

Wendy Ryden

HOW SOFT IS PROCESS? THE FEMINIZATION OF COMP AND PEDAGOGIES OF CARE

ABSTRACT: This article is essentially a narrative using the metaphors of "hard" and "soft" to raise and discuss questions about pedagogy and the institutional settings of college writing instruction. The author analyzes transformations that have occurred in her teaching practices in relation to the feminization of composition and an "ethic of care."

Early in my career of teaching college English, I remember walking down a hallway to one of my classes and passing another classroom where the professor was running late. A crowd of students for the next class was gathering in front of the door, waiting for the professor to finish so they could go in. I squeezed passed a group of students sitting on the floor, and as I did so, I heard one say to his friend as he gestured towards me, "I heard she's really hard."

It surprised me, to hear myself talked about this way. I didn't detect animosity in the student's tone. It was said more in a fearful way with perhaps even a tinge of respect in it. It surprised me, I guess, because, as I shall further explain, I didn't really think of myself as someone to be feared or, frankly, respected either. And it was certainly the first time I ever imagined that I might be what a student would think of as a hard teacher. I wasn't all that much older than some of the people I was teaching. Only a few weeks earlier, when I was walking across campus, a young man from one of the frat houses approached me, as it turns out, for the purpose of inviting me to a party:

"You must not go here," he flirted. "I haven't seen you around."

"Actually, I teach here in the Humanities Department," I told him.

With horror, he responded, "Oh my God! I'm sorry!"

He beat a hasty retreat, which I took to mean as a revoking of the invitation.

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At the time of these incidents, I was, I think, the youngest adjunct in the humanities department of an institute of technology. Adjuncts were employed mostly to teach remedial English to mostly male engineering and computer science students who tended to view their English courses as impediments to their more important work. It was a strange place to be in a lot of ways. A year earlier I had finished an M.F.A., during which time I began teaching freshman writing, specifically basic writing. Like others in my situation, I was for the meantime going to continue to teach while I worked on my own fiction. The lousy pay was slightly offset by the flexibility of schedule that provided time to work on other projects. And, ironically, the school's lack of commitment to its adjuncts was a comfort. It meant the hold they had over you was limited. You gave no more commitment to them than they gave you. It was a job that you didn't have to care too much about. Except that somehow you did, even when you didn't want to.

While I was a graduate student, I had the customary "intro to teaching comp" course, and I had liked and been very interested in what I encountered there. But in my mind my justification for teaching writing was that I was myself a writer. I clung to this qualification because I was quite sure I had no other and, probably, I was right. I was not a scholar, as I understood that term to mean, and I hadn't even been an English major as an undergraduate. I soon learned that in an academic environment, the degree that entitled me to teach, my M.F.A., was an added liability, the mark of Cain, evidence that I was not to be taken very seriously. I was fundamentally insecure about my right to be teaching at a college, and I understood that I was only fit for teaching basic writing—that is students who were fundamentally insecure about their right to be learning at college. Together we shared this peripheral status as well as more than a touch of disdain for the course we inhabited together. Add to this mix the fact that the Humanities Department was one of the few in the school that had women faculty, and they were mostly English professors. The department still had an old boys' feel to it with a current-traditional approach to writing instruction that gestured now and again towards process. Surface pleasantries aside, the message came across loud and clear how part-time faculty were regarded and how writing instruction was considered. It was the course you didn't want to touch with a ten-foot pole, and remediation, well, forget about it. That was the course reserved for the likes of me—creative writing dilettantes and those who didn't have enough real knowledge to teach anything more valuable. Once in a while a full-time faculty member might pull duty in the remediation sequence—indeed I knew one woman who liked doing so because she thought the classes were very undemanding to teach (!)—but mostly the classes were taught by people like myself—people who lived this marginalized academic existence because it gave them both the tem-

poral and psychic freedom to invest their sense of selves elsewhere and because, in a very real sense, they had nowhere else to go.

Certainly there were faculty there with whom I became friendly and worked with a sense of mutual respect – I ended up being there a long time and teaching a variety of courses besides basic writing – but nonetheless I couldn't help but internalize the sense about writing and writing instruction that pervaded the place. It was pretty hard to take yourself, your students, or what you were doing seriously, and this was exacerbated by the institutional attitude towards writing conveyed to students in subtle and not so subtle ways. One student explained to me, for example, that his math professor had told him, as a strategy of time management, to work on his math problems during his less important classes – such as English.

