Race Identity, Writing, and the Politics of Dignity: Reinvigorating the Ethics of “Students’ Right to Their Own Language”

PATRICK BRUCH
RICHARD MARBACK

We affirm the students’ right to their own patterns and varieties of language—the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style. Language scholars long ago denied that the myth of a standard American dialect has any validity. The claim that any one dialect is unacceptable amounts to an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another. Such a claim leads to false advice for speakers and writers, and immoral advice for humans. A nation proud of its diverse heritage and its cultural and racial variety will preserve its heritage of dialects. We affirm strongly that teachers must have the experiences and training that will enable them to respect diversity and uphold the right of students to their own language.

“Students’ Right to Their Own Language”

In the nearly quarter century since the landmark publication of “Students’ Right to Their Own Language,” composition has continued to struggle with dilemmas of language, race identity, education, and justice. In 1987, Geneva Smitherman already observed the extent to which “Students’ Right” and its promise of racial justice remained unfulfilled, calling on compositionists to reassert their commitments to “the unfinished business of the Committee on the Students’ Right to Their Own Language . . . to counteract those reactionary sociolinguistic forces that would take us back to where some folk ain’t never left from”(31). More recently, in 1992, Thomas Fox echoed Smitherman’s call, stating that “our greatest obligation is to transform literacy education for [African American] students” (105). In each case, the challenges laid out by “Students’ Right,” by Smitherman, by Fox, to theorize literacy education in ways that affirm cultural diversity, suggest that academic knowledge always already exists in political relationship with the broader cultural and historical circumstances of its production.

As an example of the politically charged nature of academic knowledge, recent public reaction to Linda Brodkey’s English 306, Writing about Difference, expresses continued cultural opposition to the professional goals stated in “Students’ Right.” As Richard Penticoff and Brodkey have observed, the controversy over English 306 is “curiously reminiscent of the political climate”
in which "Students' Right" was drafted and adopted. Penticoff and Brodkey go on to explain that in both cases, attention to difference "challenges the culturally and socially sanctioned practice of imputing extraordinary human value to some people by diminishing the worth of others" (229). Writing about Difference, like "Students' Right," challenges teaching practices and ideas of writing that either implicitly or explicitly diminish the worth of African American students by overvaluing the conventions of academic writing. Opposition to Writing about Difference, like opposition and indifference to "Students' Right," gives expression to culturally powerful and institutionally sanctioned ways of negotiating language, race identity, education, and justice that have yet to unthink the privilege of white America. Combined with calls to action from Smitherman and Fox among others, Brodkey and Penticoff connect the lack of progress in achieving social justice for African Americans to professional and public attitudes that continue to isolate the teaching of writing from the goals of racial justice and social equality.

Composition's professional inability to make good on education's promises to African Americans historically parallels continued disappointments in the social geography of race relations after the end of the hopeful era of civil rights. Contemporary compositionists work in a society that responded to demands for racial justice and human equality by instituting procedural reforms intended to guarantee "fairness," while at the same time criminalizing the urban landscape, redefining citizenship around mandates for cultural homogeneity, and so limiting civic participation to commodity consumption. As writers such as Cornel West have remarked, it is in this context that civic life takes on a sense of meaninglessness and hopelessness that has had particularly disastrous consequences in African American communities. In light of facts that today "there are more Black men aged 20-29 who are under the control of the criminal justice system than there are black men in college," and that "45% of all minority children live in poverty while the drop out rate among minority students has attained truly alarming proportions, reaching as high as 70% in some major urban areas," Henry Giroux has suggested that educators must rethink their discourse and practice, and recognize how "the language of excellence and individualism when abstracted from considerations of equality and social justice serves to restrict rather than animate the possibilities of democratic public life" ("Politics" 18,19). Disproportionate imprisonment, poverty, and drop out rates among African Americans are not merely coincidental with composition's struggles with difference. Stark geographic realities of marginalization suggest that for many African Americans the opportunities represented by literacy, opportunities for dignity and freedom from dominance invoked by "Students' Right," have receded over the past quarter century.

