Incendiary Discourse: Reconsidering Flaming, Authority, and Democratic Subjectivity in Computer-mediated Communication

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This article explores the relationship between teacher authority and flaming in asynchronous online communication. Teachers who rely on what I call stabilization and universal applicability—two concepts emerging from a liberal democratic theory—may actually be preventing a full and robust understanding of the complexities of 21st-century democracy. Iris Marion Young and Chantal Mouffe, two postmodern democratic theorists, provide a foundation for understanding a democratic subjectivity that counters the tendency toward stabilization and universal applicability. As an alternative to the rhetoric of liberal ideology, I suggest that teachers begin to understand flames not as deficient forms of communication that require remediation but as part of a discourse of challenge that requires nuanced, thoughtful community response.

“New technologies cannot automatically create new democracies. They can reify and reinforce already existing oppressions and inequalities.”

–Juliet Eve and Tara Brabazon (58)

For more than two decades composition scholars as diverse as Gregory Clark, Kenneth Bruffee, Peter Elbow, and Patricia Bizzell have connected the work of the composition classroom with larger democratic concerns. As far back as Richard Ohmann’s 1985 article “Literacy, Technology, and Monopoly Capital,” the discipline has also critically reflected on how writing pedagogies might best deal with the challenges technological progress brings to the way democratic practices are understood and taught in our classrooms. Indeed, early edited collections—particularly Carolyn Handa’s Computers and Communities and Cynthia Selfe and Susan Hilligoss’s Literacy and Computers—reflect the critical relationship between the concerns of democratic sensitivity and advancing technology.

It is clear that the connection between technology, democracy, and composition pedagogy is and continues to be an area of scholarship that is important to our discipline. This paper examines the underlying assumption about democratic subjectivities that are reflected in teacher responses to the online phenomenon known as “flaming.” I argue for a way to defuse authority outward from the teacher to the classroom community at large.
The consequences of this power sharing allow teachers and students alike to explore the complexities of contemporary democracy.

I take as a given the fact that the way instructors respond to flaming reveals assumptions about democratic subjectivity within a given classroom. Unlike some scholarly treatments of flames, however, I am not primarily concerned with the question of why students flame each other. The bulk of my attention is given to how writing instructors confront behaviors that cannot be ignored or responded to through rational modes of inquiry and the implications that follow. This paper’s main contribution to pedagogical theory, therefore, is to articulate ways in which instructors and students might reconceptualize responses to flames. The goal here is to teach writing in ways that develop an understanding of the complexities of 21st-century civic engagement. This paper provides resources for understanding why current approaches to flames are limiting and how writing instructors might begin to overcome them. One of my aims here is to suggest how students and instructors alike might be able to make use of this incendiary behavior in ways that democratize communication among community members within and beyond the classroom.

In what follows, I discuss several responses to flaming and argue that such responses, though useful in many ways, are insufficient when it comes to contemporary democratic citizenship. By looking at teacher responses to flaming, it is possible to understand how liberal ideology plays out in the classroom. Second, I detail a critique of liberal subjectivity. This critique creates spaces for new ways writing instructors might confront flames. The last section makes the case for a theory of democratic subjectivity that does not rely on these liberal trappings.

**Flames, Liberal Democratic Subjectivity, and Teacher Authority**

Flaming, or what Alfred Rovai calls the “electronic equivalent of a prolonged tongue lashing” (229) is a form of communication that has been difficult to define usefully. However, Philip Thompsen’s “social influence model of flaming” is an early and still useful conceptualization of flaming. According to Thompsen, the “social influence perspective holds that choices people make regarding technology use are neither entirely rational nor entirely subjective, but rather are ‘subjectively rational’” (303). This model suggests that the choice to label a communicative act as “flaming” is highly contextual. A flame in one context is benign in another. Therefore, under the social influence model, flames can best be understood as a form of communication that disrupts a community to the extent that it is not productive to ignore it or respond in purely rational ways. Given my reliance on the social influence model, identifying a specific text as “flaming” is complicated because different discourse communities understand and respond to disruptions differently. With this difficulty in mind, I define flames within the context of computer-mediated communication as lan-
language that negatively impacts individuals within a community to the extent that ignoring such language is harmful to the community. My argument, therefore, centers on ways writing teachers respond to language choices students make that should not be ignored or treated exclusively through rational means of inquiry.

