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ENCOURAGING STUDENTS TO (CONTINUE TO) SHARE AUTHORITY IN THE CLASSROOM: A RESPONSE TO PATRICIA BIZZELL

ABSTRACT: While it is both desirable and necessary to confront controversial, politically charged issues in a writing class, it is self-defeating to subject students to a pedagogical relationship in which the teacher convinces them to surrender authority. This paper questions attempts to persuade students to trust the opinions of the teacher too completely, suggesting instead that students who are presented important issues have the interest and the capability to examine those issues critically and fairly while still maintaining control.

In the Fall 1991 issue of *Journal of Basic Writing* Patricia Bizzell presents a notion of authority that justifies the teacher's leading the class toward his or her political views. Bizzell's argument is that we can actually teach our "left-liberal" views in our writing classes without worrying that we are imposing our authority on the students. While many in our discipline might consider these views admirable, Bizzell's notion of a three-part model of power, with the third part serving as the guiding but not authoritative scheme, actually seems to justify coercion in the classroom. I want to show that while Bizzell's approach may please most of

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us left-liberal educators, our adoption of such an approach might well obstruct our students' progress as developing writers and thinkers. Such an approach might very well also marginalize several of these same students.

I readily concede that we teachers present our political values, whether implicitly or explicitly, in every class we teach. Bizzell, as I read her, frames this realization by saying that our perception of literacy informs the way we teach composition, and she suggests that we examine "what alternate notions we may want to convey" (55). However, Bizzell promotes exercising authority, some would say *oppression*, over writing students in such a way that may alienate them more than educate them. She assumes that the perception of authority held by writing teachers is dichotomous, marked by either coercion or persuasion. In the model of coercion, "A uses B to benefit A and there's nothing B can do about it" (56). One problem with coercion, from a left-liberal standpoint, is that it benefits B only by measuring how far from A's elite group B will fall, or by finally allowing B to participate in that group. An example is a college entrance examination that classifies students as those who need remedial help, those who are ready for first-year composition, or those whose test results warrant giving them credit for first-year composition. The second type of power that Bizzell presents is persuasion: A exercises power over B only with B's consent. And B would grant consent only if A can convince B that A has B's best interests at heart. In a rather totalizing claim, Bizzell posits that "we" prefer this type of classroom strategy because it encourages us not to abuse our authority as teachers. She posits further that under such a strategy "we" choose not to "set standards for good writing that we can compel our students to meet. Rather, we simply try to create a climate in which the students can generate their own standards of good writing" (56). We simply offer advice to students on how their writing can best meet certain objectives. A cannot transact with B in this instance without also being changed, and the absence of such a change indicates coercion rather than persuasion.

But Bizzell apparently does not consider herself part of this "we." Stating her discomfort with the inadequacy of persuasion to move students toward a desirable target, her own left-liberal goals, Bizzell then presents a third alternative. This alternative, which she calls "authority," seems at first blush to combine the first two, but in fact it is simply coercion again:

Authority is exercised by A over B instrumentally in the sense that sometimes B must do what A requires without

seeing how B's best interests will be served thereby, but A can exercise such authority over B only if B initially grants it to A. (57)

In other words, the teacher must persuade the student that the teacher's unquestioned authority will ultimately benefit the student. Bizzell phrases the model in such a way that B empowers A to direct the course of action after some initial dialogue, but this approach actually just soft-pedals the coercion. After the student is persuaded to recognize such power in the position of the teacher, the student must participate in any activities the teacher deems appropriate. "The student's initial reluctance to undertake these activities is not allowed to prevent their practice, however, or delay it while a lengthy process of persuasion is undertaken" (58). This is actually an extension of Bizzell's argument in an earlier article, "Beyond Anti-Foundationalism to Rhetorical Authority," in which she describes James Berlin's experimental course at Purdue. Berlin encourages his students to deconstruct ideologies regarding gender and economics, but his "value-neutral" approach prevents him, according to Bizzell, from taking his students beyond investigation of the nature and ramifications of sexism and capitalism (672). She suggests that he "openly state that his course aims to promote values of sexual equality and left-oriented labor relations and that this course will challenge students' values insofar as they conflict with these aims" (672).

Bizzell, in her more recent piece, presents educator bell hooks [sic] as a model for the pedagogy of authority. Hooks admits that her teaching style is confrontational in order to jar students into becoming critical thinkers. And although many of her students resent her, at least during the course, hooks justifies her approach by invoking a no pain-no gain principle in encouraging her students to develop as writers and thinkers with the belief that they will benefit in the end (Bizzell, "Power" 64-65). However, this confrontational style will surely silence a number of students for a significant period of time before eventually, if ever, encouraging them to become assertive themselves. Without overemphasizing the significance of cultural traits, I do feel obligated to point out that students from some cultures may have more trouble dealing with hooks's style than other students. For instance, many East Asian students have indicated discomfort with making negative statements (Allaei, Connor 24) so these students would clearly be marginalized. They would not be encouraged, it seems evident, to voice any opinion unless it aligns with that of the teacher.