We believe it is therefore imperative upon compositionists to critically evaluate the promise of "Students' Right" and composition's dilemmas of language, race identity, education, and justice in terms of racial inequality and injustice in the broader society. In this essay, then, we revisit "Students' Right"
and its critique of traditional literacy theory and teaching in order to reinvigorate the statement’s hope for democratic literacy instruction and democratic social transformation. Reading “Students’ Right” as locating language practices at the center of problems of racial justice and democratic citizenship, we move the question of race identity in composition studies away from what we argue have become the limited options of choosing between teacher appreciation of non-privileged dialects and student assimilation to privileged dialects. In composition studies, the choice between difference and assimilation is grounded in an instrumental emphasis on competence that avoids asking hard questions about how prevailing notions of competence might actually sustain conditions of racial injustice.

We reconsider prevailing notions of competence in writing and their implications for racial justice by taking up an ethical discourse made available when “Students’ Right” concludes by defining linguistic competence in terms of human dignity. Invoking “Students’ Right,” we rethink composition’s commitment to racial justice by introducing a vision of writing pedagogy that does not simply dignify competence but that requires our competence in dignifying each other. Our claim is that exclusive emphasis on acquiring competence in writing as a means to equality, freedom, and justice privatizes competence and so fails to maintain discursive conditions through which being a competent writer comes to mean equality, freedom, and justice. We argue that competence in writing remains an important source of dignity only when students and teachers alike commit themselves to discussions of how writing can and cannot be a dignifying practice, discussions that perpetually define and redefine equality, freedom, and justice as conditions for, as well as consequences of, competence (see Gutman). Returning to “Students’ Right,” we describe how the statement’s articulation of competence with dignity has and has not provided answers to problems of race identity and writing in composition studies. To extend the possibilities for racial justice we believe inherent in “Students’ Right,” we propose a commitment to dignity in composition theory elaborated through the transformative dimensions of Cornel West’s prophetic pragmatism.

Prophetic pragmatism is, according to West, a “new kind of cultural criticism,” which, “with its roots in the American heritage and its hopes for the wretched of the earth, constitutes the best chance of promoting an Emersonian culture of creative democracy by means of critical intelligence and social action” (Prophetic 212). There are several reasons for turning to prophetic pragmatism for the purposes of advancing talk of race identity in composition studies. First, by making concern for dignity central to talk about writing, “Students’ Right” asserts the basic democratic purposes of competence but leaves open the specific kind of dignity made available. Prophetic pragmatism offers an elaboration of competent practice that can expand current formulations of dignity in light of commitments to social action critical of domination and committed to the development of human agency. Second, we argue that in composition studies dignity understood as a commitment to the individual has
failed to address the ways education institutionalizes the individualism and cultural imperialism of liberal capitalism. Here, West's combination of postmodern skepticism with humanist hope facilitates practices that "criticize and resist forms of subjection, as well as types of economic exploitation, state repression and bureaucratic domination," while being "unashamedly guided by moral ideals of creative democracy and individuality" (226). Third, West's placement of dignity at the center of meaningful political and social transformation provides a discourse for compositionists to recommit themselves to "Students' Right" and to productive negotiation of difference in the creation of a democratic reality.

Dignifying Competence and Competence in Dignity
The continued significance of "Students' Right" lies in its passionate proposal of the purposes for teaching writing. The background statement to "Students' Right" defines the ethical purposes of composition pedagogy by concluding: "Common sense tells us that if people want to understand one another, they will do so. Experience tells us that we can understand any dialect of English after a reasonably brief exposure to it. And humanity tells us that we should allow every man the dignity of his own way of talking" (18). This conclusion reminds us that writing instruction can be a powerfully dignifying practice that can promote students' senses of their own self-esteem and self-worth, or it can be an undignifying practice that degrades and humiliates by evaluating difference as deficiency. Describing the kinds of dignity argued for in "Students' Right," we demonstrate both the limitations and the possibilities of the statement's key terms, "competence" and "dignity." We describe the limitations of defining dignity as something that one owns as a consequence of communicative competence; instead, we argue for the possibilities of dignity as a political practice—dignifying the opportunities we have to interact democratically—so that discovering and sustaining mutual dignity becomes the principal measure of past, and motivation for future, definitions of competence.