One way to respond to flames is through the rhetoric of liberal ideology. Focusing on such rhetoric and how expressions of authority are reliant upon it opens spaces for understanding why such expressions are problematic. However, as Wendy Brown notes, in the United States specifically, political theory is complicated by the slippery application of the term “liberal.” In the United States, the concept of “liberal” is typically associated with Leftist political values most closely aligned with the Democratic Party. This distinction is both limiting and erroneous for democratic theorists. For Brown, “liberalism signifies an order in which the state exists to secure the freedom of individuals on a formally egalitarian basis” (39). Therefore, both conservatives (as in members of the Republican Party) and liberals (as in members of the Democratic Party) can exist under the same ideology of “liberty for all.” In other words, the foundation of a liberal democratic theory relies on the deft negotiation between personal freedom of expression and a strong belief in equitable treatment for all community members.

Additionally, liberal democracy, for Brown and contemporary democratic theorists, has its roots in Enlightenment thinkers like Adam Smith and Jürgen Habermas, and more recently Amy Gutman and Denis Thompson. Under Enlightenment ideology, rational argument between equal members of a society will ultimately lead communities to the solutions to their problems. Thus, liberal democracy includes not only an ideal conceptualization of community members but it also includes a normative system for how those members should interact with each other.

Two elements of liberal democratic theory have special import for those concerned with flames and computer-mediated communication (CMC). First, the liberal notion assumes an identity that allows individuals to make sense of the world in ways that stabilize experiences. Presumably, then, the rhetoric of a stabilized liberal subject allows people to believe that they are engaging each other as equals. And if they do not see each other as equals then individuals are able to presume a necessary rationale for the inequality. If identity is stable or a thing that can be stabilized, individuals arguing and reasoning under a rational system of discourse can truly understand others in ways that are materially genuine. For example, the white heterosexual woman who thinks hard and listens long enough to the lesbian Latina’s personal experiences with social injustice can eventually come to understand her suffering, and on the basis of that understanding, agree to remedies that are warranted and generated from a place of authenticity. In the classroom, the falsehood of stability most clearly plays out under the auspices of teacher authority. Yet, since Freire’s devastating critique of the banking method, overt displays of teacher authority have become passé in
critical pedagogical scholarship. More frequent displays of teacher authority in critical pedagogies rely on the assumption that students should have a limited role in shaping the classroom environment. Put differently, while students may be involved in choosing the texts that they read, and they may even have the chance to write in a variety of genres of their choosing, the chance to shape how they conduct themselves in the classroom or how they engage the material is still heavily directed by the instructor.

Second, liberal subjectivity assumes that social injustices can be dealt with through a fair system of distribution that has universal applicability. In *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, Iris Marion Young argues that liberal approaches to justice align themselves with a distributive model. The distributive model of justice assumes that rights are material in that they can be gained or lost and the amount of justice in the world is dependent on the amount of rights that are fairly distributed among those who have historically not had them. The lie of stability lends itself to the idea of equal distribution in part because it allows liberal democratic theorists to broadly conceptualize basic human needs around a *universal* understanding of humanity that presupposes a conversation about how we *should* understand humanity. In the classroom, universal application often plays out when teachers and students alike assume that there is a single proper way to deal with community problems and that these solutions should be based on a system of rationality accepted by everyone.

Recent approaches to the use of flaming reflect the pervasiveness of what I am calling the rhetoric of liberal ideology. The rhetoric of liberal ideology suggests that individuals understand deliberative discourses through the precepts of stabilization and universal applicability. These concepts are useful for writing instructors because they allow us to recognize the values embedded within contemporary responses to flaming. Separating these key terms—stabilization and universal applicability—is difficult since they are co-constitutive of liberal ideology. However, by focusing on these terms individually, it becomes clearer to see cracks in the foundations of liberalism.

In “YOUR VIEWS SHOWED TRUE IGNORANCE!!!”: (Mis)Communication in an Online Interracial Discussion Forum,” Heidi McKee illustrates the tensions that often arise from a reliance on the rhetoric of liberal ideology and the willingness to understand flaming through a different perception. An important takeaway from McKee’s work is that what writing instructors understand as flaming might not be flaming. Rather, disruptions to communication are understood through densely constructed social positionings. Her work, and the work I suggest we do as writing teachers, encourages us to avoid identifying flames until communities have worked out the consequences of statements that heighten negative emotional responses.

