Postmodern Pluralism
and the Retreat from Political Literacy

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Resolved, that the National Council of Teachers of English support the efforts of English and related subjects to train students in a new literacy encompassing not only the decoding of print but the critical reading, listening, viewing, and thinking skills necessary to enable students to cope with the sophisticated persuasion techniques found in political statements, advertising, entertainment, and news.

—NCTE

The humanities lead beyond “functional” literacy and basic skills to critical judgment and discrimination, enabling citizens to view political issues from an informed perspective. . . . The entire secondary school curriculum should emphasize the close relationship between writing and critical thinking. . . . English courses need to emphasize the connections between expression, logic, and the critical use of textual and historical evidence.

—Report of the Commission on the Humanities

The NCTE resolution cited above was one of several similar ones passed in the 1970s; the second quotation is from a Rockefeller Foundation report published in 1980. Nearly three decades after the above and several similar statements of goals for English studies were formulated, while some segments of our profession have continued vigorously to pursue these goals (most prominently, advocates of critical pedagogy and, most recently, Rhetoricians for Peace), the general tendency has been to marginalize such goals, in composition courses and textbooks, our professional journals, conferences, scholarly books and research. In this article, I will try to trace the complex of developments in the profession.

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that have converged toward this tendency, to analyze some of the
excesses in these developments, and to advocate the re-affirmation of the
earlier goals throughout the profession. In brief, these developments
include the excessive or exclusive privileging of the production of
students' personal writing (both expressive and argumentative) over
analysis and criticism of public rhetoric; of non-academic over aca-
demic discourse; of "women's ways of knowing" over allegedly
phallogocentric modes of cognition, reasoning, and discourse; of local
and identity politics, communities, and cultures over national and inter-
national politics and cosmopolitan culture; of celebrations of diversity
and difference over cultural commonalities and unifying political causes.
In spite of the unquestionable intrinsic value of all these diverse "literacy
practices," some of their more doctrinaire advocates, whom I call
"diverseologues," seem to me ingenuous in acting as though such
practices in local communities either can operate outside the influence of
national and international centers of power or can somehow counteract
them, so that the latter are virtually ignored as a subject of critique and
action. Thus, although most of the advocates of these theoretical lines
consider themselves and their causes as politically liberal or progressive,
their insistence on unlimited proliferation of localism and diversity—
coincident with an age of unprecedented concentration of economic
ownership, political power, and social control by multinational corpora-
tions and the right wing in America—has had profoundly conservative
consequences in obstructing the kind of unified opposition that progres-
sive constituencies need to counteract the right.

As prologue to a detailed critique of the above professional develop-
ments, here are some broad observations. First, for an academic field that
is dedicated to the development of independent, nuanced thought in
students, theory in writing instruction is little less captive to trendiness,
conformity, and swings from one extreme to another than is American
society in general. (I think it was Leslie Fiedler who observed that in
America, the minute something is no longer banned, it becomes required.)
It is particularly ironic that so many followers of the poststructuralist
deconstruction of conventional binary oppositions, rather than seeking a
nuanced reformulation of the very opposition between poles like those in
my first paragraph, have tended simply to privilege the previously
devalorized pole in as one-sided, essentialist a manner as the other pole
had conventionally been privileged, producing new sets of what Beth
Daniell aptly calls "killer dichotomies" (401). In a similar pattern, over
and over again one sees the original formulation of theoretical positions
by thinkers like Gilligan, Derrida, Lyotard, Arendt, and Geertz vulgarly misinterpreted and pushed to dogmatic extremes that would be abhorrent to their originators. Corrections of faults in the second sets of binaries above toward the side of the first sets, which indisputably are valuable to the extent of balancing the scales, get turned into Iron Laws, enforced with zero tolerance for any disagreement or deviation. It may be a paradox, but it does occur that advocates of postmodern pluralism and diversity often encourage tolerance of all positions except those that question the limits of pluralism and diversity. I reiterate that I am not trying to defend the second set of these binary oppositions unilaterally; I fully acknowledge the value of the first in the formulations of scholars that are nuanced, qualified, and conciliatory, and am only criticizing versions that are excessive, exclusive, and poorly reasoned. I side with those who seek both-and solutions, not either-or ones. Toward this goal, I emphasize that I value many of the theorists I disagree with here as colleagues and friends, so I hope they will take my criticisms in the spirit of constructive conciliation of positions whose opposition is often based on misunderstandings.

Second, our profession has long been in deep denial about the handicap on college English studies imposed by the failure of most American high schools at nearly all socioeconomic levels, for at least the past hundred years, to give all students adequate grounding in history, geography, world and national politics, to prepare them for informed, active citizenship. When I ask my students what they think about their high school education, especially in "civics" (a subject typically taught by sports coaches as a sideline), their answer is invariably, "a joke." Progressive college teachers tend to get defensive on this issue because they falsely assume that criticism of schools must imply a put-down of teachers and students (especially the poor and minorities), but they are obviously the victims, not the perpetrators, of forces like the primacy of vocational and preprofessional education, inadequate or inequitable taxe funding, de facto segregation, political and public indifference, parental and other pressure groups, and the distractions of TV, other popular culture, sports, consumerism, and the notorious conformity of high school social life. The consequence is the large number of college students, including many who have attended relatively privileged, middle-class high schools, who are utterly ignorant of and repulsed by politics, do not follow the news or consider voting or taking an active part in the electoral process (thirty-two percent of Americans between eighteen and twenty-four voted in the 2000 presidential election). Many of these
students nevertheless in any crisis like 9/11 or the Iraq War obediently parrot the dominant pieties about patriotism, trusting our leaders, and supporting our troops—while being unable to locate Afghanistan or Iraq on a map or to demonstrate the least knowledge of the history of political and religious conflicts in the Middle East and of U.S. foreign policy and corporate interests there. Again, I do not blame students here: they are the victims of inadequate secondary preparation and constantly increasing pressure to cope with the outrageous cost of college by working exhausting hours at jobs and avoiding any courses that will not directly help them get gainful employment after graduation. They are caught in a vicious circle whereby they must deny themselves access to the humanities courses that might help them understand the political and economic forces to which they are captive.

To colleagues who take umbrage at what I say here and who insist that it is sufficient for students to have “local knowledge,” I pose the following questions. What is the minimal level of critical reading ability, vocabulary, and common knowledge needed for students—of all classes, ethnicities, and genders—to take an informed part in national and international affairs, for their own self-interest and for progressive social policy-making? (NCTE’s 1996 Standards for the English Language Arts was sadly equivocal on this question.) Have you ever given your students a quiz on their understanding of newspaper reports and editorials, a journal of opinion at the level of The Nation and The Weekly Standard, a presidential speech or debate? Have you ever asked them to define the difference between conservatism and liberalism; right wing and left wing; capitalism, socialism, communism, and fascism; the Republican, Democratic, Libertarian, Labor, and Green parties? Is there no cause for concern by college writing teachers in facts like the belief of over half the Americans polled in 2003 that most or some of the 9/11 hijackers were Iraqi and that Saddam Hussein was behind the 9/11 attacks—beliefs shared by about the same number of my sophomore students when I polled them?

