4

Beliefs and Attitudes

> The real meaning of a liberal education goes far beyond just teaching the student how to be a doctor, a lawyer, a diplomat, or a business executive. A liberal education is really about encouraging the student to grapple with some of life's most fundamental questions.
>
> —Alexander Astin, *What Matters in College?*

We are past the halfway mark in the semester. Students have started the library paper, an assignment that asks them to integrate the reading and discussions in class with some library research. The assignment is not long enough to be a full-dress "research paper," but it does require them to summarize, paraphrase, and quote references. It also requires the objective stance of academic prose and the use of evidence to support a thesis.

Their reading assignments have focused on the world of Islam: a piece on early Islamic science, another on the art of calligraphy, one explaining the Five Pillars of Islam, a few selections from the Quran, and a piece on the Nation of Islam in the United States. I also have brought in several news articles on events in the Middle East, trying through a discussion of these events to help students separate out the religion of Islam itself from some of its radical political manifestations. The class discussion indicates to me that the tenets of this religion, as familiar as some of them may seem,

are still pretty foreign to the students. Islam and its believers are not a noticeable presence in the Pacific Northwest; I am afraid my students are using the popular media stereotype of "Arab" as a filter for the readings. On campus we have a small mosque, organized and run by a group of international students and faculty. I call and ask if they could send a speaker, to give these ideas a local habitation and a name. I am expecting a man (which says something about my own stereotypes). The speaker turns out to be a young woman, a local resident who has converted to Islam. She comes to class wearing a dun-colored robe and a sort of wimple, a costume she has fashioned herself derived from her study of the Quran. It covers her entirely except for her face, making me think of the nuns of my childhood. The students are visibly uneasy watching and listening to this apple-cheeked ex-Lutheran. She is, I think to myself, the Self who has become the Other, a visible and vocal challenge to their beliefs, attitudes, and values. During the question and answer session, Ed, who saw action in the Middle East when he was in the army, pushes her about the status of women in Islam; she answers by quoting the Prophet. Other questions are answered in a similar way. The students are polite but dissatisfied with her answers. It is one of the most spirited class sessions yet—even Tom has his head up off his desk and is paying attention.

Three students are having difficulty dealing with the very subject matter of Islam. After class Alberto tells me that he needs to talk to me. I have asked the class to summarize the reading on the Five Pillars, to make sure they understand the basic tenets of the religion and also to help them with techniques for summarization as they get ready to write the library paper. He is visibly agitated, perhaps in part because of the speaker and her firm insistence on the superiority of her religion. "I can't write this," he tells me, jabbing at the assignment sheet with his forefinger and getting red in the face. "I don't believe it!" Alberto belongs to a pre-Vatican II Catholic congregation, a breakaway group that was just pub-

licly condemned by the local bishop. In a conference the week before, he told me he was dropping his biological sciences class because the teacher "kept talking about Darwinism," a theory Alberto doesn't agree with. He must be feeling under siege from all sides. Trying to be soothing, I tell him that I didn't expect people to believe everything they read or heard—that in fact I hoped they wouldn't, citing a few Elvis/aliens tabloid headlines I have seen recently in the supermarket. I go on (a bit too long) about how he would be reading and discussing many ideas that he didn't agree with and that one of the purposes of college is to encounter other beliefs and values in order to sort out one's own. All I want to do is help him understand how to summarize and also to understand people like the speaker a bit better. He leaves, still not happy about the assignment. My little sermon on critical thinking and tolerance doesn't help much; his "summary" turns out to be a rather disjointed refutation of the Five Pillars, at the end of which he has written, "I can't write about things that offend me." How can I help him deal with and write about ideas like these that challenge his beliefs?