Respecting the dignity of students by accepting the legitimacy of their dialects profoundly alters ideas of what counts as good writing and of how it might be taught. Drawing on sociolinguistic scholarship to situate language across communities of more or less social prestige and privilege, "Students' Right" challenges undignifying racist definitions of literacy that assume the superiority of Standard English. As the authors argue, the prestige of Standard English derives exclusively from the social status of its speakers and has no relationship to linguistic or syntactic complexity or regularity. Formal definitions of good writing that privilege one dialect over another only express the power of dominant groups to name and define the terms of social life. In place of a "difference-equals-deficit" model of language developed from exclusive emphasis on the formal features of Standard English (11), the background statement to "Students' Right" argues for a competence-based model of language that is potentially dignifying and not "destructive of the students' self-confidence," because it deals with "larger and more significant options" (11).
As the background statement explains, moving attention from skills to competence promises to break the undignifying cycle of social control that privileges Standard English and that invites exaggerated student concern with acquiring that dialect and its privilege: “By building on what students are already doing well as part of their successes in daily living, we can offer them dialect options which will increase rather than diminish their self-esteem, and by focusing on the multiple aspects of the communication process, we can be sure we are dealing with the totality of language, not merely with the superficial features of ‘polite usage’” (12). “Students’ Right” shifts attention from uses of language and teaching practices that treat dialect variations as cultural deficits, and so threaten student dignity, to the project of expanding student competence by dignifying the different dialects students bring with them to the writing classroom.

As Allen Smith pointed out at the time, dignifying student difference is, by itself, an unremarkable conclusion:

If the resolution adopted by the CCCC Executive Committee in 1973 meant only that we should respect our students as individuals and recognize their infinitely varied family and social backgrounds and that our role as teachers demands constant courtesy in both the classroom and the conference, so few teachers would deny it that it would hardly have been worth the committee’s trouble to pass it. But the question seems to go much deeper. The resolution apparently involves a question about the end product of our service: what should we be teaching and for what purpose? (155)

As Smith recognizes, what makes “Students’ Right” so remarkable is that the resolution does indeed raise questions of what to teach and why. Despite advocating the equal worth of all dialects, and so asserting the dignity inherent in varieties of language use, “Students’ Right” also reaffirms the value and dignity that derive from competence in edited American English. To teach in ways that enhance student dignity is to teach in ways that both dignify different competencies and make available competence in, and so dignity through, edited American English.

Emphasizing edited American English as a dialect like any other, and explaining that competence in any given dialect is a source of self-esteem and self-worth, “Students’ Right” places the teaching of writing within larger cultural struggles over voice, identity, and community in the racially stratified social contexts that produce and give meaning to diverse language practices. But by relativising competence, the authors of “Students’ Right” did not therefore call into question the undignifying cultural, economic, political, and social stratification of dialects and their users. Instead, they responded to the undignifying stratification of dialects by arguing for making available to more students the dignity of competence in privileged dialects. As the background statement explains:

Students who want to write EAE [Edited American English] will have to learn the forms identified with that dialect as additional options to the forms they already control. We should begin our work in composition with them by making them feel confident that their writing, in whatever dialect, makes sense and is important to us, that we read it and are interested in the ideas and persons that the writing reveals. Then students will be in a much stronger position to consider the rhetorical choices that lead to statements written in EAE. (15)
Attempting to make the teaching of writing a dignifying practice that accommodates and even develops in response to infinite variety, the statement's pluralism appeals to the common good in ways that rationalize the dominance of communicative patterns of the white middle class; as when it argues that "the need for a written dialect to serve the larger, public community has resulted in a general commitment to what may be called "edited American English"" (5). Here, the authors opt for a weak reading of the meaning of competence and the possibilities for dignity. They envision a democratic "public community" built upon competence in a common language that is already available and that assures to all who can master it the dignity of equal participation and fairness. But the dignity made available through a commitment to competence in a common language collapses; as an end, the dignity of competence is not concerned with questions of how dignifying or undignifying the actual acquisition of competence may be. Dignifying a "common" language, the authors mark difference as a source of individual dignity at the same time that it becomes an obstacle to, rather than the substance of, mutual dignity.

