LITERACY IN THEORY AND PRACTICE: ONE CLASS'S EFFORT TO BRIDGE THE GAP

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"During the first week I was so frustrated by the class I cried every time I went home. I felt stupid and out of place. At home I cursed myself for having had the audacity to enter a doctorate program and for even for a moment believing that I could complete a class as theoretically oriented as yours." This statement was written by a women in her early 50s, a strong, intelligent woman who had survived enormous difficulties in her life, who hated school as a child and young adult but had nevertheless recently completed a master's in adult education — and who felt, as her comment indicates, functionally illiterate in my graduate-level course, "Composition, Literature, Literacy."

This student was not alone. Last fall I taught "Composition, Literature, and Literacy," a new course in Oregon State's Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies in composition and literature program, for the first time. Sixteen students enrolled in the class. Here's what I wrote in my journal about the class after the first week:

> Something bad is happening in this class; discussion is awkward, halting. The class is drawing upon two very different constituents, students in our own MAIS program and M. A. and Ph.D. students in education, mainly adult ed and ESL. The students in our own program are keyed in to what's going on, speak the language. Even those who for various reasons *should* be worried about how they'll do in the class don't seem to be. Almost all the education students are clearly nervous, unconfident. They hesitate when they speak; they belittle their comments even before they make them. I'd hoped the class would attract students from outside our own program — now I wonder...

Why did these two groups of students have such different responses? Listen to what two students freewrote on the first day of class; their language provides a clue. (I'd asked the class to write anything having to do with who they were, why they were taking the class, what they hoped to get from it.) The first student, like most of the education students in the class, is an older-than-average student with substantial experience teaching in basic literacy programs. The second student is an advanced graduate student in the English department's MAIS program.

> (FIRST STUDENT) Hello. My name is [ ] and I teach writing to high school dropouts and ESL students. I also teach a reading class to college freshmen and the study skills portion of a college success class at my community college. I am taking this class so I will be better able to help my students.

> (SECOND STUDENT) Dear Lisa, As you are probably aware, my interests seem to be gravitating toward rhetorical theory, critical theory, cultural criticism, epistemological issues and on...and on. I selected this class primarily because I liked the looks of the texts on display in the bookstore. Though I've heard of Rose, I've not read him. And I've already shared with you that the Eagleton book has piqued my interest before.

There's much to note here. The second student already knows me, already feels that he's established a relationship with me. The first has not. The second student thus begins the course with a distinct advantage over the first student. Perhaps more important is the way these students discuss their reasons for taking the class. The first student pragmatically assumes that the class should have immediate and direct consequences for her teaching: "I am taking this class so I will be better able to help my students." The second student doesn't mention teaching — though he is a TA. Instead, he begins by theoretically positioning himself through references to various critical approaches. The first student presents herself as a teacher surrounded by, and committed to, students; the second student presents himself as a theorist surrounded by, and committed to, texts.

These two students are of course much more complex and multi-faceted than their freewrites indicate. The first student is, I quickly learned, an intelligent and articulate, if unconfidant and somewhat resistant, reader of critical texts. The second student is a committed and masterful teacher. But their self-presentations — the language they use, the reasons they give for taking the class — are powerful indicators of their differences. Although there were of course exceptions, those in my class from the college of Education tended to be like the first student; those from the department's MAIS program, like the second.

It has become fashionable to applaud and encourage "difference," but the differences between these two groups as we originally experienced them seemed to discourage, not encourage, communication and the development of a collaborative atmosphere. Some students in the class — primarily but not solely those in adult education and TESOL — privileged pragmatic solutions and simple and concise language. These students tended to be suspicious of what they called academic jargon; they were also defensive about their self-described difficulties with this language. Others — primarily but not solely those in the English department's master's program — privileged theoretical language and analysis and were suspicious of what they sometimes termed "easy" solutions.

All of the students manifested some discomfort in the early days in the class. Though the MAIS students were obviously advantaged in a number of respects, they wrote in their journals and told me that at times they felt ill at ease, felt that they needed to rein themselves in, use a different (less theoretical) vocabulary than they normally would. The students from the college of Education looked (and wrote and told me that they felt) uncomfortable, ill at ease. A number perceived themselves, in one student's words, to be in "dangerous new territory."

