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Political Economy: Bridge to WAC's Fourth-Stage Future?

In "Politics in Literacy Across the Curriculum" (and so, too, in *Writing Across the Curriculum*), Victor Villanueva "argue[s] for a reconsideration of what happens in WAC" (166). While his particular concern is racism, Villanueva proposes that "all of us concerned with language and discourse and the desire for a more equitable society" need to consider "the relations among discourse, the cultural, the political (not only as ideology but also as political power more broadly conceived), and the economic" (169). With draconian reductions in public education funding the current norm, responding to Villanueva's charge takes on exigency. This exigency is illustrated by Jerry Petersen's definition of *political economy* in *Praise, Blame, and Oracle: The Rhetorical Tropes of Political Economy*. Petersen writes that political economy is "a study of human life's most visceral needs, opulent excesses, horrid nightmares and fanciful dreams," and indicates its useful function for "[investigating] the causes of staggering poverty and immense wealth, practical concerns and ethereal ideation" (1). As such, political economy is solidly entrenched in the social and the economic, the material and imagined. It is deeply rooted in the political and economic systems that affect our students and institutions.

Rightfully so, students, parents, and educators worry that access to and success in higher education is increasingly limited by financial resources along class lines. The rhetoric of political economy in precisely this kind of issue. Villanueva writes, "Let me put it this way. The role of rhetoric, according to Burke, is the demystification of the ideological. The role of political

economy is the demystification of relations tied to the economic. If we're to understand where we are and what is happening to us—and maybe even to affect it—we need the tools provided by both” (58). So it is that, for the public good, the time and place seems kairotic for incorporating the tools of rhetoric and political economy into WAC. Toward that purpose, I explore theoretical and practical implications that need to be considered if political economy is to be deliberately configured into a WAC program that extends the third-stage critical into a fourth-stage rhetorical model, for which Jerry Jablonski calls.

WAC at the beginning of the new millennium has been defined by its intended outcomes and pedagogy, write Susan McLeod and Eric Miraglia in “Writing Across the Curriculum in a Time of Change.” As does General Education (Gen Ed), WAC seeks to support student growth in critical thinking and problem solving skills (4-5). But McLeod and Miraglia say that WAC differs from Gen Ed in that it prefers an active student-centered pedagogy rather than lecture and promotes writing as a desirable form of an active pedagogy in all disciplines. The authors discuss “writing to learn” and “writing to communicate” as “complementary pedagogical approaches” within WAC, and that “it is an error to see” the two as in conflict. Further, a multitude of initiatives affect WAC, with assessment at the beginning of the authors’ list. Other items include technology, service learning, learning communities, changing student demographics, marginalized voices, writing centers, and more (6-22).

For an overview of WAC’s three stages, I look to Sandra Tarabochia, who summarizes characteristics of each in *A Revisionary Approach to Cross-Curricular Literacy Work*. Relying on WAC experts, including McLeod, Russell, Bazerman, and Bergmann, she states that WAC stages have progressed chronologically as missionary, anthropological, and critical models. Tarabochia writes that “[e]ach [stage] can be identified according to several characteristics,

including theoretical paradigm, ideology, pedagogy, and approach to research” (15). For example, Tarabochia cites Jeffrey Jablonski’s description of the missionary model as “embracing expressivism, valuing self-discovery, promoting process-based pedagogy, and encouraging education-oriented research” (15). As you can see on the handout, the second stage is characterized by an emphasis on research in disciplinary rhetorics (see Table 1). This research has influenced third-stage formation, according to Tarabochia, with Villanueva’s essay, mentioned earlier, “the critical model that has come to define WAC’s third stage” (35).

When I discovered that my research had led me once again to Villanueva’s work on political economy, I contacted him. In an email conversation, he writes that the article came to be because of his argument “that WAC and critical pedagogy are opposed.” In response, I ask:

But what if a WAC program could be built/re-envisioned with political economy as a fundamental pillar, and critical pedagogy a vital component of that pillar? What if an educator was to take your call seriously and reconsider what WAC is and does, and attempt to reform/**pre**form WAC pedagogy so that in the “third stage,” political economy became as important to literacy/writing as [it is] epistemological? Do you think that in the sense of this opposition (critical pedagogy [as oppositional to] WAC) that WAC is salvageable? (Evans)

Villanueva answers that “it is a necessary argument, but, no, I don’t think there can be such a version of WAC.” At the institutional level, he sees administration in support of literacy but not of political economy tied to critical pedagogy: “Central [administration] would support literacy...but complicate it with the political (which is always present but easily denied), and WAC [would be] doomed.”

Indeed, given this scenario, WAC could fail. With results from assessments a strong prognosticator of institutional support, WAC risks reverting to being merely instrumental rather than transformational in the promotion of disciplinary writing if critical literacies are not validated. Yet, look again at the pattern of WAC development over time. As Tarabochia writes: “Each model defines itself by critiquing elements of the one(s) before it, forming a somewhat linear progression that currently culminates in Jablonski’s call for a fourth stage in which ‘compositionists—reclaim our expertise as rhetoricians’ in order to ‘develo[p] methods and models for translating our disciplinary knowledge to others’” (4). While as a rhetorician this call excites me, I recognize the need to move slowly and deliberately from the critical to the rhetorical stage.

