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Saving the World or Teaching Writing?: Complicating Binary Critiques of Politicized Writing Pedagogy

The Function of Theory in Composition Studies. Raúl Sánchez, Albany: SUNY, 2005. 123 pp.

Defending Access: A Critique of Standards in Higher Education. Tom Fox. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1999. 122 pp.

Changing the Subject in English Class: Discourse and the Constructions of Desire. Marshall Alcorn. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 2002. 151 pp.

IT IS GENERALLY AGREED THAT EQUAL ACCESS TO EDUCATION REQUIRES SYSTEMIC adaptation to the needs of students from diverse backgrounds. Open-admissions students, in particular, may require help negotiating reading and writing requirements if they are to be successful in college. Students can also benefit by learning about the politicized nature of literacy requirements because, according to William Sedlacek, one predictor of academic success is whether students understand how political forces structure both the educational system and the larger society. In his thorough 2004 study on noncognitive assessment in higher education, Sedlacek concludes that the "research has consistently shown that students of color who understand racism and are prepared to deal with it perform better academically and are more likely to adjust to a predominantly White school than those who do not" (43). He further suggests that studying other "isms," such as sexism and ageism, may help women and other groups be educationally prepared to negotiate the vagaries of discriminatory systems and learn to turn "obstacles" to their advantage (44).

In composition studies, politicized pedagogies address these pressing needs by helping students critique and negotiate power structures through rigorous writing and research. Yet critics within the field, such as Thomas Rickert, warn that pedagogies that explicitly challenge societal power "can nevertheless produce new forms of power and privilege that in turn produce new resistances; further alienate already cynical students; and (re)produce the possibility of violence" (291).[1] In addition, voices outside the academy continue to assail open-

1. The violence Rickert warns against is a psychic oedipalization that occurs in societal contexts of authority, such as schooling. Rickert suggests a "post-pedagogy" that gives control over writing to students and reorients their subjectivity to a post-oedipal mode of possibility, drawing on work by Gilles Deleuze and Slavoj Žižek.

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access education and politicized pedagogies with a number of problematic claims that demand response. The most commonly-heard refrain, continually reinvoked by conservatives, is that of declining standards. This trend, popularized years ago by Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*, continues to influence educational policy in the Bush Administration's No Child Left Behind program—only one of many efforts to reinstitute the assumed superiority of traditional literacy standards. Further, critics worry that the emphases of multicultural education are misplaced; such pedagogies simply go too far, as Diane Ravitch bemoans: "Demands for 'culturally relevant' studies, for ethnostudies of all kinds, will open the classroom to unending battles over whose version is taught, who gets credit for what, and which ethno-interpretation is appropriate" (86). In a similar vein, Lynn Cheney argues that in addition to studying civic and global problems, students should garner "a true understanding of past and present" with patriotic education, carefully studying the ways America works—"what we have done well—very well, indeed" (par. 13).

Writing teachers should be aware of three books that address these complex issues, although in radically different ways. First, Raúl Sánchez critiques politicized writing instruction in his 2005 *The Function of Theory in Composition Studies*, arguing that ideological approaches inappropriately make writing a mere means to a end. While we've heard similar complaints leveled against compositionists' attempts to "save the world," Sánchez's assault is a theoretically sophisticated one that critical pedagogues should consider. Tom Fox's 1999 *Defending Access: A Critique of Standards in Higher Education* sheds light on issues Sánchez (and other critics) raise. The strength of Fox's study, in addition to his defense of open access against conservative calls for standardization, is his explicit rendition of multicultural praxis, showing how theory and practice merge in both student and institutional texts. And, in a particularly insightful addition to the conversation, Marshall Alcorn's 2002 *Changing the Subject in English Class: Discourse and the Construction of Desire* carefully considers the power differential that continues to pervade even critical classrooms, and suggests that psychoanalytic theory should inform ideological pedagogies if they are to avoid reproducing the resistance and alienation against which Rickert warns. Taken together, these three books offer new avenues of research and theoretical insight that complicate and disrupt the unproductive and false binary that writing teachers should stop trying to save the world and instead teach an unpoliticized, "pure" version of academic writing.

