stigmatization, we also need to affirm the role of each individual in perpetuating destructive social systems of injustice. Giving sympathy to the devil may prevent us from realizing that the devil is in the details.

University of California
Los Angeles, California

Works Cited


Rhetoric and Service-Learning

T. R. Johnson

In “Teaching for Social Justice: Reeducating the Emotions through Literary Study,” Mark Bracher elucidates quite eloquently the central anxiety that has haunted me—and, I suspect, many of my colleagues—for quite some time, and most acutely in recent years. Bracher asks, in short, what is the value of what we do? More broadly, academic humanists have increasingly embraced over the last three or four decades certain frameworks such as feminism, psychoanalysis, Marxism, and postcolonialism that seek explicitly to promote social justice and alleviate human suffering by delineating the complex forces that supersede and even overwhelm individuals in the creation of social problems—and yet the dominant movement among government officials in this same period has increas-
ingly fostered an indifference to the larger forces at work in social problems and has emphasized instead the individual’s own responsibility for the struggles and pains he or she endures. In other words, what professors teach is precisely what politicians erase. Are we, then, powerless? Is all our work for naught?

“There is little evidence that literary study has made much difference in the injustice that permeates our world,” says Bracher, “and there is good reason to believe that literary study as it is currently being pursued is incapable of doing so” (463). A grim verdict, and not one I can dispute. Bracher is especially helpful in explaining why we’ve been ineffectual: not because we’re a “small and effete minority” with no access to power (463), but rather because we’ve not learned how to use the power we do have. More specifically, we often assume that it’s unethical to change our students, for that would be an imposition of our values upon them, and thus, drawing on Geoffrey Harpham, Bracher suggests that our intellectual work in the realm of ethics has instead only generated endlessly rarified degrees of refinement, teased out ever subtler distinctions, yet more abstract generalizations, and more and more waves of insoluble quandaries, that, taken together, are properly understood as only a stalling action, an elaborate resistance to real engagement with the world, an evasion that masquerades as moral “purity.” But when we strive to avoid imposing our values on students, we forget that the definitive purpose of pedagogy is to change students, to enable them to share our perceptual powers, to help them see complexity where others insist they see nothing at all.

We need to throw over, then, our pretense to “purity,” says Bracher, and instead self-consciously develop concrete methods for changing our students, and, through them, our world. But how to do this? Bracher’s answer, to me, is convincing but incomplete. We need to go much farther in the direction that he suggests. Actually, with literary study as traditionally, narrowly defined—reading and discussing books—we probably can’t do better than to follow Bracher’s guidelines; however, as I’ll explain, with more sweeping reforms, we stand a much greater chance of solving the problem he delineates.

In essence, I worry that Bracher’s suggestion that we lead students to entertain greater and greater complexity only leads them more deeply into
what he (and Harpham) rightly delineate as the academy's signature move in the domain of ethics: an evermore thoughtful parsing of abstraction as a sort of stalling action, an evasion of real engagement with the world. I'm certainly not opposed to complexity—in fact, I'll offer here ways to build on Bracher's methods for helping students to conceive greater complexity, to help them generate and manage still more complexity, and what's more to "own" it—but I also want to balance this welter of intellection with actual experience that students are likely to remember for years to come. I'm sure Bracher does too, and I'm confident he'll agree with what I'll recommend.

Bracher proposes that we recalibrate our pedagogy to intervene in our students' emotional lives, and he draws on Lynn Worsham's landmark essay, "Going Postal: Pedagogic Violence and the Schooling of Emotion," to detail yet more carefully the problem and to set the stage for his solution. First, he notes that people are generally motivated far more by affect than by "conscious knowledge and values;" and because feelings trump facts, we can't simply organize our pedagogy around the goal of making students superficially more informed. Second, he borrows from Worsham the additional point that our educational institutions are already deeply engaged in shaping students' feelings, for schools, in Worsham's words, "inculcate patterns of feeling that support the legitimacy of dominant interests" (qtd. in Bracher 469). Because we are already involved in shaping students' emotional lives and because emotions are the primary motivator of human behavior, we should do what we can to redirect students' patterns of emotional response from patterns of indifference to patterns of sympathy and compassion.