Certainly teachers present their politics in their classes. Not to

recognize this fact is to hold “politics” to a confined definition. For example, Maxine Hairston, in defending her position against using freshman English classes as arenas for social change, sees such politically charged pedagogy as harmful to the idea of using classes as student-centered workshops designed to promote the students’ self-confidence. She complains:

Nevertheless, everywhere I turn I find composition faculty, both leaders in the profession and new voices, asserting that they have not only the right, but the duty, to put ideology and radical politics at the center of their teaching.
(180)

However, it is one thing to put politics at the center of teaching and quite another to convince, even require, the students to aspire to the teacher’s political leanings. Writing instruction and classroom instruction focusing on political issues can lead to fruitful dialectic among students and teachers without being shut down by the students’ surrendering to the teacher’s point of view. For example, I assign my writing students to read the NCTE’s statement concerning the use of inclusive language. Although most of my students see no problem with using androgenic terms to signify both males and females, as well as certain occupations, we discuss the possibility that language creates knowledge. Such a philosophy spawns the belief that using androgenic terms for specific occupations might actually reinforce the idea that such occupations are appropriate only for males. “Chairman,” rather than “chair” or “chairperson,” inculcates the perception of solely male leaders of businesses and organizations. Although the importance of inclusive language informs my own writing, I hesitate to do more than present the concept to my writing class and let them consider the issue. Most of them never have previously, and I find it fruitful to establish a discussion with them without coercing them to accept or practice inclusive language with the understanding that I have their best interests at heart.

The importance of presenting social issues, without necessarily requiring a particular stance, is made clear in the establishment of a culturally sensitive basic writing program at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. In the wake of racial tension and subsequent demonstrations, minority student demonstrators encouraged the requirements of a writing curriculum that would help students on the margins “move confidently and thoughtfully through private meaning-making to significant communication with others” (Herrington, Curtis 490). The students provided the

political agenda, but they were not penalized for failing to follow the presented ideology. An English-speaking Anglo student considered the importance of bilingualism indicative of the fact that she was able, during a trip to Spain, to tell impoverished beggars, "Don't bother me!" and "Why don't you get a job?" in two languages. Her exuberance over learning Spanish, she continued, would never cause her to want to lose her primary culture as did the educator Richard Rodriguez when he learned English according to Herrington and Curtis. The authors write regarding this student:

[S]he tells us pretty emphatically that there are boundaries of identity and identification that she's simply not ready to cross. We did not penalize her for her reluctance, nor did we prevent her from expressing her frustration. In fact, we believe there is/was a lesson for her and for us in her resistance and the emotions it expressed. We believe it was demonstrating precisely what many marginalized students must feel every day in traditional courses. And we hope she actually was experiencing, however unwillingly, an identification with marginalized people that she might be able to reflect upon later. (494)

Through exposure to social issues, the students in the basic writing program at UMass-Amherst reevaluate their opinions. But there is no authoritative agenda to join the thinking of the instructors. Most teachers would agree that centering marginalized students is an important consideration in any curriculum. But first attempting to persuade the students that the teacher will take care of their interests and then coercing all the students to accept the centering of marginalized students may prove antiproduative for a number of those students. The program at UMass-Amherst seeks to move students to the center by considering the personal histories, the micronarratives, of these students, thereby recognizing the authority of their thinking and writing. Herrington and Curtis report success in accomplishing academic aims for their basic writing courses when the curriculum arises from collaboration of instructor-assigned readings and student-generated text (495-96).

Bizzell worries that leaving the students responsible for handling politically charged material will give them the impression that those issues are simply a matter of personal choice and, therefore, not quite so urgent. Recognizing that many teachers believe that a pedagogy of pluralism will inherently promote a left-oriented philosophy, Bizzell repeats the urgency to guide these

students through the material ("Power" 66). In contrast, Baumlin and Corder see the importance of allowing students to construct meaning out of the material they come across, even though the teacher sees some shortcomings. Baumlin and Corder propose a view of the world that is analogous to "jackleg" carpentry, a carpentry practiced by adequate but not expert woodworkers: "Well, there it is, by God, — it ain't much, but it'll hold us until we *think* of something better" (18). Based on that view, the carpentry, or perception of the world, will hold together until its makers think of something better, not necessarily when they are *led* to something better. In discussing how authority becomes restrictive, even destructive, when it becomes fixed as law, Baumlin and Corder point toward the importance of the student asserting his or her own authority to find his or her own truth. Each student's *ethos* is important to the structure of the class (19). The teachers and the students must both contribute to unveiling (I would say constructing) reality without the stipulation that one herds the other toward a certain view of reality after being granted full authority to do so (Freire 56). Although Bizzell offers first to persuade the students to relinquish any authority before imposing her political views for their benefit, are those students then not trapped for the remainder of the course?

