The Pedagogy Of WRITING

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A writing course is mandatory for all undergraduate students at most American colleges. Yet the curriculum planners' commitment to the pedagogy of writing seems undercut by the fact that in large universities the course is invariably taught by teaching assistants and part time faculty who are neither trained in the pedagogy of writing nor have the intention to make the teaching of writing their career. On the other hand, smaller four year and two year colleges, even though they look for faculty that can teach a range of courses, have unfortunately not yet seen the political imperative for a professionalized pedagogy of writing. Even though some departments of English -- especially those at Syracuse University and Purdue University -- have developed curricula that address the ideological implications of the politicization of English studies and writing courses, most traditionally trained faculty elsewhere continue to suffer from a cultural lag as far as the pedagogy of writing is concerned. Hiring a composition theorist, something which seems to have become fashionable lately, is not a panacea either. Even if an instructor admits to the necessity for the politicization of writing, this admission cannot by itself change the pedagogy of writing. In the absence of the English departments' formulation of writing programs that address this pedagogical issue, this essay will establish the urgent need for what I call an oppositional and feminist pedagogy and will briefly indicate how this critical practice works in the classroom.

As a rule, writing courses are taught under the aegis of English departments, even though educationists agree that the students need the "skills" of writing for their entire college careers. There are several anomalies implicit in this situation, and in uncovering these I will argue that the application of deconstruction to the teaching of writing not only helps the untrained teacher to meditate on the political *raison d'etre* of writing courses in the contemporary context, but also reinvigorates the pedagogy of writing. I want to show that since both deconstruction and college writing address the material and historical practices of society, their connection is not as tenuous as might seem at first. When a student becomes adept at constructing her own and deconstructing other social texts, she is indeed able to empower herself through the mode of writing and, in addition, acquires a sensibility that she is able to take to other university courses and, not least, to an extra-university context. The writing class, I feel, is an appropriate site for imbibing this way of thinking, as the course has no specific content agenda and focuses mainly on method I have to begin by agreeing with Richard Ohmann's analysis of "What is wrong with present rhetoric texts and the courses that they are taught in."1 Ohmann

argues thus:

> *I would not look to change freshman English a whole lot without changing American society too.* (EA, 160)

Ohmann first analyzes some rhetoric texts current in 1965 to show that "really the textbooks are about tidying up and transcribing thought, not thinking" (EA, 136). He samples a further fifteen textbooks from 1975 to find that even though there have been "dramatic changes in method and style," the books continue to be governed by social needs and prevalent cultural assumptions about the role of English in the university and in society at large. Ohmann finds that the textbooks intimate to the student that expertise in composition, helps them get ahead in a late capitalist society which is dominated by a bureaucratic ethos. The selection of the reading in these books, with extracts from prominent individualists like Whitman, Thoreau and Emerson, serve to preserve society in its present form, or at least the image that this society has of itself. In this way the texts indirectly celebrate the individual within a democracy and ostensibly perpetuate the status quo. Ohmann argues that ultimately "the textbooks operate without a stated analysis of literacy in a technological society and without a politics. (EA, 146-7). Even though their editors do not acknowledge this, *laissez faire* is the underlying politics of these texts. Ohmann seems to be saying that individualism in a technological age is a contradiction, but the texts do not uncover this fact. I would like to add to Ohmann's analysis the fact that the textbooks are not geared to the historical context of a multi-racial and multi-ethnic society, and the patterns of individualism that they cut out are tailored to a white, middle class audience and cannot fit the needs of marginal groups whether these be women, Blacks, Latinos or other liminal constituencies.

The situation has not changed since Ohmann did his research. Textbooks that I have examined disguise the success story of pre-draft to presidential report, but clearly indicate to the student that good writing is an asset in the business world, and for that reason a valuable acquisition. Progressive stages of writing, from topic sentence to essay, from description to argument, become simulated examples of the development of the non-individuated student to the individualized professional. The politics of this linear success story is elided by the emphasis on the discovery of the individual voice, as though that voice were latently present all along. What is more, students located in discursive fields other than that of the middle class, white male, are coerced into mimicking the dominant voice. In Reading Critically, Writing Well, for example, the editors state in the preface: "This text attempts to bring reading and writing together in an ideal relationship: students learn to read a type of discourse...and then practice writing that same kind of discourse."[2] This "ideal relationship" is essentially a duplication of the established discourse, and the text's claim that it teaches the student to "read critically" is obviously bogus. The textbooks as a whole work to valorize the authority of the professional writer and lead the student to believe that the printed word is sacrosanct.