Heather is also having trouble. She is active in the campus Youth for Christ group and spends most of her social time with friends from that organization. Nothing in her experience, either in her campus activities or in her rural background, has prepared her for confronting ideas so foreign to her beliefs. She did an acceptable summary of the Five Pillars, but now she wants to write a library paper that compares Islam and Christianity. I am nervous about this topic, knowing (in part from my experience with Alberto) the kind of polemic it could produce, and try to steer her toward a more neutral topic—Islamic art, perhaps; but she tells me that this is the first time she is writing about something she really cares about. How can I deny this earnest young woman? The first draft turns out to be an impassioned piece on the evils of Islam compared to the true path to God, a piece that assumes an audience of fellow believers. I want to approach the revision delicately, so as not to offend

her deeply held beliefs, but I am concerned about the final portfolio readings. If she puts this paper in the portfolio, I know it will come back with a low ranking and the comment "this is not research-based." (Even though we tend toward sermonizing ourselves, as I did with Alberto, academics are fairly intolerant of student sermons.)[1] One important quality of academic writing is "the giving of reasons and evidence rather than just opinions, feelings, experiences" (Elbow, "Reflections" 140). How can I move her away from a polemic to a more reasoned and reasonable piece?

Then there is Jaymie. She is less intense in her reaction to the speaker and the assignment (the two have become intertwined in all three of these students' minds), but she is also clearly troubled. She talks with me about what she describes as "confusion": being committed to her own religious beliefs and not knowing how to deal with a paper about Islam in an academic (that is, objective) way. We talk a bit about how one can be committed to beliefs and still be tolerant of other ways of believing and thinking about the world. She chooses the same topic as Heather—a comparison of Islam and her own faith—and through much effort on her part the result is not a polemic; it is, however, a bit like the genre I think of as the "high school report." How can I help her come up with a thesis for this piece while at the same time not do harm to the thoughtful, objective tone she has worked so hard to achieve?

The Challenge to/of Beliefs and Attitudes

As universities move toward accepting—indeed, actively promoting—diversity on campus and in the curriculum, scenes like these are being played out in other classrooms as well. The difficulties our students have with issues of cultural difference stem in part from the K–12 classrooms they come from, where such ideas are often seen as controversial. As Oliver documents in her book on multiculturalism, censorship is a growing problem for the

public schools (39–52). In the past two decades, the religious right has been growing steadily in size and sophistication. Conservative groups have organized themselves in various ways to deal with what they consider dangerously liberal ideas.[2] Some activists have visited school classes and libraries searching for "un-American" books—often those having to do with the experience of Jews, women, African Americans, or Hispanics. In one case in New York, a list of "mentally dangerous" works included authors Bernard Malamud, Richard Wright, Kurt Vonnegut, and Langston Hughes (Moffett, *Storm* 29). Conservative Christian groups in Yucaipa, California, brought about the removal of a whole-language textbook series ("Impressions") because in their eyes some of the selections challenged traditional family values. One of the objectionable stories was "Beauty and the Beast." Another quoted the traditional rhyme "Lavender's Blue," which has the line "And we shall be gay, dilly dilly, and we shall both dance"; since two little boys in the story had earlier exchanged valentines, some parents saw the text as endorsing homosexuality (Meade 40). One result of this pressure from the right, as Moffett's *Storm in the Mountains* shows, is that publishers selling language arts textbook series have in effect censored themselves, cutting anything that might be considered even remotely controversial. Books that do arouse controversy, like Moffett's "Interaction" series, are dropped.

The effects of these challenges should not be underestimated. The publishing industry, dominated by large corporations, is naturally more interested in profit margins than controversy over texts.[3] Once purchased by schools, the safe vanilla textbooks these publishers produce remain in use for some time. K–12 teachers who have encountered resistance to new ideas from a group of impassioned parents may be excused if they shy away from the issues that produced such passion, or a pedagogy that aims at helping students think for themselves; teachers in the Yucaipa case have received harassing phone calls and physical threats (Meade 37–38).

Hence, many students today come to higher education from classroom environments and curricula that have consciously avoided all issues that might be construed as controversial. One of the first university classes they encounter is a writing course that encourages critical thinking and often requires reading about issues they may have been told should not be discussed in school. No wonder students are unprepared for the kinds of ideas we discuss and the way we discuss them in college. No wonder some of them are put off, feeling their valued beliefs are threatened.