"an appropriate, even unavoidable, place from which to address problems of politicized exclusion"

Each of these texts holds in common a deep concern with the content and conduct of the college writing course. They collectively persuade me that the college writing course is an appropriate, even unavoidable, place from which to address problems of politicized exclusion. I agree with Fox that if we are to prevent further inroads against access, then writing teachers, as literacy experts, must "enter into the ideological definition of 'standards'" that promote greater inclusion (70). Composition pedagogy, of necessity, is a politicized endeavor that works for or against access. The politicized composition course may be oriented towards issues of multiculturalism, gender, sexuality, or class, or be focused on civic literacy, cultural studies or critical pedagogy. But whatever the emphasis or course title, these approaches to writing instruction acknowledge the political dimensions of learning to read and write, and help students understand the gatekeeping function that literacy standards always perform in society.

Sánchez's concern, however, is that politicized pedagogies inappropriately take the focus off writing: "Many composition theorists have sought to connect our field's interest to the cultural practices that comprise an increasingly complex, interconnected, and written world. . . . [T]hey have changed the object of study on the assumption that the category of *writing* alone cannot describe the theoretical and cultural situations they see before them" (9). He argues that critical pedagogies, rather than exploring writing itself, give primary status to certain master terms, such as *ideology*, *interpretation*, *discourse*, *meaning*, or *communication*. Just as the composition course is viewed as a service course to serve the needs of other disciplines, writing teachers themselves employ writing as a means to achieve ends of ideological indoctrination, cultural interpretation, consciousness-raising, meaning-making or dialogical relationship building.

Teachers may question whether such privileging occurs in any given writing classroom, but it is also fair to ask why means-to-an-ideological-end pedagogy is necessarily a problem. It could be argued, for example, that Writing Across the Disciplines courses routinely use writing as a means to achieve disciplinary learning goals. The purpose of Sánchez's critique, then, emerges as he reconsiders the function of theory in the field and assesses its value and future trajectory. He believes that composition theory, as it currently informs politicized pedagogy, undermines the credibility of the field itself.

Sánchez explains that current theoretical practice consists of mining the larger realm of critical theory for applicable concepts. Compositionists seek the academic exchange value of theory for a field that is constantly viewed as service-oriented and subservient. Critical theory as an object of study is, of course, a complex body of texts written by philosophers, Marxists, and cultural theorists. The "intellectual heft" of theory makes it

appealing to teacher-scholars who seek disciplinary status and publishing opportunities (77). Sánchez uses the example of James Berlin to illustrate a common pattern. In "Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class," Berlin presents Althusser's theory of ideology and then applies that philosophical frame to composition research. Subsequent scholars have adopted this strategy with the result that theory and empirical research now are "largely irrelevant" one to the other (2). Composition theory has become "an assertion of a relation between critical theory and composition practice. These forms of composition theory . . . remain the predominant 'methods' of theorizing in our field today" (13). The problem, in Sánchez's assessment, with this borrowing method is that it never obtains its primary stimulus from theorizing the act of writing itself.

Here is where Sánchez's work can be of value to those committed to open access education and critical pedagogy. For Sánchez, meaning is not created, transferred or established through writing. Rather,

> to study writing might be to try to explain why and how it is that when one writes, one acts as if meaning were to issue. That it never does issue, because the arrangement of symbols (or, signifiers) is only ever "understood" through the further arrangement of symbols, is something else that the study of writing might try always to account for. (58)

This suggestion, that composition theorists tackle problematic questions—questions such as why meaning evades written representation—may help critical pedagogues at open-admission schools revision their work. If meaning is unstable and illusive, might not that fact be particularly well-demonstrated in multicultural classrooms, where meaning is constructed, yes *written*, very differently by those from varying cultures? Might not the very writtenness of culture, ideology, and interpretation be illustrated in student writing? Rather than adopting theory from other fields to gain status, composition theorists might seize the opportunity to generate their own theoretical insights. It is well to keep in mind Charles Bazerman's observation, "the irony that although writing has been centrally implicated in practices of human cognition, consciousness and culture for over 5000 years, it still is not identified as a major university discipline" (36). Bazerman goes on to predict that the field of composition is poised to take on the challenge of synthesizing a "large, important, and multidimensional story of writing. We are the only profession that makes writing its central concern" (33).

