

Response to comments on my article "Diversity, Ideology, and Teaching Writing"

It strikes me as a healthy sign for our profession to be having such a spirited discussion about what and how we should teach in writing courses, particularly in required freshman English courses. What an encouraging change from those days when English 101 was dismissed as a service course, not important enough to argue about. The issue of what goes on in freshman English has always been primary for me; in fact, my first professional article, published more than 20 years ago, was titled "What's a Freshman Theme For?" It seems appropriate that "Diversity, Ideology, and Teaching Writing," which will almost certainly be my last major professional article, focuses on the same topic. Today, however, the context for the discussion is more complex, given a changing student population and a changing world. The tone is also far more emotional. That's unfortunate--some good professional friendships have dissolved in the heat of the argument.

I've reread my article and, with the exception of one egregious misquote that I will acknowledge shortly, find nothing in it I would change. I still believe that bringing ideology into the classroom stifles diversity and hampers students' development as writers. However, I see little point in trying to rebut the criticisms of those who disagree with me so sharply because I am not in a rhetorical situation with them. We differ so radically about basic premises--about teaching, about our society, about the purpose of education-- that we have little foundation on which to base a useful discussion that is likely to change any of our minds.

Nevertheless, I had to enter this conversation about the political classroom. Once I looked at Racism and Sexism, the Rothenberg text proposed for required freshman English at the University of Texas, I could not walk away and say, "I don't want to get involved in this conflict." even though I knew my speaking out would stir up controversy. I had no idea how much! I think I've said some things that needed to be said, and I hope I've convinced some people with my arguments. Now, however, I'm out of the classroom, and ready to exit the conversation. At this point in my life I find it more rewarding to focus my energy in my own community, particularly on projects that directly help disadvantaged women and children. There's much important work to be done, and I want to contribute what I can.

I will not, however, leave without offering Cy Knoblach my apology. He was quite right to complain to the editor that I wrongly said of him that he "set[s] up straw men arguments that attack a mechanistic, structuralist, literature-based model of composition and call[s] it 'conservative, regressive, deterministic, and elitist' when he knows such arguments have long been discredited in the literature. " I searched his article to which I attribute that quote, and he's right--it's not there. And at this point, 18 months after I wrote the talk on which the article was based, I can't track down my original source. That's sloppy scholarship, and I regret having let it happen. I'm also sorry that Cy feels that I distorted a longer quotation from his work by leaving out what he saw as important qualifying phrases. I didn't feel that I altered the essential content, but if the author thinks I did, I bow to his judgment and apologize.

Sincerely,

Maxine Hairston