“Social Issues in First-year College Writing”

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Abstract: Many educators believe that including social and political issues in first-year college writing is an effective strategy for helping students learn to read, research, and write critically. Others, however, argue that focusing on such controversial topics will distract students from the traditional goals of the course and sway them unwittingly toward the political ideologies of teachers or more articulate members of the class. The challenge, therefore, is to help students use reading and writing to shape their own informed ideologies through thoughtful analyses of multiple perspectives and careful attention to reading and writing processes.

Background
As teachers of college writing, we see many first-year students who are unaware of the complexities of the social and political issues that affect their lives. We know that they know that the issues are “out there”—poverty, racism, homophobia, religious intolerance, sexism, and others—but we can wonder what they have learned about the pervasiveness of these issues, and from what perspectives. If they are aware of the issues at all, that awareness might have come from family conversations, high school experiences, or—currently and often most persuasively for them—from television talk shows. For these reasons, many composition professionals see the first-year composition course as an appropriate site for introducing students to the complexities of the social attitudes and policies that affect those issues. This first college year is a milestone, a turning point, a new page with countless opportunities for reflection, growth, and change. On many college campuses, first-year composition curricula include time devoted to college survival skills—assignments and activities that focus on the behavioral and intellectual growth expected of first-year students. From this perspective, many practitioners argue that reading and writing assignments that dig more deeply into the complex causes and effects of poverty, racism, sexism, and the like provide important pathways to the equally important “survival skills” of critical thinking, scholarly research methods, and informed academic and civil discourse.

Others, however, just as strongly assert that attention to controversial issues steers the curriculum away from its “primary goals” of writing instruction: practicing writing processes, writing effective academic prose, and applying to that prose the standard rules of English usage. In fact, in “Narrating Conflict,” Patricia Harkin warns about a prevailing assumption within and beyond the academy that composition courses are “service courses” that should be designed to help

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students “with skills and drills, to overcome ‘faulty’ discursive practices” (279). Furthermore, some academics (and many non-academics) believe that the teaching of writing should be a politically neutral process; that to grapple in first-year composition courses with issues such as welfare reform, reproductive rights, racial profiling, or ecological stability is to risk “indoctrinating” those who are, as Maxine Hairston described them, “grade-conscious students who will simply ‘parrot’ their instructors’ opinions on controversial issues” (“Required Writing Courses” 1). Other professionals, on the other hand, argue that no education is politically neutral, and that to steer students away from social and political topics is to deny them opportunities to find their own stances and create their own dialectics in relation to those topics.

These arguments about the place of social and political issues in first-year college writing courses constitute a microcosm of arguments concerning first-year college writing curriculum in general. Increasingly, the goals and content of college writing instruction have come under fire from both academic and public sectors. Some want writing curricula to include the study of canonical literary texts; others argue that all the world is text and that a writing curriculum, should recognize and study it as such. Some assert the importance of teaching the conventions of academic discourse, while others see such a focus as furthering the pervasiveness of capitalistic hegemony. These and other controversies have created significant paradigms that are continually changing the face of composition pedagogy.

The Broader Controversy
Composition professionals are not the only group expressing concern for college writing curricula. Donald McQuade asserts that “composition studies remains one of the few academic disciplines in which outsiders insist on naming and authorizing its activities, without accepting the intellectual responsibility—and the institutional consequences—for doing so” (484). In 1989, a debate over the content of first-year writing courses came to national attention when an English department committee at the University of Texas at Austin devised a writing course syllabus that “required students to read and write critically about ‘difference’ in the context of antidiscrimination law and discrimination suits” (Brodkey 236). Linda Brodkey had hoped that the UT-Austin course would Convince some students to use writing critically; to identify, analyze, and produce arguments; and in so doing, to learn that the purpose of academic argument is not to discredit an adversary (as it often is in debates) but to arrive at, or construct, informed opinions about the profoundly complex and vexing social issues implied by difference (239-40).