To do so, Bracher turns to psychology, but what he finds there doesn't quite strike me as adequate to the problem he has so deftly outlined. He asks us to consider cognitive schemas, which are "generalized knowledge structures that govern most of our higher-order mental activities, including attention, perception, recognition, recall, judgment, expectation, fantasy, emotion, and hence behavior" (479-80). One sort of cognitive schema is the causal schema, which simply enough organizes how an individual understands what causes some particular event or situation. Our students, suggests Bracher, too often have "faulty causal schema" that lead them to understand social problems and human suffering as
matters that originate simply in the moral nature of the individuals involved—rather than in the complex cultural and institutional forces that academics can prove are their real source.

Bracher gives us a clear picture of how these ideas from cognitive psychology systematically shape his classroom. His students read literature (which, he notes, can be thought of as texts designed precisely to complicate and extend our cognitive schemas), and then develop the most complex understandings possible of what causes a certain character to behave a certain way. More specifically, Bracher follows the arguments of Richard Rorty, Martha Nussbaum, and Robert Solomon in asking his students to read sad, sentimental works, tragedies, and "protest novels" like those we associate with Steinbeck, Sinclair, and Stowe, for these novels are explicitly composed to stir sympathy and decry injustice. And then he gives his students sets of questions to answer that not only lead them to more complex understandings of causation, but that also draw their attention to the very problems that truncated or faulty causal schemas produce and how. In other words, he teaches his students about "schema therapy" and how, through literature, to practice it on themselves and, through discussion, each other. The more they practice it, presumably, the more they internalize it, and, as they habitually see more complex causes for behaviors, events, and situations, they presumably grow more compassionate and—again, presumably—are more likely to work toward remedying the problems that cause people to suffer.

Bracher beautifully describes the goals of his teaching—getting his students to identify faulty causal schemas and the problems these can generate, and in turn, helping them to replace these schemas with richer, more complex ones. However, I worry that his way of reaching these goals—simply asking students to answer much the same, even formulaic questions every time they read a book—may not be enough to spur them to change the world. It might not even be enough to change the way they think and feel to a meaningful degree, much less for any length of time. After all, as he himself notes, the academic work of reading, thinking, and talking can serve as only a stalling action, an evasion of real social engagement. What's more, the work of developing more complex answers to questions of why people do what they do may, at the end of the day, only be a sort of information-game that students can quickly master.
and begin to perform in the most perfunctory way without ever moving
toward the domain of feeling, much less the world outside the classroom.
At worst, I fear that some students might come to see the work of filling
in the blanks in Bracher’s formula as a sort of busywork, and, as such,
fairly forgettable.

How, then, can we change the faulty, truncated causal schemas that
govern students’ interaction with the world? And how can we heighten
their interaction with the world? I have two suggestions that build on
Bracher’s work, one that draws on the ancient and the other on the
radically new. First, instead of teaching students to use only cognitive
psychology to interpret literature, we should also teach them, in very
specific ways that I’ll outline in a moment, the arts of rhetoric to engage
in public discourse, and we should do so without relying on formulae but
rather on methods that give students some sense of ownership or, better
yet, accountability for the complexity that they themselves generate.
Secondly, and more radically, we should create a service-learning com­
ponent for each of our courses. I’ll elaborate this second suggestion after
I explain what I mean by rhetoric.

Granted, when a causal schema is especially truncated and inade­
quate as a formula for interpreting some phenomenon, it leads to a
simplistic response, such as that the sufferer’s problems are entirely her
own fault, whereas a more developed causal shema will lead to more
informed responses, ones that trace out the far more elaborate assem­
blages of forces that have led to the individual’s suffering. In essence,
therefore, our goal is to get our students to generate a sense of complexity,
for this complexity can enable compassion, and, in turn, altruistic action.
Therefore, I recommend courses not simply in cognitive psychological
formulae for discussing sentimental, tragic “protest novels,” but rather
courses that no matter what their thematic content (protest novels, film
noir, William Faulkner, Victorian ghost stories, whatever) are ultimately
courses in rhetoric, for rhetoric gives students flexible, widely applicable
tools for invention and revision, style and structure, that enable them to
build—on their own, without any fill-in-the-blanks formulae—evermore
complex, evermore coherent, and hence evermore powerful texts that can
become explicit interventions in the public sphere. What I’m recom­
mending, in short, is a pedagogy that pursues precisely Bracher’s goals
but that does so by far more ambitious means. I don’t think that simply
discussing a certain kind of literature according to certain formulae can
get us where he wants us to go. But I do think we can get there with two
additional steps: by cultivating as rigorously as possible the broader,
more flexible, more open-ended territory that is rhetoric, and by
anchoring this study explicitly in experiences of the public sphere, in
specific contexts of human struggle and suffering in our surrounding
communities. In short, we should include in all of our courses
opportunities to practice rhetoric in conjunction with projects of service-
learning.

