

SYMPOSIUM: What Should College English Be?

Student Investment in Political Topics

William H. Thelin

[T]he most valuable political act any teacher can perform is not to impose particular political views but to teach students to see the words that society tries to inject into them unseen.

—Wayne Booth, *The Vocation of a Teacher*, p. 154

Composition instructors often feel the urge to bring pressing world issues into the classroom. Certainly, the actions of our government since 9/11 have prompted all sorts of assignments delving into the Patriot Act, the war in Iraq, propaganda, and terrorism. Two things strike me about the immediacy or felt need of such assignments: (1) their ahistorical nature, and (2) their maintenance of a teacher-centered classroom. As we continue to explore the boundaries of just what we should be teaching in undergraduate English courses, I think we need to pause and reflect on these two pedagogical issues.

Our students' expectations for our writing courses cannot be overlooked when we discuss such issues. Indeed, the prevalent student conception that graduating from college will lead to job security needs to be problematized within our coursework more than ever. We know that foreign outsourcing will further complicate the careerist desires of our students in the years to come. Education no longer offers "much protection against the effects of globalization," as the types of jobs being offshored now include white-collar professions usually filled by college graduates

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(Gosselin 1). Pragmatic pedagogies that had geared themselves toward the often naive, capitalist-inspired dreams of students (see Durst as one example) will have to rethink their tacit message that the purpose of college is to prepare students for satisfying, financially rewarding careers.

The time has come for instructors to be honest with students. Even in a healthy economy, students' chances of success—as they understand success—are dim if they succumb to the myth that they can work harder than the others they are competing against and prosper where the others fail. Capitalism reached its saturation point in terms of producing to meet consumer needs some time ago, and profit could only increase in the ways we have seen it do in the last twenty-five years—mechanize jobs once filled by workers, decrease the percentage of expenditures on workers' salaries, make disposable products, replace dependable consumer items through technology (think of the switch from phonographs to CDs and how difficult it is to stay with the old technology), open new markets within cultures that previously had resisted American exports, and outsource jobs to cheaper labor conditions. Our students have a better chance at financial comfort by developing an awareness of the cultural contradictions of capitalism and engaging in the concomitant political action than by competing against one another within the current system. Our pedagogy, then, should reflect our concern for our students' success by presenting students with this more accurate picture of their chances. But this brings up the ethical concerns of how we teach political ideology in the classroom.

As Henry Giroux reminds us, “[P]edagogy must address the relationship between politics and agency, knowledge and power, subject positions and values, and learning and social change” (22). While a simple acknowledgment of Giroux's point is important both for the development of the social consciousness of students and the integrity of the instructor, the way in which instructors introduce and develop topics consistent with this understanding is a crucial, often neglected matter. The anxiety our students will soon feel from the changing economy, if they haven't already felt it, needs to be contextualized in an understanding of global issues. In this sense, I agree with Donald Lazere, who argues that having students focus exclusively on local issues does those students a disservice, as it denies them the opportunity to “understand the political and economic forces to which they are captive” (“Postmodern” 260). Lazere believes that English studies should concentrate on “critical thinking and national public rhetoric” (283), both of which are laudable goals.

Lazere demonstrates the problem of ahistoricity through his examples of current practices in composition classrooms that use potentially powerful texts merely for students to tell their own stories. He critiques Joseph Harris's use of *Do the Right Thing*, for instance, noting how Harris makes no mention of contextualizing the movie's theme within the history of the civil rights movement and urban ghettos

(266–67). I would extend his thoughts to say that without a global vision of yesterday and today, assignments that touch on war or terrorism risk degenerating into “Where was I on 9/11?” or something to that effect, and in so doing, release students and their instructors from the responsibility of finding out the many factors that produced conditions ripe for insurgencies, war, and terrorism. However, I part company with Lazere in his distinction between student-generated arguments and critical analysis (268). I do not see the friction between the two, as I feel they can complement each other. I also feel that if we ignore student-generated themes, we will alienate students and turn the pedagogy in composition instruction into the very banking concept that Paulo Freire critiques, even if this civic focus is only meant for the advanced courses in expository, nonliterary prose that Lazere advocates. Lazere’s “teaching the conflicts” model, as discussed more fully in an earlier article, still strikes me as sound, but I’m troubled by who decides what the conflicts are. We risk coming too close to making students the subject of our narration, in which they would memorize “mechanically,” as Freire worded it, “the narrated content [. . .] the gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing” (72).