Sánchez's argument—that writing (as opposed to ideology/culture) be the focus in composition theory and practice—may be helpful in taking up this challenge. Yet I wonder if his argument that ideology or culture is privileged over writing may itself falsely separate

mutually constitutive entities.[2] He admits at one point that "it is possible, even necessary, to theorize writing and culture together" (77). Still, he believes cultural theory holds promise only as it recognizes writing not as product, but as (re)producer of culture. He finds that cultural studies' pedagogies merely analyze and read culture, enacting a "rhetoric of literary interpretation" (69). In his view, analysis and interpretation take the focus off textual production. He presents examples from James Berlin and Michael Vivion's *Cultural Studies in the English Classroom*, showing how teachers themselves describe practices in which "writing is, once again, only a means to an end, the by-product of a prior, interpretive act" (69). He concludes that writing "is not imagined or understood" by teachers "as a cultural and rhetorical activity" and that writing is not "presented to the students as such" (69). Cultural studies teachers may disagree. To resolve this conflict, researchers might take up Sánchez's recommendation, following Linda Flower, that empirical research interrogate theoretical concepts (13-14). Researchers might investigate cultural studies classrooms to determine exactly how writing is understood and presented to students.[3] It also seems contradictory to suppose that interpretation and analysis, ideologically based or not, can be relegated to a category distinct from that of textual production. Perhaps writing teachers could envision writing, ideology and culture in a recursive relationship in which no term holds hierarchical status. The intriguing point that emerges from my reading of these texts is how Tom Fox brilliantly demonstrates exactly this complex understanding of how writing, ideology, and culture intertwine.

First Fox deconstructs the pervasive notion that standards and access are goals somehow diametrically opposed.[4] That opposition is precisely the one that conservative critics, such as Dinesh D'Souza, William Bennett, and Allan Bloom, try to set up. Fox challenges the assumptions upon which these critics base their arguments, noting that they "claim their version of the university will provide students of color with academic and economic access, even though history has proved them wrong. And they then assert that multicultural education

2. Sánchez sees *ideology* and *culture*, as well as additional notions such as *thought* and *ideas*, as effects or "enactments" of writing "attached retrospectively to always-already-written texts" (6-7). He sees this as a distinctive realization that goes beyond "the familiar admission that most human activity requires or takes place through or in written or otherwise signifying discourse" (5-6).

3. For recent texts that investigate writing in a cultural studies setting see Tonya M. Scott's 2005 dissertation, *Composition Studies and Cultural Identity: Writing Instruction at a Historically Black University*, Donald Lazere's 2003 "Composition, Culture Studies, and Critical Pedagogy in the Managed University," and Ira Shor and Caroline Pari's 1999 *Critical Literacy in Action*.

4. Fox compelling argues that the worry over declining standards is a not-too-well concealed effort to disallow educational access to minority groups. He shows through historical example that the standards issue has been raised again and again when the power balance of society seems to be shifting towards equity and away from the privilege granted to upper-class white males (18-39).

and affirmative action actually deny access" (5). Fox presents statistics regarding SAT scores, affirmative-action programs, and programs such as California's English Only law that reveal the reality of the "minute, almost imaginary changes toward a multicultural society" that the standards movement is attempting to reverse. Further, he complicates the definition of literacy standards, showing how teachers' standards may be just as challenging and rigorous as "bureaucratic standards that almost always emerge from a political context of crisis" (10).