According to the pluralism of "Students' Right," any student's competence in his or her own discourse need not and should not compete with his or her access to competence in economically and institutionally privileged discourse communities. Students have a right to dignity in both their own dialect and in the conventions of edited American English. Such a right does not, however, imply that anyone has responsibility to making competence a dignifying practice. Imagining competing competencies themselves as ideologically innocent, as devoid of the racial politics they are used to express and support, "Students' Right" privatizes the dignity of competence as a possession to be protected. At the same time, "Students' Right" personalizes the dignity of assimilation to the power of a dominant discourse, with the result that, as bell hooks explains, "no change has to occur in larger social and political realities" (hooks, Talking Back 34).

The dignity of difference and the dignity of assimilation are uncritically elided as consequences of expanded competence. To be competent in any number of dialects is to expand one's feelings of dignity to include the self-esteem and self-worth available to the dialects' users. Acknowledging a personal right to possess dignity available through expanded competence, "Students' Right" fails to fully articulate the politics of dignity inherent in acquiring competence. "Students' Right" provides an ethical language of ends that understates the ethics of means. The tension created between the assertion of dignity as an end of writing instruction—an assertion that challenges the otherwise invisible privileges of race identity and history—and the failure to make dignity the principle of competence in writing, facilitates interpretations of "Students' Right" that appreciate diversity but find no place for difference in democracy or education.

The legacy of "Students' Right" in the classroom and in the profession grows out of the interaction between discourses of competence and dignity as parts of the larger cultural situation of the mid 1970s. The ways that the ethics and politics of dignity are articulated and embraced in subsequent years cannot be separated
from the cultural changes that shaped commitments and priorities for students and professionals during this era. Thus, conflicts and crises within the profession that define and redefine the public purposes of literacy derive from ambivalent commitments to competence and dignity in “Students’ Right” in ways that reveal the institutional effects of larger historical patterns.

**Liberal Pluralism and Learning Writing**

In order to understand competence and dignity as expressions of broader social trends, we turn here to a thick contextualization of “Students’ Right” in the cultural, economic, political, and social conditions and pedagogical practices of the mid 1970s. Describing the conditions within which and through which the statement took shape, we explain how the meanings of the key terms “competence” and “dignity” resonate with crises in American life in and since 1974. Our purpose is not to equate uses of terms in the professional discourse of composition studies with uses in other discourses. We are, however, interested in showing how key terms in composition studies, such as “dignity” and “competence,” influence and are influenced by discourses in other spheres.

The mid 1970s were significant years for a number of reasons: the collective humiliation and frustration with government associated with Watergate and Nixon’s subsequent resignation, the worsening economic recession and increased fuel shortages that challenged middle class complacency and polarized rich and poor, the diminished effectiveness of the civil rights and Black Power movements and the slow but steady repeal of civil rights initiatives that collapsed the rise of an African American middle class. In this setting, discourses of dignity were focused on conditions of either economic improvement or cultural empowerment. The language of dignity left over from the protests of the 1960s and the initiatives of the great society was preserved in efforts to institutionalize black political power in big cities, and in the development of identity-based resistance movements asserting dignity for women, gays, and urban African Americans. These efforts and the movements which gave them expression were undermined, however, by disillusionment with government, economic insecurity, and the physical realities of continued racial hostility. Whatever dignity may have meant at the height of the civil rights movement, that sense of self-worth and mutual respect had been displaced by 1974 when “Students’ Rights” was published. Under the terms and conditions of the mid 1970s, dignity derived its force as a cultural value primarily from ideological investments in work. Feelings of self-worth and mutual respect drew from experiences of employment security and monetary empowerment. This version of the lived experience of dignity was not unique to the 1970s but derives from values of a Protestant work ethic deeply engrained in American culture. As such, economic dignity was not wholly external to the language of the institutional left.

This concentration on individualized definitions of dignity became a cultural dominant in the 1980s as Reaganomics fashioned into public policy what
had previously been the unofficial ethos of an increasingly polarized society. Seizing upon the language of moral righteousness abandoned by the radical left, conservative politicians and cultural critics articulated a redefinition of citizenship that defined the common good in terms of benefits to the wealthiest Americans, and blamed social problems from trade deficits to white flight to drug addiction and homelessness on poor, urban minorities. Critical attention to this shifting social context, on the part of intellectuals, activists, artists, workers, and the poor, was linked in dominant discourses to the 1960s and explained away as "political correctness" assaulting the standards that make this country strong. As the discourses of politics and culture merge in the 1980s, schools and media become public spheres that "retreat into an exalted past in order to reassert a view of traditional authority and morality as the best hope for social stability and for reconstructing schools as bastions of moral and social regulators of the existing order" (Giroux, *Schooling* 51). The 1980s defines itself as a truly post-civil rights era by the near total eclipse of a popular democratic commitment to dignified diversity. Today, the replacement of urban industry with a racially stratified and bureaucratized economy of unemployment, welfare, and drug trading associates the dignities of difference with the indignities of cultural and economic isolation. Mass media representations picture urban minorities as threats to peace and responsibility, and continue to represent the educational commitment to democracy and diversity as an attack on Western standards and values. In such a context, the urban spaces of the city and the campus criminalize linguistic resistance to ahistorical and racially neutral conceptions of EAE. This narrow view of the dignities of literacy restores prior notions of competence initially challenged by "Students' Right," pre-civil rights notions that imagine dignity inhering within assimilation to rather than critical interrogation of power relations expressed through the competition between dialects. In professional responses to "Students' Right" in particular, and to the dilemmas of race, social justice, and education in general, assertive discourses of dignity recede and are replaced by a liberal pluralist position that dignifying diversity means institutionalizing processes for assimilation more sensitive to the needs of minorities. Such professional discourse fails to challenge the both broader foreclosure of the dignity of difference and the affirmation of the dignity of uncritical assimilation, and so implicitly underwrites the retrenchment of existing racist hierarchies between discourses.

The tensions and overlaps between the senses of dignity described above can be read in responses to "Students' Right." Following its publication in CCC, a flurry of articles, letters, and opinion pieces discussed the statement's implications for relations between white people and black people in general and white teachers and black students in particular. Few supported the statement's political challenge. William G. Clark, for one, criticized only the equivocality of the statement's commitment to dignity, suggesting that its unwillingness to indict the hegemony of edited American English was an implicit endorsement of white privilege. Clark read the statement's message to the profession as "Be
gentle with your students. Encourage them. Be interested in their ideas. But, by God, see to it that they write like white folks!” (217). Several respondents resisted the statement out of concern that, in William Pixton’s words, “the student, having the right to his own language, might be denied his right to higher education” (247). Most respondents, however, favored the middle road of a pluralist interpretation, defending “Students’ Right” as sanctioning tolerance for linguistic and cultural diversity. As Constance Weaver remarked, “learning to use Standard English features in place of Black English features (or Appalachian features, Chicano features, or whatever) will not in and of itself produce the command of vocabulary and syntax” necessary to “make discerning readers and listeners” (218). Weaver’s response indicates an openness to the belief that the dignity of linguistic (and social) privilege need not be a birthright, a belief shared by virtually all respondents.

Pixton’s, Clark’s, and Weaver’s responses to “Students’ Right” are not as distinct as they may first seem; and the ground shared between explicit tolerance and implicit racism defines composition’s continuing struggles with the democratic and transformative potentials of writing instruction. “Students’ Right” endorsed an institutional liberal pluralism that asserted the inherent value of different and diverse discourses but did little to challenge the ways that social privileges of whiteness are concealed by attention to the empirical equality of all dialects. The tolerance advocated in “Students’ Right” easily avoids questioning the privilege of edited American English because tolerance means simply defending “students’ right” to move back and forth between a privatized dignity of difference and a public dignity of sameness and assimilation.

This tolerance has been justified in composition studies by theoretical discourses of “code-switching,” and more recently through appeals to “repertoire expansion” and “discourse communities.” Research in these areas theorizes mainstream dignity for historically marginalized people while allowing them the dignity of diverse cultural backgrounds by not critically discussing the politics of competence as a struggle over the meanings of dignity. In a recent article, Gerald Washington clearly summarizes this important legacy of “Students’ Right” when he draws on ethnographic and linguistic research linking academic achievement to cultural experience to contend that “while linguistic loyalty and retention of oral expression connect African American students to their African past by affirming their cultural/ethnic consciousness, I believe that students from oral cultures must gain mastery of standard linguistic codes if they are to acquire proficiency in writing” (429). As an expression of the broad professional legacy of “Students’ Right,” this argument revisits the call to define writing instruction in terms of dignity, at the same time ignoring the statement’s simultaneous call to contextualize the search for dignity within a redefinition of competence and the question, to recall Smith, “what should we be teaching and for what purpose?”

Related to this unwillingness to redefine the meanings of literacy, are arguments such as Keith Gilyard’s that “democratic educators focus upon repertoire expansion” (83). As an expression of commitment to the “Spirit of Students’ Right” (15), code switching and repertoire expansion accomplish the
necessary work of challenging the overt degradation of diverse discourses and dialects. At the same time, though, by opening access to a predefined “democratic” public sphere of dominant discourse, repertoire expansion dignifies the dominance of that particular dialect. The predominant legacy of “Students’ Right” then, has been a liberal pluralism unwilling to critically interrogate the cultural and historical circumstances for the production of dignity’s meanings in the social negotiation of competing competencies.

To summarize, contemporary conversations of racial politics and writing stem from an interpretation of “Students’ Right” that offers only a narrow definition of competence as an answer to the injustice and indignity of marginalization. The weakness of this position is that the solution that competence presents demands that dignity be lived as one set of ideologies, worldviews, and historical memories, as these are embodied by the dialect of the dominant race identity. The expectation that all others accommodate themselves to the discourse of ruling groups brings composition studies dangerously close to the views of cultural critics like Dinesh D’Souza. Calling himself “strongly antiracist and sensitive to minorities” (vii), D’Souza has argued that “the relativist proposition that all cultures should be equally respected and accommodated within American borders is . . . unrealistic.” Thus, in a footnote, D’Souza argues, quoting Rosalie Porter, that “the best option is keeping one’s native language for informal, conversational use in the home and neighborhood and developing a higher degree of English language fluency and literacy for work, schooling, and contacts outside the community” (698). Here, D’Souza reveals that affirming one dialect’s dominance at work, school, and for civic contact, while tolerating another dialect’s use at home and within otherwise isolated communities, does not express a belief that “all cultures should be equally respected and accommodated within American borders.” Within the context of D’Souza’s argument that the superiority of white, European, capitalist culture should not be attributed to biology—for that is racism—but to the tangible superiority demonstrated by history—for that is empirical honesty—widespread disappointment with the ways composition has responded to “Students Right” and to questions of race identity and social justice comes into clearer focus. Competence and dignity have been articulated within the profession in response to broad pressures to co-opt or criminalize all forms of resistance to uncritical assimilation so that we have collectively valued competence, by conceiving difference as nothing but potential sameness, and so eroded the dignity of diversity. The result has been a conception of dignity at once divorced from ethical responsibilities to negotiate its meaning in response to difference, while at the same time opposed to the subjectivities and agencies of different dialects.

In response to these cultural and professional interpretations of competence and dignity, we follow Henry Giroux’s argument that “the discourse of standards represents part of the truth about ourselves as a nation in that it has often been evoked in order to legitimate elitism, racism, and privileges for the few, as
well as shutting down possibilities for public schools and the academy to educate students for critical citizenship and the promises of a democratic society” (“Pedagogy” 190). We believe that promises of a democratic society are made in composition studies in “Students’ Right” and we believe that compositionists can recommit the profession to the cause of racial justice by rethinking the implications of “Students’ Right” and its legacy. We do not mean to suggest that compositionists have never had compassion for African American students; rather, we have yet to use “Students’ Right” to imagine a sense of dignity that radically redefines competence in terms of a democratic educational project. Rather than reading the statement as a failed attempt at pedagogical reform or as a nostalgia for social activism, we want to read it instead as giving expression to the contradictions of the struggle for citizenship and democracy through schooling. What we can do today, then, through critical use of the statement is reinvigorate its original project of democratic education through literacy. What “Students’ Right” gives expression to, within the discourses of composition studies, are the terms through which struggles were carried out for civil rights and a democratic society. The statement also gives expression to the ways those struggles were not realized.

Phrasing student options as a choice between the personal experience of difference and the public demands of assimilation, composition studies has continued rather than curtailed the problems of education, justice, race formation, and writing. To suggest a more productive way of framing issues of race formation and writing that moves composition studies beyond problems created by opposing assimilation to difference, we dedicate the remainder of our discussion to reinvigorating “Students’ Right” and its promise of racial justice by reconceiving its language of dignity.

Prophetic Pragmatism and The Practice of Dignity

Pick up any newspaper and it is clear that the United States is facing a democratic crisis. Conventional definitions of citizenship and national identity have been thrown into question by ruptures in the global political landscape, changing postindustrial economic relations, shifting racial demographics, and new attitudes towards sexuality and religion. In a post-cold war era lacking in superpower conflicts, old fears of foreign insurgency have been supplanted by anxieties about trade deficits, declining educational standards, and a loss of common purpose. As social inequities continue to increase, citizens are losing faith in the government and in the master narratives supporting it. David Trend

In the nearly quarter century since composition studies made official its opposition to the linguistic “effort of one group to assert its dominance over another,” by redefining competence—what we teach and why—in terms of a contextual negotiation of dignity, both the profession and the culture have changed dramatically. Straddling the decline of one era’s expanding possibilities for individual and social dignification, and the dawn of another era that
deflated the cultural worth of competencies in dignifying (as opposed to commodifying) diversity, “Students’ Right,” we have argued, imagined the possibility for placing literacy education in the service of racial justice. As we have also argued, the terms that “Students’ Right” offered for this project—“competence” and “dignity”—have instead been elided within an opposition of assimilation/isolation that uncomplicates, and so misses the possibilities within, the interactions between discourse and human relationships on the one hand, and diversity and democratic public life on the other. The current possibilities for reanimating the language of competence and dignity and thereby expanding composition’s sense of its role in public life derives today from two simultaneous cultural currents: the crisis of liberal pluralism in public life and recent theoretical advancements that temper the radical skepticism of postmodern thought with a humanist commitment to social justice.

The first of these currents, the crisis in liberal pluralism that Trend points to, is perhaps best captured in recent front page news from California. There, overshadowed by the national election and the controversial ballot proposal to end affirmative action in state and local institutions, another ballot proposal narrowly passed that amended the state constitution so taxes, property-related assessments, and fees imposed by local governments are subject to voter approval, with assessment votes limited to property owners and weighted on a sliding scale proportionate to the amount each parcel owner would pay. Here, the liberal pluralist commitment to individualism and meritocracy presents itself as a crisis: multinational corporations (owners of parcels) are effectively given control of local government revenues and services while registered voters who rent property are unable to vote on funding for any local services supported by property-related assessments. Such policy, reminiscent of the poll tax used to circumvent voting by African Americans in the Jim Crow South, captures the crisis of public life in that it reveals the way that appeals to procedural “fairness” are always determined by contextual positions of privilege and power. At the same time, this crisis calls for renewed commitment to democratic hope by showing us how things like the right to vote are fragile social constructs we must always work to dignify.

The democratic crisis of recent history has elicited diverse responses from the academy. Among these have been humanistic articulations of postmodern theory that seek to critique subjectifying forces in public life and to offer alternative visions committed to expanding human agency. Such discourse draws on the enabling dimensions of poststructuralism and post colonial theory, recognizing that critique alone is an inadequate response to actual human suffering. Defining academic critique as “a form of political and ethical address that weighs cultural differences against the implications they have for practices that disclose rather than mystify, democratize culture rather than shut it down, and provide the conditions for all people to believe that they can take risks and change existing power relations” (Giroux, “Politics” 15), this form of cultural criticism and moral vision “encourages relentless critique and self-criticism for the aims of social change and personal humility” (West 232).
West's prophetic pragmatism provides composition studies a discourse of self-criticism for the aims of social change and personal humility that reaffirms the ethical vision of "Students' Right" and so encourages us to redefine composition's struggles with language, race identity, education, and justice. More specifically, prophetic pragmatism critiques liberal pluralist individualism and complacency towards existing social hierarchies in a way that suggests defining competence primarily in terms of the politics of dignity. Prophetic pragmatism thus provides critical leverage on the conditions of liberal pluralism that have so far influenced relations between competence and dignity in composition studies. West sets the terms for this elaboration of the project of "Students' Right" when he indicates that "human struggle sits at the center of prophetic pragmatism, a struggle judged by democratic and libertarian vision, sustained by moral courage and existential integrity, and tempered by the recognition of human frailty" (229). Commitments to hope, courage, and compassion measure competence not as a means for individualized economic transcendence, but as a search for practices that dignify and sustain collective commitments to alleviate "the plight of those peoples who embody and enact the 'postmodern' themes of degraded otherness, subjected alienness, and subaltern marginality, that is, the wretched of the earth (poor peoples of color, women, workers)" (237).

Competence becomes not simply an end in itself, but a means to the democratic goals of self-esteem and dignity. We can further elaborate the relationship of competence to dignity through West's assertion of human agency and human action within an imperative for critical transformation. Prophetic pragmatism places the individual within "a long and grand tradition trying to forge a sense of dignity and decency, keeping alive quests for excellence and elegance" (Prophetic 3). Here, West reorients the liberal pluralist language of competence by removing it from an exclusive attention to self-interest defined apart from socially situated concerns of "dignity and decency." In this framework for communicative action, dignity and competence are mutually determining imperatives. "The quest for excellence and elegance" is both mediated and sustained by a long history of "trying to forge a sense of dignity." As West's language makes clear, manifesting new relations between competence and dignity is a constant process of making and maintaining.

From the perspective of prophetic pragmatism, the meaning and value of competence are not weighed against others but are measured as responses to others. While individuals may have varying degrees of ability, the true test of their competence is their capacity to use their abilities for the benefit of all, to dignify others. As explained in 1974 in the background statement to "Students' Right," the purposes of teaching writing turn on building self-esteem and understanding the political complexities and social realities of language use: "By building on what students are already doing well as part of their successes in daily living, we can offer them dialect options which will increase rather than diminish their self-esteem, and by focusing on the multiple aspects of the communications process, we can be sure we are dealing with the totality of
language, not merely with the superficial features of ‘polite usage’” (12). This passage expresses what has become the dominant legacy of “Students’ Right.” The dominant legacy of “Students’ Right” has, however, neglected the background statement’s call to compositionists to rethink the dignity of competence, to develop “empathy” for “the difficulties often faced” by “minority speakers” by becoming “wholly immersed in a dialect group other than their own” (18). Developing empathy for students marginalized by dominant conceptions of competence, we focus our critical attention on the “multiple aspects of the communications process,” the social dimensions of language use and the politics of dignity.

A sense of competence derived from empathy for students is necessarily critical of the privilege of prevailing notions of competence and the practices that sustain them. As a vision of communicative competence, prophetic pragmatism asserts the need for cultural criticism, connecting the work of promoting language competence to challenging existing discursive relations that are undignifying within a commitment to enacting more dignifying relations. Competencies in critique—in “opposing the status quo of our day”—“are never to become ends-in-themselves, but rather to remain means through which are channeled moral outrage and human desperation in the face of prevailing forms of evil in human societies” (West 229). In terms of the imperatives of “Students’ Right,” possessing competence in writing does not bring dignity. Neither does exclusive concern for student dignity promote competence. Rather, teaching practices should forge new senses of dignity and develop from definitions of competence that express outrage at the indignities perpetuated through language.

Drawing on West’s assertions of the imperative of dignity, we can extend the “Students’ Right” project of intervention into the racial dimensions of social hierarchies. Reading “Students’ Right” through prophetic pragmatism subsumes questions of competence to senses of dignity that have hope for human capabilities, courage to revise traditions, condemnation for the human foundations of misery, and compassion for the humanity of others. With hope, courage, and compassion, we can work to reinvigorate the promise of “Students’ Right” and find the competence to dignify each other.

Wayne State University
Detroit, Michigan

Works Cited


**Kinneavy Award Winners Announced**

The James L. Kinneavy Award for the most outstanding essay in volume 16 of *JAC* was awarded to Richard E. Miller for "What Does It Mean to Learn? William Bennett, The Educational Testing Service, and a Praxis of the Sublime." Honorable Mention was awarded to Nancy Welch for "Worlds in the Making: The Literacy Project as Potential Space."

The award is generously endowed by Professor Kinneavy, Blumberg Centennial Professor at the University of Texas, and was presented by Professor Kinneavy at the meeting of the Association of Teachers of Advanced Composition at the CCCC Convention in Phoenix.