Nevertheless, beneath the surface of McKee’s argument is a tension, not with what students have done, but with what I believe is a slow shaking off of the rhetoric of liberal ideology. When initially identifying flames in the Affirmative Action/Diversity/Multicultural forum on the Intercollegiate
E-Democracy Project, McKee was “dismayed because these statements seem characterized less by rational deliberation and more by impoliteness, charged outburst, and emotional venting intent, it seemed upon shouting down others rather than further dialogue” (413, emphasis added). What McKee’s articulation of her feelings suggests is a response to the frustration instructors feel when students do not follow the dictates of a stabilized and universalized discourse for figuring out difficult social issues. Though McKee comes to understand the limits of her dismay, her narrative is illustrative of the deep entrenchment of the values I am suggesting that we interrogate and alter.

Mary Lenard’s “Dealing with Online Selves: Ethos Issues in Computer-assisted Teaching and Learning,” represents one way in which writing instructors stabilize minority students in ways that make realizing contemporary democratic agency more difficult. When students in Lenard’s CMC course began to flame homosexuals, Lenard’s concerns with what to do about it are revealing. She questions, “How can [teachers] prevent vulnerable students like homosexuals from being verbally abused in online environments?” (90). In such questions, “flaming” is considered something from which to shield students. Lenard’s desire to protect the vulnerable casts the teacher in a dominant role of teacher as protector. She writes, “I responded to this episode by alerting the class to the ways that their communication was problematized by the networked classroom. I told them that since InterChange was a medium in which the lack of visual markers made misunderstandings even more likely, they (and I) needed to be particularly careful to avoid attacking other people unintentionally” (85).

Two things about an approach like Lenard’s are worth mentioning. First, this response suggests a top-down approach to civic engagement where the teacher polices a concept of civility. This approach reveals that stability is closely akin to concepts of authority in the classroom and, therefore, implies that the teacher is the one who has the power to name, create, and regulate the stable subject. This is particularly interesting in an online environment that opens up the possibility for a destabilized subject. Second, by casting homosexuals as a “vulnerable” group, the teacher makes particular assumptions about the impact of flames. As more and more students “come out of the closet,” for example, it becomes more difficult for liberal educators to grasp how mundane some forms of homophobia become. Hearing the flame “you’re so gay” is not always an experience that leaves homosexuals feeling disempowered. At times hearing such comments are understood as silly and ignorant. A more nuanced understanding of ignorant speech might allow us to pause on the contexts of its use in the moment and on particular individuals in the classroom. Simply put, liberal democratic subjects reject the use of words like “gay” because they assume that it is always-already hurtful to someone. It is important to reflect on this tendency toward stabilization and universal application. When we make assumptions about the stability of subjects and what hurts those subjects emotionally or intellectually, we
speak for them. I can think of no greater affront to a fully realized democracy than taking away the voice of another.

After engaging many chat rooms and discussion boards with her students, Lenard created the following addition to her syllabus: “... Make your contributions relevant and timely, so that you are not posting on something that we covered many weeks ago or just repeating a comment that several other people have already made... Feel free to respond to your classmates’ comments (politely, of course!)” (90, emphasis in original). And though Lenard acknowledges that the inclusion of “politely” is full of ambiguities and complications in a “culturally diverse world” (90), the tensions between cultural diversity’s ability to question our values and the way in which students should engage each other is nevertheless symptomatic of a liberal notion of identity in that politeness, relevance, and timeliness are universal values necessary for communication. Universal applicability of any specific value system is fraught with foreclosures and dis-invitations. These foreclosures must be open to critique by our students. The point should not be to get students to express their feelings in order to create an emotional inventory with the larger goal of fostering empathy and mutual identification. Rather, students and teachers alike should be able to confront flames in ways that allow everyone to acknowledge how this disruption communicates in the specific online/classroom community. Therefore, a typical response to flames would not only require a statement of emotional response but also a reflexive question about how the flames complicate what the community was trying to do. Too frequently, as Lenard’s pedagogy reveals, the majority of our attention is given to dealing with the emotional impacts of negative behavior. I want to be clear that there is nothing inherently wrong with the desire to protect students from physical, emotional, or rhetorical harm. However, we must enact this desire in ways that allow students to confront disruptions both individually and as members of a community.