Fox confronts the fallacy that his pedagogical and administrative focus on multiculturalism can change the world, and admits the impossibility of such a task for any writing teacher. But does that mean that small incremental change is also impossible? That ground Fox refuses to concede, and in doing so provides a model for how hegemony can be resisted and redirected. Teachers do not always have administrative authority; nonetheless Fox suggests they "enter into the mire of institutional change, and transform those structures that work against access" (70). And the means to achieve such transformation is not just ideological, it is primarily and consistently *textual*. The power of Fox's book is that he gives specific, down-to-earth examples from his experiences at California State University, Chico, of writing at work, of textual interactions that elicit real-world change. In one example, he recounts how a letter to the editor in the local paper complained about American Indians having grades "doled out on the basis of their race" (74). Subsequent media conversation circulated the "commonsense" argument that standards should be raised. Soon after, a university provost, apparently in response to this media conversation, sent a memo to deans and chairs requiring that faculty enforce "demanding" writing standards in each discipline (72). The problem the University Writing Committee [UWC] found with the memo was that it moved the question of writing standards away from a faculty-based Writing Across the Disciplines [WAD] committee, to a bureaucratic stipulation (73). Fox asserts that the mandate for "commonsense" standards "signals hegemony at work. Undefined or vague standards (usually simply resting on status quo conditions) remain a primary tool of hegemony against access" (75).

Fox describes a long-term and complex response from the UWC, writing faculty, and administrators. A key text was a memo constructed by Thia Wolf, chair of the UWC, which "recast" the provost's memo, "suggesting to faculty, chairs, and deans ways for the standards requirement to become something other than a new set of rules to exclude students" (84). Wolf then organized a series of conversational meetings for departmental faculty to discuss writing assignments and evaluation. Further, WAD made a series of strategic moves aimed against the bureaucratic hegemony of exclusion. Their highly regarded faculty newsletter, *Literacy and Learning*, published a front page "collage of quotations," beginning with "published authors of color, all [who] argued for language standards that would enable access, standards that would be more plural" (85). Next on the page was an invitation for faculty to attend a WAD workshop

to explore diversity issues. The page concluded with quotations arguing for traditional standards, including an S. I. Hayakawa quotation about English-only. The successful workshop was followed with an article in the newsletter that confronted the original provost's memo, making faculty the agents for diversity standards: "Faculty . . . questioned . . . prescriptive 'standards of acceptability' as antithetical to instructors' individual approaches and emphases in teaching" (86). The result for CSU, Chico was a successful reframing of the "gatekeeping" standards memo. Fox's very specific and detailed examples give his argument currency and cogency. Rather than appealing to ideologic theories of plurality, Fox demonstrates textually how hegemony can be rewritten to enable inclusion.

In another example of how ideology becomes, to use Sánchez's phrase, "one of the many terminological residues of writing," Fox cites his students' texts to make his argument for a progressive and nuanced definition of writing standards. He shows how teachers "challenge students to achieve more, to be more thoughtful and reflective about their writing, to be more effective and powerful in their critiques, to turn their attention to compelling and important topics to write about" (iv). Fox presents excerpts from student writing that provide specific evidence in favor of access. He also shares examples of when his students fail, while showing that "lack of skills only rarely explains failure" (11). Again demonstrating his point textually, Fox shows how "failure is usually caused by a complex web of social and political circumstances" (11), precisely the circumstances that conservative calls for standards obscure and ignore.

"Writing theory or pedagogy that is divorced from the material conditions of power that surround its production, transmission, and reception, leaves out too much."

What I want to call attention to in Fox's text, then, is its central pedagogical focus on student writing. Writing, culture, and ideology intersect recursively in these examples. Keeping in mind Sánchez's critique of means-to-an-end pedagogy, these examples contravene the notion that ideology is privileged over writing, and demonstrate how hegemony can be reinforced or redirected—one text at a time. If, as Sánchez claims, an intriguing fact about writing is that we (falsely) assume it will unproblematically transmit meaning, these examples nevertheless show how texts produce functional meanings. Functional meanings, derived from material texts, determine real-

world actions, such as policies regarding access and basic writing. Theory must account not only for the instability of meaning, but also for the pragmatic fact that material texts and words themselves create consequences for human beings. Writing theory or pedagogy that is divorced from the material conditions of power that surround its production, transmission, and reception, leaves out too much.