My own mode of remediation in these areas is to assign, in all of my writing and literary survey courses, regular supplementary reading in print or on the internet of The New York Times and The Wall Street Journal, The Nation and The Weekly Standard, with emphasis on connections between class reading and writing assignments and the current issues therein. When local or national elections are taking place, we also devote time to discussing the campaign rhetoric. Would something like this be an unreasonable expectation for all English teachers to adopt?
What Ever Happened to Critical Thinking?
The high moment of the critical thinking movement was the late seventies and early eighties. In 1980, Chancellor Glenn Dumke announced the requirement of formal instruction in critical thinking throughout the nineteen California State University campuses, serving some 300,000 students. The announcement read:

Instruction in critical thinking is to be designed to achieve an understanding of the relationship of language to logic, which should lead to the ability to analyze, criticize, and advocate ideas, to reason inductively and deductively, and to reach factual or judgmental conclusions based on sound inferences drawn from unambiguous statements of knowledge or belief. The minimal competence to be expected at the successful conclusion of instruction in critical thinking should be the ability to distinguish fact from judgment, belief from knowledge, and skills in elementary inductive and deductive processes, including an understanding of the formal and informal fallacies of language and thought.

Similar requirements were soon adopted by community colleges and secondary schools throughout California and elsewhere. Here is the list of “Basic Critical Thinking Skills” in the California State Department of Education’s Model Curriculum for Grades 8–12 in 1984:

1. Identify similarities and differences
   The ability to identify similarities and differences among two or more objects, living things, ideas, events, or situations at the same or different points in time. Implies the ability to organize information into defined categories.

2. Identify central issues or problems
   The ability to identify the main idea or point of a passage, argument, or political cartoon, for example. At the higher levels, students are expected to identify central issues in complex political arguments. Implies ability to identify major components of an argument, such as reasons and conclusions.

3. Distinguish fact from opinion
   The ability to determine the difference between observation and inference.

4. Recognize stereotypes and clichés
   The ability to identify fixed or conventional notions about a person, group, or idea.
5. Recognize bias, emotional factors, propaganda, and semantic slanting
The ability to identify partialities and prejudices in written and graphic materials. Includes the ability to determine credibility of sources (gauge reliability, expertise, and objectivity).

6. Recognize different value orientations and different ideologies
The ability to recognize different value orientations and ideologies. Values which form the common core of American citizenship . . . will receive primary emphasis here.

7. Determine which information is relevant
The ability to make distinctions between verifiable and unverifiable, relevant and nonrelevant, and essential and incidental information.

8. Recognize the adequacy of data
The ability to decide whether the information provided is sufficient in terms of quality and quantity to justify a conclusion, decision, generalization, or plausible hypothesis.

9. Check consistency
The ability to determine whether given statements or symbols are consistent. For example, the ability to determine whether the different points or issues in a political argument have logical connections or agree with the central issue.

10. Formulate appropriate questions
The ability to formulate appropriate and thought-provoking questions that will lead to a deeper and clearer understanding of the issues at hand.

11. Predict probable consequences
The ability to predict probable consequences of an event or series of events.

12. Identify unstated assumptions
The ability to identify what is taken for granted, though not explicitly stated, in an argument.

The fields of developmental psychology, sociolinguistics, and composition theory have provided supplements to such criteria with other skills of analysis and synthesis that distinguish advanced stages in reading, writing, and reasoning (sometimes termed "higher order reasoning"). These include the abilities to reason back and forth between the concrete and the abstract, the personal and the impersonal, the local and the global,
cause and effect, the literal and the hypothetical or figurative, and between the past, present, and future; also, the abilities to retain and apply material previously studied and to sustain an extended line of argument in reading, writing, and speaking, incorporating recursive and cumulative thinking (the abilities to refer back to previously covered material and to build on that material in developing stages in an argument).

Some scholars make a further distinction, between critical thinking skills, related formally or informally to traditional logic, and dispositions that foster or impede critical thinking within the broader context of psychological, cultural, social, and political influences. Dispositions that foster critical thinking include facility in perceiving irony, ambiguity, and multiplicity of meanings or points of view; the development of openmindedness, autonomous thought, and reciprocity (Piaget’s term for ability to empathize with other individuals, social groups, nationalities, ideologies, and so on). Dispositions that act as impediments to critical thinking include defense mechanisms (such as absolutism or primary certitude, denial, and projection) culturally conditioned assumptions, authoritarianism, egocentrism and ethnocentrism, rationalization, compartmentalization, stereotyping and prejudice.

Many of these critical thinking skills and dispositions coincide with ideas that have been generated since the 1930s by the International Society for General Semantics, its Institute for Propaganda Analysis, and its journal *Etc* (at its best under the editorship of the late Neil Postman). A general semantics approach to rhetorical analysis was implicit in Dumke’s reference to “an understanding of the formal and informal fallacies of language and thought”—suggesting questions of denotation and connotation, deception and lying—as well as in the skills in the California guidelines distinguishing fact from opinion and identifying stereotypes, “partialities and prejudices in written and graphic materials”; bias, propaganda, semantic slanting, different value orientations and ideologies; and the disposition of facility in perceiving ambiguity and multiplicity of meanings or points of view. A related sign of those times was the formation of the NCTE Committee on Public Doublespeak, which thrived from the late seventies into the nineties.

This whole panoply of critical thinking terms contained the potential for providing a new, unifying disciplinary framework for studies in composition, rhetoric, literature, and cultural studies—a framework that could also make English courses the gateway and master discipline for virtually all academic studies. Many of these skills and dispositions, such as the abilities “to identify central issues in complex political arguments”
and “identify partialities and prejudices,” provided a warrant for the application to English studies of political criticism in the above NCTE resolution and Commission on the Humanities Report, as well as of Frankfurt School, Freirean, and other marxist, feminist, multicultural, and postcolonialist theories critiquing authoritarianism, ethnocentrism, and Marcusean one-dimensional language. The references to value orientations, ideologies, and multiple viewpoints further warranted a cultural studies perspective examining ideological implications and subject positions in a wide range of cultural practices and texts, as in James Berlin’s social-epistemic rhetoric: “the study and critique of signifying practices in their relation to subject formation within the framework of economic, social, and political conditions” (77). My 1992 article “Teaching the Political Conflicts” synthesized the conceptual framework of critical thinking into a composition course outline, and it has been incorporated in textbook form in Reading and Writing for Civic Literacy, which is an application of the approach to composition advocated throughout this article.

Unfortunately, critical thinking has never gained much of a foothold in English studies. In California and elsewhere, college philosophy and speech departments waged more aggressive turf wars to teach the new critical thinking courses, and the main research centers, such as the Center for Critical Thinking at Sonoma State University, have been philosophy-centered. Most textbooks based extensively on the above models of critical thinking are also in philosophy, in contrast to the English texts that use the term only as a vague buzzword for conventional composition instruction. (I do not know of any texts in critical thinking for literature; though they could be of great value, publishers recognize no market for them). But English studies itself has defaulted on critical thinking. For example, in 1979 College English published Andrea Lunsford’s “Cognitive Development and the Basic Writer,” applying the stage-developmental theories of Lawrence Kohlberg and William Perry. But then along came Carol Gilligan’s In A Different Voice, which judiciously modified the gender bias in Kohlberg and Perry. Gilligan’s modifications quickly were turned into a dogmatic killer dichotomy between women’s and men’s ways of knowing, and the notion of stage-development of moral or intellectual reasoning was dropped like a hot potato in English studies. Terms like “higher order reasoning” were banished as gender-biased, eurocentric, elitist, hierarchical, essentialist, and “logic chopping.” Frankfurt School and other recent theorists’ critique of the perversion of Enlightenment reason toward oppressive
aims got misinterpreted as a rejection of reason altogether—a classic case of throwing out the baby with the bath water. To my mind, however, it is precisely higher order reasoning that is needed to refute the logical fallacies in sexist, racist, class-biased, or jingoistic rhetoric (like that of the Bush administration selling war in Iraq) manipulating sociocentric emotion, “church, kitchen, and children,” among other stereotypical realms of female sentimentality. These are the perennial appeals of right-wing demagogues. Hitler compared the gullible masses to women, incapable of intellect or reason. Current masters of such appeals to irrationalism like Rush Limbaugh sound much like postmodernists, claiming to champion plain-folks common sense against the logic-chopping, liberal cultural elite, while they themselves amass wealth and power in the Republican Party elite. When recent scholars like Curtis and Herrington dare to revive developmental ideas, they are highly defensive: “Does the notion of personal development carry any credence at all in a time when notions of person and self have become so problematic?” (70). Other tendencies working against critical thinking are surveyed below.

