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chapter 2

Advocacy in the Writing Classroom

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...there could hardly be a more unbearable—and more irrational—world than one in which the most eminent specialists in each field were allowed to proceed unchecked with the realization of their ideals.
—Friedrich Hayek (1944)

What's wrong with college teachers using writing courses to propagate their political beliefs? After three drafts of an essay that attempted to answer this question, I found myself unable to come to satisfactory terms with the subject without slipping into precisely the sort of academic jargon that makes politicizing the classroom seem plausible, abstractions about *oppressive and dominant postures, demagogic tactics, ideological dispositions,* and *paradoxes in the sociological argument.* Instinctively, I sense the issue ought not be raised at all. It's a question framed to appall the few nonacademics reading our anthologies or journals—we must seem like psychiatrists asking, "What's wrong with dating patients?"

I sense, too, that the best arguments against politicized classrooms have always been obvious and have already been made, though perhaps not heard well enough. I can hardly improve upon what Patricia Bizzell (1992), Richard Marius (1992), and Louise Whetherbee Phelps (1992) offer in an *ADE Bulletin* triptych on classroom advocacy. In "A Constrained Vision of the Writing Classroom," Phelps warns that "recent composition theory paves the way for a pedagogy that treats students as vehicles for political action by others who know better than they do what is good for them and society" (p. 17). Informed by an ethic of care developed by Nel Noddings, Phelps argues for a balanced sensitivity to differences "between teaching for the sake of the

student and teaching for the sake of a future society." As a writing program administrator, Phelps recognizes that, unlike the political visionary, she must act within an environment constrained by practical realities and local concerns, "looking for prudent trade-offs" (p. 19). Phelps' refusal to take liberatory postures strikes me not as timidity, but as maturity and professionalism, warning as she does "that some of us might come to trust our own political analyses and our utopian visions more than students' potential to become their best selves and to contribute to society in ways we do not predict or control" (p. 17).

Richard Marius (1992) arrives at essentially the same conclusion in "Politics in the Classroom." "A course should not be like an inquisition," he asserts, "in which the object is to get our students to confess their feelings about a particular moral issue so that, in the happy ending, those with the wrong opinions abjure and repent" (p. 9). Like Phelps, Marius expresses a faith in education and students that makes political machinations in the classroom seem self-indulgent: "There is life after college, and if we teach gently and well, we give students the power to correct themselves. I think most of them will" (p. 11). In a truly better world, good sense would prevail at this point, and our profession might move on to other matters.

But Marius and Phelps have, inevitably, been challenged, and Maxine Hairston has similarly had her provocative essay, "Diversity, Ideology, and Teaching Writing" (1992)—wherein she wonders whether students might not be better off learning to write in writing classes—rebutted by an entire NCTE-sponsored collection, *Pedagogy in the Age of Politics* (Sullivan & Qualley, 1994). In the same agonistic mode, I spent two of three earlier drafts of this piece assailing a critic of Marius and Phelps—Dennis Lynch (1995), who finds a rationale for progressive politics in the very nature of rhetoric, which, he argues, can survive as a discipline only if people are guaranteed an equal hearing and a right to be understood. This intriguing proposition pulled 10 pages of analysis, citation, refutation, and bluster from me before I abandoned the file and opened yet another: Draft 4.

But what then stopped me cold was a question I realized I'd never bothered to ask myself, though I remember Stephen M. North wrestling with something like it in 1991: Why don't *I* want to teach politics in my writing classes? Surrounded by faculty and graduate students energized by their progressive pedagogies and committed to a profession that has invented rationales for classroom advocacy for more than a decade, why don't I feel the same tug my colleagues do to use writing courses to change the world?

I quickly reread North's essay, "Rhetoric, Responsibility, and 'the Language of the Left'" (1991), from a collection entitled *Composition and Resistance.* Yet North doesn't seem much into resistance; in fact, it is hard to tell from the article exactly what North's politics might be. He concludes his piece suggesting that he and the left may be on the same side or on different

sides or perhaps they have different goals but can share the same tactics. Perhaps North just isn't a political person—and on that score we probably differ. I've been a fairly active conservative for 25 years, I've co-edited an anthology for writing classes (Ruszkiewicz, *The Presence of Others* [1997]) that explains my political views, and I've been a fellow of the Heritage Foundation. But I have no desire, no inclination at all, to make "Writing About Family Values," or "Writing About Personal Responsibility," or "Writing About Reagan" into topics for the freshman courses I teach. I'm even uneasy using my own anthology in class, though it is scrupulously balanced by readings selected by my devoutly liberal coeditor Andrea Lunsford.

