

THE POLITICS OF COMPOSITION

I celebrate teaching that enables transgressions—a movement against and beyond boundaries. It is that movement which makes education the practice of freedom.

—bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*

There's a canard about teaching that goes like this: "Just when you design the right syllabus, the wrong students walk in the door." Unlike academics who construct their pedagogical task as passing on knowledge (that is, unlike teachers in almost every other academic discipline), composition teachers profess the development of students' abilities. Hence the canard applies to their work with particular force.

Preparing a syllabus involves making predictions about how a semester's work will be orchestrated. The obvious predictions made by a syllabus are about timing and pacing. But a teacher preparing a syllabus also makes predictions about who students are and what they want from her class, and she predicts as well how what she knows will be integrated into the class. An experienced teacher of writing knows that what she knows will be modified by the experience of teaching a composition class, and she must admit as well that the conduct of any class is affected by her desires as well as her health and her well-being. All of these things can change on a daily or even an hourly basis. When she is preparing a syllabus, she has to guess about how all of this will affect her plans as the group grows or shrinks, as students work together for fifteen weeks, and as their desires, health, and well-being affect classroom interaction. No wonder that syllabi are difficult to write.

The teacher who prepares a syllabus is asked to make generalized predictions about a time-bound and localized activity. The activities that go on in writing classes may be much more localized and temporal than they are in a class where the aim is to impart knowledge rather than to improve abilities. And in other fields where it is important to impart skills to students, such as

medicine or engineering, there is a body of knowledge and procedures that precede each student's immersion in the discipline. These protect each student, to some degree, from making innovations or errors that might result from eccentric or uninformed responses to the discipline. On the other hand, in writing instruction (according to the ideology of process pedagogy, at least), the entire point of instruction is to help students to produce eccentric or individualized responses.

To put this point in theoretical terms, I am suggesting that disciplines like medicine and engineering create what Foucault called "relations of governmentality," wherein a technology of power creates and controls a technology of the self—the engineer, the doctor (Foucault 1991). This relation of governmentality regulates teaching in these disciplines in such a way that the predisciplinary subjectivities of students and teachers are less important to their practice than they are in composition instruction. That is to say, the subjectivity we call "doctor" or "engineer" is expected to replace, to some extent, the predisciplinary subjectivities with which students embark upon the study of medicine or engineering. However, in first-year composition instruction, students' predisciplinary subjectivities are the very materials with which they and their teachers are expected to work.

I am not suggesting that first-year composition has no discipline. Indeed, its disciplinarity is to be found in the discursive mass of hints and plans and procedures that Stephen North calls its "lore," as well as in the host of institutional practices that configure the universal requirement—textbooks, standardized syllabi and assignments, grading scales, and the like (23ff). Curiously, though, throughout its long history, the technology of disciplinary power that is the universally required composition course has not been considered to produce a postdisciplinary subjectivity that might be called "the writer," in the sense in which this term is usually understood outside of composition classrooms. Nineteenth-century teachers like Adams Sherman Hill, Barrett Wendell, and Charles Townsend Copeland knew very well which subjectivity they wished to develop in their students by means of writing instruction: the gendered, classbound subjectivity that marked them as Harvard men. Hill and Wendell did the non-Harvard world the dubious favor of packaging and marketing that subjectivity as current-traditional rhetoric, which continued to discipline composition teachers and their students for much of the twentieth century. And even though current-traditional rhetoric is said to have disappeared from the scene of composition instruction, the institution of the universal requirement continues to do its policing work. The uni-

versal requirement is, in Foucauldian terms, an ethical technology of subjectivity that creates in students a healthy respect for the authority of the academy. The requirement makes clear to students that they are not to write in their own voices, despite what their textbooks tell them. To the contrary: they must produce discourse that will satisfy their teachers in Freshman English and beyond. In other words, the subjectivity produced by the requirement can be characterized as something like "docile student." The ethical technology that is the requirement, I submit, supersedes anything that specific composition teachers operating in local spaces may want to do for their students in the way of helping them to become writers; it gets in between teachers and their students, in between students' writing and their teachers' reading.