The Divorce of Writing Instruction from Reading and Disciplinary Knowledge

By now everyone in the profession is familiar with the history of the paradigm shift that began with the Dartmouth Conference in 1966, a shift away from the previous model of composition as a mode of response to academic readings, with primary emphasis on subject matter, toward process instruction and successive spin-offs including expressivism, narrative “stories,” collaborative and community-based writing. (In theory-speak, the shift has been from hermeneutics to heuristics.) A corollary to this history is the increasing emphasis on basic writing and deemphasis on advanced composition, especially in critical reading and argumentative writing. Although we continue to pay lip service to “reading, writing, and reasoning” as the realm of our discipline, in practice that discipline has now become defined almost exclusively as writing instruction as an autonomous discipline, with reduced attention to the development of skills in reading, vocabulary, reasoning and argumentation at a level geared to prepare students for academic study in other disciplines or for the critical reading of media of public discourse such as serious journalistic periodicals, books, speeches, debates, and political deliberations. A serious consequence of this shift is that the profession of college English has pretty much washed its hands of
responsibility for, or even recognition of, the fact that students graduate from most American high schools with deficiencies in reading, reasoning, vocabulary, and world knowledge, especially in political literacy, at least as grave as those in writing.

When readings are discussed these days in professional literature, and even in textbook readers, they are often limited to a multicultural diversity of voices and narrative “stories,” which are used as prompts for students in “negotiating meaning” and telling their personal stories, with little attention to negotiating academic or journalistic readings that are outside students’ own experience. Reports in the 1980s by the National Assessment of Educational Progress indicated that there is a difficult stage-developmental step between reading or writing self-expression or narration and critical analysis and argumentation. While some recent compositionists have sought pedagogical means for facilitating that step, many others have evaded the issue by making personal writing the be-all-and-end-all of composition instruction. Thus, there has been relatively scant attention in recent composition journals, scholarly books, and conferences to argumentation, in disregard of the widespread existence of argumentative writing courses in the second term of first-year English. Even most current argumentation courses and rhetoric textbooks place primary emphasis on the generation of students’ own arguments rather than critical analysis. (One of my many frustrations in trying to publish an argumentation text based mainly on analyzing the rhetoric of national political controversies has been that teachers reviewing the manuscript insist on shifting the primary emphasis to writing instruction for students generating their own arguments, along with “coverage” of every genre and formulaic heuristic for writing arguments—the Toulmin model, Stasis Theory, and so on—which are, it seems, more easily “teachable” than “critical judgment and discrimination, enabling citizens to view political issues from an informed perspective” and “the critical use of textual and historical evidence.”) If college composition courses must privilege personal over critical writing, why can we not at least recognize the need for college-level basic and advanced courses in critical reading of expository, non-literary prose?

The culminating example of Joseph Harris’ classroom practices in A Teaching Subject is a discussion of student writing responses to the differing views on racial conflict in Spike Lee’s film Do The Right Thing, articulated in the film by the opposition between Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. These responses were apparently based purely on students’ personal experience and opinion. There is no indication that this assign-
ment was extended, as it might well have been, to reading some history of the civil rights movement and urban ghettos, the speeches of King and Malcolm, and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* or James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*, two books that I have frequently taught as models for the movement in cognitive development from personal narrative to extended, complex argument (though many students fixate on the narrative elements and need considerable prompting from the teacher in coping with the difficult vocabulary and syntax of the argumentative sections). A further challenge would be to evaluate these books against recent conservative arguments about race by authors like Thomas Sowell and David Horowitz. In Harris' more recent "Revision," he takes issue with Ira Shor's teaching emphasis on the content of political readings (environmental ones here) for writing assignments, to the neglect of process instruction, and presents as a preferable alternative an emphasis on the revision process in students' writing, supposedly about political issues. But the examples Harris gives from his own courses involve mainly reading fictional stories dealing marginally with social class, while the kind of revision he emphasizes is in the mode of writing-about-literature, and the student writing is again based purely on their personal experience and opinions, producing predictable platitudes to the effect of, Dr. Jekyll is rich and has everything he could desire, but it seems like money doesn't buy happiness. Couldn't students go on to write and revise papers about argumentative readings on social class, like Stanley Aronowitz's *False Promises: The Shaping of American Working-Class Consciousness* or Benjamin DeMott's *The Imperial Middle: Why Americans Can't Think Straight About Class*?

Our very conception of writing as an autonomous academic subject in America is symptomatic of a larger problem that has been little acknowledged in the profession. In most other contemporary democracies, reading, writing, and reasoning instruction is integrated far more into courses in academic subject areas in both secondary and college education. This split in America lets faculties in other disciplines off the hook from teaching English skills and lets English teachers off the hook from connecting their courses to other disciplines. The concept of writing across the curriculum is an admirable but insufficient attempt to remedy the damage when it is already too late. (I think it also works against the concept of English as the master discipline for critical thinking across the curriculum.) These problems were addressed in Gary Olson's *JAC* interview with none other than Jacques Derrida:
Q. Most European universities do not offer courses in writing. Is composition taught in French universities? If not, do you think that formal courses in writing should be taught there.

A. No, there is no such instruction in France. We don’t teach composition, as such. Of course, through the teaching of French and literature, there has been, or there should be, the concurrent teaching of composition. The teacher of French literature, for example requires students to write correctly, elegantly, and so forth. There are grammatical and stylistic norms. . . . There should be parallel teaching of composition everywhere: in the teaching of French literature, of history, and so on. . . . Of course, the minimal requirements in grammar, clarity of exposition, and so on can be addressed everywhere. . . .

Q. In fact, there’s a model here that we call “writing across the disciplines” in which all or many of the academic departments are involved in the teaching of writing.

A. I don’t know what your feeling is, but is it possible to teach writing without being competent in the content of a discipline? You can’t teach writing simply as a formal technique. Each technique is determined by the specific content of the field. (125–26)

Derrida, sounding rather like Allan Bloom, goes on to lament the recent decline of traditional French academic standards, in which “the pedagogy . . . was very rigorous, and the social authority of the teacher was enormous. This meant that there was an ethics of spelling, of orthographe, and every transgression, every misspelling was a crime” (126). So much for platitudes extolling post-structuralist “transgression.”

A 1991 NEH report titled National Tests: What Other Countries Expect Their Students to Know presented academic high school graduation and college entrance exam questions from Europe and Japan. The English General Certificate of Education exam in History consists of four essays in three hours, with this preface:

Ensure that you pay close attention to the specific wording of the question, answer all its aspects and maintain strict relevance to its requirements. When writing an essay, it is necessary to frame an argument and to use information as evidence to support your case; descriptive or narrative material is of limited value. Appropriate references to historical sources will be credited.