In “WAC as Critical Pedagogy: The Third Stage?,” Donna LeCourt notes McLeod’s terms for writing to learn (the “cognitive”) and writing in the disciplines (the “rhetorical”), and states that both “work toward a similar goal: the accommodation or inscription of (student) subjects into the various disciplinary strands of academic discourse” (71). In her analysis, LeCourt states that

Writing-to-learn exercises provide a discursive space in which students learn to write themselves as subjects of the discourse, using the writing space to ‘practice’ an integration of self with a disciplinary subjectivity. The rhetorical model reinforces such an integration even more strongly, providing explicit instruction in how the discursive subject must write herself in order to produce ‘effective’ prose which mirrors the texts of other ‘speaking’ subjects of the discourse. (71)

This kind of rhetorical modeling of texts is one that can produce strong disciplinary writers; however, without the contributions of the critical, the individual student’s voice may be silenced.

Certainly, students must learn the requirements of different disciplinary discourses, and most importantly, that in which they will begin their work careers. But caution must be practiced in implementing the rhetorical in order to assure that critical considerations are incorporated.

Our current political and economic climate tends to elevate education as job-training over investment in intellectual knowledge-making that encourages human ingenuity. This atmosphere compels many institutions to cut humanities budgets in favor of STEM disciplines. While science, technology, engineering, and mathematics work is important and vital, such training alone does not produce the critical thinking and problem solving skills that generate new ideas, new jobs, and revitalized economies. WAC crosses disciplinary boundaries to support and encourage writing, one means of building critical thinking and problem solving skills, and to some degree, to promote interpersonal relationships built through social, political, and pedagogical collaboration. Leaving student good out of the goals for such actions seems counterproductive.

Instead, I propose that political economy be considered as the bridge that can promote student good, as the critical stage has, if and when WAC engages in the rhetorical stage. In “Toward a Political Economy of Rhetoric (or A Rhetoric of Political Economy),” Villanueva, draws *rhetoric* and *political economy* together into relationship. Even before this introduction to political economy by Villanueva, I encountered economist and economic historian Deirdre McCloskey’s contributions on the rhetoric of inquiry in *Rhetoric in the Human Sciences*. At the time (as I am now), I was interested in the syncretic possibilities of inviting disparate scholarly communities to join together in promoting matters pertinent to the public good, matters such as writing in the disciplines. I find in the rhetoric of political economy the kind of *both/and* inclusiveness that is necessary to balance the fundamentally inhumane worship of profit (a god

term) with humane attention to the effects that economic ideologies, particularly capitalism, have upon the human condition. Specifically, in this case, we must consider effects of economic ideologies upon our students, their parents, and our colleagues.

As teachers and administrators, our objective is to establish WAC and its influencing initiatives with a core always already focused on the best interests of students and considerate of faculty's disciplinary differences. As a tenet of this position, political economy offers a counterbalance to personal, disciplinary, institutional, and governmental self-interests that might detract from efforts to enhance student good. Political economy endorses ethics, preserves morality, and promotes productivity, particularly in the shadow of a political and economic system controlled by corporate theocracy, one that appears to be abandoning education as requisite to economic revival and national security. By identifying political economy as always already part of the theoretical foundation of the "third stage" WAC, the good of all concerned is incorporated into outcomes and pedagogy. Moreover, political economy becomes a bridge over which the work of the third-stage critical can be carried into the rhetorical fourth.

How might a WAC program function if it embraces political economy as one of its theoretical foundations spanning both third and fourth stages? Krista Ratcliffe, in *Rhetorical Listening: Identity, Gender, and Whiteness* presents rhetorical listening as a pedagogical approach that may be useful in promoting and facilitating political economy in a critical-to-rhetorical WAC model. Ratcliffe defines rhetorical listening as "a trope for interpretive invention, that is, as a stance of openness that a person may choose to assume in relation to any person, text, or culture; its purpose is to cultivate conscious identifications in ways that promote productive communication, especially but not solely cross-culturally" (25). To accomplish this, she suggests three ways of listening: metonymically, which allows for people to be associated

with a group but not looked to as representative; eavesdropping, part of overcoming our own assumptions and misconceptions by “positioning oneself on the edge of one’s own knowing”; and pedagogically, valuable for teaching difficult issues such as race, gender, sexuality, class, power, and more (105). Specifically, Ratcliffe points out that “[*l*]istening pedagogically signifies the rhetorical-listening moves that students and teachers may make in classroom discourses in order to recognize resistance, analyze it, and when necessary, resist it” (133). The author goes on to identify the most common types of resistance in the classroom, and to recommend strategies toward implementing rhetorical listening as a pedagogical practice. Such pedagogical use of rhetorical listening holds promise as a way to promote and facilitate political economy in a rhetorical WAC model.

Political economy, which is inherently rhetorical, would support goals of a transition from a critical third-stage to rhetorical fourth-stage model. Moreover, political economy includes the acknowledgement, preservation, and protection of discipline-specific writing pedagogies and the validation of students’ rights to individual voice, as underscored by the Conference on College Composition and Communication’s updated resolution on “Students’ Rights to their Own Language.” As LeCourt points out, a narrow definition of “rhetorical” could quash that voice as it “mirrors the texts of other ‘speaking’ subjects of the discourse” (71). With political economy as bridge, that need not occur.

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