What I have just written explicates a view of first-year composition instruction that is not widely shared among composition professionals in the university. Since the 1970s, dedicated composition teachers and specialists in composition studies have tried to intervene or to circumvent the subjectivizing function of the requirement. They have generally done this by reconfiguring the pedagogy used in first-year composition. Process pedagogy is a good example of this sort of attempted intervention, since its adherents directly addressed the matter of students' subjectivities. Theorists of process constructed a self-directed student who would take control of his or her own writing process; this projected student subjectivity was to replace the docile, rule-bound, grammar-anxious student subjectivity produced by current-traditional instruction. The institutional paradox, of course, is that students are *forced* to take the class in which they are to be constructed as self-directed writers.

This talk about the creation and maintenance of subjectivities suggests that composition pedagogies are not innocent of politics. Even though teachers who espouse current-traditional rhetoric, or process, or some other approach to teaching composition may assume that their practice is governed purely by personal preference, or expediency, or tradition, or lore, it remains true that pedagogies and practices are implicated in the politics of the institutions in which they work and with ideologies that are in wider circulation as well (Althusser, Bizzell 1992, Fish). In this chapter I make a case for the political implications of the major pedagogies that teachers of composition have espoused during the history of the required first-year course—current-traditionalism and process. An explicit argument in support of the political implication of pedagogy is necessary, I think, because many teachers of composition, as well as some leaders in the field of composition studies, maintain that it is possible to offer instruction that is politically neutral (for example, Hairston 1992). I ar-

gue further that the switch to process pedagogy can usefully be described as an ideological alteration of the politics of first-year composition instruction from conservatism to liberalism. I will also try to establish that the liberal politics of process pedagogy is an insufficient and inappropriate response to the contemporary situation of composition in the university.

THE POLITICS OF COMPOSITION PEDAGOGIES

Current-traditional pedagogy is conservative in the ordinary sense of that term insofar as it resists changes in its rules and preserves established verbal traditions and institutional lines of authority. Current-traditionalism preserves traditional social and academic hierarchies insofar as students are taught to observe without question rules of discourse that were constructed long before they entered the academy and to submit their native grapholects to grammar and usage rules devised by a would-be elitist class. Current-traditional pedagogy is teacher-centered: the teacher dispenses information about the rules of discourse and evaluates the students' efforts in accordance with those rules. Students themselves are constructed in current-traditional rhetoric as potentially unruly novices whose work needs to be continually examined and disciplined.

As this analysis implies, current-traditional pedagogy is also conservative in an explicitly political sense. Political conservatism is marked by a "quest for a realistic concept of order which acknowledges the ineliminable tension at the heart of the human condition" (O'Sullivan 52). Norman Foerster's insistence on the dual nature of the human being, poised between its animal and spiritual natures, is a fine example of a conservative's typically low estimate of human potential. Conservatives view human beings as creatures caught between reason and desire, and, unlike liberals, conservatives generally have a healthy respect for the power of human desire to overcome reason. Given conservative pessimism about the perfectibility of human nature, the institutional practices of surveillance and examination—associated with current-traditional instruction from its beginnings at Harvard—make perfect sense. Current-traditionalism and the institutional practices associated with it represent an attempt by those in authority to impose order on student discourse. This explains why a teacher who opposed some universities' decision to lift the universal requirement in the early 1970s could write that this trend was "but a small part of a national trend of leniency" that was occur-

ring "in a sociopolitical milieu which . . . at its worst is a cover for irresponsibility and laziness" (Patrick Shaw 155).