You are reminded of the necessity for good English and orderly presentation in your answers. (59; emphasis added)

The essay questions in American history include, “‘It was necessary to free the slaves to win the war; the war was not fought to free the slaves.’
Discuss this judgment of the Civil War" (59). Also, "Examine the causes and consequences of the black migration from south to north in the inter-war period" (60). And "To what extent does the conduct of American foreign policy, 1954–74, offer evidence for the existence and influence of a ‘military-industrial complex’?" (60). The other countries’ exams expect a comparable level of writing and critical thinking abilities and factual knowledge about the United States—in addition to far greater knowledge about their own countries.

Such international comparisons are, of course, complicated by many variables. It was often argued in the past, for example, that the pool of students admitted to universities was far more restricted than in America. This may have been true in the past, but much evidence suggests that the disparity has been narrowed, and even reversed, in recent decades when other countries have made a concerted effort to prepare more students and provide more financial support for college. According to one recent report, the United States declined from first place a decade ago to thirteenth in 2000 in percent of the population that goes to college (Gomstyn). Such variables, however, seem to me beside the main point. Shouldn’t the United States be willing and able to educate all students to the level of these exams? And shouldn’t we college educators be lobbying to bring about the public policies needed to raise primary and secondary education nationwide to that level?

Prejudice Against Factual Knowledge and Academic Discourse
Not only have many recent compositionists arbitrarily split off writing from academic reading and disciplinary knowledge, they have sweepingly belittled the value of factual knowledge and its use in academic discourse altogether, simplistically associating it with right-wing politics and educational policy. It is obvious from the above essay topics in National Tests, however, that a substantial bank of historical, geographical, and political facts is not just valuable but essential for enlightened progressive forces. It is an anomaly of the American culture wars that the defense of factual knowledge has been conceded to conservatives, while progressives have reasoned that if the right supports it, it must be bad. (An exception to this rule was the American Federation of Teachers report What Secondary Students Abroad Are Expected to Know, which found that European students on non-college-preparation tracks learn far more than Americans.) I admit to being bemused about agreeing with Lynne Cheney, with whom I have clashed on other matters, in citing National Tests, commissioned by her as chair of NEH. I can only surmise that
implementation of the standards in the report that she advocated would have been intolerable to Cheney, other Republican leaders, and their mass base, both in the liberal implications of many of the exam questions and in their level of difficulty, since implementing them would cost vastly more public funds for education than would ever be supported by Republicans, whose perennial calls for higher standards are rarely accompanied by comparable calls for increased spending. (Republican ideologues like Cheney and William Bennett also waffle between calling for rigorous, impartial academic or intellectual inquiry and demanding simpleminded, pro-American propaganda.) My surmise is substantiated by an episode in which a panel of distinguished historians was commissioned by Cheney at NEH to produce a set of national standards for high school history. These standards, published in 1994, were admirably close to the level of European testing in the depth of knowledge covered and in test questions demanding critical thinking and essay-writing skills, as well as being amply multicultural and recognizing the history of women and progressive movements. In one of the most disgraceful episodes of recent American history, Cheney—who by 1994 was out of office—led a Republican smear campaign against the standards in the press and the U.S. Senate, distorting their content to exaggerate their liberal bias. The standards were bizarrely made the subject of a full Senate vote, railroaded through with almost no senators having read them, and overwhelmingly defeated, with Paul Wellstone among their few defenders (see Nash et al.). I do believe that the standards authors should have included more conservative scholars and that compromises satisfactory to all could have been made if the draft had been revised within academic circles rather than being turned into another Republican culture-wars publicity offensive. Republican propagandists like Cheney, Bennett, and George Will, who under the Reagan and Bush I administrations had been pushing for national standards overseen by the federal government, hypocritically decided, first when Clinton was elected and then when they saw the history standards, to revert to being Jeffersonian champions of local control over education. The history standards fiasco marked a tragic end to any viable movement for national education standards in the foreseeable future, while postmodern diverseology has helped nail up the coffin.

Nevertheless, I think that conservatives like Cheney, Diane Ravitch, and E.D. Hirsch have been on the right track in their emphasis on deficiencies in American schooling for a common base and minimal standards of factual knowledge and vocabulary concerning civic literacy and its integration with reading and writing instruction. Academic leftists
have tended to caricature Hirsch as an educational Grandgrind and political reactionary (in many cases while showing no sign of actually having read him); however, in spite of its serious flaws, Cultural Literacy compellingly argues both that factual knowledge and critical thinking are inseparable and that cultural literacy is compatible with—indeed, essential for—an informed political left. Moreover, perhaps the most important aspect of Cultural Literacy has been virtually ignored by composition scholars: the empirical research, confirming the earlier NAEP reports showing that college students whose reading and writing skills function well in dealing with personal experience and knowledge often are stymied when they encounter academic discourse and readings with vocabulary and elementary historical or cultural allusions outside their personal knowledge (one example Hirsch gives is a reading passage that assumes minimal knowledge about the facts of the Civil War). Hirsch's much-maligned list of what every American needs to know was not intended as a commissarial edict but merely an empirical compilation of the vocabulary needed to understand "the information that is assumed without explanation in magazines like The Atlantic and general circulation books" (136). Is this such an oppressive goal to set for college graduates? Obviously, as Hirsch acknowledges, such assumed information is always in flux and open to additions, most recently of a multicultural nature. Vocabulary expansion is not a zero-sum game, as some multiculturalists seem to believe, in which one must choose either traditional or multicultural literacy, rather than constructively building on both. Hirsch has been one of the few English studies theorists in the past two decades to emphasize vocabulary building, though Gerald Graff's recent Clueless in Academe has a welcome chapter on bridging the gap between student and academic vocabularies. Finally, Hirsch's notion of cultural literacy does not imply a banking or any other model of pedagogy, and I think it can be easily incorporated into critical or teaching-the-conflicts pedagogy.

Postmodern theorists have tended to ignore, if not to denigrate, Mina Shaughnessy's analyses in Errors and Expectations of the relation of vocabulary to both the syntactic and critical-thinking dimensions of academic discourse. Shaughnessy uses both the phrase "academic discourse" (237) and a variety of other phrases including "the dominant code of literacy" and "the general dialect of literacy" (13), "the code that governs formal written English" and "the dialect of formal writing" (45), "academic language" (187), "the vocabulary of general literacy" (237), and "the idioms of academic prose" (287). Her categories in the vocabu-
lary of general literacy that basic writers need to master (216–21) incorporate elements of Hirschian cultural literacy (Gandhi, the French Revolution, Marxism), logical and critical thinking terminology (generalize, document, prove, causation, condition), modes of discourse (define, compare, summarize, interpret), and literary-rhetorical terms (irony, figures of speech, fiction, drama, novel). Moreover, she brilliantly analyzes the difficulties that student misunderstandings of both vocabulary and syntactic structure lead to in critical-thinking operations like reasoning between the personal and impersonal, abstract and concrete, past, present, and future, and coordination, subordination, cumulation and recursiveness in exposition or argument. Glib charges that Shaughnessy is elitist, teacher-centered, and concerned only with mechanical correctness may have scared scholars off from pursuing the countless useful lines of research and pedagogy outlined in Errors.

