
Reviewed by Gordon P. Thomas, University of Idaho

Thomas Fox begins The Social Uses of Writing by stating that our society "most obviously and unequally distributes social and economic privileges, status, and opportunities" along the lines of gender, class, and race. Fox believes that one of the primary aims of teaching should be to lead students to become more tolerant of and sympathetic toward disadvantaged groups. He also hopes that his students will understand how the language patterns brought about by differences in gender, class, and race can be used to subjugate them. Students can then use this knowledge to alter "those aspects of language use that [they] feel work against their interests." These goals are best brought about, Fox argues, by explicitly requiring students to write about issues concerning gender, class, and race. This book is both a theoretical rationale for such an approach to the teaching of writing and a collection of four case studies that illustrate the enormous difficulties that our society can impose on women, working-class students, and blacks in college.

The first two of the book's six chapters provide a theoretical rationale for the particular course from which Fox selected the subjects for his case studies. Briefly, the course required students to explore issues of gender, class, and race by responding to readings (often from minority, working-class, or women writers) and by recounting their own experiences. Chapter 3 is a case study of two students, one female, the other male, who demonstrate different language strategies for coping with the assignments. While the male has more apparent success in college, he is unwilling to alter his habits of domination and thinks of his female colleagues as weak and vacillating. The female, by contrast, avoids saying what she really thinks and does not feel herself capable of changing her audience's beliefs. By semester's end, though, she becomes aware of these patterns and "gains the potential to change." Chapter 4 studies the change that occurs in a student who had habitually hidden his working-class background for fear of how other students and his teachers would judge him. He comes to realize the extent to which this background has influenced his conception of academic success. Although this awareness is painful at times, Fox argues that the student is on the way to developing "the kind of class-consciousness that makes for a critical understanding of oneself and one's world." In Chapter 5, Fox explores the case of a black writer who remains resentful and suspicious of Fox's motives throughout the course, in spite of her ability to explore the issues differently. Chapter 6 concludes by questioning many of the tenants of the typical writing class and arguing that interpretation should "replace evaluation as the
central concern of literacy instruction."

One of the most significant problems in writing classes and in education in general, Fox claims, is that students have been taught for twelve years or so to "leave their social identity outside the classroom and behave within the confines of two concepts, Student and Individual, or better, a combination, Individual Student." Borrowing from Richard Ohmann, Fox explains that a "Student" is a peculiar being on which all real students model themselves: he (our society assumes a Student to be male) wants to succeed out of a "thirst for knowledge," not any baser motives, and he depends on the wisdom of the teacher to guide him. Real students are also asked to think of themselves as individuals with no ethnic qualities or social history; to call attention to these qualities in the classroom is considered bad manners. Fox's central goal in the book is to argue that these conventional teaching practices "inhibit the success of women, working-class, and minority students." The case studies make this argument by illustrating how students from these different groups respond to Fox's radical pedagogy.

Fox also advances this argument by forging a language theory of his own from a wide range of theorists who have become important to composition studies: Kenneth Bruffee and Patricia Bizzell (social constructionism); Shirley Brice Heath and Clifford Geertz (ethnography); J.L. Austin, John Searle, and H.P. Grice (philosophy of language); Stanley Aronowitz, Henry Giroux, and Paulo Freire (educational theory); Basil Bernstein and Richard Ohmann (social class); William Labov, Walter Ong, Thomas Farrell, Deborah Tannen, and Geneva Smitherman (Black English). One of this book's significant contributions is the way that it unites such a broad range of authors and theories into a single vision of how teaching could transform our society.

While it seems that the case studies are meant primarily to illustrate the problems that some students face, they are also meant to show how Fox's pedagogy can make students more aware of their language use patterns so that they can change them. At no point does Fox suggest that the purpose of his book is to defend the particular syllabus that he used for the case studies. Yet because the students in the case studies were enrolled in a course taught by Fox himself and that was specifically designed to address certain political issues, it is difficult to see how he could have avoided an implicit defense of the syllabus. Fox built most of his assignments around one of three approaches based on gender, ethnicity, and class. For each of these approaches, he devised four assignments—one personal essay dealing with the general issue, two response papers to a literary work, and an "analytical" paper that asked students to analyze either their own or another subgroup member's "language system." Instead of grading the essays, Fox commented in a "nonevaluative, dialogic manner" by summarizing what the student seemed to have said and then posing a question "designed to reconceive the student's experience in terms of the social categories" of the course. In later assignments, the student would attempt to answer these questions while thinking
of the teacher "as a person with a point of view, asking questions and posing problems sincerely without knowing the solution." Fox would judge the success of the students according to whether they showed an awareness of their language change—but Fox de-emphasized grades in favor of interpretation (students would receive at least a B if they did all the work).