The adoption of process pedagogy marked a sea change in the politics of composition instruction, since process pedagogy is undeniably indebted to liberalism. Teachers who have adopted process pedagogy encourage novice writers to write as though they are free and sovereign individuals who have unimpeded access to their (supposedly unique) "selves." Each such individual is encouraged, as the textbooks say, to find her own voice. The free and sovereign individual is, of course, a central assumption of liberal thought (Arblaster). The liberal individual is imagined to possess the capacity to reason, which capacity insures his autonomy and sovereignty.¹ Liberals assume that this individual has clear and unmediated access to whatever desires motivate behavior; that is, with sufficient reflection, the sovereign individual can become aware of the reasons that support his decisions and actions. This reflection is assumed to occur in a perfectly private arena of individual thought, which is, ideally, uncontaminated by either communal memory or public discourse. That is to say, the private reflecting individual of liberalism is thought to be able to make rational decisions about behavior as though these decisions were not affected by the ideologies that circulate in culture, his history, or his desires and those of others.²

Conservatism and liberalism differ significantly in their assessment of the worth of human nature. While conservatives retain a healthy respect for the inherent human proclivity to go wrong, liberals assume that individuals are either inherently good or are subject to shaping toward it by supportive environments. Hence liberal educational theory is motivated by the metaphors of emancipation and empowerment (Bowers). Unlike conservatives, who assume that the point of education is to acquaint new generations with respected traditions, liberals assume that the point of education is to help individuals get better at whatever they want to do. Education accomplishes this by enhancing individuals' capacity to reason and to think through problems on their own. As a corollary of their faith in education, liberals assume that education allows individuals to overcome the impact of circumstances on their development. Indeed, liberals are fond of referring to such circumstances as class, race, and gender as "accidents" whose cultural liabilities can be overcome if individuals will only work hard enough and acquire sufficient education.³ Since liberalism rejects the authority of tradition and common sense—since, in short, it rejects ideology—liberal teachers must insist that

the effects on people of class prejudice, sexism, or racism can be overcome with sufficient individual effort.

Process theory constructs students as unique individuals who should be encouraged to develop their personal voices. Hence its premiere genre is the expressive or exploratory essay, which is assumed to represent authentic access to students' experience. Process-oriented teachers view students as naturally capable writers whose abilities have for some reason lain dormant prior to their encounter with the process-oriented classroom. Liberals place great faith in progress, and this faith is everywhere apparent in the professional literature about process: process-oriented teachers believe in their students' abilities to improve their writing with the help of process-oriented instruction, and they believe that composition theory itself progressed with the discovery of process pedagogy. Since all individuals are constructed as equals in this pedagogy, until very recently process theorists did not acknowledge that class, gender, or racial differences can affect the dynamics of workshop groups and peer review. Much less did process-oriented teachers consider that as power is unequally distributed in culture, this unequal distribution would be repeated in student-centered classrooms.

Of course, practices are never politically pure. Institutional practices in composition typically represent the general history of the course as well as the history of influential teachers and administrators on a given campus. Current-traditional rhetoric lingers on in composition textbooks, not because it is of much use to writers, but because the academy is comfortable with it. Literary texts linger on in the second-semester course because literary study has always been constructed as more advanced than the direct instruction in composition given in the first semester. Many composition programs are marked by a mix of liberal attitudes toward students and conservative, humanist, attitudes toward texts. Sometimes concepts borrowed from current-traditionalism and process pedagogy are used to rationalize the same set of institutional practices. For example, many composition programs distinguish the two semesters of introductory composition from one another in current-traditional terms, characterizing the first semester's work as a course in exposition and the second as a course in argument. Other programs adopt the terminology associated with process pedagogy, characterizing the first course as a series of exercises in personal writing and the second as devoted to public writing assignments. The current-traditional distinction between exposition and argument is generic, while the distinction between public and private is ideological, having been borrowed from liberal thought. And while many

programs say that they move students into the composition of argumentative or persuasive writing in the second course they actually focus on composition of a research paper, which is a current-traditional exercise in exposition rather than in argumentation. Others confine students in the second course to the practice of writing about literature, a special form of argumentation that cannot be called "rhetorical" or "persuasive" in the ancient sense of that term, since its highly specialized audience resides mainly within English departments and always already knows much more about literature than do the students who write the papers.