The disfavor into which Shaughnessy has fallen with postmodernists forms part of a larger assault on academic discourse and the authority of teachers initiating students into that discourse. One of the first phases of this assault was Paulo Freire’s critique of “the banking model” of teaching. Freireans, however, generally do not wholly reject either academic discourse or teachers’ authority; most Freirean teachers, while beginning “where students are at,” try to guide students from that place into critical consciousness of the political world and to make academic discourse accessible to them toward that consciousness. In this respect, Freireans (and I consider myself one, with qualifications) are allied with other educators who, following Shaughnessy, find value in academic discourse and argumentation, seeking various means to bridge the gap between student and academic discourse and to integrate the latter with feminist, multicultural, working-class, and national/international political concerns. These include Patricia Bizzell, Bruce Herzberg, Lester Faigley, David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky, Kathleen McCormick, bell hooks, Gerald Graff, Stephen Parks and Eli Goldblatt, Susan Jarratt, Deborah Meier, and Lisa Delpit. Freireans in turn, however, have come under attack by a whole wave of postmodernists like Elizabeth Ellsworth, Kurt Spellmeyer, Richard Miller, Stephen Fishman and Lucille McCarthy, and Harris, who accuse them of being authoritarians who, under the guise of liberating students, coerce them into their own political ideology.

Many postmodern accounts of academic discourse are highly reductive. It is merely “the kind of rarified talk and writing that go on at conferences and in journals” (Harris, Teaching 106–07). It is “the production of legitimate (read specialized, publishable, esoteric, aca-
ademic) language, which gains material, cultural and symbolic capital by implicitly devaluing nonstandard (read colloquial, vernacular, common, vulgar) language” (Cushman, “Public” 334–35). It, along with the entire institution of “schooling in the United States as well as in the Third World, is a class-based enterprise, serving the status quo and making few allowances for students whose home experiences with language and literacy deviated from middle-class ‘ways with words’” (Daniell 399).

But is academic discourse the monolithic, exclusionary evil that such accounts suggest? To begin with, it is not simply the intramural jargon of academics but, as Shaughnessy says, “the common language not only of the university but of the public and professional world outside” (187)—the common language of national and international political discourse, of books, newspapers, and magazines whose audience is college-educated. If this is the case, and if, as Daniell claims, “restricting access to literacy is an effective way to deprive particular groups of power” (399), are we doing members of communities traditionally deprived of college education a service by telling them their own culture is a sufficient alternative to academic culture and that they shouldn’t want the kind of education that we have been privileged with? Shouldn’t we instead be doing everything we can to enable them to gain access to academic discourse for their own empowerment?

Furthermore, academic discourse cannot be as exclusionary and oppressive as Daniell and Cushman claim, as is evidenced by its having been accessible to them and its other critics, as well as to many like me, for whom college education and its introduction to cosmopolitan culture served as a liberation from a stiflingly provincial local culture. This leads to the most important, and what should be the most obvious, point here—that the academic and intellectual worlds are far from being the monoliths of domination depicted by these critics. The history of Western universities, intellectual culture, and the facilely-derided literary canon has been variegated and contested, between dominant cultural forces and those of dissent, reform, and even revolution. Yes, this culture has always included its prejudices, but it has also incorporated opposition to them. Indeed, I think a preferable phrase to “academic discourse” is the marxist sociologist Alvin Gouldner’s “the culture of critical discourse” (28). This phrase signifies that academic and intellectual discourse are a unique site for the fostering of all aspects of critical thinking, aspects that are necessary (though not sufficient in themselves) means for challenging the mainstream social forces of authoritarianism, ethnocentrism, and conformity. How could such an oppressive institution as the university produce
Toni Morrison, Edward Said, Noam Chomsky, bell hooks, Howard Zinn, Richard Ohmann, and legions of others who have merited right-wing attacks on the academic world as the bastion of adversarial values? This is not to deny that non-academic communities are also frequently sites of critical thinking and oppositional culture, but only to defend against killer dichotomies that position the two sites as mutually exclusive. (Cushman, to her great credit, in “The Public Intellectual” does say she wants to overcome this dichotomy and successfully connects the two sites in her description of a graduate course she taught in which the students combined academic studies in literacy theory with activist research working with children in an inner-city literacy program.)

A moment’s thought makes it evident that countless leaders of domestic and colonial revolutions, movements for African-Americans’, women’s, and workers’ liberation have drawn strength from their acquisition of the culture of critical discourse—even when, like nineteenth-century feminists and slaves such as Frederick Douglass, they were denied access to formal education. It is equally evident that all of these postmodern attacks on academic discourse are written in that same discourse, yet few of their authors pause to consider the implications of this fact. I find it especially anomalous that so many works praising non-academic, local communities and discourses are written in pretentious jargon—clogged with “interpellation,” “imbrication,” “inscription,” “formations,” and “discursive interventions”—not remotely comprehensible to the peoples they champion. Why is there a need to approach immediate problems in American society circuitously, by slavishly imitating the most opaque European philosophy, obscuring the trees with a dense forest of “theorizing”? In recent years we have largely been spared earlier postmodernist orthodoxies to the effect that you can’t use the master’s tools to tear down the master’s house, or that reasoned discourse and polemical argument are no more than a masculinist snare and delusion. Somewhere along the line it must have dawned on even the most zealous exponents of this line that in the very process of voicing it they were refuting it. Nor did these injunctions succeed in deterring great polemists like Susan Sontag, Arundhati Roy, Molly Ivins, Barbara Ehrenreich, Barbara Kingsolver, and Martha Nussbaum.

A final anomaly is the constant invocation of poststructuralist theory in trashing academic discourse and the literary canon. Derrida, in his interview with Olson, says, “I think that if what is called ‘deconstruction’ produces neglect of the classical authors, the canonical texts, and so on, we should fight it. . . . I’m in favor of the canon, but I won’t stop there.
I think that students should *read* what are considered the great texts in our tradition—even if that's not enough, even if we have to change the canon, even if we have to open the field and to bring into the canonical tradition other texts from other cultures. If deconstruction is only a pretense to ignore minimal requirements or knowledge of the tradition, it could be a bad thing" (131).

**The Limits of the Classroom as a Contact Zone**

One prominent alternative in current composition studies to affirmation of academic discourse and the authority of teachers in initiating students into it is, in Harris' words, “the classroom as a contested space where many discourses and cultures may meet and struggle with each other” (*Teaching* 117), that offers “ways of bringing differing positions not simply in contact but also in meaningful interchange with each other . . . a forum where students can articulate (and thus perhaps also become more responsive to) differences among themselves,” and “a classroom where student writings . . . serve as positions in an argument whose blessings we can count and measure together, but whose final merits we can leave students to judge for themselves” (123, 115). This was the position favored in *CCC* under Harris' editorship, often articulated in opposition to Freirean critical pedagogy and cultural studies—most prominently in the October 1996 issue, where it was reiterated in Susan Wells' “Rogue Cops,” Fishman and McCarthy's “Teaching for Student Change” (“Conflict must always occur within the context of appreciation for cooperative inquiry and the virtues that sustain it” [344]), and Spellmeyer's malicious review of *Left Margins: Cultural Studies and Composition Pedagogy*, edited by Karen Fitts and Alan France, savaging the contempt its contributors allegedly show toward students' home cultures and personal sensitivities, and for such critical teachers' attempts to “coerce” students into submission to their own leftist, cosmopolitan views.