To construct the ethical classroom that I strive for, we need to enact democracy in the same way we hope students will practice it in their lives outside the classroom. Ellen Cushman, in critiquing the blame-the-victim subtext within the notion of false consciousness, suggests that “individuals cultivate counterhegemonic ideologies in and from their everyday lives” (9). While I resist Chris Gallagher’s characterization of critical pedagogues’ rewriting “institutional scripts only or primarily in dramatic moments that bring about drastic and immediate institutional change” (81), he picks up on the notion implicit in Cushman’s words that what is already present in our students’ experiences can lead to smaller but still substantial ideological changes. While the media have saturated our students with capitalist ideology, the injustices the students routinely see and encounter have sown seeds of resistance and decency that can take us in productive directions in our classrooms. By giving students a vote in assignment construction and generating and extending themes based on their interests, we can use their counterhegemonic ideas, avoid the teacher-centered classroom, still maintain political rigor, and make realistic progress toward students becoming change agents.

To give an example: I have tinkered with an assignment in the first-year research and argument courses I teach that focuses on dictators around the world. I use *Parade*’s annual list of the world’s worst dictators as a starting point for the investigation. In studying the policies and practices of dictators, students develop awareness that the problems that led to 9/11 and a stagnant economy are not isolated events. The students explore the historical context of imperialist politics and globalization and can see connections to their immediate concerns. I can imagine an inter-

ested reader stopping now and asking how such a theme generated or can generate from student interest or experience. In response, I would emphasize the importance of critical pedagogues extending student interest, not surrendering to it, which is how I developed this assignment.

A few years ago, my students voted to research serial killers for a unit in our writing class. I focused my teaching on the cultural fascination with serial killers and how victims often were objectified, but the majority of the students seemed transfixed by the details of the murders and the pathologies of the killers. I had difficulty enabling the students to produce the cultural critiques that I saw lurking within this topic, so I felt disappointed by the results. However, the preponderance of television shows and films that focus on murder made the reappearance of this topic almost inevitable. The next time it came up in one of my sections, I posed a problem for the students: What makes individual killing so interesting while we ignore mass murders across the globe? Beyond Saddam Hussein, most of the students had only a passing knowledge of dictators who killed their own citizens, but the subject had the allure necessary to secure student investment. The assignment that sprang from this had students study their own reactions when researching a serial killer and researching a dictator. Not only did students gain some knowledge, but most of them questioned their fascination with serial killers in a much more critical fashion than had my previous class. As this subject has evolved, I have been introducing it in class without the connection to serial killers. No group of students has rejected this theme when I proposed it, as it comprises an extension of what I concede is a morbid interest of theirs.

Parade's list, compiled by David Wallechinsky, gives snippets of information about the ten worst current dictators in a format that students might have seen in *People's* annual listing of the sexiest people alive. Each profile in Wallechinsky's article has a color photograph of the dictator and gives information in bold-faced and italicized fonts, such as the dictator's age and last year's rank, before explaining in a hundred words why he (they are all men) made the list. Wallechinsky adds a rather whimsically worded component in a brief column listing the top "contenders," those not vile enough to crack the top ten, apparently. In analyzing this article, we start with the use of visuals and colors in the article and question the conflicts between the horrendous information, the often smiling or stately images of world leaders, and the format. I ask the students to write about their feelings, and they are often bewildered more than outraged. These dictators are not quite real to them yet.

We then talk about the definition of a dictator, as Wallechinsky limits his contenders to "a head of state who exercises arbitrary authority over the lives of his citizens and who cannot be removed from power through legal means" (4).¹ We talk about the examples of dictatorship found in the article, plus the students' associations with the word. We also probe the antonyms and opposite associations of "dic-

tator,” where the students quite naturally want to invoke the United States’ practices as democratic and benevolent. Yet such a contrast does not easily fit. For example, the students usually talk about the invasion of privacy found in a dictatorship. In the 2006 rankings, their notions are supported by Wallechinsky’s summary of the government of Hu Jintao of China, which “monitors phone calls, faxes, e-mails and text messages” (5). Recent revelations have made students aware that our government spies on private citizens in similar ways, although even before this, students in my classes had referred to J. Edgar Hoover’s actions while others had seen evidence of infiltration tactics in Michael Moore’s *Fahrenheit 9/11*. Students also talk about torture in relation to dictatorships, something discussed by Wallechinsky regarding Islam Karimov of Uzbekistan and King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia. The well-known photos from the Abu Ghraib prison, not to mention the holding of detainees at Guantanamo Bay, prevent students from comfortably portraying the United States as the opposite of these regimes. On top of this, students often notice that these dictators take money for themselves while their people starve, something represented in the 2006 edition by Teodoro Obiang Nguema of Equatorial Guinea, who has stashed away \$700 million in American banks while “most of his people live on less than \$1 a day” (6). Students have difficulty seeing any profound difference between this disparity of wealth and the obscene divide in the United States between the wealthy and the poor, which I have in the past demonstrated through graphs such as those available on the Web page of the Office for Social Justice of the Diocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis, “Facts about Wages that Every American Should Know.” These discussions enable students to expand on Wallechinsky’s definition to include specific detail and then to question how the definition functions to target certain nations over others. In the 2006 edition of the list, not one Western country is listed, while Asia, the Middle East, and Africa are all represented.