The implicit notions about democratic citizenship undergirding arguments like Lenard’s suggest that students must be protected from harmful language. More than that, whom she understands as vulnerable presupposes a particular democratic status. Though we must be cognizant of injustices and the material reality that there are groups of people who are inherently disadvantaged (ethnic, gender, religious, and sexual minorities), when instructors assume that students cannot find the voice to speak truth to injustice, it is time to re-evaluate the type of democratic citizenship we assume we are helping to foster.

In “Respond Now! E-mail, Acceleration, and a Pedagogy of Patience,” Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock relies on the liberal tendencies I have articulated, but in ways that place the onus of responsibility for understanding proper modes of interaction onto students. This approach is different from Lenard’s pedagogy because flames are confronted directly in a community and by students. The educational approach to flames that Weinstock advocates suggests that instructors should have students:
1. Consider a time when they sent an e-mail they regretted or when they received flames;
2. Write a flame and “not hold back”;
3. Discuss the practiced flames as a class (379).

This rhetorically rich exercise requires the classroom community to explore a flame’s impact on audiences. However, when instructors remove what they believe to be problematic speech from the contexts of its use, they implicitly advance a theory of communication that insists upon rational, logical public interaction. With flames taken out of contexts, students and teachers alike are able to disassociate from the emotional impacts of flames. Thus, an exercise such as this requires first that teachers rely on a theory of communication that brackets emotional responses as valid forms of community interaction.

Additionally, within Weinstock’s “pedagogy of patience” we see flames as a communication failure. Understanding flames as failures brackets out challenges to hegemonic discourses. This failure centers on the subject’s inability to deliberate properly rather than how communication breakdowns reveal fissures in the communicative system itself. Moreover, treating flames as a communication failure enacts a liberal notion of authority because it forces the teacher into the role of remediation or the assumption that the student who flames is somehow deficient or unable to appropriately respond to a system with which he is dissatisfied. More to the point, however, the deficiency theory of communication suggests that students are in need of remediation. When instructors and like-minded students understand students who flame as deficient, it is difficult—though not necessarily inevitable—for flames to be understood as a strategic communicative act or as an act of de-legitimization.

Decontextualized flame exercises help students to understand mature forms of communication in democratic environments, but such pedagogical exercises are indicative of a traditional liberal ideology that reinforces ideals of democracy that are problematic. By removing the context of the flame from the actual moment of its use, teachers diminish students’ abilities to find creative solutions to communicative barriers. Responses to flames that rely on the rhetoric of liberal ideology make it difficult for students to see flames as a part of communication systems that want to enforce certain social relations.

Finally, both Lenard’s and Weinstock’s approaches require writing instructors to struggle with the tension between learning outcomes that teach students appropriate academic roles and an openness to worldviews that differ from the instructor’s own. Nevertheless, the idea undergirding Weinstock’s teaching of flaming in classrooms originates from the ability to place oneself in the “shoes” of another, or what he calls “empathic identification” (379). This empathic identification is a rephrasing of Seyla Benhabib’s concept of “egalitarian reciprocity” (30). The assumption is that we would not flame in CMC if we could empathize more fully with each other. Public
interaction based on the principal of egalitarian reciprocity insists upon the notion that if we could only see the hurt flames cause individuals then we would seek better forms of communication. This conceptualization of flames ignores the fact that students who have not already bought into the established classroom community may feel very strong negative emotions when placed in such an environment. The democratically appropriate course of action is not to prohibit expression prior to or immediately after disruptions. Rather, if something happens within a community that impacts an individual directly, that person must be allowed the opportunity to engage the community as best they can at the moment.

Approaches for confronting difficult speech in online environments like Lenard’s and Weinstock’s solidify instructor authority in ways that should give instructors interested in democratic subjectivity pause. By functioning as gatekeeper—understood here as an authority that steps in “just in time” to protect students from feeling uncomfortable—instructors are unintentionally making deliberative discourse more difficult to realize. Contrasting with approaches like Lenard’s and Weinstock’s, I suggest that writing instructors can work with students to conceptualize approaches to flames so that classroom communities may begin to reconsider the hegemonic aspects of rational discourse that are pervasive in democratic systems of argument and the role of rhetoric in community formation. In what follows, I show how postmodern democratic theory opens spaces for new ways of conceptualizing flames.