Somewhat like North, I find myself uncomfortable exploring the question of the politicized classroom in personal terms. Yet my very resistance probably warrants the examination. Though I'm far from alone in opposing politicized writing classrooms, I speak only for myself here and hope my experiences resonate with those of others.

Right from the start, colleagues on the left will probably dismiss my aversion to politicized classrooms on the grounds that conservatives such as I naturally prefer the status quo. Fully invested in the capitalist rationales that sustain even institutions of higher learning, we've got a clear stake in preserving existing social and political hierarchies. Bottom line: to pay for the house and the Grand Cherokee, I've got to keep students believing there's a point to subject/verb agreement and Toulmin argumentation. For if students ever figure out that everything I routinely ask them to do, know, say, and write has been mandated by "the System" to serve its greedy, chop-down-the-last-redwood ends, they might attain critical consciousness, engage in resistance themselves, and bring down the whole house of cards, putting altruistic progressive academics in charge. And the progressives may even have a point—at least those still committed to sweeping away capitalism entirely. In the political West today, after the implosion of the Soviet Empire and the economic retreat of most Western European welfare states, leftists do have a tougher case to argue than someone like me, convinced that relatively unfettered capitalism creates more prosperity and freedom than centralized command economies.

But the academy is not society in general and in many academic environments, particularly in colleges of liberal arts or humanities, the prevailing assumptions are vastly different. In these enclaves, capitalism is portrayed as a relentless (but paradoxically doomed) system responsible for oppressing women, minorities, Third World nations, the poor, the different, and the ubiquitous *other.* So capitalism becomes an opportune target for courses, seminars, workshops, study groups, film societies, web sites, and other campus clusters dedicated to anatomizing its contradictions and hypocrisies. Within the higher education community, then, conservatives are very much on the defensive and, ironically, often share the same conviction as progres-

sives that students need to have their eyes opened to alternative realities. Obviously, academics invested in an economic system under withering attack have cause to defend it—and classrooms certainly offer tempting platforms for mounting such defenses. So on a typical college campus today, conservatives would seem to have as much reason for advocacy in their courses as progressives.

But even the argument that conservatives feel comfortably in command is deeply flawed. Indeed, I'd argue that conservative academics, cut off from institutional power at most universities and denied equal access (until fairly recently) to many channels of communication, have been far more embattled during the past 30 years than most white liberals and progressives; Jeffrey Herf (1995) overstates the case only slightly: "Nothing is as deadly to an academic career in the humanities and social sciences as to be labeled a conservative" (p. 151). In universities steered by bureaucracies implementing state and federal mandates for diversity, dominated by multicultural programs and constituencies, and awash in curricula and programs designed around leftist agendas (colonial and cultural studies; peace studies; queer studies), I find little reason for right wingers to feel more empowered than leftists do. While the left remains more deft at dramatizing its sense of oppression, the right today has almost as many constituencies, off campus and on, feeling displaced, alienated, and unloved. Yet I don't hear conservatives suggesting classrooms be used to correct existing political imbalances—yet.

Maybe I have no stomach for playing the advocate in my classes because I haven't experienced first hand the kinds of prejudice or hatred that drives leftists to raise the political consciousness of their students. I am, after all, a well-paid, middle-aged, tenured white male at a big state research institution. But so are many of my left-wing colleagues—just as male, white, and privileged. And most of the female theorists on the left I know are equally well-situated, pink, and comfortable—and far less guilty about it than the men. At least I can claim an urban, working-class background, but that's the experience of at least two leftists I've sparred with—so upbringing in this case has no predictive value when it comes to pedagogy. I am where I am by fortune, circumstances, and accomplishments no greater or less than those of colleagues who read the world much differently. I know prejudice up close at least as well as most of them, in fact, I suspect somewhat better. Yet I feel no imperative to use my classroom to change the way things are because of the way my life has been.