Before describing how my students and I responded to this unproductive and uncomfortable situation, I'd like to comment that to the extent that those of us in composition studies are successful in our effort to make literacy a central concern in our field, we are going to face the kind of difficulties I'm describing. Increasingly — as the second literacy conference in Pittsburgh attests — those in English studies in general and composition in particular are recognizing their "Responsibilities for Literacy," the phrase which also served as the title for this conference. We are coming to understand, as the organizers of the conference note, that all literacy workers — scholars and researchers, classroom teachers in community colleges and universities, workplace and community-based service providers — *all* of us must "reach across boundaries and consider what demographic change and economic challenge mean for the way schools, employers, and communities take responsibility for literacy" (*Call for Proposals*, MLA Conference on "Responsibilities for Literacy," Pittsburgh, 1990)."

Those of us who work in universities may have particularly strong responsibilities in this regard, however. As people cut off in many ways from basic literacy work, it is our responsibility to educate

ourselves, to attempt to understand what teachers of ESL in prisons or Laubach volunteers face when they work with students. We also need to recognize that we have the responsibility — and the burden — of our privileged position. Not only are we paid more and better supported and valued than many literacy workers, our facility with theoretical language and analysis also gives us power. For though practitioners may resist theory, the hegemony of theory over practice is so strong in the academy that practitioners' resistance finally cannot erode theorists' privileged position.

As the organizers of the first literacy conference in Columbus, Ohio discovered two years ago — and as I and my students discovered last fall — accepting our joint responsibilities for literacy and bringing diverse groups together is only a first step. A number of public school teachers and community-based literacy workers who attended the first literacy conference expressed frustration with it. The fall 1989 *MLA Newsletter* printed a powerful letter from Richard J. Murphy about that conference, which, though attended by a diverse group of people interested in literacy, was dominated by academics. Murphy wrote of speakers' "estranging language," which "clogged many of the sessions" (12). Unfamiliar with academic jargon — words like "discourse," "hegemony," "phenomenology," and "marginalization" — Murphy felt "powerless and silent" (12). Ironically, the main benefit of the conference for Murphy was that by making him feel like a student, "not just ignorant but excluded," he was reminded "how easily our students may be dispossessed by us" (13).

I read Murphy's letter during the first week or so of class, and it stimulated much thinking. If Murphy felt that he had learned something worthwhile about teaching by reflecting on his rhetorical situation at the first literacy conference, could I and my students gain by reflecting on our own classroom rhetorical situation, with all its uncomfortableness? I decided that in an important sense we had no alternative but to do so, and to stimulate this discussion I xeroxed Murphy's letter and gave it to my students, asking them to read it and come to the next class with ideas on how we could avoid a similar "silencing." I talked directly about the fact that some of the students in the class perceived themselves to be primarily practitioners, and some theorists — and about what these distinctions can mean in terms of the politics of knowledge.

Perhaps not surprisingly, when I began the next class by asking for responses to Murphy's letter I was greeted with silence. Eventually, one of the most theoretically sophisticated students in the class responded; his comments were almost a parady of academic jargon, as though defensively (for now of course the MAIS students implicitly had to respond to Murphy's criticisms) he resorted to abstruse and dense language as a means of protection. Silence again. And then one student said simply: "This is what that letter means. By your language, you are silencing me."

I wish I had taped the resulting 1 1/2 hour conversation, for we spent the rest of the period discussing not just Murphy's letter and our situation as students and teacher in the class, but our lives — how we got to be who we are. (And who we are was very much at stake in all of this.) From my perspective (and I must stress that this is my perspective), this and other similar discussions during the term confirm the validity of Gerald Graff and William E. Cain's assertion in "Peace Plan for the Canon Wars" that the solution to theoretical and pedagogical conflicts should be neither "pluralistic evasion" (312) nor enforced agreement. Rather, they argue that we must instead "teach the conflicts" (312).

I will emphasize in a moment that this approach is of course no panacea that will resolve all problems in all situations. It certainly didn't do so in mine. But before I turn to this, let me describe in a bit more detail the practical consequences of this decision to emphasize, rather than ignore, conflict between theory and practice and to probe our own rhetorical situation. One immediate consequence was that my role as teacher of the class became both highlighted and problematized. The question of my authority came up in numerous ways — sometimes raised by me, sometimes by the students — and from my perspective never was resolved. What *does* distinguish a monological from a dialogical classroom? Putting chairs in a circle certainly doesn't do the trick. Though we didn't resolve this issue — *can* it be resolved? — we discussed it often throughout the term, and that seems a positive step to me.