The English 101 curriculum at my institution is part of our new general education core of courses for entering students, involving readings from world cultures. At the heart of this curriculum is a conscious effort to promote tolerance, to help students understand what it means to live in a world and a nation made up of different cultures and ideologies. But of course it is not enough to simply introduce students to other cultures and ways of doing and believing; they will sometimes react as Alberto did by rejecting out of hand anything that seems "other," because it offends them. I try to practice a pedagogy that affirms the individual student but also works to promote tolerance of difference and to challenge outright misconceptions about race, ethnicity, and gender (see Whitten; Adams). While I am respectful of my students' religious beliefs, I am also aware of the research that shows a link between religious fundamentalism and discriminatory attitudes (Allport, *Nature*; Kirkpatrick).[4] I want my students to develop a more skeptical habit of mind, one that questions assumptions, looks for evidence, and does not blindly accept authority as always right. I agree with Bizzell ("Politics") and Stotsky that teaching cannot be value-neutral; recent examples of ethnic violence give a special urgency to my thinking about diversity and cultural pluralism in the classroom, to my commitment to the kind of ethical community I want not only in my classroom but also in society. I do not want to tell my students *what* to think, but I do want to teach them *how* to think for themselves.[5] This is

the value of a liberal arts education—the *artes liberales* that in a Roman education were those subjects and skills necessary for the development of a free man, a citizen. When we challenge our students' deeply held beliefs and attitudes by discussing difference, we are not trying to change their beliefs to agree with ours; we are merely trying to help them understand that there are other ways of believing that other people hold just as deeply. We are, in other words, trying to move them toward more open-minded stances as they grapple with (in Astin's words) the fundamental questions of life. In order to manage such a challenge effectively, teachers need to know about the nature of beliefs and belief systems.

What Are Beliefs and Attitudes?

There is little consensus in the academic community about the definition of "belief." Bar-Tal identifies beliefs as units of knowledge, including within this broad definition such notions as hypotheses, inferences, values, intentions, and ideologies. According to Bar-Tal, knowledge encompasses all the beliefs one accumulates through any means, scientific or otherwise—facts as well as faith (5). Rokeach (*Beliefs*) and Fishbein and Ajzen, the most well known social scientists who have written about the phenomenon, agree that bēlief is cognition; in the field of composition we are familiar with this notion thanks to the social constructionists, who identify knowledge as socially justified belief (see Bruffee, "Social"). The view of beliefs proposed by the philosophers (and used by most of us in ordinary parlance) differentiates between knowledge and belief (Griffiths). Knowledge is seen as justified true belief, while other kinds of knowledge (not justified) involve subjective states of mind about propositions. People *know* that if they drop something, it will fall down rather than up, and that during the winter it is cold in this part of the country. People *believe* that a particular race or religion is superior (or inferior), that cultural pluralism and tolerance are central (or not) to the survival of

democracy in America, that there is (or is not) a supreme being in charge of the universe.

However they may disagree on the definition, most who write about beliefs do agree that beliefs are propositions or statements of relations among things that are accepted as true. Beliefs underlie attitude formation (Fishbein and Ajzen; Rokeach, *Beliefs*); an attitude is a predisposition to action, a readiness to respond in certain ways. To accept a proposition as true is to invest it with some value. Some people feel deeply enough about their most cherished beliefs to die or to kill for them. It is this class of beliefs and attitudes—those that are heavily value-laden and therefore charged with affect—that I would like to examine in this chapter; these are usually, but not exclusively, religious and/or political beliefs. Because they carry affective freight, value-laden beliefs can give rise to the emotions that either facilitate or interfere with students' writing processes, as discussed in chapter 2. As teachers, we need to know more about how our students' beliefs and attitudes are formed and how we can help students understand them as they interact with their writing processes.

Psychological and Social Theories

As with emotions, beliefs and attitudes can be examined from two different but related points of view: the psychological or individual, and the social or contextual. The former attempts to explain the mental phenomenon of belief formation and the relation between beliefs and attitudes; the latter looks at belief systems and their maintenance, especially in groups of believers.