Perhaps I just don't know as much about politics as my leftist colleagues or don't grasp the subtler implications of critical theory impelling some writing teachers to reconceptualize literacy. But I have kept up with the journals, read the theory, endured almost every recent anthology about politics and writing from MLA, NCTE, Boyton/Cook, and other publishers. I've experienced big league academic politics close up too, as one of four English faculty to oppose a curriculum focusing on *difference* at the University

of Texas. So I've heard all the arguments for making writing classes sites for political struggle—sometimes shouted at me, sometimes whispered quietly in my office along with warnings about "threats to your career." I understand the rules of the game, recognize the players, and know it's hardball the left is playing. And still I am unmoved by liberatory classrooms or any potential conservative riposte.

Perhaps I don't feel my politics with quite the passion that proponents of liberatory and social rhetorics do. And there may be a reason for that. If conservative academics in the humanities have an intellectual advantage over their more liberal co-workers, it's that most are vastly better read in liberal perspectives than leftists are in conservative thinking. This superiority has nothing to do with conscientiousness; rather it is the expression of a political reality liberals ought to relish—minorities have no choice but to master dominant discourses. Because they are deeply familiar with alternative views, academic conservatives tend more than leftists to read the political landscape rhetorically, appreciating liberal and leftist positions as plausible and arguable alternatives to the views they prefer. Most conservatives can even imagine intelligent people choosing to be liberal, something most leftists refuse to believe about conservatism. How else can Reed Way Dasenbrock (1996) write in *College English* without qualification or fear of editing that one "disastrous" consequence of the left's critique of liberalism is that "in the larger culture the successor to Adlai Stevenson hasn't been anyone on the left but Newt Gingrich *and those who think like him*" (emphasis added, p. 551). Clearly, no academics at all would think like conservatives without ample cash infusions from the Olin or Coors Foundations (Lauter, 1995).

Still I believe that most leftist writing instructors teach little differently from conservatives when they configure their classrooms as forums where students encounter challenging ideas, fully and fairly expressed. Here, I differ slightly with Maxine Hairston (1992), who argues that writers need a protected environment in which to grow and so should compose only on subjects they choose: "Few students," Hairston observes, "will do their best when they are compelled to write on a topic they perceive as politically charged" (p. 189). I consider political topics thoroughly appropriate in writing courses and think it healthy for students and teachers to confront vibrant political ideas that challenge their opinions and prejudices. Indeed I am buoyed by a growing sense among compositionists that a writing course can be a place where students exercise their responsibilities as literate citizens examining the ways that language can be used to influence and shape public thinking (Wells, 1996). To locate writing courses within the public square and to prepare students to be articulate and powerful citizens are sensible, responsible and, I would argue, conservative goals for writing instructors, even if advocates of related service learning pedagogies, seem inevitably to frame their projects as "issues of power, oppression, and exclu-

sion" (Schutz & Gere, 1998, p. 147). But I do insist that both students *and* teachers enjoy a level playing field within the realm of "civic writing," exploring domains unsetted and unsettling to both. And that may be, finally, the deep reason I don't use my classroom to promote *specific* political views or philosophies: I am not so steeped in my political beliefs that everything I do professionally must be shaped by them, nor do I think it is my mission to recast the political lives of my students.

I can too easily imagine powerful and defensible alternatives to any political proposition I might privilege or disparage in a writing classroom. For example, I fully expect that multiculturalism, in the long run, will prove a disastrous philosophy for American education and society. But I would not design an undergraduate writing course to prove, advance, or privilege this thesis because students need to consider other views. And I could be wrong about multiculturalism; my colleagues think I am. Even in my most determined foray into cultural studies—a class called "The Automobile in American Culture"—I avoid a specific political orientation. So Critical Mass bicycling activists might find as much to think and write about as their classmates who covet gas-guzzling sport utilities. And that range of possibilities pleases me mightily. For when questions have a preferred answer or issues a single dimension, they cease to be vital material for a rhetoric or writing course.