I see three limitations to this concept of the classroom as a site of negotiating differences among students. First, how can students “articulate differences among themselves” about issues like political elections and legislation, the military-industrial complex, third-world sweatshops, or Middle-Eastern geopolitics, about which few students in a class might have sufficient factual knowledge? A similar problem arises with attempts at student-centered literature courses, which often founder because few students have adequate critical reading skills or background knowledge of readings' historical and other contexts. Second, what about
the many colleges where the student body is not the zesty multicultural mix of voices always envisioned by diverseologues, but overwhelmingly white, middle class, late-adolescent, small-town or suburban, Republican, and Christian, as at the four colleges where I have taught over the past quarter-century? At such colleges even the few minority and immigrant students tend to be conservatives eager to assimilate into the dominant American social structure, and the majority of women are quick to insist that they aren’t feminists. In these colleges, where differences among the students tend to be minimal, isn’t it the responsibility of the teacher to “coerce” students into confronting topics, readings, and data that challenge the ethnocentric consensus? (In other colleges where the socio-economic mix of students is the opposite and the consensus is liberal, the teachers’ responsibility would be to compensate by presenting conservative viewpoints.) Third, there is an increasingly large presence, especially at colleges like these, of conservative students who emulate the bellicose manner of Rush Limbaugh, Ann Coulter, and Bill O’Reilly attempting to intimidate liberal students, and even teachers, into silence, with zero “appreciation for cooperative inquiry.” Some of these students belong to the networks created by Republican-front organizations including Young Americans for Freedom, Young America’s Foundation, the Leadership Institute, the Collegiate Network, and the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, which fund, train, and coordinate college conservatives as classroom provocateurs (see Colapinto). Will those like Spellmeyer, Harris, Miller, Fishman and McCarthy, who are so solicitous about respecting student sensitivities, please tell us how teachers are supposed to deal with these classroom bullies without being coercive or domineering?

Postmodernists who disparage the authority of teachers often seem blind to the obvious truths that we know a lot more than our students do about many important subjects, that we are more experienced and traveled in realms outside of most students’ scope, that we are more adept in the culture of critical discourse, and that, consequently, we have, or should have, the right and responsibility to convey what we know to them in classroom practice that must go beyond “a forum where students can articulate . . . differences among themselves.” Today’s challenge is to explore means of conveying that knowledge through pedagogy that is, to every reasonable extent, not mere “banking” but dialogical, interactive, and respectful of students’ own realms of knowledge—means that have been modeled by various Freireans and other theorists like those listed in my previous section. (I must pay tribute here to Ira Shor, who for over a quarter-century has been conducting an awesomely scrupulous, inge-
nious exploration of these problems, even though he reduces the authority
of teachers more than I am comfortable with.) Nevertheless, neither
postmodern diverseologues nor Freireans in general have realistically
acknowledged that a sound education, especially at the elementary and
secondary levels, necessitates a certain level of banking of factual
knowledge, standards, and coercion, if you will, by authorities in selec­
tion of subjects studied, and that it always will, unless we are ready to
abandon the ideal of universal public education—a prospect whose most
enthusiastic backers would be Christian conservatives, voucher advog­
cates, and schools-for-profit privateers. We just need to assert ourselves
to become the authorities in implementing progressive standards. (I see
those standards including factual knowledge of basic political vocabulary
and opposing ideological or partisan positions, knowledge that needs to
encompass the complex ways in which ideology and partisanship bias the
definitions and points of opposition themselves. Such a base of
factual knowledge must precede any effective cultural/political critique,
for as Graff observes, many students don’t feel coerced by leftist teachers
so much as baffled by what they’re talking about.) These truths are taken
for granted by most educators, including leftists, in most other countries
and other academic fields. Why is it only American scholars in English
who work themselves up into excesses of anti-intellectualism and self­
hatred in their phobia of factual knowledge and their perceived collusion
in domination, coercion, and elitism?

Acting and Thinking Locally: The Shrinking of the Public Sphere
I see two main sources of postmodern theory favoring local cultures and
discourses over cosmopolitan ones. The first line seems to derive, directly
or indirectly, from sources including Jean-François Lyotard’s *The
Postmodern Condition*, Hannah Arendt’s *The Human Condition*, and
Clifford Geertz’s “local knowledge,” while pushing their ideas to ex­
tremes never envisioned by their authors; for example, these authors
champion local communities, but not to the point of condoning indiffer­
ence to, or ignorance of, national and international politics in literacy
education, as some postmodernists seem tacitly to do. Thus, Daniell,
after making a persuasive critique of the oversimplified killer dichoto­
mies grounding the “great leap” theory of orality versus literacy, advo­
cates in their place the trend toward studies in “little narratives [that]
almost all examine literacy in particular local settings,” conducted by
scholars who “seldom make theoretical statements that claim to be valid
for literate persons in general or literate cultures in general” (403). But is
a theory of literacy that would make accessible to all persons the culture of critical discourse in higher education and knowledge of international and national politics, economics, and intellectual media, an invalid one, no more than a "grand narrative" to be shunned by our students in favor of being restricted to their local culture? Isn't Daniell creating yet another killer dichotomy?

In a *College English* article, "Service Learning and English Studies," Aaron Schutz and Anne Ruggles Gere outlined a theoretical justification for an argumentative writing course Schutz taught, keyed to service learning and community activism, with the culminating example of students collaboratively researching and writing about campus issues like a case of racial discrimination in their student union. I wrote a comment in a later issue of *CE* admiring their approach while offering a "friendly amendment" suggesting extending such assignments to national politics and offering the example of an assignment I gave at Loyola College in Baltimore in 1997, in which students collaborated on communicating with their representatives in Washington and with national journalists concerning disputes over a part of the recent Republican Contract With America's euphemistically titled "Personal Responsibility Act" that reduced funds for the federal school lunch program. (Republicans claimed they were in fact increasing them, just at a reduced rate of growth, though Democrats claimed this amounted to a net loss after inflation.) The students pooled their results—which clearly showed Democrats telling the truth and Republicans equivocating or stonewalling—and they individually wrote op-ed columns to submit to local newspapers. Schutz and Gere's response was churlishly doctrinaire, insisting on the superiority of their approach:

Schutz's class encouraged students to work toward a discursive intervention into the larger community . . . and not just write about it for a teacher. . . . In addition, Lazere's project appears to have been designed to engage students more as individuals than as collective groups. . . . Finally, Lazere presents his project as an effort that moves beyond the limited "local" nature of Schutz's class. In his effort to address national issues, however, Lazere appears to have avoided exploring the impacts this policy change might have on actual people in particular local contexts. (358–59)

Never mind that I said most of the students at this private college lived in affluent local contexts unaffected by cuts in school lunch subsidies and that the main result of the assignment was to shake their faith in the credibility of Republican rhetoric. Comrade Lazere was guilty of bour-
geois anti-discursive-interventionism in believing that American college students can benefit from individual engagement with national and international issues without immediate reference to their own communities.

In *Arts of Living*, Spellmeyer asserts, “In a genuine democracy, all politics become local politics because the decision making that matters most occurs at the local levels. By the same token, a democratic culture will not teach us to look beyond our actual lives for the solution to our problems; it will remind us instead that solutions of some sort always lie at hand, even when our hands have been tied” (9). The untenability of this position is inadvertently exposed later in Spellmeyer’s book when he proposes an agenda for contemporary humanistic studies that would address “central problems of our time—globalization, the environmental crisis, the growing split between the haves and have nots, the erosion of well-defined cultures, the disappearance of the transcendent” (20). He also praises a faculty proposal for curricular reform he had a hand in at Rutgers that “acknowledged openly what everyone knew but seldom vocalized: that college students across the United States graduate without an adequate understanding of their society, their world, and their times.” The committee recommended, “instead of a core curriculum . . . courses designed around ‘dialogues’ on the issues of consequence to society as a whole. The idea was to give students the intellectual tools—the information and the interpretive paradigms—to explore both the problems of the coming century and their possible solutions” (242–43). Spellmeyer never acknowledges the contradiction between these opposing positions, nor does he explore possible ways of reconciling them—as Freireans and Graff, both of whom Spellmeyer sneers at, have done.