More specifically, we should teach our students, first, about numer­
ous tools for invention and regularly require them to use—and be graded
on their use of—these tools. These tools generate complexity, but, to do
so, they need to be practiced in-depth and with slow, painstaking care.
Therefore, I recommend that we foreground only one invention strategy
every two weeks. The first tool of invention is critical reading, by which
I mean reading-one-text-through-lens-of-another-text and, moreover,
using the text that one is reading critically to create a text of one’s own.
To get students to do this, we should teach them to make “moves” with
various passages from that text of the sort Joseph Harris sketches in
Rewriting: How to Do Things With Texts. That is, we should teach them
to summarize, to paraphrase, to quote, to argue against; we should teach
them to “forward” a particular text into a new context or imitate its
approach with some other material or revise that approach to make it work
more productively, and so on. These activities—the deliberate complicat­
ing of some assigned readings—are more flexible, open-ended, and
multidirectional than the simple sets of questions Bracher asks his
students to repeat each time they read. And hence they are more likely to
generate the complexity he so rightly values.

The second tool of invention we should linger over is freewriting, a
sort of spontaneous talking-onto-the-page that can lead to surprising
complexity as writers read back through these freewrites (and do so
critically—see the preceding point) to list key insights and cluster them
into groups. This approach ultimately derives from the Freudian psycho­
analytic method of free association—the “talking cure”—and, in turn,
from Victorian spiritualism; it is explicitly designed to generate uncanny
effects, surprises, and new depths, where perception and thought had previously obeyed simple, ordinary, and flawed routines. As such, this invention strategy is well suited to fostering a sense of burgeoning complexity, and like the critical reading strategy I noted a moment ago, it has far greater flexibility, a multidirectionality and open-endedness that prevents students from falling into rote, perfunctory repetition of the simplistic formulae Bracher offers. What’s more, as self-generated, it yields material that “belongs” to the student in ways that can foster commitment, and this small-scale commitment to certain squibs of text—an especially poignant phrase, a good zinger, a fine paragraph—can pave the way for larger commitments in the public sphere.

We should also spend two weeks on each of the six classical appeals: kairos, stasis, ethos, pathos, logos, and commonplaces (see Crowley and Hawhee’s marvelous textbook, *Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students*, for an essay-length chapter on each of these appeals that gives students a full sense of the power each makes available to them). Each of these methods is well suited to leading students where Bracher wants them to go. Ethos and pathos are quite obviously so; kairos, the appeal of timeliness, the sense of urgency, of social relevance, inevitably fosters an engagement with the world beyond the classroom, and stasis, the framing of material in terms of deadlocked conflicts or paradoxes, induces ideas to proliferate complicatedly (toward reconciliation), just as the logical appeal can engender longer and longer syllogistic chains of induction or deduction.

The particular invention strategy of commonplaces is quite close to Bracher’s use of schemas. I recommend leaving it for last. Again, whereas Bracher would give his students simply the same questions to answer about characters’ motivations, over and over, we should teach our students to engage a commonplace (a bumpersticker-like slogan or cliché) of their own choosing and explicitly build a rebuttal to it, as a culminating step in the larger process of generating complex essays through all the other invention strategies they’ve studied. This way, we squarely identify real complexity over reductive routines as the ideal to pursue in prose. What’s more, we should explicitly remind students that they will be graded on how well they use the various invention strategies. The upshot: they will produce texts of ever increasing complexity and
depth, especially as they grow more adept at the eight different strategies we’ve introduced.

However, complexity alone is not the sole value we should celebrate in student prose. We should also give students tools for managing complexity, for owning it and being accountable for it—that is, for creating texts that are evermore coherent, and hence evermore likely to have an impact on an audience. We should acquaint them with the sorts of stylistic principles outlined in Joseph M. Williams’ *Style: Lessons in Clarity and Grace* and in the appendix to my own *A Rhetoric of Pleasure*, again, by moving very slowly and carefully through these ideas, engaging no more than one major principle per week, reminding students explicitly in the paper topics we assign that they will be graded partly on how well they adhere to the broad principles of style and structure that allow all their complexities to cohere. Coherence, again, enables their texts to have an impact on an audience, even to travel in the public sphere, to make a small difference there. Coherence, in fact, forces certain commitments—this issue before that, these insights over those—that pave the way in turn for larger commitments, yet more mature choices of action in the world. Without these strategies for coherence, we run the risk of perpetuating precisely the weakness that Bracher (via Harpham) suggests has characterized the academic engagement with ethics to date: we lead students to generate ever greater complexity, more rarified and refined distinctions and subtleties, only as a stalling action, an evasion of the moment of committed intervention in the patterns of human suffering in our surrounding communities.