Does this mean that instructors who prefer that writing courses expound political agendas and "teach virtue" must be more confident about their politics and ethics than I am? That would seem to be the case. And, indeed, proponents of liberatory rhetoric do sometimes sound to me like true believers—persons willing to suggest that the classroom can be a place where "pain and rage lead to new revelation" (Fishman & McCarthy, 1996, pp. 342–343). Phelps (1992) echoes my own uneasiness when she warns that "political visions projected without constraint in writing classrooms tend to self-righteousness and moral outrage" (p. 19).

Of course many social rhetoricians write sensitively and soberly about their strategies for directing students to their perspectives. Despite syllabi and texts that may look one-sided (see Ruszkiewicz, 1992), progressives argue that their courses don't actually compel students to believe anything. Rather, instructors work to establish conditions in which apprentice writers can discover that their "subject positions" have been largely scripted by an oppressive *status quo*, which students can then perhaps resist by writing scripts of their own. As Susan C. Jarratt (1992) puts it, "Instead of conversion, the 'politicized' teachers I know look for dialogic reflection in our students' writing and oral responses" (p. 37).

My problem is that the social critique within which such dialogue occurs often sounds like a soliloquy rattled off by a bored actor—practiced, predictable, and unreflective. Any devotee of social theory will, for example, recognize the script Kurt Spellmeyer (1991) composes for English teachers:

> The dilemma of college English has been complicated further by the discovery that knowledge itself, which formerly seemed so benign and accessible, is irreparably "contaminated," and in fact always was, by interests arising from class, race, gender, logocentrism, logophobia, reification, mystification, ideology, and power. (p. 71)

The word *discovery* makes the contaminants of knowledge here seem as calculable as the orbit of an asteroid, ironic in that this worldview purports to arise from nonfoundational epistemologies. Yet the very predictability of this core message makes talk of encouraging students to explore *difference* within liberatory rhetorics ring hollow to me. For in fact, the system seems defined and closed, fully determined by predictable, if complex, interests arising from class, race, gender, logocentrism, logophobia, reification, and so on. The progressive teacher already has the answers.

I want to believe Karen Fitts and Alan France (1994) when they attest that "[i]n the struggle to advance our own political agenda against our students' resistance, we have found a way to open a space, an occasion for cultivating public discourse" (p. 23), but I'm not sure where that space might be in a writing class where teachers also declare that "we consider our role to be that of *teaching resistance* to cultural definitions of biological sex by provoking dissonance between egalitarian expectations on one hand and social and cultural asymmetries of power and perceived worth, on the other" (original emphasis, p. 15). Fitts and France sound too sure of themselves.

I want to believe that Adam Katz (1995) is interested "in the particularity of different voices" within the framework of a "genuinely democratic polity" (p. 209), but my faith is shaken when I read what he proposes doing with his students' work:

> ...the type of writing that is based upon what I call the "consensus model," in which the purpose of writing is to conceal and reconcile contradictions and oppositions ("we all need to come together as a nation"), also needs to be expropriated from the students. Only in this way can the student's own positioning in relation to the dominant ideology be investigated for the student. (p. 215)

I don't associate expropriations and investigations with democratic practices, inside or outside the classroom. And I resist a pedagogy that regards people as tools of ideology unable to fashion a place in the world without the aid of startlingly reductive theory.

I do expect that theorists and practitioners of social rhetoric understand simple political difference, but have some cause for doubt. Nine years ago when I complained that an anthology selected for a required writing course at UT-Austin explored only leftist perspectives on race and gender questions, a junior member of the faculty asked (sincerely, I'm sure), "Has anyone

written on the other side of these issues?" When I mentioned affirmative action policies specifically, an associate professor declared,"No one opposes affirmative action." Perhaps this narrowness of vision also explains how 40 English faculty in Austin could miss the irony in their buying a newspaper ad to chastise an undergraduate journalist for editorializing against their course in *difference* (Bernstein, 1994).