I am troubled by some aspects of this course and how it is used in the study. First, its overall aims seem disproportionately ambitious. While it is important for students to become more aware of their social identities, few of them appeared to be able to do so. Only the female and the working-class student showed progress of the sort that Fox hoped for. Toward the close of the book, Fox admits he was surprised at how difficult it was to teach the course. He had expected some indifference, but some students could not understand what he meant when he asked them to examine their language politically: "They instead complied with what they thought were my real wishes, my real agenda, which looked like the one they expected: the perfection of a narrow conception of academic writing." Fox and the editors of the series of which this book is a part, "Interpretive Perspective on Education and Policy," would probably take this as evidence of what is wrong with American education. They may be right, but many of us have more modest aims for our courses, and even these often seem difficult to achieve.

I am sympathetic to the goals of such a radical pedagogy, as are, I suspect, a majority of composition teachers in this country: I want my students to become more tolerant of those who are different in gender, race, and class; to become more aware of the degree to which disadvantaged groups are victimized by our economic and social systems; to understand how language and history have worked together to preserve the status quo and assure that wealth, status, and power continue to reside in the hands of privileged groups; to acquire some skills—rhetorical, cognitive, intellectual, or whatever—that will help them conceive of and create a society that is more just and more humane than the current one. In short, like many of us, I hold to liberal values and hope that my students will be influenced by them. But I am more hesitant than Fox is about attempting a pedagogy that has such goals as its overt aims. If I can be allowed to pursue my own political goals so unabashedly in my classes, what is to prevent conservative colleagues from doing the same with their goals? Fox's implicit answer is that we all teach political ideology anyway, whether or not we do so overtly, and students should be aware of what is happening to them. Most important, a large mass of language and education research supports the agenda of radical pedagogy—everything from studies that challenge the "deficit" theories that attempt to explain what is wrong with Black English to revisions of the reproductive theories that explain how schooling perpetuates social class.

Finally, I am troubled by the way that such a course and Fox's study gloss over the teaching of what seems to me an important aspect of introductory composition: the teaching of academic prose. It is certainly true that this
aspect can be overemphasized, but most of us feel, as Peter Elbow has pointed out, a responsibility in two directions: toward the student with his or her individual concerns and needs and toward the society for which we are preparing our students. The radical pedagogy that Fox endorses here suggests that we have been thinking entirely too much about the latter and not enough about the former. The case study of the black student in the book illustrates the strengths and problems of such a pedagogy.

Ms. N, as Fox named this student, did not write about racial issues in essays that might be read by the whole class, and Fox convincingly argues that the racial climate in his class and her other educational experience justified such a response. Fox tried to convince her that his class was different: she would not be humiliated for speaking about how she felt about her role as a black in a society that wanted her to speak in Standard English. Ms. N hints at some of her feelings about having to code switch in certain situations, and Fox shows how it is unlikely she was being completely honest with her feelings. In most of her essays after the first one, she employs some features of Black English, such as the absence of "s" on the third person verb forms and -ed on past tense verbs. Fox argues that she probably had the capability to write in Standard English but chose to assert these "errors" as tests of Fox's sincerity. Fox's overall analysis of Ms. N is interesting and provocative, but he begs the important question of what would happen if a black student were not able to write in Standard English even when he or she wanted to do so. Isn't it likely that Fox's pedagogy would confuse and even mislead this student?

The possibility that Fox's pedagogy might be misleading points to a larger problem with our educational system which his book attempts to solve: much of the education students receive teaches them to conform to certain norms of behavior, and this situation benefits students who are white, male, or middle class. Fox's book is valuable because it shows that writing courses do not have to contribute to this problem; in fact, with the right teacher they may do much to combat it. But, valuable as it is, I do not see how such a pedagogy could be imposed on an entire composition program, and I doubt that we can expect very large changes in students as a result of such a course. If writing courses should not be thought of as "service courses," as Fox argues, but as the study of the discipline of writing, then one important goal for students in the discipline of writing is to understand their social identity and its consequences for their writing—a tall order for anyone. Thomas Fox provides a thorough rationale for pursuing such a pedagogy, and he also illustrates the difficulties of doing so.