Still, in the book's final chapter, "Access and Classroom Practice," Fox acknowledges that scholars are re-examining the effectivity of critical classrooms: "The profession has come to suspect claims of political transformation" (91). He believes such suspicions are based on evolving understandings of power and hegemony. Fox answers the critics with a tentative framework for how teachers can create localized writing standards that both challenge and create opportunity for their students, for example, valuing "writing that seeks to reduce the violence of inequality—the social forces that prevent access" (92). Still, I believe critics legitimately raise problematic questions that deserve further study—do politicized pedagogies at times substitute new repressive hegemonies for those they challenge? What about Rickert's claim that politicized pedagogy may reproduce resistance and unethical power differentials? Marshall Alcorn's study of how desire is constructed in written discourse clarifies the psychic relationship to power that the writing classroom elicits.

Alcorn sees writing as an act spurred by desire, yet the writer's desire exists in an intersubjective relationship with the desire(s) of the other (teacher/audience). Negotiating competing desires presumes an act of agency. Alcorn therefore provocatively claims the "problem of agency" is more important in composition studies than in any other field: "Agency is more central to composition because composition makes the most irrational demands on agency" (64). Unfortunately, instructors often teach composition "as a simple exercise in rational thought" (64). Alcorn alternatively offers a telling description of how conscious and unconscious forces intersect in the complexity of the writing act:

> Composition characteristically requires not a rational act but a subtle, unconscious response to competing and inchoate intuitions and desires. . . . This, in fact, describes how good writing succeeds. As we seek to anticipate the responses of others, we interrupt and complicate what we ourselves want to do. Clearly, it is the desire of the other that must interrupt our relation to our own desire. (64)

This definition of writing elucidates the perennial student question about what the teacher wants: "students . . . unconsciously intuit that tacitly and unconsciously imitating a teacher's desire is more important to successful writing than following the explicit directions given by teachers" (63-64).

If students want to imitate a teacher's desire, then how do we account for the problem of student resistance? Clearly the student writer may be less than consciously aware of

not only her own desires, but also the desires of the teacher/audience/other; this fact becomes particularly apparent in the politicized classroom. Alcorn describes the irony that "when teachers gain energy in their own speech, students fall strangely silent. They are at a loss for words; they are sometimes confused, uncomfortable, or silent. Often this silence masks a pain that will not, or cannot, be spoken" (95). Rational discourse, careful logical explanation, fails to persuade. Psychoanalytic theory accounts for such resistance in terms of certain attachments or "libidinal investments" (17). These attachments make up the student-subject's sense of identity and are maintained at a physical bodily level: "Human subjects, while they do show multiple and conflicting identities, also reveal defensive resistances to discourse . . . . If you 'fill' a person's mind with new discourse, there is little chance that person will *be* this new discourse" (16-17).

Psychoanalytic theory can offer politicized pedagogy an understanding of the libidinal forces that critical thinking and writing elicit. For Alcorn, teachers disingenuously suppose the primarily enjoyable character of writing: "it is a mistake to believe that writing (and the political advancements it can effect) is essentially pleasant. Writing is always haunted by masters and interlaced with forms of authority or correctness that we cannot easily abandon without guilt or discomfort" (95). Alcorn's point here is most relevant for open-access education and politicized classrooms. Teachers, as authority figures, present versions of master discourses (correctness being one) that likely will empower and enable students in society. Teachers want to help students bridge gaps of class and culture not only with correctness, but also by encouraging writing that questions inequality and simplified explanations for societal ills such as racism, sexism, and poverty. Yet students cannot easily ignore the attachments of identity and culture. The language of the academy challenges and disrupts deeply embedded socialized identities.