LOCATING STUDENTS IDEOLOGICALLY

Even though liberal composition lore suggests that writing instruction is a highly individualized activity, composition teachers continue to think of students in generic and idealized terms. As Richard Ohmann noted over twenty years ago, composition textbooks depict the student as "newborn, unformed, without social origin and without needs that would spring from his origins. He has no history" (1976, 148). Ohmann was referring, of course, to the class blindness manifested in best-selling composition textbooks of the day. The same charge can still be brought against textbooks, and it can still be made with some assurance about contemporary composition lore and research. In other words, composition teachers have still not begun to account satisfactorily for our own and our students' location in physical and ideological space. And if I am right that students' subjectivities are the material of contemporary writing instruction, their (and our) location in these spaces utterly compromises the liberal depiction of students as free and self-sovereign individuals.

In composition research and lore, composition teachers speak of "the classroom" as though this space is similarly constructed at Yale and at San Jose Community College. And yet teachers know, even if they have never set foot on either campus, that the students who attend Yale are subjected to very different relations of governmentality than are the students who attend San Jose Community College. Contemporary colleges and universities are credentializing institutions, but they credentialize in different ways. A student may attend a local community college in order to attain information and skills that she needs to get a job; she goes to Yale, on the other hand, to attain a social credential or to solidify one she already has by virtue of family connections. Stanley Aronowitz and Henry Giroux argue that a student who obtains an MBA at Harvard Business School has received no better education

than she would have obtained in the School of Business at most other universities in the country (1985). What the Harvard degree offers, that most others do not, is access to extremely powerful social and business connections as well as the social status that this association brings.

Research on the demographics of universities and colleges suggests that students' placement in a particular kind of institution results primarily from their class affiliation and secondarily from geographical location. In other words, the primary factor determining admission to a given university is class; the second is place of residence. The politics of class and location are complicated by two well-established hierarchies that operate among and within institutions: a ranking hierarchy distinguishes worse from better kinds of institutions, and a status hierarchy distinguishes privileged teachers and students from those who are less so. The ranking hierarchy (as if it needs repeating) privileges older, private, eastern universities. Large public universities called "research institutions" come next, while "teaching" universities and two-year colleges come last. The status hierarchy that operates among disciplines places the sciences at the top; composition is at the bottom. This complex intertwining of privilege, rank, and status explains why composition is not required or taught at older, private, eastern universities; their students (by virtue of native intelligence? class affiliation? family connections?) are assumed not to need it.

And yet composition scholarship and lore often proceed as if the politics of class, status, and location were not operative in our classrooms. We tend to think of "students" in terms of the (liberal) subjectivity we have constructed for them in our professional imaginations, rather than as middle-, upper-, or working-class persons who hail from Los Angeles or Philadelphia or Milltown or Mayberry. It is perhaps less difficult for composition teachers to remember our place within the university. Those of us who are senior can remember a time when we were treated as nuisances by our colleagues (Crowley 1988). Composition teachers who are new to the profession are reminded daily—by the fact that they are expected to teach someone else's syllabus—that they work at the very bottom of the academic pecking order.

I am painfully reminded of the politics of location when I get letters like this one from a former graduate student. I quote, omitting details that identify him or his institution:

Dear Dr. Crowley: Thanks for your response to my note. I am sorry to be such a bother. The fact that I dislike [State] is compounded by the fact that parts of it don't like me. My Division Chair seems to not

want to make my life here any easier. If you recall, he didn't want me to be hired, he preferred a local. I have come to the conclusion that it was foolish for me to try to swim upstream against the political tide. . . . Many of the people who live here do not trust anyone from the outside. All of us who came from the outside feel the same kind of isolation. The best we can do is hang together. . . . It just seems better for us to leave than fight.

This person teaches four sections of composition every semester. During his first semester at this institution, someone put sugar in the gas tank of his vehicle. Now, a liberal might wonder what is wrong with him—what could he have done in class to deserve such treatment? I suggest, rather, that he has put his finger precisely on the difficulty: he is an outsider working in an insular community. Nothing he could have done, or can do, will change his status vis-à-vis that community, at least in the short run. Such are the politics of location.