All this Rousseauan romanticizing of local cultures glosses over the fact that now and in the past, they have as often been politically reactionary as progressive. They are currently the “red state” electoral bedrock of the Republican Party. For those raised in such cultures, exposure in college and elsewhere to cosmopolitan views is an avenue toward decentering their ethnocentric prejudices. If empowering conservative, provincial bigotry is part of postmodern theorists’ agenda, they should at least be straightforward about it.

A second line of theory privileging the local derives from discussions of the terms “public discourse” and “the public sphere.” Several postmodern theorists praise Michael Halloran’s 1982 “Rhetoric in the American College Curriculum: The Decline of Public Discourse.” Christian Weisser summarizes Halloran’s case that the eighteenth-century
American origins of modern English studies consisted of educating secondary and college students for oratory and debate on political issues, and he notes Halloran’s qualifier, “rarely were the topics of discussion limited to subjective or local matters” (44). Weisser briefly cites Lester Faigley’s endorsement of Halloran’s project of restoring the rhetoric of national public discourse into our studies, and then turns to several other recent theorists who cite Halloran and/or Faigley, preeminently Susan Wells in “Rogue Cops” (to which I will return). Weisser fails to register, however, that these theorists no sooner pay homage to Halloran and Faigley, than they switch from their national scope to “local matters.” This unexplained slippage from the national to the local can be seen, for example, in Cushman’s “The Rhetorician,” which begins with a citation from Halloran, then states, “One way to increase our participation in public discourse is to bridge the university and community through activism” (7). However, Cushman’s examples of activism and service learning, both here and in “Public Intellectuals” (though irreproachable in themselves, as noted above) are all local. Likewise, in the chapter “Community” in A Teaching Subject, Harris, without citing Halloran, discusses other recent thinkers’ use of the term public “in theorizing a large scale [author’s emphasis] form of democracy, as a key (if troubled) means of bridging the interests of local communities and individuals with those of a state or nation” (108). But rather than pursue this “bridging,” he immediately and thenceforth throughout his book shifts the focus to local civic and classroom communities. Again, it is perfectly justifiable to turn academic attention to previously neglected local communities, but not to the unwarranted exclusion of national and international communities or issues.

“The public sphere” is mainly associated with Jürgen Habermas, whose The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, has prompted many appropriations in rhetoric and composition, most of which take issue with Habermas’ focus on national public spheres and posit instead a diversity of smaller, local publics and “counter-publics.” Wells’ “Rogue Cops,” a much-cited example, is eloquent and compelling in many ways, but I remain puzzled over several key points in it which typify this line of postmodern theory. First, without any explicit justification for this, Wells’ examples of “public literate action” nearly all are local rather than national ones. They include a Temple student who wrote a complaint after being brutalized by Philadelphia police, and the conversation at a neighborhood meeting between whites and blacks about crime. It would be patronizing to suggest that people engaged in such community struggles
should or could find the energy to connect their local problems with pertinent national political policies, but mightn't scholars who become involved in struggles like these provide a useful service by drawing on the resources of academic discourse to contribute those connections?

The only national case Wells devotes substantial space to concerns the rhetorical problems facing President Clinton in trying to sell his national health insurance plan to the public. Wells says, "In spite of Clinton's palpable desire for a broad public debate, and the force with which he expressed it in the health care speech, we had no debate, no health care reform" (331). Her analysis of this situation is restricted to the complexities involved in addressing a fragmented public sphere, and while conceding that "the failure of health care reform was not primarily rhetorical," she says nothing about what the primary cause was—the Republican attack machine, in league with the HMO and pharmaceutical lobbies, conducting a campaign of lies and deceptions like the "Harry and Louise" commercial (331).

Unlike Fishman-McCarthy's and Spellmeyer's articles in the same issue of CCC, Wells' does support critical pedagogy and cultural studies, but with some qualifications and somewhat marginally. She says about Faigley's endorsement of cultural studies in writing courses, "Faigley advocates the analysis of literacy rather than public literate action . . . Cultural studies has made invaluable contributions to political pedagogy, but it does not answer the question of how students can speak in their own skins to a broad audience with some hope of effectiveness" (334). This is a valid point, and I accept it as a limitation in my own work, although I find more value than she does in individual classroom writing assignments like her example of a student writing on gun control, which she describes as writing in a vacuum, "since there is no place within the culture where student writing on gun control is held to be of general interest" (328). Isn't researching, synthesizing, and analyzing opposed arguments on this topic into a paper a valuable learning experience, which might well be subsequently applied to influencing legislation, working with gun control organizations, and so forth?

Wells goes on to say, "Given the intractable fragmentation of our own public sphere, it is likely that the representations of the public we offer students beyond the classroom will be provisional; we will look for alternate publics and counter publics" (335). But is the public sphere really that intractable, and do alternate publics need to be invented from scratch? Don't plenty already exist, nationally and internationally, in oppositional electoral and legislative politics, parties like the Greens and
Labor Party (and even the currently marginalized democratic wing of the Democratic Party); the national communitarian movement, activist groups for environmentalism and peace and against globalization; civil, women’s, and gay rights organizations and media activism groups; labor unions (including those of teachers, regular and contingent college faculty, and graduate students); the journalistic circles of The Nation, In These Times, The Progressive, Z Magazine, Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting, and Pacifica Radio? These activist arenas can all be linked to composition instruction and other realms of university activity. Wells neglects the corporatized university itself as a site of national political struggle and, even as it is presently constituted, as a base for counter-publics.

I find the whole discussion of the public sphere in Wells, Schutz and Gere, and other postmodern theorists (as well surveyed by Weisser) disconcertingly vague, convoluted, and oblivious to the most glaring realities controlling public discourse in America today. Foremost among those realities is the unprecedented consolidation of wealth and power in the hands of fewer and fewer individuals and corporations, with near-totalitarian control of elections and government, the media, the economy, the courts, and education—all devoted to manufacturing public consent. Although these forces largely dominate both the Republicans and Democrats through campaign-funding and lobbying, their most extreme controllers have established through the Republican Party a highly-coordinated machinery of power and propaganda that threatens to turn America into a one-party country. This machinery includes not only multinational corporation executives and the whole military-industrial complex, but PACs, party operatives and spin-doctoring consultants, public relations and advertising agencies, foundations and think tanks, media empires like that of Rupert Murdoch (along with all the rest of the American system of media owned by corporations and controlled by advertisers), radio and TV attack dogs of the Limbaugh-Coulter-O’Reilly school, conservative women’s, African-Americans’, and religious fronts, and the judicial empire of the Federalist Society for Law and Public Policies (whose members include William Rehnquist, Antonin Scalia, Clarence Thomas, Kenneth Starr, Robert Bork, and a host of Bush nominees for judgeships—see Brock). These elites also cynically manipulate for their own electoral advantage conservative populist movements on social and religious issues, demonizing us as the liberal cultural elite. Their academic branches—including the National Association of Scholars, Lynne Cheney’s American Council of Trustees and Alumni, David Horowitz, and the groups organizing college students identified above—for the past
two decades have waged ceaseless war against both the academic humanities and public elementary and secondary education, seeking to cripple public schools and squeeze out liberal teachers and their unions, through tax cuts, privatization, vouchers, and "Channel One"-style classroom propaganda. Yet, one looks in vain for any extensive concern with these "grand narratives" in rhetcomp scholarly journals (JAC being the most prominent exception), books, and conferences.