**Liberal Democratic Subjectivity and Systems of Social Relations**

The rhetoric of liberal ideology articulated above does not exist in isolation; it carries with it particular forms of social interaction that must be understood before alternatives can be explored. In order to understand the forms of social interaction that liberal ideology suggests, I engage the work of Iris Marion Young and Chantal Mouffe. Pairing Young and Mouffe may seem odd, but I believe that Mouffe provides a critical insight into the negative consequences that a single hegemonic discourse has on democratic citizenship. In other words, Mouffe allows us to understand flames in a broadly realized conceptual context. Young, on the other hand, particularly her theories of distributive justice and asymmetrical reciprocity, allows us to envision a post-liberal theory of interpersonal communication. For the purposes of the argument I am advancing, Mouffe shows the failures of liberal ideology’s articulation of stabilization, whereas Young’s theories critique the concept of universal applicability.

For Mouffe, current liberal thinking prevents us from considering the ways societies are organized (9). In order to work through this problem, Mouffe takes pains to distinguish between the political and politics. The political is the antagonistic elements that comprise the structures of society. Politics, on the other hand, is the means by which the political is understood: the practices and institutions through which order is created. Politics orga-
nizes how individual bodies coexist around the forms of conflicts allowed or disallowed by the political. As Mouffe understands it, liberal theorists ignore the political. This, in turn, limits their ways of thinking about politics. In the liberal order, Mouffe maintains that the primary form of conflict is the friend/enemy distinction. This antagonistic structure focuses political thought and action on the ways in which rhetors can solve conflicts rather than paying attention to the way in which these conflicts are discussed. For Mouffe, the way liberals understand the political provides us with too narrow a set of predetermined rules for social behavior that make discussion of the structures that set the terms of the conflict unappealing and threatening for democratic action. Liberal theorists do not necessarily believe that there is only one solution, nor do they necessarily believe that a plurality of voices should be minimized. Her concern with liberal theory is the system of social relations that limit the ways in which individuals can interact. Liberal ideology, Mouffe suggests, reduces all problems to a binary between those who are like-minded and those who are not: friend or enemy. Regardless of an individual’s affiliation with the friend group or the enemy group, Mouffe argues, “consensus [with that group] is based on acts of exclusion” (11). The clash between friend and enemy creates factionalization that is finally in service of a single hegemonic order.

The civility organized by the liberal order demands consensus regarding the particular ways of engaging the world. When choices are limited to how to solve social problems, argument plays out along a binary, friend/enemy split comprised of two camps: those who agree with us and those who do not agree with us. The result can be a rupture in civility. It is Mouffe’s notion of civility that brings us back to the concept of flames. Rather than a lack of understanding regarding how to comport himself, understood through the hegemonic logic of the friend/enemy binary, allow us to read the act of flaming as a radical disruption where the student who flames feels compelled to identify an “enemy” against which he can react. Under the political order of liberalism, flames are understood as a failure to engage the behaviors of a mature member of civil liberal society. Contrary to a liberal understanding of flames, a postmodern democratic order conceptualizes flames as a radical critique of the liberal political order. In this view, flames execute a new politics that calls on communities to understand the political in different ways.

Like Mouffe, Young suggests that liberal discourses often focus on outcomes and solutions to social problems. However, where Mouffe details how the political plays out, Young critiques liberal concepts of the political as socially unjust. It is this attention to justice that drives home the material consequences of a liberal theory of identity.

In *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, Young asserts that the major question for a liberal system of justice is how or even if the state should “mitigate the suffering of the poor” (19). Young calls this the distributive model of justice because the solutions found within this model are based on the allocation of resources according to whose needs are best met. The
assumptions undergirding the model, however, center on a social atomism that does not allow individuals to see the relationships between people in a society (18). The distributive model of justice carries with it two problems. First, it “paradoxically affirms and ignores the institutional contexts that give rise to injustice.” Second, when relating to nonmaterial goods, the “logic of distribution misrepresents them” (18). What we are left with in the distributive model is that the focus is on providing services to the individual rather than on how individual behaviors are “structured by institutionalized relations that constitute their positions” (25).

The connection between Mouffe and Young become clearer when we see that both critiques of liberalism focus on the limiting outcomes and procedures that liberal thinking insists upon. These critiques leave us with a question: If focusing on outcomes and procedures is problematic, how then should we consider injustice? To answer this, we can turn to Young’s theory of asymmetrical reciprocity.