But we cannot solely pursue the work of shaping student emotion and cultivating student empathy by leading them to produce evermore complex, evermore coherent essays. We must require a public service component to our courses.

Neither an internship nor simply a volunteer program (the former being often a sort of job training and the latter potentially having no intellectual dimension), the service-learning component of our courses should be explicitly intertwined with the readings and concepts of our courses, and should constitute a chance to experience actual, human circumstances where the issues of the course are fully at stake, while doing work in the community that needs to be done and that the
community values and recognizes as meaningful or "real." For example, students in my course on the theories of pedagogy spent twenty hours over a ten-week period tutoring at a middle school that serves a low-income, crime-ridden neighborhood, and they wrote regular reflections on how the service experience and the course content were mutually illuminating or sometimes complicatedly at odds. Inevitably, they came to know the students they helped as complex, individual personalities contending with numerous challenges from their immediate social environment. And these experiences allowed my students to discuss, for example, the ideas in Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary* or Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* with a greater depth and passion than they would have otherwise had; likewise, the concepts from the book gave them a framework for engaging and understanding their service experience—in short, for doing it well. When they wrote their longer, end-of-semester reflective narratives on the service experience, they had to quote from at least five of the texts we had read that semester. And they had to use the eight invention strategies and the numerous methods for coherence I discussed a moment ago. The documents they produced were very rich, as were the changes produced in them through this work of rhetorically synthesizing their experiences at the middle school.

In this course—a graduate seminar—the ideas about rhetoric arose in the context of discussions of various pedagogic approaches, but, no matter what the course, these ideas can be woven into discussions about how to develop the reflective narratives about the service experience. And, too, the service project can take any number of forms, depending on the content of the course. My colleagues at Tulane who teach courses on women's autobiography have had their students spend time at a shelter for battered women, helping women there write their life stories, partly basing this work on what they've learned from the course's readings and partly by sharing rhetorical strategies; another course on oralist literary modes, literacy, and urban adolescence asked students to help organize creative writing clubs at nearby high schools, as well as spoken-word events, even a "youth poetry slam"; yet another on public space and public discourse helped the parks department in New Orleans reconstitute and publicize a program of events in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. I could go on and on. In each case, my colleagues had great
opportunities to teach rhetoric in the context of service-learning projects.

And they reported anecdotally the same findings that I did. In fact, in nearly all of the reflections my students in the seminar on pedagogy wrote on their service experience, I noticed a general pattern: at first, they didn’t see the point of such a significant breach of traditional classroom learning; they even resented it, considering it useless at best, and, at worst, downright scary. By the end, though, they took great joy in having made a small difference in the lives of the people they had tutored, and in noticing significant changes in themselves.

Our observations are not idiosyncratic, not unique to post-Katrina New Orleans. In Where’s the Learning in Service-Learning?, Janet Eyler and Dwight E. Giles, Jr. share the results from two national research projects that involved surveying over fifteen hundred students from twenty colleges and universities, over eleven hundred of whom were involved in service-learning, as well as intensive interviews with sixty-six students at six colleges. They found that students “develop a more positive view of the people they work with” and “report that their service-learning contributes to their sense that the people they work with are ‘like me’ and demonstrate their growing appreciation for other cultures” (54); service-learning leads to “greater self-knowledge” and a sense of “reward in helping others” and an “increased desire to include service to others in one’s career plans” (55). Yet another of their findings matches precisely Bracher’s goals: in addition to reporting that they learn more in service-learning courses, a majority report that, among the benefits of service-learning, are “a deeper understanding of subject matter, understanding the complexity of social issues, and being able to apply material they learn in class to real problems” (80; emphasis added).

To me, then, the ideal solution to the problem Bracher outlines is a curriculum in which students learn to practice rhetoric (specifically, strategies of invention and style), and, still more importantly, in which they engage in service-learning. For this way, they not only grow more adept at generating and managing complexity than they can through schema therapy, they also actualize the potential for such complexity to engender not simply more and more abstract, nuanced generalizations,
but rather compassion—compassion as a lived experience among particular human beings in nearby communities, compassion, as such, that can continue to grow.

Tulane University
New Orleans, Louisiana

Works Cited