Fishbein and Ajzen, whose attitude-behavior theory is the standard reference for research on beliefs, propose an information-processing model for belief formation (131–34). Beliefs may arise in one of three ways: from experiences with an object (descriptive belief), from inferences made based on some other belief (inferential belief), and from other

sources of information (informational belief). Beliefs about an object lead to an attitude toward it, which in turn leads toward behavioral intentions (for example, good, therefore seek out, or bad, therefore avoid). These intentions affect the actual behaviors toward an object. Behaviors then feed back to beliefs, either reinforcing or modifying them, depending on the results of the behavior toward the object. If the results of behavior toward an object reinforce the belief, the attitudes about the object will be strengthened. If, on the other hand, the experience with the object is not reinforced, the beliefs may change (positively or negatively), and the resulting attitudes will change as well.

Here is how the process works. My own beliefs about the timber industry (the object) have been influenced largely by my encounters with ugly clear-cuts in this part of the country (my experience with the object), my inferences about the industry based on what I know about other industries having to do with natural resources (like oil), and my reading and conversations, especially conversations with a colleague who is an ecofeminist. (I suspect my undergraduate study of romantic poetry also had an influence on my beliefs about and attitudes toward nature.) Until recently, I believed the timber industry to be male-dominated, embodying the Western ethic of dominion over nature rather than living in harmony with it. My attitudes toward the industry were negative. These beliefs and attitudes influenced my verbal behavior when I discussed issues of the environment.

This year, however, I have had occasion to discuss issues of environmental education with representatives from a large timber company, one that has reforested the Mt. St. Helens blast area. These representatives included a forest research hydrologist, a former teacher turned corporate executive, and a forester with experience in forest management, forest research, and science education in the United States and overseas. They immediately challenged my stereotype of the industry, in part because of their education and background, in part because all three are women. My behavioral

intention when I first met with them was to listen and to be open-minded, but I was not convinced that I had any attitudes about the subject that should change. In one particularly interesting session over dinner, I found that these representatives shared many of my attitudes and beliefs about the environment, that in spite of different viewpoints we shared some important values. My contact with these three thoughtful and articulate women, from whom I have learned a good deal, has challenged my beliefs about the timber industry (or at least about this company as a member of that industry), which in turn has changed my negative attitudes and my verbal behavior in conversations with my colleagues about environmental issues.

Belief Systems

Beliefs and their accompanying attitudes do not exist in isolation from one another; they are part of systems that are organized in a way that makes sense psychologically if not logically (Rokeach, *Beliefs* 2). The size of the belief system and the degree of interrelatedness of beliefs within the system can vary from domain to domain—a person's religious beliefs may be very organized, while his or her beliefs about the effects of living near a nuclear power plant might be organized or not, depending on the proximity of such a plant. All belief systems have certain characteristics in common (Borhek and Curtis 9–16). Along with the actual content of the system comes a set of values; these values define what is right and wrong for the believer. The system also has some set criteria for establishing those values (the word of God or of Marx and Lenin, for example). There is an implicit logic to the system, although that logic is not always consistently applied (it is easy to promise to love your neighbor in the abstract, but it might be harder in actuality, depending on your neighbors). The system also provides a perspective, a cognitive map for believers to position themselves with regard to other things, especially other groups

and world views (the "other" is the infidel or an equal). The system comes with a set of prescriptions and proscriptions (action alternatives or policy recommendations—thou shalt/thou shalt not) and a technology (that is, an accepted means to attain valued goals—prayer, protest marches). A belief system might be idiosyncratic (as in the case of a person who believes he is Napoleon), or it might be shared with large numbers of other persons (as in the case of religious groups or political parties). Most importantly, for our purposes in the writing classroom, a system might be "open" in the sense that its structure allows for change and acceptance of new ideas, or it might be "closed," rejecting any ideas that do not conform to the system and intolerant of all but those with similar beliefs; the closed belief system relies heavily on the word of authorities for its maintenance (Rokeach, *Open*).

Understanding the difference between the closed and the open system will help teachers better understand students like Alberto, Heather, and Jaymie. All belief systems serve two powerful but conflicting sets of motives: the need for a cognitive framework to make sense of the world and the need to ward off threatening aspects of reality. When the cognitive need to know is predominant and the need to ward off threat is low or absent, the system is open; for those holding open belief systems, the world is seen as a relatively friendly place; in the open system the power of authority is not absent, but that power depends on the authority's consistency with other information about the world. Authorities who give information in conflict with the belief system will be considered unreliable.