Communities can be ideologically located, as well. Before I tell some stories that illustrate this point, I want to note that what I am about to say goes against the grain of the prevailing etiquette in composition studies, which mandates that teachers never criticize or blame students, at least in public.⁴ This etiquette is in place for a good reason: it repudiates a historical practice in current-traditional composition, where for many years students were imagined as stupid and irresponsible louts who couldn't learn to spell or punctuate properly no matter how hard institutions tried to teach these skills to them. Composition teachers seem to have learned that students' inability to master these arcane arts has as much to do with institutional settings and practices as it has to do with students' willingness to learn or their level of preparedness. However, we have overreacted to this past, I think, to the extent that we no longer see students as they are, as people whose discourse is immersed in the master discourses of our culture. When I examine students' immersion in these discourses, I am not student-bashing, or at least I'm not doing it for fun. What I am trying to do is to locate students in ideological space.

When I teach the required first-year course, I ask my students to read the student newspaper or a daily newspaper on a regular basis. During one session of such a course, the class discussed news reports and editorials concerning our university's decision to disallow the use on campus of sports mascots that offend any group of persons. Students in my class professed to be nonplused by this decision. They simply could not see, they said, in what

ways the mascots of the Florida State Seminoles or the Kansas City Chiefs could be offensive to anyone. Much less could they see how such a symbol could be perceived to be racist. I believe my students when they say that they believe such things, but I cannot allow them to leave class without knowing that such beliefs are contested—indeed are vigorously contested—by others, including their teacher. This requires that I explain to them how racist beliefs circulate in culture; where this particular set of racist beliefs came from and how it is maintained; and why, finally, such beliefs are unethical. I also need a theory of discourse that accounts for the circulation of sets of beliefs such as racism and for the commonplaces that sustain them—commonplaces such as the assumption that “Chiefs” and “Seminoles” are harmless titles, disassociated from any racist history or practices. Nothing in either conservative or liberal composition lore prepares me to do such teaching.

Another story: a student in my required first-year class itched from the very first day to make a homophobic speech. The word *homophobic* is mine, not hers; she was astonished to learn that there is a word for her attitude toward nonheterosexuality. I thought I had convinced her in a series of conferences that her position was so unsavory to me that she would, like a savvy rhetorician, use one of the other topics she and her classmates had generated in workshop. Imagine my chagrin when she stood up, late in the semester, to proclaim that she would leave the university were she assigned a gay roommate. As she continued to speak, repeating most of the homophobic commonplaces that circulate in public discourse, I wondered what on earth I could say in response to her talk. I ended the stunned silence that followed her conclusion by saying: “You know, Muffy, if the statistics are correct, there is at least one gay person in this class.” From a corner of the room a loud voice responded: “You bet your ass there is.” Another student had chosen this moment to out herself to the class, thereby creating what is known in our trade as “a teachable moment.” Thanks to her intervention, the class began to contest Muffy’s position, and some ideological work was done that day. Unfortunately, teachers cannot always count on students to perform such work. Nor should we.

Sometimes the politics of location utterly confound the premises and standardized practices that typically organize the mass instructional setting of the first-year required course. For example: two students in my class made a series of speeches about the regulation of drugs. One student was from a suburb of a small city; his position was that drugs should be entirely deregulated. He had been a debater in high school, and he was anxious to make the

university’s debate squad. His topic was thoroughly researched, and he occasionally argued his position with brilliance. The second student hailed from downtown in a large urban area. His position was that drug trafficking should simply be stopped by whatever means were available, including the use of force. His arguments were drawn from his experiences on the street, and he spoke with power, often with eloquence. How, I asked myself, am I supposed to grade these guys? The grading scale used by my department listed specific criteria that I was to use in evaluation. The rules also required me to award so many A’s, B’s, C’s, D’s, and F’s, and so, implicitly, it required me to rank these performances against one another. Taken together, the arguments advanced by each speaker were convincing even though they held opposing positions on the issue; but their persuasive power was achieved by entirely different means. Neither was clearly right or clearly wrong. Class response was no help: many students in the class accepted the argument that drug traffic ought to be thoroughly regulated or even stopped, but they did so for entirely different reasons (some of them racist) than those advanced by the student who argued that case.