Maybe insisting my students do their writing assignments in English class gave me the reputation of being a hard teacher. Or perhaps as a self-defensive reflex to the conditions I described I acquired a kind of hardness. In order to be taken seriously, a young woman in a predominantly male engineering school had to act tough, especially when she was working in what has come to be called a feminized discipline, one which “has become associated with feminine attributes and populated by the female gender” (Holbrook 201). The feminization of writing instruction was especially apparent at the predominantly male school, where, as I mentioned, one of the few places you might encounter a woman was in a writing or literature class. How conscious was I of this feminization of writing instruction and my resistance to it? I don't know. I think I was vaguely aware that my status as a young woman made me vulnerable; that it could easily become associated in the minds of my students with the “soft” writing course that the math teacher had disdained as being unimportant. I remember being offended, even afraid, when students wrote in comments on my course evaluations about my clothes or my hairstyle. And I remember that I seldom smiled at my students; I think I felt I couldn't afford to.

At first I used Rosemary Deen's and Marie Ponsot's textbook *The Common Sense*, a book I had discovered and liked as a graduate student because it made sense to me from the standpoint of being a writer. Ironically, I clung to what were meant to be its alternative rhetorical forms with a fierce rigidity. There was, I discovered, a structure and plan to my basic writing class that wasn't duplicated in others, and it aggravated me when my students didn't keep up with that structure or seemed not to take it seriously. On occasions when I glimpsed the other teachers' curriculum, I was struck by the flexible haphazardness of it, even the way they would accept handwritten papers and late assignments. I think I told myself that students needed structure, and maybe they do. But perhaps more than anything I was the one who

needed that structure so that I could take myself and what I was doing in earnest. My self-esteem demanded that. I eventually began following the great works/Western Civ bent of that Humanities Department in my writing courses, using Lee Jacobus's textbook *A World of Ideas* in an attempt to compensate for what I perceived as the intellectual flabbiness of myself and of my course. I certainly learned a lot from teaching that book, and I think some of my students probably did too, although I never let myself get close enough to them to ask. And it wasn't as though I was behaving with them in some way that I felt was unnatural or constrained. It never occurred to me that I should be anything but, to use the student's term, "hard." It never occurred to me, nor would I have known how really, to be "soft," to enter into a personal, nurturing relationship, one steeped in what has been called an ethic of care where a pedagogical rapport is "based on interrelationships and connectedness rather than on universalized and individualized rules and rights" (Schell 75). Rather than develop personal relationships, I was doing everything I could to stave them off, to prevent such familiarity from breeding, for fear that what little bodily and intellectual authority I did have would be compromised. When a woman instructor has to read journal entries that freely comment on her appearance and demeanor, being soft is not an option.

Let's skip ahead about ten years. I'm teaching now at CUNY and taking courses myself as a Ph.D. student in the midst of another CUNY standards crisis—something that has been occurring off and on since the great open admissions experiment of the '70s prompted reactions against that democratizing move. The song, which is not distinct from the nation-wide rhetoric surrounding literacy and standards, goes something like this: the quality of education within CUNY has been steadily eroding due to the poorly prepared students who have been allowed to enter. CUNY degrees are meaningless because students, if they graduate at all, do so without being able to read or write. In the media there is nostalgia for the days when the CUNY degree meant something. Responses from the Board of Trustees are draconian. Among them: eliminate remediation from the senior colleges; institute new assessment measures that will further block students from completing their degrees. There is money for developing new gatekeeping instruments but none, it seems, for increasing faculty and decreasing class size.

I'm specializing in composition and rhetoric, so this crisis hits me hard, even though I know that the field of composition in a sense owes its existence to literacy crises that stretch back over a century. The rhetoric of literacy crises remains astonishingly consistent, positing a view of literacy that is "reified and measurable" (Killingsworth 35) instead of "an activity of social groups" that "embeds social relations within it" (Ohmann 685). It's depressing—the "back to basics,"