Having come this far, I would like to qualify my criticism. I would not fault the textbooks to the extent that Ohmann does, for it is possible to deconstruct the "definitive" voice of the writers in these texts, to make the students see the political, historical and cultural inflections that imbue the professional writer with authority. It is possible, in other words, to read the texts "against the grain," thereby enabling the student to cultivate a voice that exists, not in a cultural vacuum, but within her real socio-political milieu. I am proposing a deconstruction that Barbara Johnson calls, "the careful teasing of warring forces of signification in a text."[3] Hence the onus of rectifying rhetoric courses lies not with the texts, but with the teacher, the English department and the University. The refusal on the part of these empowered institutions to define the political agenda of rhetoric courses leads, as Ohmann sees it, to the production of technocrats. A shying away from a definition of their politics makes the hidden agenda of the textbooks and the courses they are used in into an extremely effective propaganda. The deconstruction of these texts through the unmasking of this strategy helps the student to position herself within some and against other discursive fields.

Not all deconstructive rhetoric theorists see the application of deconstructive modes in the classroom operating in this way. Even a self-professed and, in some ways, important deconstructive composition theorist like Ann E. Bertoff does not define her orientation in political terms.[4] There are numerous contradictions

in her theoretical position. For instance, Bertoff claims that "writing can help develop a critical method of reading by first of all providing the students with an example of a text coming into being -- their own" (MM, 45). She goes on to argue that how we construe is how we construct and, therefore, "languaging" is our means of making meaning. What Bertoff does not clarify is the relation of this manufactured meaning to the existing socio-political context of the student, and how this student might claim a more powerful position in her existing context through the practice of writing. If, as she claims, her principal methods derive from I. A. Richards, she cannot disavow his politics: that the study of literature is an acculturing agency which cultivates a constituency of readers and a canon of texts that variously accommodate, modify and repress any oppositional discourse.

The dialogic discourse that her pedagogy permits is confined to that of the facing pages of a student's journal entries. This is perhaps the most diminutive opposition compared to the radical practice of her other mentor -- Paulo Freire.[5] For Freire, the process of acquiring literacy is fundamentally to enter into a dialogue with the illiterate. Given that the peasant cannot play a role in the shaping of his reality, his acquiring literacy, (which entails his ability to create his own discourse) must necessarily destabilize the existing political situation, in no matter how small a measure. The illiterate peasant is essentially voiceless and, for him to *know*, means to *intervene* in his reality. Freire's pedagogy is an instrument of intervention which hopes to regroup constituencies. Bertoff, however, does not clarify whether the making of meaning is a stabilizing Richardian venture or a destabilizing Freirian project, for surely it cannot be both. Should the student learn the writing "skills" to best fit into the socio-political context, or should she have at her disposal the means of changing it? Likewise, should the marginal student be "normalized" through her ability to simulate the academic discourse or should she cultivate the confidence to disrupt the existing power equation in order to make it work in her favour? Bertoff's inability to resolve these contradictions makes her deconstructive practice politically suspect.

Since I have condemned Bertoff's deconstruction as spurious, it seems imperative that I define my own theory of a deconstructive and feminist pedagogy of writing. In a writing course the praxis of deconstruction relies to a great extent on the teacher, who must constantly reinforce and redirect a theoretical position which persuades the students to become critical of their assumptions not just about writing, but more importantly, about culture and politics. This is not an easy task since the students invariably read texts as heuristic and closed, and expect to write similarly. In a deconstructive classroom context, the student must constantly be asked to recognize alternate readings, so that the teacher can establish the fact that "truth" is never stable and uncontested. When students begin to see that texts (those they consume, as well as those they produce) mediate,manipulate and ultimately construct reality, their initial response is to shy away from the responsibility of manufacturing knowledge through writing.

Most writing courses that I have taught follow a curve that I now easily recognize and even when I preempt the trajectory of this curve, it does not in any way disrupt or alter the curve. I begin by asking the students to define the point of view from which s/he is writing. Further, I insist on the student locating herself in discursive fields like culture, politics, class structure, gender difference etc. It has been my experience that students will locate themselves first and at times exclusively in their geographic context. Only occasionally will they hark back to their religion, ethnic background or parents' occupations. Initial introductions such as "I am so and so, I am from New York City, I am Jewish, and both my parents are doctors," are not apolitical pronouncements, either for the student who introduces herself as above, or for other students in the class. However, since the student has not consciously connected her writing and her politics, it is no surprise that none of this background information is foregrounded in any conscious way by the writer. But even a simple, first assignment like, "describe an experience that has in some way made you into what you are," can set the stage for the students to learn to deconstruct their own and each other's subject positions. For instance, a student's essay on his experience of being initiated into majority adulthood, at a deer hunting expedition, can be used to examine questions such as, "how does a certain culture define a man?" "what are the implications of being a major?" and "what constitutes a fraternity of men, as opposed to a sorority of women?" Issues of class, gender and

the social grouping of these that had been latently present in the student's writing are foregrounded in the class discussion. This marks the first stage of the curve. Here, an important though unstated assumption that the students had hitherto been working on, (namely, that whether one is a first generation emigre from Jamaica or a suburbanite from Long Island in no way determines how one writes, what one writes or what one cannot write) is undermined.