Our discussion of Murphy's letter couldn't automatically empower students who felt disempowered or uncomfortable, but it did create a way for discussion of this issue to be aired. "You're silencing me" became a catch phrase or code word in the class, a way students indicated they were not "in" the discourse. As the course progressed, students also seemed more comfortable asking for clarification when they didn't understand a term or concept. (We spend an entire class period discussing the word "rhetoric," for instance — time will spent even though I hadn't planned to do so.) Gradually, as one student pointed out in her journal, we negotiated a shared vocabulary: "discourse" and "marginalize" were ok — all felt comfortable with these terms. Other more recondite terms, such as "cathexis," were likely to evoke a pointed question or negative response when used.

The attention we paid to our differences encouraged us to make connections between our reading and our rhetorical situations as students and teacher. The students often used their effort to achieve "graduate student literacy," for instance, to exemplify or challenge points raised in our readings. A moment that I remember particularly well occurred when the same student whose abstruse discussion of the Murphy article evoked the "you're silencing me" response talked about what it means to say that literacy is power. As an example, he discussed how after very little time as a graduate student he realized that fluency with theoretical language was a means of gaining status in the academy. He didn't repudiate the value of theory or theoretical language, but — as those who study literacy argue we must — he did contextualize his understanding of its acquisition and uses. Another student illustrated the point that communities can *seem* to empower individuals through language without truly doing so by discussing how our department's potentially empowering decision to appoint graduate student members to all important committees is outweighed by students' lack of power, authority, and numerical strength.

What was the result of these and other discussions? For me, the result was the most exciting — and risky — class I've ever taught. I was sometimes uncomfortable in the class, but I was always intellectually challenged and emotionally rewarded. I can't pretend, of course, to know, much less convey, the variety of student responses. What I can do is share a few written statements about the class.

Here are two comments that show how the difficulty and diversity of the course worked for some students.

> (FIRST STUDENT) My problem understanding Street's text [*Literacy in Theory and Practice* — the most dense and difficult work we read] was not a vocabulary problem. It was not a problem of how well I could read or write. It was a conceptual problem and a problem of academic orientation: I lacked a basic knowledge of the anthropological, linguistic, and literacy contexts within which Street grounded his arguments. I was "underprepared," a circumstance which Mike Rose has described as one that "makes it hard for students to get their bearings with material: to know what's important, to see how the pieces fit together" (Rose 192). This experience taught me in a real way that literacy entails more than the ability to decode symbols on a page. I now realize that literacy is a process of making connections — connections with prior knowledge, connections with other concepts and ideas, with

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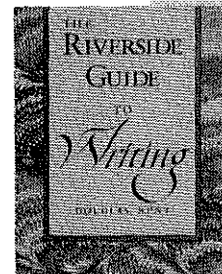

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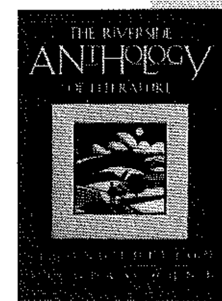

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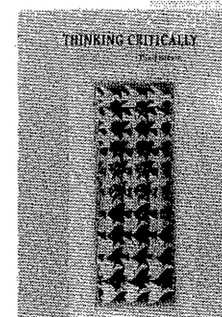

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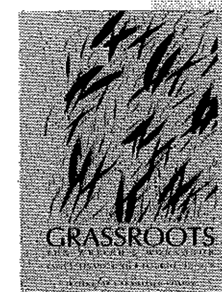

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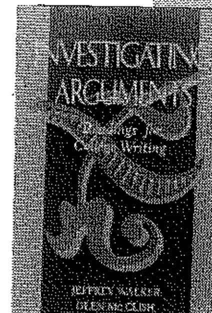

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social and historical movements, and most importantly, connections that were personal to my life as both learner and teacher.

(SECOND STUDENT) The early class dynamics were very disturbing, but I have come to appreciate the diversity as the class has progressed. At the start of the class, I felt like an educationally disadvantaged student most of the time...the times we reflected on the class — stopped and looked at what was happening — were helpful and encouraging... this experience has given me more empathy for those struggling with other literacies.

The class did not — and undoubtedly could not — work for all students. One student commented in a midterm freewrite, for instance, that "I see a lot of words surrounding precious few ideas." Another wrote on a final evaluation of the class that "For an allegedly less hierarchical class in terms of power structure, I felt we had very little real input on the selection of what you considered important for us to read."