When other department faculty and some administrators strongly resisted this proposed course as one that they felt constituted a liberal political agenda, the media and soon other composition professionals entered the debate, sparking a controversy that continues today about the expediency of including social and political issues in first-year college writing courses.
The interdisciplinary nature of composition scholarship opens this controversy to rich discourse, now informed by a variety of pedagogical and theoretical perspectives; among them are voices from rhetorical, feminist, multicultural, critical, and literacy theorists. Scholars in classical and modern rhetoric stress critical reading and thinking as ways for students to broaden their understanding of their own and other writers’ strategies, to draw insightful conclusions from what they read and write, and then to effectively convey those conclusions to their own readers. Feminist, multicultural, and critical theorists remind us of the importance of students’ own experiences in the arena of their learning. They focus on the effects of gender, race and ethnicity, economic class, sexual orientation, educational and religious background, and physical differences among others as important structures within students’ worldviews and ways of trusting their knowledge. Literacy theorists as varied as E. D. Hirsch, Paulo Freire, and Mike Rose urge us to consider ways in which students construct that knowledge, and they assert a variety of sources from which it should or does evolve. Such theorists present a maze of ideas about ways in which students approach all kinds of texts, and their diverse perspectives offer composition scholars an ever-broadening range of options for helping students see themselves as engaged readers, thinkers, and writers. Within this theoretical framework is found not only a variety of opinions concerning the roles of first-year college writing instruction in general but also the shaping of an important discourse about the place of social and political issues within those curricula.

While composition professionals might fall on either side of this argument, we still need to understand the concerns that some have about the ways in which students are introduced to social and political controversies in first-year writing courses. A study of the literature can illuminate the validity of those concerns as well as the practices that breed them, but it also can affirm the importance of including those issues through responsible and reflective pedagogy. Increasingly aware of the power of the media to shape our perceptions of current or historic events, I argue that we must encourage students to seek multiple perspectives on every issue. Wary of the ways in which those with power benefit from the decisions (or lack of decisions) of the uninformed, I affirm our need to teach—not just require—students to draw well-supported conclusions from critical analyses of a variety of reliable sources. As teachers of college writing, we are in an ideal place to help students recognize their own questions, explore their own biases, expose themselves to varied and multiple perspectives, and shape their own conclusions. I contend, however, that to do this, we first need to become aware of our own biases and limitations and to acknowledge the influence of our backgrounds and experiences—not only on our ideologies, but on those of our students as well.
In an article published in *College Composition and Communication* a few years after the UT-Austin incident, Maxine Hairston expressed her ongoing concern about the direction of first-year composition today:

I see a new model emerging for freshman writing programs...that disturbs me greatly. It’s a model that puts dogma before diversity, politics before craft, ideology before critical thinking, and the social goals of the teacher before the educational needs of the student. It’s a regressive model that undermines the progress we’ve made in teaching writing, one that threatens to silence student voices and jeopardize the process-oriented, low-risk, student-centered classroom we’ve worked so hard to establish as the norm. It’s a model that doesn’t take freshman English seriously in its own right but conceives of it as a tool, something to be used. The new model envisions required writing courses as vehicles for social reform rather than as student-centered workshops designed to build students’ confidence and competence as writers. It is a vision that echoes that old patronizing rationalization we’ve heard so many times before: students don’t have anything to write about so we have to give them topics. Those topics used to be literary; now they’re political. (180)

Hairston included examples from contemporary published articles to show the force of this trend and to challenge its assumptions. She noted that she found similar sentiments in both “leaders in the profession and new voices” published in all of the field’s professional journals as well as in program descriptions of the 1988 MLA Convention and the 1991 CCCC. She called to task a large number of well established writers in the field for what she saw as “contempt for their students’ values, preferences, or interests”(184) as well as for that of other teachers’ classroom goals and pedagogies (185). After analyzing the theories and paradigm shifts that she believes have created such dangerous trends, she made her own recommendations for first-year writing courses: first, that they center on students’ own diverse experiences about which they feel more secure and informed; second, that students work collaboratively as a way to “decenter” and to foster “genuine multicultural growth”(190). What Hairston did not acknowledge, though, is that both of those strategies require of students a heightened level of social and political consciousness so that they can move beyond “feel[ing] more secure and informed”; only then can they begin to experience “genuine multicultural growth.”

In the introduction to their 1994 seminal work, *Pedagogy in the Age of Politics*, Patricia Sullivan and Donna Qualley affirmed my conviction that composition pedagogy has always been political. In comparing the writing pedagogy of the 1960s with that of today, they note that while early expressivist teachers of writing such as Donald Murray, Peter Elbow, Ken Macrorie, and others urged personal writing “aimed at self-actualization,” our focus has shifted to “the
sources of the self—the social, cultural, historical conditions by which selves, or ‘subjects,’ are formed, and which make particular acts of writing possible” (viii). In *Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures*, James Berlin asserted that teaching strategies in writing classrooms may “unavoidably shape our students as ethical and social subjects,” and that this possibility more surely requires us to “take seriously our duty as public intellectuals inside and outside the classroom” (180).

This focus on what we now call critical pedagogy continues to broaden and will, I believe, significantly shape college writing curricula well into the twenty-first century. Hairston also argued that “Writing courses, especially required freshman courses, should not be for anything or about anything other than writing itself, and how one uses it to learn and think and communicate” (179). And because I agree with part of Hairston’s premise—that first-year composition should “be about...how one uses writing to learn, think, and communicate”—my own composition pedagogy supports the inclusion of social and political issues. Assignments that expose students to new and varied perspectives, that teach them to recognize the rhetorical significance of presenting those perspectives, that encourage them to “try on” multiple perspectives in light of their own value systems, and that then help them to effectively articulate how those perspective “fit” with their own seem to me to perfectly meet those important goals of learning, thinking, and communicating.

Peter Caulfield draws an important link between those goals and that of critical pedagogy:

> Obviously, I am also trying to help those students become better writers. Given my understanding of the relationship of thought and language, however, I am convinced that they cannot become better writers until and unless they also become better, more sophisticated, less solipsistic thinkers. (162)

And this call to help students be more critical thinkers should address the concerns of those within and outside of the academy that including social and political issues in the writing classroom “detracts” from the real goals of writing instruction. Because writing instruction includes close reading, consideration of multiple perspectives, and careful articulation of writers’ own informed opinions and ideologies, including those issues seems a natural goal of writing pedagogy for young adults.

Joseph Harris, in a recent article in *CCC*, advocates revision as one way to accomplish such a goal. Recalling what some theorists call the “social turn” in writing pedagogy that occurred in the 1990s, Harris argues that we need to help students imagine revision as “a practice of making stronger use of the work of others and of more clearly articulating one’s own project as a writer” (591).
He warns against claiming to know what is best for our students and instead to work with them to help them find their own voices and authority. To do this, he recommends writing pedagogy that pays careful attention to “how ideas get shaped in and refracted by language...a focus not on form but on function, on use in context” (582). He says, “The moment of revision, of going back to text, offers us the chance to ask students to rethink not just what they have to say but also what they are trying to do as writers” (588). This focus on function—on a deliberate awareness of audience, purpose, and sources within and beyond their own experience—can effectively help student writers recognize, trust, and call upon their own informed authority.

Conclusions
Over the past few years, I have encountered an increasing number of students who appear to be at a stage of cognitive development in which they state a position quite strongly, but when asked to support it with reasons or evidence or examples, they seem able to only restate the position, not defend it. For this reason, I am increasingly convinced that students at this level need to engage more fully in meaningful subjects, to practice more frequently and skillfully the processes of inquiry and analysis, and—as a bonus—to become better informed about the complexities and interrelatedness of the events, ideologies, and decisions that shape their world.

There seem to be few more appropriate venues for continuing (or sometimes beginning) this learning than in first-year college composition. I am dismayed by the frequent and often unconscious references that I hear my students and colleagues make to “the real world” when referring to life after college; I want students to recognize that this world they are in now is no less real than the one they will inhabit after they graduate. As citizens of this campus, city, state, country, and world, they are no less a part of its problems, complexities, and issues than they will be five, ten, or fifty years from now. One way to help them see their connection to this “world” is to give them opportunities to explore—through sound writing pedagogy—the social and political issues that shape their world and to encourage them to begin now to study, interpret, and influence it in informed ways.
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