The politicization of the student writers' subject positions has an immediate impact on their writing. Not only does it give them a tool with which to critique the writing of fellow students, but it convinces them that writing can very effectively serve their specific political interests. This marks the second discernible shift in the curve; a stage of development which is by no means an easy phase of the development for the writers. The students realize that they have been trained to write under "false identities" which, at times, are directly opposed to their own political interests. I taught a course on writing and gender difference, which explored the associations between authority and the male voice. Initially the women students resisted the implications of my argument that they had all along been assuming male authority in their writing. As Kathleen B. Jones argues in her essay, "On Authority, Or Why Women are not Entitled to Speak,"

> *If...the dichotomy between compassion and authority contributes to the association of the authoritative with the male voice, then the implication is that the segregation of women and the feminine from authority is internally connected to the concept of authority itself.*6

Since I required the students to write from a self-conscious and well defined point of view, their first reaction was to remove the double standards of their situation by choosing to write from an overtly male point of view. Later they realized that this was not a feasible strategy if they wished to learn to empower themselves through writing: to counter their non-authoritative, marginal and subordinate positions.

Crises like the one I have described above are not confined to women who realize they they have been writing like men, for similar crises occur when other students realize that they have been writing from a variety of traditional positions of authority; Blacks write like Whites, immigrants like citizens and the underprivileged like the privileged. In order to facilitate this realization, I direct classroom discussions toward helping these students to deconstruct their positions, thereby enabling them to intervene in their reality. When I asked the students to write an essay bringing to public attention an issue they felt strongly about, they chose to write on racist, sexist, homophobic, ethnocentric or elitist attitudes that they had experienced. The students, of their own choice, went on to establish where these attitudes originated from, whose political interests they served and what can and should be done to change them. Hence the writing bridged the gap between a purely academic pursuit like the writing of an essay and an intervention in a social reality, marking the most important aspect of this third and final phase of the course.

David Kaufer and Gary Waller argue that students seldom have goals beyond finishing the assignment.7 This is partly true, though less so when students realize that writing is a political tool and an ongoing political process. Any obsessive drive towards finality and completion on the part of the student must constantly be undermined by the teacher, because writing as finished product only celebrates the logocentric tradition. Encouraging the students to reexamine texts for aporias can lead them to uncover their own problematic relation to language and discourse, and to understand that closure and finality in a text are artificial barriers that effectively repress certain subject positions. In order to challenge the authority of writing that is presented as a pre-packaged selection of essays in a reader, we examined writing whose political outcome, at that time, was open (the "writing" of the presidential candidates of 1988, contemporary religious leaders, newspaper editorials, television newscasts and advertisements), in order to deconstruct their hidden political agendas.

By reading these social texts we were, to an extent, able to understand why the minority student may not want to hold on to her original position if her cultural context does not imbue that position with pride and conviction, or why the mainstream, self-assured and academically successful student refuses to see that her point of view seems like the "natural" and legitimate one only because society and the entire process of education reinforce this point of view for

ulterior motives.

This raises a crucial question for a feminist, oppositional pedagogy: can "mainstream" teachers, who come largely from the same background as the students, take this liminal position? In other words, can there be a pedagogy of the marginal? My unequivocal answer to the question is that not only is this possible, but this pedagogical stance is the only viable option available to the politically conscious English teacher in the 1980s. It is relatively easy for me as a foreigner to take on a self-consciously marginal position, but even if I were native to the socio-political context in which I teach, I would of necessity have developed an oppositional discourse in the classroom.

English teachers have long complained about their peripheral role as aesthetes in a society that keeps them out of the realm of "real" political debates. Among English teachers, composition teachers are treated with even greater contempt, for they have merely been the technicians that keep the machinery of English studies well oiled and finely tuned. However, it is in their classes that future English majors and graduate students are first tapped. As Gayatri Spivak argues, the position of the composition teacher as less privileged and more precarious than other English teachers is partly voluntary:

> *It is the received dogma of the freedom of the aesthetic and literature's refusal to soil itself by rendering service to the state -- when that very refusal is the greatest service that it can render to a polity that must disguise the extraction of surplus value as cultural dynamism.*8

I am arguing along the lines of Spivak's argument that English teachers can turn this disadvantage in their favour if they, along with their students, take it upon themselves to become critics of the dominant ideology as it manifests itself in various social texts. It is possible for the composition teacher to embrace her marginal position by becoming an oppositional force in the classroom such that the student is compelled to reexamine her inherited values. Given that the university is, in Althusser's terms, "an ideological state apparatus," the writing teacher must work against a society that produces the student as a docile, limited and servile subject.

If college writing students are caught in a situation from where they may not move outside the literary texts and the classroom context in which they operate, it is because writing has been clearly demarcated as a cordoned off discourse which is not allowed to dynamically regroup constituencies. This rigid structure of courses, disciplines and departments can be broken down by a deconstructive mind-set cultivated in a writing course. Conservatives may see "red" in my proposals, but I think that only an acute awareness of all kinds of political forces can introduce the student to the "real world" and train her to empower herself in it. A pedagogy of writing that reveals the play of power in the discourse of the classroom, the university, the media, institutionalized religion, the corporate world and international politics can be an effective way of showing the student how to take a responsible position in her socio-political context through the mode of writing.

In recent composition theory, the pedagogy that I am suggesting is roughly analogous to the Social View (as opposed to the Cognitive and the Expressive Views).9 The Social View of language and writing is derived from theories of post-structuralism, the sociology of science, ethnography, and Marxism. Given that large areas of these theories overlap, the focus of social theorists like Patricia Bizzell and David Bartholomae is to show that the social situation constructs the individual writer. Patricia Bizzell's work especially derives from the linguistic theories of Vygotsky, for whom language acquisition and development are cultural and historical processes, and society as a whole is a stable matrix of social relationships.

Vygotsky's research, however, was conducted under controlled laboratory conditions; rhetoric theorists who use his theories do not take into account that outside the laboratory, the community of writers may generate their own dynamism of social tensions and crises. Deriving from Vygotsky's artificially stabilized social matrix, the social theorists of composition show how the individual is a constituent of culture, but do not extend the argument to highlight that language and writing can compose an alternate culture. The Social View also does not take into account the fact that what language brings into being is always at the expense of an alternate discourse that has been repressed. If language forms what Henry Giroux calls, "discourse communities"10 that are concerned more with ways of excluding new members than with ways of admitting them--selectivity implying power --

then the Social View tends to be monolithic.

None of the reservations that I have expressed, however, invalidate the Social View insofar as it addresses the positive, constructive aspect of language. An oppositional pedagogy of writing where the teacher constantly unmasks the students' assumptions about culture, language and politics can give the student an acute sense of what a text is and wherein lies its textuality. A truly deconstructive pedagogy starts from the following premise:

> *a text is not a text unless it hides from the first-comer and the first glance, the law of its composition, and the rules of its game.*[11]

If students are subject to the discursive practices of texts, should they not learn the rules of the game?

Notes

1. Ohmann, Richard. English in America: A Radical View of the Profession. New York: Oxford University Press, 1976.

2. Axelrod, Rise B. & Charles R. Cooper. Reading Critically, Writing Well. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987, p.v.

3. Johnson, Barbara. "The Critical Difference," Diacritics 8 Summer 1978, p. 3.

4. Bertoff, Ann E. The Making of Meaning: Metaphors, Models and Maxims for Writing Teachers. N.J.: Boynton/Cook Publishers Inc., 1981.

5. Freire, Paulo. Education for Critical Consciousness. New York: Seabury Press, 1973, pp. 48-58.

6. Jones, Kathleen B. "On Authority, Or Why Women Cannot Speak," Feminism and Foucault: Reflections on Resistance. Eds. Irene Diamond & Lee Quinby. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988, p. 120.

7. Kaufer, David & Gary Waller. "To Write is to Read is to Write, Right?" Writing and Reading Differently: Deconstruction and the Teaching of Composition and Literature. Eds. G. Douglas Atkins & Michael L. Johnson. Lawrence, K.N.: University Press of Kansas, 1985, pp. 66-93.

8. Spivak, Gayatri C. "Reading the World: Literary Studies in the 1980s," Writing and Reading Differently, pp. 27-38.

9. See reference in Lester Faigley's "Competing Theories of Process," College English, Vol. 48, No. 6, 1986, p. 98.

10. Giroux, Henry. A Theory of Resistance in Education. South Hadley: Bergin, 1983, p. 98.

11. Derrida, Jacques. Disseminations. Trans. Barbara Johnson. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981, p. 63.