I recently received the worst teaching evaluations of my career from a class of students who took their required first-year composition course with me. One of the students in the class was forthright enough to explain what had gone wrong. She pointed out that several members of the class, all white men, had felt silenced by me. Her revelation made me angry on several counts. First of all, I was angered that she felt she had to speak up for the men, who, despite her remark, were perfectly capable of speaking for themselves. Women continue to feel, apparently, that they must clean up after men. I was angry as well that this matter was not brought to my attention while class was in progress. In fairness, I must say that I probably would not have encouraged the men in question to speak more, had I known about their resistance, since I remember the class as a struggle by women students to speak and be heard. But I would have liked the opportunity to discuss their feeling of being silenced, with the men themselves and with the class as a whole. So in a sense, their commentary after the fact elided discussion of the entire issue of gender relations and teacherly authority. To put this another way, their hostile silence about these issues silenced the rest of us.

In this case, students resisted what they took to be my feminism. A liberal might say that I should just shut up in class about my “personal” ideological convictions because I am unjustly imposing them on students. Whether or not it is possible to hide one’s convictions from students in this way is an

arguable point, as is the ethical question it entails. But I also think that the students in question resisted my teacherly authority because I am an old woman—a figure who is typically constructed in American culture as relatively powerless (Walker). These young men did not like being in a class where an old woman had opinions, expressed them with force, and was, to boot, their professor. There is absolutely nothing I can do about this particular ideological construction—except to challenge it.

And yet I am not unaware that I speak and teach from a position of relative privilege: I teach at a relatively privileged institution and I hold rank and tenure within that institution. Bad evaluations no longer scare me because they do not endanger my job. Of course none of this is true for most teachers of writing. If the teacher of the first-year course is unranked, untenured, and utterly without academic status, she does not have the luxury of responding angrily to bad evaluations. And bad evaluations happen to untenured teachers of the required first-year course for the same reason that they happened to me in this instance: students resist a teacher's ideological location. For example: a teaching assistant is asked by students in her class just how much Native American blood she has. The question comes from a group who had read and discussed essays written about precisely this manifestation of white racism. Another TA is harassed in her classroom by a male student who persists in remarking upon her appearance. A white student asks an African-American teacher whether he has sufficient credentials to teach the class. Another TA is told repeatedly by his students that they do not wish to study multicultural issues because multiculturalism has nothing to do with them.

And so Maxine Hairston is just wrong when she claims that “we can create a culturally inclusive curriculum in our writing classes by focusing on the experiences of our students” (1992, 190). Hairston's sunny liberalism overlooks the fact that students' experiences are saturated with their disparate access to cultural power. The “accidents” of gender, race, sexual orientation, ability, age, and class do make real differences in classroom interaction: whites own more cultural power than people of color; males own more power than women. These disparities hold even when the person of color or the woman in question is the teacher of the class, and they may be deployed with powerful effect if he or she has no professional status. Most teachers of composition have no professional status whatever. I have my doubts whether ideological and cultural differences can always be negotiated into the warm “community” that Hairston depicts as her classroom ideal: “real diversity emerges from the students themselves and flourishes in a collaborative classroom in

which they work together to develop their ideas and test them out on each other. They can discuss and examine their experiences, their assumptions, their values, and their questions. They can tell their stories to teach other in a nurturant writing community” (1992, 191).

No matter how nurturant the teacher, the so-called community of the classroom is rife with the ideological differences that students and teachers bring with them to class. These differences will inevitably be put on the table, as they might not be in a history or biology class, because liberal composition pedagogy insists that students' identities *are* the subject of composition. Within the context of the universal requirement, which forces people to take and teach the class, this seems to me to be a recipe for pain.