But in the closed belief system, the need to ward off threat is stronger than the cognitive need to know (Rokeach, *Open* 67–68), as in the case of conservative groups in the censorship cases mentioned earlier—or as in the case of Alberto, who could not summarize ideas that were in conflict with his beliefs. The more closed the system, the greater the belief in the rightness and power of authority. Those outside the closed system are evaluated according to the authorities

they line themselves up with; closed system believers have difficulty separating out and evaluating beliefs from the person who holds them (62–63), as my three students who couldn't talk about Islam without talking too about the class speaker. The more closed the system, the more different ideas and people threaten it. Those who hold closed belief systems, like Alberto (and like the conservative groups demanding censorship of ideas in the public schools), feel anxious and threatened much of the time.

The social aspect of shared belief systems is extremely powerful. People strive to hold "correct" beliefs about the world, and when objective evidence is not available to them, they will test the accuracy of their beliefs and attitudes by comparing them with the beliefs and attitudes of others (Festinger, "Social"). This social aspect of belief systems is one reason that religious groups like the Amish (who adhere to a closed system) forbid contact with the world outside the one they have created for themselves; that contact would interfere with the continuance of the system as it is now constituted. Yet personal commitment is one of the most salient features of many belief systems (Borhek and Curtis 6). The conflict between that commitment and the need to test the accuracy of one's beliefs by comparing them with those of others produces some of the stress of the first year of college. Students like Alberto, Heather, and Jaymie adhere to belief systems that rely heavily on authority; they come to the university from environments in which they were surrounded by other people very much like themselves who gave them feedback that reinforced their closed systems. Now they find themselves encountering conflicting authorities, encountering people and ideas unlike theirs; their beliefs are challenged rather than reinforced by some of their social experience. The emotion aroused as a result of this experience (in George Mandler's terms, an interruption of expectations) may be expressed variously—anger in Alberto's case, confusion in Jaymie's—but if it is intense enough, it can interfere with their thinking and writing processes.

The Cultural and Organizational Contexts of Belief Systems

The culture of the university itself challenges student belief systems. Culture consists in large part of learned and shared ideas; belief systems are part of a culture, instances of it, and have social consequences. A shared belief system having to do with the superiority of the Aryan race allowed the Holocaust to occur. In a more mundane instance, the culture that values individual achievement in the humanities (especially in America, where individualism is highly valued) leads to suspicion of collaborative research and writing—the reason our students at first resist writing groups, our academic colleagues don't understand collaborative classrooms, and our coauthored publications are questioned in tenure and promotion reviews (see Ede and Lunsford ix–x).

Shared belief systems and their accompanying attitudes are carried and perpetuated by social structures and associations. These structures can be relatively unspecialized (like a kinship structure or a neighborhood), or they can be associations and organizations formed for some specific purpose, which may (as in the case of a church) or may not (as in the case of a corporation) be the belief system itself. All associations have belief systems with certain characteristics, for example, a corporate body, a membership, or a larger community of believers. Those that have become fairly institutionalized tend to expand beyond the original purpose for the association, have members for which the association is a career and develop hierarchies for those careers, and have connections with other associations of like kinds. They also have a shared discourse. The belief system provides a context in which otherwise cryptic messages ("power to the people," "family values") can be understood, since the rest is implicit for those who share the beliefs (Borhek and Curtis 60–79).

The university is an example of an association that car-

ries a belief system. Every institution of higher education has a mission statement, articulating what the members of the association are to believe and value. Unlike churches, colleges and universities are not organized for the purpose of the belief system; academic believers focus not on the content of the shared belief system but on the process—the process of open inquiry in the pursuit of knowledge, of understanding, perhaps even of wisdom. One important part of the belief system of universities is open-mindedness in the pursuit of new knowledge or in classroom discussion; an old academic saw has it that the only thing professors will not tolerate is ignorance. Of course, we all know that academics can be as dogmatic as the next believer, holding a particular belief system (radical constructivism, Marxism, behaviorism) and defending it at all costs; but the fact remains that one of our most cherished beliefs is in the sanctity of academic freedom—a belief that includes not only our own right to be free from interference with what we teach and research but also a respect for the rights of others in the free interchange of ideas. When we teach our students the value of an open, inquiring mind as a major component of a liberal education, we are conveying a central aspect of our belief system.