Yet the principle of controlling or silencing dissent has earned a place in social rhetoric and critical theory, echoing arguments made a generation ago by Herbert Marcuse (see Kors & Silvergate, 1998). The Preface to the first edition of the popular *Rereading America*, for example, asserts that "we have not tried to 'balance' pro and con arguments so that students are encouraged—ever so predictably—to see both sides and find truth always in the middle" (Colombo, Cullen, & Lisle, 1989, p. viii). By the third edition the book is even bolder: "It's more accurate to think of *Rereading America* as a handbook that helps students explore the ways that the dominant culture shapes their ideas, values, and beliefs.... Ultimately, *Rereading America* is about resistance" (1995, pp. viii–ix). Deanne Bogdan (1990) suggests ever-so-delicately that certain literary texts may have to be silenced to serve feminist political ends: "Sometimes it is important first to close down alternatives, to use negative capability as a way of calling things out of existence for a while to make a case for new growth" (p. 139). James R. Bennett (1989), writing in *College English*, declares that "we can affirm the freedom to dissent radically in the classroom by refusing equal time to ruling powers" (p. 816).

I suspect most practitioners of liberatory rhetoric do find place for dissent in their classrooms, but then I hear Patricia Bizzell (1992) authorizing teachers to exercise rhetorical authority in the name of social justice: "I would range over the values my students are exploring and try to find those that could be used persuasively to turn students to my egalitarian worldview" (p. 6). I watch Sharon Crowley (1991) moving a step farther, agreeing with Bizzell that perhaps white males ought not to have the same voice in writing classes as women and minorities:

> [B]ecause composition students are in some sense our captives, we must give up our liberal tolerance if we are to bring about social change through them. We must also admit that we enact our own hegemonic desire when we use the required composition course to teach our preferred politics. (pp. 196–197)

And I wonder what's going on here? Shouldn't a course in rhetoric and composition move students toward more political choice and freer expression? Why must Bizzell's egalitarian worldview be an issue in her writing class? And why must Crowley communicate her preferred politics to a captive audience, civilities of liberal tolerance suspended? Have all other streams for political expression in America—political parties, special interest lobbies, newspapers, journals, town meetings, demonstrations, radio call-ins, and chatrooms—suddenly dried up?

Why this fear of balanced points of views, alternative ways of seeing, or sharing time with traditional views? Do the proponents of social rhetoric—though interested and energized by politics—actually fear and distrust it, knowing that outcomes cannot always be predicted or controlled? Or perhaps they silently subscribe to P. J. O'Rourke's (1994) definition of politics as "the business of getting power and privilege without possessing merit" (p. 12). I should think that theorists of language who want classrooms to be sites of political struggle would be capable of operating in real political kitchens themselves, not just in academic safe havens.

Yet in theory, at least, it's conservatives who should be concerned, silenced as they have been in the academy. Why else would Dennis Lynch (1995) feel obliged to concede—in the final paragraph of an essay arguing that teachers of rhetoric ought to advocate certain social values and unteach others—that "one can hold any political beliefs one chooses and still teach or practice rhetoric" (p. 368)? Who but an academic would think otherwise? That the concession has to be made in a scholarly article suggests how far postmodern composition theory has drifted from classroom practice. And yet if one subscribes to a view of language that so privileges one's progressive commitments that theory and politics converge, one might indeed wonder whether conservatives can be literate at all.

Lynch (1995) makes his concession near the end of an article grounding politicized writing classes less in postmodernism than in classical rhetoric; he draws attention to a line in Isocrates's *Antidosis* describing the conditions of Greek judicial hearings: "we take our solemn oath at the beginning of each year that we will hear impartially both accusers and accused" (p. 358). From this precedent, Lynch argues that teaching fairness and a principle of equal hearing are appropriate in a rhetoric class because these are conditions that reinforce democracy—a reasonable assertion. But Lynch also infers from Isocrates that there is a concomitant right to be understood—a precondition to social justice: "I would argue that virtues such as an equal hearing and the right to be understood...are and should be a part of rhetoric courses and rhetoric curricula because they are values—or habits of mind" (pp. 358–359, 363). This concern for social justice leads him, via a reading of Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's *The New Rhetoric* (1958/1969), to suggest that teachers act appropriately when they lead students to question the quality of their political autonomy. Lynch endorses, for example, the writing instructor who sees it as her political duty to make women in her class understand that "women aren't free agents in a sexist society" (p. 367). Teachers who ignore the social and political conditions under which rhetoric operates will, he warns, ultimately undermine the discipline itself.