In “Asymmetrical Reciprocity: On Moral Respect, Wonder, and Enlarged Thought,” Young developed the concept of asymmetrical reciprocity that begins not by trying to understand the position from another person’s perspective, but by understanding the person’s difference with respect to history and social positioning in a given cultural moment. Both the position from another and the position about another are aspects of a theory of moral respect, yet the asymmetrical approach incorporates differences in material ways that allow individuals to acknowledge the validity of these differences. The result is a new concept of interaction based on a more varied understanding of difference and identity.

One way composition studies professionals have thought about the tensions within what I have been calling the rhetoric of liberal ideology is through the relationship between rationality, emotion, and affect. This scholarship, moreover, provides a foundation on which to build a response to flames that does not reify the rhetoric of liberal ideology. In Notes on the Heart, Susan McLeod argues that writing instructors need to pay closer attention to affect. For McLeod, affect names the “noncognitive aspects of human behavior” of which emotion is part. However, for McLeod, though individuals “experience emotions physically” as when bodies tense up and stomach flutter at the sound of insult, individuals interpret and construct these emotions mentally (30). The result is a dialectic relationship between affect and rationality that cannot be separated. Similarly, Kristie Fleckenstein argues in “Once Again with Feeling: Empathy in Deliberative Discourse” that emotions are “tied up in a complex process of perceiving, valuing, and believing” (704). Here Fleckenstein helps us understand how the rhetoric of liberal ideology narrows the ways in which individuals come to understand affective responses students and teachers have regarding challenging moments in the classroom. Taking Fleckenstein’s and McLeod’s insights into consideration requires teachers of rhetoric and composition to explore with
students these emotional-rational moments in class with our attention finely tuned to both aspects.

For students who are part of classroom environments where they feel that their modes of writing, arguing, thinking and feeling are not valued, anger at others may be an appropriate way to challenge authority. In “Multicultural Public Spheres and the Rhetorics of Democracy,” Phyllis Mentzel Ryder argues that what makes “unsolicited oppositional discourse” so difficult to deal with is that it is used to “attack the benevolent self-image of those who are complicit in oppression” (521). For Ryder the consequences resulting from a dismissal of unsolicited oppositional discourse are profound. She argues that if an individual “cannot learn to hear anger as an act of good will—as a sign of possibility for a new kind of relationship” then the individual has foreclosed the possibilities of a relationship before that relationship has time to begin (522). Though Ryder has in mind the type of anger that is brought about through a material relationship with social injustice, I suggest that instructors who seek an alternative to the rhetoric of liberal ideology understand flames as a process of developing goodwill. I do not mean to imply that individuals who are the focus of incendiary attacks thank the student who flames. The concept of goodwill is more complex than that. Rather, I mean to suggest that when students flame, we should acknowledge the awareness that has arisen because of it.

As these composition scholars suggest, emotion does not make rationality irrational; rather, it allows us to understand and mobilize difference in ways that resist the rhetoric of stabilization and universalization. It does this by helping us understand that one of the reactions people have when their differences are erased, when they feel that they are not or have not been heard, is frustration. The flame erupts, possibly, out of the feeling that the rules of civility and order are so contrary to an individual’s understanding of them that they feel disempowered from participating in sanctioned ways. Thus, flames become a de-legitimization strategy for the entire process. The perceived anger of the student who flames is an invitation to understand new forms of social relations. These new relations forged are not necessarily to transform democratic interaction into a consequence-free environment where the default is to cause as much pain and suffering as possible. Rather, the scholarship on affect and emotion in rhetoric and composition is useful for understanding how to move beyond the rational response to flames and into a position that accounts more fully for the relationship between rationality and emotion.

I choose the phrase “you’re so gay” as an example of the types of incendiary languages students often use. This phrase often exerts powerful influences in a contemporary moment that is characterized by the presumption of default heterosexuality. When a student chooses, and I believe setting fingers to type is always on some level a conscience choice to write those words, to flame in this way, I believe that there are a number of responses that teachers might execute in ways that do not enact a universalized or stabi-
lized discourse. Working against the rhetoric of liberal ideology suggests that we treat this flame as a de-legitimization strategy. Calling another student gay (whether or not the student is actually gay) is an attempt to protect a normative way of being that disallows contrary arguments from being suggested. However, by engaging the student who flames through a rational inquiry with a question like “What are you getting at by calling X ‘gay’?” or “Can you help us understand how calling X ‘gay’ helps us understand your point?” opens the student to a response like “I said he’s gay because he’s a faggot” and very likely would increase the emotional tension because such questions do not take into account the rhetoricity of emotion. Alternatively, should the student who flames feel silenced by the rational line of questioning, the community is left with little choice but to ignore the incident and move on or to process the consequences of the flame without his input.

As an alternative to this, instructors might do well to develop responses that account for the rational and the emotional. In the illustration above, the instructor would do better to begin with something like the following, “When you said ‘you’re gay,’ it sounds as if you might be frustrated with the way things are going. Help us understand what’s going on here.” Through the articulation and negotiation of the student’s feelings, the teacher and student are in a better position to begin the work of understanding tensions arising from the way community members interact. The intention behind this emotional-rational approach to flaming is to guide the conversation in a way that helps the student who flames articulate frustrations as those frustrations relate to the structures of engagement. If the student evades or responds with silence, a teacher might offer an interpretation of what is going on and ask for clarification. Such interpretations might encourage the teacher to say the following, “To me, your frustrations seem to come from not being understood. If that’s the case, take a moment to explain for us what was frustrating to you.” Whatever the pattern of exchange between the student who flames and the teacher, the goal should be to engage each other in ways that push the student to develop his emotional vocabulary as it relates to the ways the community has been discussing a particular issue. Finally, the teacher should suggest ways in which the classroom community might change as a result of this experience.

Given the potential negative consequences for engaging flames through a predominantly rational mode of inquiry, writing instructors should develop a set of emotional-rational inquiries for students that invite the classroom community to reconsider the modes of civility that have been enacted prior to the flame. Developing such inquiries should be at the heart of our relationship to incendiary language.

**Burning Down the Liberal Order: Toward a New Approach to Flaming**

The consequences of flames as a reiteration of the we/they split, rather than as an immature display of student behavior, suggest that we may begin
to value students’ thoughts and opinions, allowing us new ways of open-
ing discussions and community formations. Four considerations to flaming
arise from a critique of liberal thought: One, flames must be treated in the
contexts of their occurrence. Two, students can respond to flames both in
the moment and how they see fit. Three, instructors must respond to flames
in two ways: first, we should acknowledge that tensions occur as a result of
flames, but before we act on them, we need to reflect about why students
who flame decided to participate in that way; and second, we must explore
the justification students have for their own behaviors and question them
in ways that do not assume deficiency or a fixed identity. Four, the meth-
ods of exploration into incendiary discourses must serve emotional-rational
modes of inquiry. Though these four considerations may also support the
values I have been critiquing, how we’ve come to them is arguably more
just. In this way, we can dislodge rationality from stability and universal
applicability.

Liberal ideology understands these disruptions as part of the rhetoric of
acknowledgement that assumes the injustices students perceive are based in
a lack of recognition and that if these students found their voices within an
established system, they would be acknowledged by the proper authorities
and therefore able to lead more successful lives. The approach to flaming
I advocate removes this assumption by suggesting that students are much
more aware of the problems within the system than instructors may realize.
This re-articulation of flaming allows us to also re-examine the teacher’s
role as authority figure.

We must never forget the power of the teacher, who, after all has pre-
sumably thought in systematic ways about her discipline and her pedagogy.
It is important to not check out during these conversations where flaming
occurs, but rather maintain a critical eye and show our students how we
might read these moments. We can show our students to treat such lan-
guages as a much more complicated manifestation of rhetoric and language
based on an implicit feeling that something might be horribly wrong with
the procedural democratic and educational systems that have been in place
for decades. The resultant conversations might allow students to shift their
focus from the importance of rational critical debate and to a focus on the
relational discourses between community members. By focusing too much
on “what can be done” about students who flame, instructors minimize the
time we can spend on how we can think about engaging with each other
in ways that are courageous and mature. Ultimately, this approach reminds
us that education begins by listening better and honoring the terrible things
that get said not as appropriate choices, but as ways to further complicate
ideas that are talked about and around.

Finally, I think that it is important to understand that classroom content
can be the subject of rhetorical education. The unplanned happenings that
occur in the classroom are ripe with opportunities for discussion and analy-

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a means for understanding reflexivity. The technology is advanced enough where students and teachers can keep record of what happens in chat rooms. In hybrid classes where students spend some time in virtual environments and sometime in F2F classrooms, we can analyze previous discussions in more fruitful ways than if the discussion happened only verbally.

Consequences for Democratic Citizenship

In his highly influential *Fragments of Rationality*, Lester Faigley argues that we teach based on the type of students we want to create. Faigley’s assertion, however, does not take into account that we teach particular ways of being that we assume are desirable for communities beyond the classroom. The case I have made is that as online writing instruction becomes commonplace, writing teachers are in a unique position to be able to teach democratic subjectivity as a practice of writing. In other words, writing instructors are in the perfect position to write democracy in ways that traditional F2F classrooms cannot allow. In a sense, we are responsible for fostering the habits of democratic citizenship. And though this idea is nothing new for educators, the critiques of identity and values challenge existing modes of thought often in ways that make people uncomfortable. What I have shown is that the liberal notion of being is fraught with presuppositions about how students should engage their world that should not be taken as a given.

Flames do undermine the goals of democratic citizenship. It just so happens that some goals of democratic citizenship might become more democratic with a direct critique such as the ones that flames may implicitly make. But rather than focus solely on remedying a perceived failure of communication that liberal ideology suggests, the model that I have been advocating allows us to focus on the relationships between individuals. And though indelicate language complicates an “ideal classroom environment,” to neglect such disruptions or to relegate them to a marginalized position enacts a liberal notion of teacher authority. Moreover, such “disruptions” to the classroom environment create opportunities for instructors to re-evaluate what they mean by ideal.

My argument relies on the treating of first-year students as adults worthy of receiving the full brunt of our mature communication. Not every student is going to be accepting of this form of communication. Students whose maturity levels do not recognize the love and attention it requires to treat students’ concerns seriously might not understand why flames should receive the attention that I am advocating. This is where early training in listening behavior can help mitigate the responsibilities teachers often feel for the moral and critical development of their students. As Patricia Bizzell writes in a beautifully written response to Stanley Fish’s polemic against teachers who want to save the world, it is okay for instructors to want to help students as members of our communities. It is okay to want to use the disciplinary knowledges we have worked hard to acquire to improve our
An initial place to turn could be Krista Ratcliffe’s *Rhetorical Listening*. In her book, Ratcliffe makes important connections between writing studies and listening. If listening takes on valued critical purchase in our discipline, as I believe it should, then writing instructors would do well to extend listening to computer-mediated communication within our classrooms.\(^5\) I suggest that we rely on our disciplinary knowledge not to bolster a liberal notion of superiority, but from a strong commitment to democracy of the type Young suggests.

I want to make clear that I am not advocating the idea that students should insult each other in a consequence free environment. Nor am I suggesting that we replace blame with praise. Flaming is disruptive. Yet how we understand disruptions speaks volumes about our values and our notions of democratic citizenship. It is this ability to challenge and unsettle values that are presumed to be free of baggage that is both beautiful and challenging about the democratic subjectivities I have been advancing. Decades of scholarship on the “basic” writer and thousands of pages written about first-year writing students demand that we carry the appropriate assumption that our students are capable of such challenges.

**Notes**

1. This paper would not have been possible without the generous support and guidance of Patrick Bruch and the two blind reviewers.
2. I am thinking here of the use of avatars and screen names that suggest a fluidity of identity that traditional face-to-face (F2F) classrooms cannot experience.
3. I have deliberately used the male pronoun, in part, because much of the scholarship on flaming suggests that males flame more frequently than females. Readers should not read this choice in pronoun use as an uncritical deployment of gender. For a reading of females’ relationship to flames see Rhiannon Bury’s *Cyberspaces of Their Own: Female Fandoms Online*.
4. Eve Sedgwick explains the heteronormative default position in her important and foundational book *The Epistemology of the Closet*.
5. A recent edited collection, *Silence and Listening as Rhetorical Arts* edited by Cheryl Glenn and Krista Ratcliffe, suggests that listening is gaining traction in our discipline. Though the collection includes many wonderful essays, Shari Stenberg and Wendy Wolters Hinshaw’s contributions are particularly valuable given the lines of reasoning I have been developing.

**Works Cited**