Our shared discourse, academic prose, has characteristics that reflect our shared belief system: this specialized discourse sets out a position or proposition, weighs and marshals evidence to support the position, and invokes the work and positions of others. Academic prose is by no means passionless, but unlike the polemics our students are used to in other arenas, our discourse acknowledges the fact that other ways of thinking about an issue exist. As Elbow says, "[M]ost academics reflect in their writing and teaching a belief that passionate commitment is permissible, even desirable—so long as it is balanced by awareness that it is a passionate position, what the stakes are, how others might argue otherwise" ("Reflections" 142). Students used to associations that carry belief systems with different rules for

discourse get into difficulty when attempting academic prose; witness Alberto, who on the works cited page of his library paper listed the author of the Bible as "God."

From Closed to Open Belief Systems

The writing process is also a thinking process. Students with closed belief systems of any sort have learned to accept authority (a particular authority) and not to weigh evidence, test ideas, think critically. When we talk about student beliefs and attitudes that keep them from engaging in such critical thinking, we are in fact invoking models of intellectual and ethical development—those of Perry and of Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule. We want to move our students away from thinking that authorities have all the answers, an early stage of thinking these theorists describe, toward what we as academics think of as more "mature" thinking—a commitment to particular beliefs while acknowledging the existence of belief systems that are equally valid for others.

How might we work to bring about such a change? A common assumption is that interpersonal contact with those who are different will establish more open ways of looking at difference (this is the assumption behind such phenomena as the Goodwill Games or student exchange programs). But mere contact is not enough; sometimes such contact can reinforce negative beliefs (as when the speaker from the mosque came to my class). Because people test the accuracy of their beliefs by comparing them to the beliefs and attitudes of others, active participation rather than just contact with those who think differently can help bring about change in the way students think about issues. Through focused, positive social interaction, students can test their beliefs against the beliefs of others and modify their way of believing accordingly. Astin, in his study of the impact of a college education, finds that the single most important environmental influence on student development is the peer group; "by

judicious and imaginative use of peer groups, any college or university can substantially strengthen its impact on student learning and personal development" (xiv). When writing groups give suggestions for revision, they are also suggesting a revision of thinking.

Assignments that focus on the development of empathy can also move students toward more open ways of thinking and believing. Empathy is treated more fully in chapter 6; here it is enough to say that having students participate in activities designed to get them into the shoes of the "other" for a time will help develop empathy and promote more open beliefs. One such activity is role playing. Clore and Jeffery conducted a study in which a supposedly disabled researcher asked students to spend some time in a wheelchair on campus or go with the person in the chair as an observer. At the end of the experiment, the students who had actively played the role or observed the role player were found to have more favorable views of disabled persons (and of the supposedly disabled experimenter) than the students in the control group, who simply walked around campus.

Role playing that asks people to engage in counterattitudinal behavior can also have an effect on the way they hold their beliefs. There is some evidence from the theory of cognitive dissonance that the most effective way to change someone's attitude is to change their behavior first; the change in attitude follows the change in behavior (see Festinger, *Cognitive*; Buck 428–29; Friedman; Glasser). The classroom debate in which students are asked to argue from the side they disagree with is an example of an activity that invites students to role-play counterattitudinal behavior. In my class, for example, I asked students to read an article about Muslim schoolgirls in France not being allowed to wear scarves to cover their heads, as their religion required. I set up a mock court debate and asked some of the students who seemed to be having the most difficulty understanding the tenets of Islam to play the lawyers arguing the case for freedom of expression of religion for these children.

Of course, we may not see any movement toward a more open stance in our students' thinking processes during the few weeks we have with them in a writing course. Alberto, for example, put a good deal of energy all semester into warding off ideas that threatened his closed belief system. He chose not to listen to the suggestions of his writing group members, who argued with him at some length about his depiction of Islam as "evil." Although he had debate experience, he told me he couldn't take a position that conflicted with his religious beliefs and so did not participate in the class debate on the rights of Muslim schoolgirls. The final draft of his library paper turned out to be another polemic in which he castigated not only believers in Islam but also those who adhere to Judaism (he termed the latter "Christ killers"); his "library" sources were religious tracts from his church. I conferred with him about this paper, telling him that although I would count it as having been completed, I could not grade it as one of the papers he submitted at the end of the semester and shared with him my concern that the portfolio readers would not pass it, since it did not in fact fulfill the assignment. He agreed to submit another paper for the final portfolio readings, and while he accepted my decision not to grade his paper, he was not happy about it. He had simply told the truth; it was a violation of his religious freedom to expect him to do otherwise. After the conference I felt dismayed and worried about him. I wondered if he would ever be able to think and write in a way that understood and acknowledged the stance of the "other." I hoped that if my class didn't have an effect on his closed belief system, the culture of the university and the social interaction with his more tolerant peers would eventually open his mind and heart.

Heather's experience shows how positive, focused social interaction can bring about more open ways of thinking as students develop a sense of audience. Throughout her paper Heather quoted scripture to refute the teachings of Islam. In a conference I asked her how she felt when the

speaker quoted the Prophet in answer to questions from the class, and she saw the parallel immediately. We talked about how she could write this so that the speaker from the mosque would accept the representation of Islamic beliefs as fair. Heather's writing group helped her even more. In her draft she had stated that Islam took the ideas of Christianity and "twisted" them. An Mei, ever sensitive to the nuances of English diction, told her she didn't think "twisted" was the right word. The other students tried to help her find another word, finally suggesting "adapted." Heather seemed surprised but responded to this and several other suggestions that helped tone down the polemic. She later told me that it did not occur to her that the writing group wouldn't agree with her, and that rewriting the paper with them as well as the mosque speaker in mind helped her think about how to present her ideas "more clearly." The final version was still more a "my turn" essay than an objective comparison, but there was less polemic and more reliance on research to make her points, a much more open stance.

Jaymie's experience illustrates how an activity designed to build empathy can move students toward more open thinking. Like many other English 101 teachers on my campus, I have one assignment where I ask students to interview an international student about his or her contact with the culture of the United States. The assignment gives students an interview protocol to use, but most students end up chatting with the student they interview long after the last question on the protocol. Jaymie interviewed a young woman in another of her classes, a Muslim from Ethiopia who was a peer advisor in one of the residence halls; like Jaymie, Tarik was very much involved in campus student organizations. Both were intensely interested in the Middle East and spent quite a bit of time discussing the situation of the Falashas, the Ethiopian Jews. Both deplored the actions of the more extreme adherents of their respective faiths. Tarik also told Jaymie that in spite of the fact that she had lived in Italy before coming to the United States, she still had diffi-

culties adjusting to life in our small college town. Jaymie, coming from a city on the west side of the state, sympathized. Her paper on the interview focused on the similarities between the two of them, in spite of their different backgrounds. Jaymie then went back to her paper on Islam and rewrote it, using a similar thesis: while there were many differences, her religion and Islam were more alike than they were different. Her interview with Tarik had helped her see the subject matter from another's point of view. I found the revised version of this paper to be a quantum leap from her earlier draft in its maturity of thought and expression.

Astin's research shows that students involved in activities that promoted diversity and increased cultural awareness reported greater gains in cognitive and affective development, increased satisfaction with most areas of the college experience, and increased commitment to promoting racial understanding (431). Jaymie's growth as a thinker and writer is the sort that makes a teacher's heart leap up. It is rare, at least in my experience, to find such growth in a first-year writing class; most of our students move (as I did myself at that age) more slowly and much less dramatically toward more open belief systems. Some, like Alberto, may never change their way of believing. But I am convinced that this move toward an open system of beliefs and attitudes is one of the most important affective changes that we as writing teachers can help bring about.