At this point, I like students to study visuals of dictatorships and to describe what they see. While my array of visuals does include torture and corpses, I do not want to be overly graphic, as such a display might act as sensationalism, so I choose photographs that evoke despair, rage, and humiliation. By working with these emotions, students can connect global issues with their feelings, which allows for the investment in the topic that is necessary for my ability to propose an assignment. Again, students have yet to vote down my assignment, which asks them to research the leaders listed plus others and compile their own rankings, based on criteria they choose. Working in groups keeps the research load manageable.

In seeing the many world leaders who can be classified as dictators, some students wonder why the United States or some other nation has not intervened. In their research, a very chilling answer starts to appear. The United States and European nations, of course, have intervened and continue to do so. Our support of Saddam Hussein through the eighties was of concern to students when I first used

the *Parade* article. The students learned that we essentially put him into power and that his suppression of his own people started from the very beginning of his rule. Students were stunned when they realized the United States condoned Saddam's human rights abuses when he was doing what we wanted him to. This reaction has occurred over and over, especially when students look beyond the list and into the history of Latin America. Questions of "How?" and "Why?" abound.

The discoveries students make are often phenomenal. Just this semester, a student found the official Chinese response to the U.S. State Department's report on Human Rights Practices for 2005. Using American newspapers as its source, the Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China gives a detailed accounting of the human rights abuses in the United States. Students do not often hear how others perceive the United States, and this document gave us a chance to discuss perspective. We also have the opportunity to scrutinize accusations made by and against dictators and put them in historical perspective. One group this semester found a piece about Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe. Mugabe used the occasion of the sixtieth anniversary of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization to criticize George Bush and Tony Blair for trying to unseat him because of his policies of redistribution of white-owned farms among blacks (Pullella). The article, published in *The Washington Times*, a notoriously conservative paper run by the Reverend Sun Myung Moon, repeats accusations that Mugabe's policies turned a "breadbasket of southern Africa into a country facing mass shortages at home" and that he rigged elections. While few people, including me, want to defend Mugabe's practices, the issue that needed to be teased out of our discussion was the colonization of Africa and the havoc it has wreaked on the environment, the cultures, and the health of Africans. What was the country like before white ownership of land? What part did the long-term exploitation of resources and labor play in the current economic problems? As I write, students are investigating these questions in making a case of whether to put Mugabe on their list of the worst dictators.

Naturally, all students do not soak in the lessons of the assignment. Banter during in-class research from over a year ago included students' separating the "starting team" from the "second-stringers" and claiming that Fidel Castro had to "try harder" if he wanted to make their list. And there have been students who think they understand my political ideology and try to score points by putting George Bush on their list. Overall, however, the students acquire a more informed, global view of current events that allows them to contextualize their opinions and observations. They can make connections between their own plight as young adults trying to find secure futures within the turmoil of globalization and the policies that encourage dictators to flourish. I conclude this unit with an attempt at reconstruction. What can the students do? How can they get involved? I talk about Akron-based organizations such as Campus Community against War, progressive third-party candidates,

and election-year drives made by MoveOn.com and others. I have never collected data on how many students pursue political involvement, but I at least issue the invitation and am available for consultation, if so desired.

While this type of political advocacy might trouble some academics, I do not see the problem with exposing students to information and alternatives they do not often encounter, as long as we avoid imposing our political will on students. Rather, I grow concerned when hot-button issues are confined to a rigid, stale Toulminian or Rogerian approach, decontextualized and simplified so as not to matter to our students. We venture closer to unethical behavior when we ask students to make “for or against” arguments on anything of substance without insisting upon a fuller understanding of global issues. By extending student interests, we can ethically teach political awareness while still giving instruction in the institutionally mandated skills of an argument/research class. Notice in this one example of a generative assignment that students need to make a definition, create criteria, compare sources, and argue for their rankings—all outcomes appropriate for such a writing course. As we look toward the future of English studies, we do not want, of course, to limit our goals to such skills, but we can serve our students by putting such skills to use in meaningful assignments—assignments with formats not too far removed from student experience but with content that is challenging and engaging.

NOTE

1. It should be noted that this definition represents a change since the first installment in 2003. While Wallechinsky talked about “repressive governments” then, he focused on the citizens’ lack of freedom of speech and other rights that Americans “take for granted” and was much more specific regarding human rights abuses. This aspect of my assignment necessarily changes as Wallechinsky makes changes.

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