I'm still reflecting on this class, which I'll teach again next year. There's much that I don't know, such as how to resolve the questions raised by my authority as teacher and how to address the very real hegemony that theory holds over practice in the academy in general and composition studies in particular. But my experience teaching "Composition, Literature, and Literacy" has reinforced and deepened my understanding of the significance of Brian Street's assertion in *Literacy in Theory and Practice* that "the processes whereby reading and writing are learnt are what construct the meaning of it for particular practitioners" (8).

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CONFESSIONS OF A BACKSLIDER; OR, HOW I LOST MY *ETHOS* BECAUSE I COULDN'T READ THE MAP OF THE TERRAIN OF THE MIND OF RHETORIC

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Something strange happened to me in the three years after I got my Ph.D. in rhetoric and composition. I got lost. I didn't get it anymore. I didn't understand my own field. I suffered from what I now diagnose as a disenchantment with freshman composition. Not just in teaching it, though that did happen too, but in most everything associated with it. Especially grading. But my frustration primarily centered around theory and even more especially, articles about theory. As I look back on it now, and of course I look back on it as a healthy person looks back on a particularly nasty, virulent illness that came close to claiming her life, I realized that a number of factors led to my estrangement from my chosen field.

The most notable and probably most ironic factor that caused my disenchantment was my appointment two and half years ago as the Director of Composition at the university where I had landed my first job. In retrospect, I should have known it would happen. I should have seen it coming. The Search Committee had told me during my interview that eventually I would be the Director, and to a lowly A.B.D. graduate student that prospect was heady stuff. Imagine: me as the Director of Freshman Composition. (I know some of my former professors are still trying to.) When the chairman called me a few days later and actually offered me the job, I felt like Sally Fields accepting her Oscar and giving the same dumb speech. But I didn't know what would happen *after* I became the Director.

The second contribution to my disenchantment was feeling the need to use a textbook. I don't exactly know how that one came about. I'd never felt even the slightest urge to use one, even in graduate school. It was a bad habit that I was proud of never having developed a taste for — like not drinking coffee. I think now that deciding to use a textbook was the result of feeling the need to show my colleagues in the department that all our deliberation on the composition committee over the countless new textbooks, readers, handbooks, and workbooks that pour our of the publishing houses each year was worth it. These books were delivered each year by a myriad of book reps. (The book reps were something we didn't learn about in graduate school.) These people descended on my new office with bulging briefcases and huge notebooks they leafed through feverishly no matter what I said. They gave me textbooks, readers, handbooks, rhetorics, and on-line handbooks they urged me not to resell even if my department didn't adopt them because it would drive up the price of new textbooks and cheat the authors out of their royalties. I apparently fell for this ethical appeal since these textbooks, handbooks, etc. etc. now completely fill two huge bookcases in my office. I have taken to stacking them on the floor and am now threatened by two precariously wobbling towers that I am certain will someday come crashing down on me. "Yeah, that was Harris's office. She's under there — somewhere."

So I got sidetracked by the textbooks. In my lost and confused state, I actually examined (even read!) each one of the new books that I received every spring and found six textbooks, readers, and workbooks that all thirty-five members of my department could live with. Maybe I wanted to feel that all my work had some personal benefit too. I'd spent all this time looking at the damn things — might as well use one. And, to be honest, since I had never used a textbook before, picking one was a novelty. The covers were so bright and colorful, and the writers all sounded so positive, cheerful and decisive. Frankly, I was feeling a little insecure in my new job and thought a textbook would provide me with security. It was also an opportunity to bond with my new colleagues over coffee in the mail room. "What are you using? Yeah, I'm using that too. How do you like it so far?" I could look at my new textbook and actually know what I was going to do next Tuesday. Or next Thanksgiving.

But I went from disenchanted and sidetracked to disturbed when I found that I had no time to read *CCC* and *College English.* They'd come and I'd glance at the front cover to see if anybody I knew had gotten lucky and then put them on the bookcase next to the textbooks I wasn't selling so that the free enterprise system wouldn't collapse. I knew I should read them, but I just didn't have time.

Then, a couple of summers ago, I had surgery and decided to catch up on my journal reading. That's when I really became disturbed. For a while I thought I was hallucinating the weird titles; I surmised it was the Demerol the nurses were pumping into me. Titles like "The Working Class Novels of Sid Chaplin" "Fishing in Atwood" "The Rhetoric of Paralogy" "Kathy Acker and the Postmodern Subject of Feminism," and, most daunting to me, "Psyche/Logos: Mapping the Terrains of the Mind and Rhetoric" spun around my confused, drug-crazed brain. But the real headache arouse when I actually tried to read some of them. Just a sample: