we have an obligation to proffer the social dimensions of our research, theory, and discussion as well. And we have the obligation to learn from those to whom we pass on our knowledge of the teaching of writing. If WAC is no longer (or perhaps never was) missionary in its method, then we should be engaging the other minds across the disciplines who also face the students we face. We should enter into a dialogue across the disciplines so as better to understand the social processes that could relegate such a large number to the troubleheap: the poor and the racial or ethnic majority. All of us can use the tools at our disposal to circumvent reproducing a school system that has traditionally failed to educate the woman, the poor, or the person of color at the same rate of efficiency as others. Time for the third stage.

WAC Critical!

The Calling

The calling came to me
 while I languished
 in my room; while I
 whittled away my youth
 in jail cells
 and damp *barrio* fields.

It brought me to life,
 out of captivity,
 in a street-scarred

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and tattooed place
I called body.

Until then I waited silently,
a deafening clamor in my head,
but voiceless to all around me;
hidden from America's eyes,
A brown boy without a name,

I would sing into a solitary
tape recorder,
music never to be heard.
I would write my thoughts
in scrambled English;
I would take photos in my mind—
plan out new parks;
bushy green, concrete free,
New places to play
and think.

Waiting.
Then it came.
The calling.
It brought me out of my room.
It forced me to escape
night captors
in street prisons.

It called me to war;
to be writer,
to be scientist
and march with the soldiers
of change.

It called me from the shadows,
out of the wreckage,
of my *barrio*—from among those
who did not exist.

VICTOR VILLANUEVA

I waited all of 16 years
for this time.

Somehow, unexpected,
I was called.

LUIS J. RODRÍGUEZ

While *process* and *consensus* become the catchwords of writing across the curriculum pedagogy, rhetorical theory and composition theory look to how language is not just the conveyor of knowledge but is also the way knowledge becomes known. The question becomes how to convey writing in a way that doesn't alienate. One suggestion, well articulated by Donna LeCourt, is to add the pedagogy of Paulo Freire to the imperatives of meaningful college literacy. Freire offers a particular brand of social theory for education that we in composition studies have tended to adopt for the work we do within our own programs but have only half-heartedly conveyed across the curriculum. In other words, we should say that writing is not only a way of learning but also a way of fostering critical consciousness, more than a means of problem solving but also a means of problem posing.

Patricia Bizzell notes that Freire, in *Education for Critical Consciousness*, argues a case that sounds decidedly like our pronouncements on college literacy, our justification for writing across the curriculum:

Knowledge [Freire writes] necessitates the curious presence of subjects confronted with the world. It requires their transforming action on reality. It demands a constant searching. It implies invention and reinvention. It claims from each person a critical reflection on the very act of knowing. It must be a reflection which recognizes the knowing process, and in this recognition becomes aware of the "*raison d'être*" behind the knowing and the conditioning to which that process is subject. (qtd. in Bizzell 100-101)

This is the very knowledge we ought to be fostering: the self as situated within a discipline and within the world, confronting racism head on as well as other situations that distance women,

the poor, and others from the dominant discourse and its racialized and gendered assumptions. For LeCourt the means is through a politicized personal narrative with which to interrogate students' relations to the disciplines for which they are writing. This is the means whereby the critical has been introduced to first-year composition, as LeCourt acknowledges, and it should work well, particularly in introductory courses throughout the disciplines.

But at a certain point, students need to break free from the personal as the sole genre of engagement. How then to maintain the critical and one's sense of identity and agency when called on to break from personal narrative?

Many writers of color have written about a conscious mimicry of the discourse of power. In *Puerto Rican Jam*, for instance, sociologists Grosfoguel, Negrón-Muntaner, and Georas describe the strategy employed by many Puerto Ricans given a particular political economy. Puerto Rico's situation is one in which political power makes colonialism (at least five hundred years of colonialism) no longer tenable, yet given its economic situation, nationalism is not feasible. The trick then is maintaining a cultural identity while complying with dominance. That's achieved through *jaibería*, a "subversive complicity," analogous to shining someone on. The authors describe the concept this way:

According to Diana Fuss in her essay on Frantz Fanon,⁵ there is a tendency within postcolonial and psychoanalytic discourse to distinguish between the practices of mimicry and masquerade. While in psychoanalysis, masquerade is understood as the unconscious assumption of a role, mimicry, according to Homi K. Bhabha, is understood as a colonial strategy of subjugation. Fuss, however, stresses that there can be a mimicry of subversion where the deliberate performance of a role does not entail identification. The performance's contexts thus become crucial in determining its subversive potential. . . . [In] both Fanon's and Fuss's texts, the most powerful example of subversive mimicry is that of the Algerian Nationalist woman militant who "passes" as a Europeanized subject in order to advance the cause of National liberation. (Grosfoguel, Negrón-Muntaner, and Georas 26–28)