The ever-increasing domination of American public discourse by the above forces has amply confirmed the continuing relevance of Herbert Marcuse’s 1964 One-Dimensional Man, a book that seems to me to warrant as much attention in English studies as Habermas’ The Structural Transformation has received lately. Postmodernists claim that Marcuse and Frankfurt School critical theory have been outdated by all the recent explorations of resistance, transgression, appropriation, negotiation of meaning, multiple discourses, literacies, and subject identities, classroom and community contact zones. But when all is said and done, isn’t the power structure of American politics, mass communication, and the economy even more one-dimensional, stupefying, and infantilizing in the age of President George W. Bush and Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger than when Marcuse was writing? And can local classroom and community discourses really function free of influence by the all-pervasive, dominant political/cultural discourse? Many postmodern exercises in diverseology strike me as wistful revivals of the 1960s countercultural faith that if we all do our own thing, the military-industrial complex will just wither away. It is all reminiscent of the Shel Silverstein cartoon about the two men shackled hand and foot to a prison wall, one of whom says, “Now here’s my plan.”

**What Is to Be Done?**

I make the immodest, and basically conservative, proposal that we redefine English studies as a discipline centered on critical thinking and national public rhetoric, which will, as in Halloran’s account of the eighteenth-century American model of English studies, “address students as political beings, as members of a body politic in which they have a responsibility to form judgments and influence the judgments of others on public issues” (108). Or, as Susan Searls Giroux and Henry Giroux recently put it in Tikkun, “Pedagogy as a critical practice should foster the classroom conditions that provide the knowledge, skills, and culture of questioning necessary for students to engage in critical dialogue with the past; question authority and its effects; struggle with ongoing relations of
power; and prepare themselves for what it means to be critically active citizens in the inter-related local, national, and global public spheres” (30). (The Girouexes have been admirably eloquent advocates of critical pedagogy in many scholarly and general-circulation journals and books, as well as at CCCC conventions. Both of them, however, happen to teach in a school of education, not an English department or writing program, as does John Marciano, author of the laudable Civic Illiteracy and Education.)

Our classroom studies should address the rhetoric of debates on international, national, and local issues in politics, environmentalism, and, above all, economics as it impinges directly on every student’s life in topics like globalization and sweatshop labor as they lead to job loss and attrition of unions in America; the exponentially growing gap between the wealthy and the middle class and poor, between executives and workers, and between big and small business; the cost of health care and insurance; progressive versus regressive tax policies and their effect on funding of public services like education, including the increased financial squeeze on college students. (An anonymous composition director reviewing my textbook manuscript emphasizing these topics commented, “Students aren’t interested in such abstract economic issues, but they’d be very interested in a debate on the economics of Napster.” Teachers like this are collaborators in infantilization.)

My own feeling is that it has become increasingly difficult in the past decade for progressive teachers to retain a semblance of classroom neutrality in the face of the all-out siege against liberalism by conservatives. Both conservative and postmodern-progressive critics of critical pedagogy seem far less concerned with the massive modes of coercion used by conservative forces than with the infinitely smaller scale of coercion by leftist teachers imperfectly seeking means to counteract the right. We can, however, in fairness incorporate conservative views versus leftist ones in teaching-the-conflicts pedagogy, especially on the very topics of partisanship and bias, that both foregrounds and buffers our own partisan biases.

Concerning our scholarly pursuits, we should be inspired by Edward Said’s statement two years before his untimely death: “At the dawn of the twenty-first century, the writer has taken on more and more of the intellectual’s adversarial attributes in such activities as speaking the truth to power, being a witness to persecution and suffering, and supplying a dissenting voice in conflicts with authority” (27). We can begin by turning our research and writing—professional and public—to studies of
Donald Lazere

the rhetoric of these national debates. Today's best-seller lists are filled with liberal and conservative polemics with titles like *Bias* and *What Liberal Media?* and *Slander and Lies and the Lying Liars Who Tell Them* and *Big Lies*—a phenomenon that recalls Orwell's judgment in "Politics and the English Language: "In our age, there is no such thing as 'keeping out of politics.' All issues are political issues, and politics itself is a mass of lies, evasions, folly, hatred and schizophrenia" (256). Surely there is rich material for serious scholarly analysis of what's going on rhetorically in all this invective. (Another reviewer of my textbook manuscript said of the analyses of left-versus-right polemics, "Postmodern theory has rendered such binary oppositions obsolete." Right, so we shouldn't teach students to understand and take part in the dominant modes of debate in our society?) Few English studies scholars, outside of Rhetoricians for Peace, Teachers for a Democratic Culture, and the MLA Radical Caucus, are publicly addressing these issues; we have defaulted to educationists like the Girouxes, speech-communicationists, and linguists like Noam Chomsky, Deborah Tannen, Robin Lakoff, George Lakoff, and Geoffrey Nunberg. (See the excellent section on the control of public language by conservatives since 9/11 in *The American Prospect*, including articles by Tannen, George Lakoff, and Nunberg.)

To recapitulate, none of my proposals here are intended to belittle or exclude any of the wonderful, current projects for academic or neighborhood community-building; but neither should they exclude mine. Our challenge is to cooperate in multiplying means through which the two lines can be connected, not to multiply killer dichotomies. Can't we all just get along?

Notes

1. It strikes me that in its most fruitful forms, the current movement of localism hearkens back to anarcho-communitarian political thought from the late 1940s to early 60s, expressed by Arendt and other writers like Albert Camus, Paul Goodman, Dwight Macdonald, and Tom Hayden (in Students for a Democratic Society's "Port Huron Statement"), and had its fruition in community organizing projects undertaken by Dorothy Day, Saul Alinsky, SDS's Economic Research and Action Project, and above all the civil rights movement (see Gitlin on all these sources). These writers and movements, however, combined local activism with equally active resistance against super-power politics nationally and inter-

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nationally. Current activists might well benefit from study of these sources on this combination.

2. In an exemplary session at the 2002 CCCC convention titled "'Something Happens Here': Discourses of Social Justice versus the Politics of Containment," Phyllis Menzell Ryder, Angela Hewett, Rachel Riedner, and Mark Mullen reported as George Washington University instructor and observer-participants in the A-16 globalization protests in Washington, contrasting eye-witness accounts with national media distortions.

3. Those postmodernists who have lurched from the extreme of Frankfurt School unqualified denunciation of mass culture to the other extreme of uncritical celebration have given cultural studies a bad name. These celebrants fallaciously charge that when critical theorists say mass politics and commercial culture are stuperfying and contemptuous of the public, the critics are being contemptuous of the public itself; this fallacy lets the politicians and media corporations off the hook. My own estimate is that the American public is considerably less stuperfied than the Frankfurt School supposed—especially among the poor, minorities, and blue-collar workers, whose harsh personal experience provides a skeptical shield against gullibility—but considerably more so than postmodernists are willing to admit—especially among conservative Middle Americans, with whom I think I have had far more close contact than many academics who sentimentalize them from a distance.

4. I owe thanks to Patricia Roberts-Miller, Harriet Malinowitz, Jennifer Trainor, Gerald Graff, Jeanne Gunner, and Mary Jo Reiff for sympathetic readings in manuscript of what, alas, seems to be a controversial article.

Works Cited


Gary A. Olson Award Winners

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