Nonetheless, certain forms of attachment can be redirected and changed, although this may entail a slow adjustment process. Alcorn explains that a physical/emotional experience of grief occurs when beliefs are challenged and changed: "giving up strong beliefs is a form of mourning" (110). Drawing on Freud, Alcorn points out that "the work of mourning . . . consists of withdrawing libido from its attachment to an object—[which is] hard and painful work" (112). Rather than indoctrinating students into political enlightenment, what composition teachers might better attempt is to help students "explore how desire supports beliefs and how the ability to be fully responsive to the ideas and real feelings of others requires slow adjustments in bodily feeling" (128). Alcorn's chapter "Engaging Affect" recounts the use of reflective journaling and subsequent classroom readings/review to chronicle this process of "negotiation and mourning" (118). This process works "precisely by not asking students to change. Instead, it simply lets students speak honestly, and in the

emotionally charged silence in which students listen to each other, they come to define themselves differently" (119).

For teachers of open-admission students, I particularly recommend Alcorn's intriguing Lacanian reading of various politicized pedagogies and their relationship to questions of agency and resistance. He asserts that Lacan's four discourses (master, hysteric, university, and analyst) "can help composition theory better understand how the circulation of desire . . . can contribute to democratic cultural practices" (67). Certainly Alcorn's psychoanalytic inquiry may inform compositionists' efforts to not only subvert, but to productively use resistance. Resistance is, in reality, a habit of inquiry writing teachers want to teach. As Joe Hardin proposes:

> Teaching resistance requires only two specific outcomes: one, that students learn to resist the uncritical acceptance of cultural representations and institutional practices by interrogating rhetoric to uncover its motives and values; and two, that students learn to produce text that uses rhetoric and convention to give voice to their own values and positions. (7)

The intriguing textual results of such resistance to dominant discourse is what most writing teachers acknowledge as powerful writing: writing that interrogates and complicates previously held beliefs and assumptions.

One contemporary observer of the academy, Julie Johnson Kidd, administrator of the Johnson Endeavor Foundation (which has contributed over $65 million to colleges over 25 years), believes that "our system has developed serious flaws that interfere with its ability to develop in our young people the depth of critical thinking, intellectual curiosity, and human understanding so essential for dealing with the problems in our world today" (195). My dialogic reading of Sánchez, Fox, and Alcorn suggests potential ways writing pedagogy can address these flaws. Each text contributes to scholarly conversation about politicized pedagogies, the significance of student writing, the applicability of composition theory to teaching, and student desire—important issues with which teachers of open-admissions students must grapple. Looking at these texts in sum, I acknowledge that Sánchez's insistence on the primacy of student writing may stimulate precisely focused research and theory. I disagree however that politicized pedagogy *necessarily* neglects writing; and, ultimately, Sánchez imagines a reciprocal theory of culture and writing: "If culture is enunciation, and enunciation is a generalized way of describing writing, then culture is writing" (81). Compositionists have the opportunity to underscore this mutually constitutive relationship and, additionally, to problematize either/or, binary thinking which pits writing against other educational goals. Contravening binary assumptions, Tom Fox clearly demonstrates how writing can be the central focus of a multicultural pedagogy. He also makes a strong case for localized assessment

standards that promote inclusion while at the same time enabling rigorous writing. Finally, Alcorn probes the complex terrain of identity and desire that complicates all pedagogy and suggests ways in which critical teachers can reconsider the ethical implications of their work. Writing theory and practice, in my estimation, is only beginning to account for how writing creates possibilities for an intersubjective ethical relationship with the other; such inquiry may be productive terrain for future scholarship and investigation.

If conservative notions of standards are to be effectively rewritten towards inclusion, then writing teachers must work towards new definitions of literacy that support those goals. Writing pedagogy must continue to foster critical writing that "willingly explores and embodies conflicts, that isn't afraid to enter into the messy contradictions of our world" (Fox 92). Politicized writing courses may provide new theoretical insights as they reorient composition praxis towards the centrality of writing in "human cognition, consciousness and culture" (Bazerman 36). To do so, teachers must acknowledge, negotiate, and teach resistance as a part of the libidinal human response to power. Rigorous standards of literacy should foster writing that makes resistance central to its rhetorical analyses and understandings. It is impossible to "just teach writing" and presume that act carries no political implications. Therefore, laying bare the politicized nature of literacy is a way to help open-admissions/nontraditional students write more effectively because what they write is thereby rhetorically contextualized within realities of the systems of power and inequity that structure our world.

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