Two of the essays in Keith Gilyard's collection *Race, Rhetoric, and Composition*, one by Malea Powell and one by Gail Okawa, explore strategies similar to *jaibería*, one calling on the

American Indian icon of the trickster, the other calling on Mitsuye Yamada's masks (though not masquerade), masks that intentionally conceal. In rhetorical terms, there is *imitatio*, best described by Quintilian, a Spanish subject of the Roman Empire. Here, however, I'm calling for *imitatio* with an antiracist critical pedagogy, *imitatio* taking on a particular mental state—a *jaibería*, a masking, a discursive trickery—while students and everyone involved in WAC work on discourse, work critically and consciously on conventions, and work on swapping what other disciplines are discovering about economics and political power.

Although the expression *jaibería* is new to us in composition studies, the practical workings of how one moves from the discourse of the individual and the individual's culture to the discourse of the academy are not. I have described, perhaps best in *Bootstraps*, a drafting process which begins with the personal as political and moves through conscious translations to the conventions of academic discourse. It entails a conscious understanding of Aristotle's logic (the teaching of which has been laid out as a practical pedagogy best by Ed Corbett in *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*). And it involves a conscious process through which the discoveries made in the narrative process are revised or translated to fit within the conventions of academic discourse. I have used the process successfully for many years with students from other cultures (even white students residing in what Walter Ong, following Marshall McLuhan, calls a "secondary orality": an awareness of the sound of literacy but literacy devised to be orally delivered only). Others under my direction have used the method as well.

Within faculty workshops, our co-workers can be shown that the organizational patterns and other discourse markers (matters other than simple mechanics) that are manifest in students' early draft writing are not necessarily signs of disorganization but of other-cultural organization (see Ann Johns in Chapter 6 of this volume on issues of contrastive rhetoric). While we all explore ways of helping students translate their ways with words into the conventions of particular disciplines, we can also listen and learn from other disciplines about the political economies that give rise to difference, opening a door whereby we might

agree to changes in conventions that will better situate cultural differences. In being conscious of the conventions as conventions, in remaining conscious of our own predispositions in early drafts to give free rein to cultural discourse, we stand a chance of doing our job of assuring students' access to the places they wish to go by way of the academy without erasing where they've been. It can be done. It has been done. WAC should pass it on.

Notes

1. I mention accommodation because Donna LeCourt, who argues persuasively for a critical pedagogy in WAC, tends to see the basic problem in writing in the disciplines as its tendency toward an accommodationist mind-set. But I would argue that we all accommodate—either in the conventions we adopt (or even mimic) or in the body of knowledge we lean on within particular disciplines. Although I believe her intent is to point to assimilation, her reliance on the language of Henry Giroux's version of resistance theory provides her with the term(s) (*accommodation*, *opposition*, and *resistance*). Rather than Giroux (who, like LeCourt, I am surely indebted to in pursuing the lines of argument presented here), I am calling on others, who I will at the very least allude to in this essay.

2. LeCourt wonders at how the politics that are played out in first-year comp courses might be carried over to WAC. Although it is true that composition studies has entered into the political in its discussions, as have many other disciplines (as LeCourt acknowledges), composition studies has hardly solved the problems of the political, has not as a discipline, for example, ventured into the political as containing more than the superstructural—the cultural. In some sense, then, the politic of the classroom remains safe, a necessity, as far as I can see, since the first-year course does remain a gateway course into the university's discourses. Although others have argued that Bartholomae's pedagogy is no less assimilationist than other pedagogies (a defanged Freire, I'd say), it does confront the dilemma—that of meeting what we see as a political dimension to our work and the need to provide the gateway function. What results from this near paradox is critical thinking, a problem solving, in which the problems are disciplinarily conscribed, rather than a critical consciousness, a problem posing, in which the problems are themselves to be uncovered by the student writer. LeCourt does try to address this, finally arguing for Freire as writing the personal within the disciplines (which is as far as any of us in composition studies has gone).

3. These three factors comprise social historian Fernand Braudel's "set of sets" or economist Andre Gunder Frank's "three legged stool" on which world systems sit, or Karl Polanyi's anatomy of political economics.
4. I think here of *Coming to Class: Pedagogy and the Social Class of Teachers* edited by Shepard, McMillan, and Tate, an interesting collection, but one that tends not to complicate the notion of class.
5. "Interior Colonies: Frantz Fanon and the Politics of Identification." *Diacritics* 24 (1994): 20-42.

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