To be sure, there is a sense of authority that pervades most, if not all, writing classes. At some point the students' writing will be evaluated, and the students may have to take some sort of test to measure a sense of writing proficiency. In a course for developmental writers at a local community college, for instance, my students participated in a largely student-centered writing environment. But at semester's end they were administered a twenty-question, standardized, multiple-choice test to determine whether or not they might advance to standard first-year composition. Students answering correctly at least fourteen of the questions were deemed eligible for freshman composition while the others were required to repeat the developmental course. Oftentimes wondering, I'm sure, why they had not picked up the gift of writing the first (or second) time around.

G. Genevieve Patthey-Chavez and Constance Gergen present an interesting plan for working within the parameters of such authority while still allowing the students to develop as subjects with authority and an active part in their own education. They recognize the crossroads encountered when teachers privilege diversity yet must preach conformity in order to address the writing of students that does not fall within the guidelines set up by the

academic community (76). They propose allowing the students to question the origins of such conventions; in other words, the students might be asked what they think constitutes a "good essay." Such discussion would invariably lead to criteria that the students gleaned from previous classes, or from what the authors term "folk theories," and at some point the students will realize that the standards of academic discourse are not absolute, but are, nevertheless, to be reckoned with (84). At any rate, the students are active participants, "subjects" according to Freire, in their own learning as they deal with an authoritative framework. The difference between this approach and Bizzell's model of authority, as I see it, is that the students in Patthey-Chavez and Gergen's study at no point surrender their authority to the good intentions of the teacher. Rather, they work with the teacher in recognizing academic factors outside their classroom.

Teachers need to strike a delicate balance here. They have genuine authority over the subject matter, and they do know the standards to which their students will be held. But too much emphasis on standards and authority will quickly degenerate into a unidirectional, "banking" exchange. (Patthey-Chavez, Gergen 86)

In discussing the academic standards that the university imposes, the teacher in this model creates a learning community within the classroom.

Bizzell ends her argument by offering suggestions for assignments borne out of politics and that would engender political discussion in the writing class. She recommends gathering a selection of written material that reflects a pluralism of thought and culture. Further, she suggests that this reading list include recommendations of students, faculty members, and even members of the community. This approach would certainly work well with what Bizzell dismisses as the persuasive model of teacher/student relationship, especially in light of the research done by Patthey-Chavez and Gergen, as well as by Baumlin and Corder. I suggest following up each of those readings that are assigned by the teacher or chosen by the students with class discussion that is student-led and, for the most part, student-directed. The teacher may voice his or her views as a participant without much fear of directly realigning the thinking of the students because the classroom power structure is, ideally, persuasive. The students may then begin writing drafts after having examined a variety of opinions, but they maintain authority, at least to a greater degree than

they would under the “authority” model. Then, as the students revise their writing after a series of peer responses and teacher/student conferences, they have even more opportunities to articulate or even change their positions on various issues. But they will do so, ideally, through their own reconsideration, and not merely to please a teacher who supposedly sees a larger picture and therefore watches out for them. Granting such authority to the students also grants them more responsibility.

In his response to Hairston’s “Diversity, Ideology, and Teaching Writing,” John Trimbur makes a sensible case against Hairston’s value-neutral approach to teaching. Trimbur mentions a letter he wrote with Bizzell in support of the composition course at the University of Texas at Austin. Such a course, which utilizes timely and important topics as a means of teaching rhetorical strategies, is laudable, but to persuade the students to accept the teacher’s point of view unquestioningly, as Bizzell proposes in *JBW*, is to jeopardize any empowerment the students may feel as they tackle the sensitive issues that affect them. As a teacher of writing, I present my political leanings to my students, and I want them to read about, think about, and write about various social issues as they participate in my class. But I certainly do not want them to adopt my beliefs out of duress; they would be much better off actively participating in creating their own realities. “Who shall be the ‘authorities’ in our writing classes? Just ask yourself: who are the ‘authors’? Must it be so hard to say, ‘Our students’?” (Baumlin, Corder 20). To develop as communicators, students need the empowerment that is a byproduct of cooperating—in other words, sharing authority—with the teacher.

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