What I find most striking about this sophisticated if somewhat tortuous argument is that it leads Lynch exactly where other social theorists have arrived—at a rendering of rhetorical situations that seems static and sheltered. In his drive to link the teaching of rhetoric and writing to postmodern critiques of power, hierarchy, and dominant ideologies, Lynch seems to forget that the rhetor, to a great extent, imagines and then shapes the circumstances of his reception. That is what rhetoric is for—achieving persuasion in situations where equal hearings cannot be guaranteed, where existing powers might wish to maintain the upper hand. And that is how we should teach rhetoric. Were there, indeed, an enforceable right to be understood, there would be little need for rhetoric.

When Antony in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* enjoins his fellow Romans to "lend me your ears," he knows he must manufacture a reason for them to listen: "I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him" (qtd. in Evans,1974). Like Aristotle, Augustine, Bacon and, for that matter, James McCrimmon, Shakespeare apparently appreciated that rhetoric is an instrument for creating conditions that Lynch, Bizzell, Crowley, and others might prefer to legislate: We will control the horizontal; we will control the vertical; we will give up liberal tolerance. To constrain the conditions under which discourse may proceed so tightly as to deduce a "right to be heard" from an inclination to listen is to imagine a fugitive and cloistered rhetoric unwilling to face the dust and heat of politics. It is, perhaps, to imagine the progressive teacher on his or her soapbox in the classroom?

I like it much better when Bizzell (1992) asserts—after claiming the right to turn students toward her worldview—that "after the fashion of Isocrates, I would encourage my students to imitate my exercise of rhetorical authority. They should be allowed to try to persuade me (a move I think academics seldom make with students whose views are radically different from their own) and other members of the class" (p. 6). This sounds exactly right, except that word *allowed.* It is the signal—and not a very subtle one—that the teacher holds all the power: she selects the topic to reflect her worldview; she confers permission to disagree; presumably, she gives out the grades. And so it must be when a teacher makes her class a forum for advancing political views, even in the name of virtue. Hence, the great irony of advocacy writing classrooms: they are not political at all, merely politicized—for what is at stake finally seems not to be important civic and social issues, but the instructor's ability to control them.

In a different context, C. H. Knoblauch (1990) warns that every sort of claim about literacy should be placed under scrutiny:

> ...what makes any ideology visible as such and, therefore, properly limited in its power to compel unconscious assent is critical scrutiny, the only safeguard people have if they are to be free of the designs of others. To the extent that literacy advocates of one stripe or another remain unconscious of or too comfortable with those designs, their offerings of skills constitute a form of colonizing, a benign but no less mischievous paternalism that rationalizes the control of others by representing it as a means of liberation. (p. 80)

I fear that the highly sophisticated arguments social rhetoricians sometimes make in defense of writing courses shaped from their personal political beliefs come very close to being rationalizations of control represented as liberation. I only hope such theorists and practitioners are both conscious of and occasionally uneasy with their designs.

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chapter 3

Advocating Language: An Ethical Approach to Politics in the Classroom

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As teachers of writing, still trying to grant legitimacy to composition as a discipline, we have to negotiate our political differences in ways conducive to our emergence as a field. What I mean here is that we need more precision in our public discourse so that it is clear what the issues are and how our various backgrounds—whether they be in linguistics, rhetoric, education, literature, or composition—give us the expertise to make the decisions that nonacademics in our government would like to make for us. I would like to suggest that we start this negotiation by listening to each other and becoming more introspective regarding our agendas, the ethical consideration of opposing perspectives, and the effect our pedagogies have on our students.

A distinction must be made, though, between negotiation and compromise. Compromising to reach some accord or consensus would work against the marginalized or disenfranchised voices in our community. Compromise is, after all, a function of the dominant power system to incorporate and then reinterpret as many dissenting positions as possible, so that the dominant system can maintain its hold on power. In a compromise in any field, the defining difference of the dissenting positions is often swept away under an umbrella of acceptance. The key underlying structures, whether they be modernism, capitalism, ethnocentrism, elitism, and so on, remain untouched and continue to operate unchanged by the inclusion of the dissenting position (see Zavarzadeh and Morton's 1991 discussion of the curriculum changes at Syracuse as an example, although they disagree with the official