impoverished discussions surrounding this topic that fail to take into account the questions: "Which literacy? Whose literacy? Literacy for what? How?" (Sledd 499). I try to avoid these discussions about the loss of standards with their barely concealed racism and xenophobia. They take so much out of me. But on one particular day, it seems I can't avoid what has become this public issue. There is an elderly woman auditing one of the classes I am taking who, knowing that I teach writing, wants to commiserate with me about how no one today can read or write. She cites as her example a dealing she had with a bank employee who didn't know how to spell Canada. I confess to having a certain curiosity about what a misspelling of Canada might look like, but otherwise I have no interest in pursuing a conversation where the complex phenomenon of literacy is reduced to an instance of misspelling. I try to laugh it off by saying something like: well, I'm not such a hot speller myself. But this enrages the woman. She pursues me, quite literally, into the women's lavatory. (This definitely is one of the more peculiar moments I've experienced as a graduate student.) "It's all your fault," she yells at me. "What?" I say, as I try to make my way to the sink to wash my hands. She maintains that it is all my fault that the bank employee couldn't spell Canada and that she couldn't get service rendered to her. "My fault?" I ask incredulously. "Yes," she says. "People like you. Because people like you, you're, you're —," she stammers, "too soft."

So in ten years, I had gone, it would seem, from being hard to being soft. Was it true? How had it happened, I wonder? And, more importantly, what does it mean for me and for my students?

Let me backtrack. A few years after I had begun teaching at the institute of technology, I started work at another college that was quite different, a teaching college with a different curriculum and, interestingly, with an inverted ratio of men and women. Here the majority of the student population was female. When I began, through faculty development workshops, to learn more about composition theory and the changes entailed in pedagogy in the enactment of that theory, a shift occurred in my teaching. Viewing your writing classroom, for instance, as a local community of writers, in which the teacher's authority is disseminated rather than centralized, necessitates a softer, more nurturing performance on the part of the instructor. As Joseph Harris tells us, "it is this sense of like-mindedness and warmth" (21) that draws us to this concept of community in the first place. Harris's main point, however, is to show the limits of such warm like-mindedness and to question a paradigm that doesn't account for struggle within community. Feminists, such as Susan Jarratt and bell hooks, to name just two, have followed suit in asserting the need to account for conflict in a notion of community in order to avoid silencing of dissent. But even in a new and improved model of community,

one such as, say, Pratt's contact zone, the instructor's role is, to use a term from a colleague in the business department, "fuzzier" than a banking model classroom would allow. Likewise viewing yourself as a writing coach rather than evaluator (Faigley 113), one who comments on student writing more for the sake of encouraging it than judging it, pushes you in that softer, more nurturing direction. The authority to evaluate, while it does not disappear, wears a velvet glove.

In such classrooms, the false dichotomy between what is personal and what is public begins to blur. Intimacy develops; trust, too, perhaps. You and your students get to know each other through the writing that you read out loud; through the responses that you offer. Often you end up laughing and smiling; sometimes arguing and yelling at each other. People might begin to tell stories, such as: the time the frat student asked me to a keg party – stories that might seem to make the teller vulnerable in the details they reveal. But it isn't just that such personal stories find their public place. The flow reverses itself, too. Knowledge that appears indisputably part of the public domain – detachable as agentless, Enlightenment ideas – becomes personal when you know the writers who espouse those ideas about, say, the article they read on civil disobedience for class that day. The "fantasy of transcendence" (Ruddick 132), the wish for knowledge that is not situated and embodied, starts to fall away. You tend to become interested in the writers and not just the texts; for better or worse, you tend to conflate the writer and the text. This is part of the pedagogical agreement that students and process teachers strike with each other. The writing becomes a stand-in for the writer, and you treat it, and her, with care. How could you do otherwise, and still remain human?

And I consciously turned in this direction, towards this fuzzier, softer way, because I knew what I didn't want to be: I didn't want to be the punitive authority figure in the classroom. Nor did I want to be the language cop, citing violations and issuing tickets, and reducing writing from the critically powerful to the rote banal. In some ways I was motivated to change by what appeared to make students happier with me. I suffered a bit from Willy Loman syndrome: wanting to be well-liked. But this desire was bound up with another more laudable one: I didn't like being hard because I didn't like the effect it had on my students and the writing they produced under those circumstances, and, in the end, I didn't like the effect it had on me. Even though it didn't come naturally to me, I had to admit, softer worked better. In order to enact a pedagogy of process, I had to enact a pedagogy of care.

But at what cost? I begin to wonder. In her discussion of part-time female labor in the field of composition, Eileen Schell cites studies (Diane Kierstead et. al., Neal Koblitz, and Elaine Martin) that indicate:

If female instructors want to obtain high student ratings . . . they must be careful to act in accordance with traditional sex-role expectations. . . . Male and female instructors will earn equal student ratings . . . only if women display stereotypical feminine behavior. If women teachers give challenging assignments and exams and follow rigorous grading policies, students are more inclined to give them lower ratings. . . . College students of both sexes judged female authority figures who engage in punitive behavior more harshly than they judged punitive males. (quoted in Schell 78)

I think back now on the student's hallway remark about my being "hard" as a gendered observation. Would he have said the same thing about a male colleague, or would it have been redundant? It's perhaps surprising for a woman instructor not to fulfill the student's fantasy about maternal nurturance, but it can be taken for granted that the phallic male will be, as the student put it, "hard."

Sometimes I feel a little damned if I do damned if I don't. Students expect me to be nurturing and yet when I provide such nurturing I take the risk of being regarded less seriously—a risk I suspect a male instructor exhibiting similar behavior is less likely to run. I do remember, while teaching at the institute of technology, having a vague awareness of being held by students to a different standard than my male colleagues. I also recall that often the men just didn't seem to worry so much about how their classes were going, whether they were teaching well or not—not, I don't think, out of indifference but more from a sense of entitlement that was validated by student response. I also think of the feminist-bating and misogyny engaged in by hostile male students that I have had to endure through the years and take seriously in the name of running a democratic classroom. Sometimes it feels like I'm allowing myself to be abused. And some students get angry when the nurturing teacher betrays them by expressing strong opinions on controversial subjects.

This gives me pause. To what extent does the improvement wrought through process and care come at the expense of caving in to gender stereotypes? To what extent does the student-centered pedagogy we have come to value in writing instruction rely on an ethic of care that itself relies on a naturalization of the maternal role of women? Are we redistributing professorial authority, or are we undermining the authority of women within the classroom and within the academy? Perhaps in order to think about these questions, there needs to be another: is there an inherent intersection between process pedagogies and a pedagogy of care? M. Jimmie Killingsworth's description of composition's paradigm shift is telling in this regard. Citing Maxine Hairston and Richard Young, Killingsworth writes:

In the field of composition, “process, not product” emerged in the 1970s as a rallying slogan for a new generation of writing instructors. . . . In this formulation, “process” signified an interactive approach to teaching, according to which the teacher would intervene as a personal presence early and regularly in the development of student papers. This classroom model contrasted strongly with what its advocates perceived as the dominant paradigm of writing instruction, the so-called “current-traditional” or “product-oriented” model, in which the teacher played an authoritarian role as the guardian of grammatical and rhetorical propriety and the judge of finished papers. Whereas the “product-oriented” instructor felt most comfortable in the lecture hall and the professorial office equipped with red pens and handbooks of error codes, practitioners of the new “process pedagogy” turned the classroom into a workshop and met their students after class in newly formed writing centers or labs. They introduced a more generous portion of face-to-face, one-to-one communication; dialogue generally preceded writing, and talk often served as the chief means of feedback throughout the process of drafting and revising papers [emphasis added]. (26-27)

In Killingsworth’s formulation, process is positively soft and product is pejoratively hard, if we connect soft with an interactive pedagogy of care and hard with an authoritarian current-traditionalism. But is process, or care for that matter, really all that soft? Back in my “hard” days at the institute of technology, in accordance with Deen’s and Ponsot’s textbook, I took my students through rounds of reading and writing observations about one another’s work in order to give writer’s the feedback they needed for revision. With as stern a self-protecting look on my face as I could muster, I practiced a process that was “hard” – unrelenting, exact, devoid of the surface features of nurturance that might have earned the fuzzy adjective. In some ways it was the current-traditionalists who were soft – opting for the ease of covering grammatical points or citing hackneyed formulas about introductions, bodies, and conclusions while students snoozed under their baseball caps or surreptitiously worked math problems.

And what kind of hardness is it, I wonder, that equates writing with spelling and literate people with competent bank workers who can master the word Canada? A hardness defined as ensuring correct spelling and other surface features is, ironically, really a very soft kind of hardness indeed, reserved for the sort of corrections mothers are supposed to make in their children’s behavior and writing teachers are supposed to make in their students’ writing. Such feminized “hard-

ness" fits perfectly with a product-oriented current-traditionalism that manages to avoid the demands a "soft" process exacts from both students and teachers. Speaking of the contingent faculty members who make up much of the composition work force, Cynthia Tuell compares them to handmaids who clean up comma splices and organize the discourse of students as though straightening a closet so that the "regular" professors teaching the "real" courses can start doing the "serious" intellectual work (quoted in Schell 87-88). I imagine that such feminized "hard" work no doubt can be done in an essentializing manner of "care" that need not involve the trials and rigors of process at all.

Once one of the technology students wrote on my course evaluation: "teacher does not try to get along with the students." The statement, accurate enough, still remains something of an enigma to me. No, I didn't "try to get along" with students. Was I supposed to? It occurred to me at the time that it was a gendered and disciplined comment. Did students expect male teachers from, say, the math department, to "try to get along" with them? Perhaps. I remember that I did envy the paternally affable manner that some of the male teachers displayed towards their students. And I found that as I got older and began to share some of that sense of entitlement, I could afford to show some of that affability too without feeling vulnerable, especially when I worked at other institutions not so heavily male and more progressive in their policies towards writing instruction. But as I continued to think about the question of "getting along with students," it occurred to me that something beyond surface demeanor might be involved. I'm not convinced that the student comment wasn't sexist; that it revealed a young man's surprise at not getting the nurturance from a woman that he felt entitled to. But on the other hand I wonder if the remark might be pointing to a more profound understanding of care that moves beyond essential maternalism and its ability to accommodate conservative pedagogies of feminized "hardness."

Perhaps "getting along" means no more than listening and responding with goodwill to the actual students who are in the actual classroom at any given time. But can a writing teacher do this without showing the traits connected to the maternal or, for that matter, paternal role? Probably not, which leaves me with some of the same unresolved issues connected to teacher subjectivity and location. Critical pedagogy addresses the question of student subjectivity very well and even, to a certain extent, instructor subjectivity with regard to being in a position of power (see, for example, Ira Shor's description of himself as a tall, white male in *When Students Have Power*). But what about when the instructor is, say, a young woman teaching mostly young men in a school that has a necessary evil view of its humanities department? How does this affect her ability to redistribute authority in her

classroom or to adopt a nurturing stance with her students?

Last week I ran into a former student on the street near the college where I now work. We're happy to see each other, we even embrace. He tells me he's doing well in his English class, getting an A. You're enjoying the class, I ask. He shrugs. "It's OK," he says, "but it's not as good as yours." I know that his compliment is as much inspired by the personal relationship that we developed as it is by anything he might have learned about writing. But perhaps in the end the two things are not so easily separated. At his words I feel the sense of reward that enacting a pedagogy of care offers. In many ways it has, quite simply, made me a better person, attentive to the responsibilities I have towards another human being, student or no. But I also realize how impossible it would have been for me to have this kind of "getting along" rapport with the students from the institute of technology. I'm glad now to have something of a choice in how I interact with students, but I'm still ambivalent about the maternal aspect of the ethic of care.

At the community college where I now work, the student evaluation forms contain a question that asks students to rate how much the teacher seems to care about whether students learn the course material. I suppose this seems like a reasonable enough question, and yet it has always struck me as off-base in its sugariness — a derivation of the Hollywood image of teacher as selfless, humanistic hero — or heroine. We perhaps take it for granted that the teacher should exhibit this posture of caring, but just how essential is such a pose to the learning process? I can't help but wonder: wouldn't it be more to the point to ask whether the teacher enacted successful strategies to help the student learn? No doubt such strategies might include a "seeming to care" attitude on the part of the instructor, but certainly someone could "seem to care" without teaching effectively or, perhaps more importantly, critically. Frankly, I worry that this emphasis on care in the evaluation form undermines the instructor's ability to adopt a critical stance. The image is reinforced of the ideal teacher as the kindly and good-hearted conveyer of undisputed knowledge that does not challenge the status quo. The instructor cares, but does she question?

As I recall, no question about caring appeared on the evaluation forms at the institute of technology, perhaps because such a question would have been inconsistent with the hard knowledge of technology and the training that future (mostly male) engineers should receive (although I would think that giving sage, fatherly advice to students about doing their math problems during English class probably constitutes a kind of caring). Indeed, there was no question about caring on the evaluations at the mostly female-populated teachers college either, and I do remember that there was a question about whether the instructor taught and valued critical thinking. Why, I wonder, does this question about caring show up at the community college with its

overworked teachers and underprepared students? This raises some interesting issues, especially about the feminization of the two-year college, but that, I suppose, is a subject for another rumination.

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