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IDEOLOGY, LIFE PRACTICES, AND POP CULTURE: SO WHY IS THIS CALLED WRITING CLASS?

Karen Fitts

Questions about what general education courses should accomplish are common, and they elicit lively debate. Recent issues of *JGE*, for instance, have proposed consideration of values (McKenzie et al., 2003), development of information literacy (Sellen, 2002), and improvements in note taking and study skills (Williams & Eggert, 2002) as essential to students' introduction to the practices and perspectives of intellectual labor. However, an aspect of general education mentioned routinely, thus suggesting its overarching importance, is students' need to engage in critical thinking (see Weed, 2003; Szostak, 2003; Ghnassia & Seabury, 2002; Williams & Worth, 2002).

This common thread in the conversation is particularly pertinent to those of us who teach writing. Consensus in post-secondary education has been difficult to reach about general education writing. While composition and rhetoric (comp/rhet) theory emphasizes the impossibility of teaching writing absent critical thinking about *something*, atheoretical (sometimes referred to as "current traditional") ideas of teaching writing as teaching grammatical correctness somehow maintain their insidious hold. In part, this is because general education writing is "owned" by a number of nonspecialized stakeholders. For instance, the majority of general education writing courses are taught by adjunct faculty, many of whom have advanced degrees in literature and little course work in comp/rhet. A subtle pressure is applied by first-year students themselves, who often think of writing as they were taught to think about it in elementary and secondary school: as either grammar instruction or writing about their feelings. And finally, the universality of writing in academe (most if not all professors write and assign their students to write) sometimes makes this subdiscipline of English seem more like a common-sense endeavor than a theoretically informed one. These

circumstances often create tensions concerning what writing instruction is or should be: a “service course” in which students learn a set of “skills” for later use or a course in its own right in which students engage in intellectual labor. (See Stevens [2001] for a historical perspective on the skills/knowledge dichotomy in general education curricula at the University of Chicago and St. John’s College.) Given this context, designing theoretically sound and principled general education writing courses involves going against the grain among one’s colleagues and students.

My purpose here is to describe a small number of assignments that I have used in recent years to complicate students’ responses to writing assignments and orient them to a new understanding of writing itself. Proceeding from a cultural studies perspective, these writing projects ask students to interact literately with cultural material by making conscious decisions about the value and usefulness of information they know. To assist students in critical thinking—as the common threads of general education discussions suggest—this turn toward a cultural rhetoric is essential. In addition, these assignments blur the boundaries between “high” and “low” culture, thus bringing popular culture into the classroom focus. Cultural studies’ perspective is that what we value as “knowledge” is culturally mediated; characteristics of “elite” texts are in continual flux—new forms appear, former ones lose status as corrupt or crude, and sometimes disappear altogether. The softening of high/low distinctions allows us to better understand what our society permits, honors, or disregards; it also indicates to students the valuable connections between one’s education and one’s everyday life. The need becomes more evident to think critically about a variety of what might be called “life practices” (e.g., watching a movie, listening to a political ad, conducting a romance, signing an informed consent medical document, and taking part in other cultural forms).

As Gerald Graff and Andrew Hoberek (1999) have noted, student writers arrive at the university with an inwardly focused perspective. Despite decades of challenge, traditional methods of writing instruction continue to encourage students to develop their personal voices, to write in order to discover what they know, and to develop their creative and imaginative abilities. Of course, all of these are excellent and necessary attributes of successful writers; the

trouble arises if writers are allowed to stop there. An essential element of good writing is connecting with readers, which calls on writers to look beyond their private worlds to the public issues, debates, controversies, and concerns that create the contexts in which they write.¹

Elaine P. Maimon, organizer of one of the nation's first Writing Across the Curriculum programs at Beaver College and one of the movement's foremost spokespersons, describes writing instruction as heightening students' awareness of the complexity of their own understandings: what they already know (or think they know), new knowledge they are learning, and the significance of each to the other. This perspective of writing instruction places students and their texts at the center of the instructor's efforts. It focuses on students' abilities to map their conceptions and plot the new ones that result from learning about and from others. Maimon writes: "We must imagine the [writing across the curriculum] classroom as a place of conversation: talking back in writing to what we read; interacting with texts and people; questioning facts rather than reciting them" (1997, p. 379). Maimon's assertion that the writing classroom is "a place of conversation" represents one of the hallmarks of progressive writing theory.

In fact, for the past twenty years progressive composition and rhetoric theory has foregrounded the importance of developing students' understanding of rhetoric as a radically dialogic act that results in knowledge. Patricia Bizzell argues that

knowledge is not a content conveyed by rhetoric: knowledge is what ensues when rhetoric is successful, when rhetorician and audience reach agreement. If this is true, then by the same token, rhetoricians cannot share a community's knowledge while remaining unchanged. Rhetoricians' own world-views will be influenced to the extent that they assimilate the community's knowledge to their own discourse. (1988, p. 149)

When made real to students, Bizzell's claim calls on them to give up their uncomplicated view of language: that it is merely an instrument by which an objective reality can be known and recorded. This is a slippery slope, because once they've reconfigured language,

students must also reconsider their role in their own education. A passive acceptance of the pronouncements of authorities no longer seems appropriate. In the wake of this understanding, the very notions of what writing is, what authors do, and what they themselves are doing when they write present themselves for examination. Rather than seeing writing as neutrally transcribing a body of objective information, now these students are imagining their work as subjectively engaging ideas constructed in language. All in all, it's nothing less than a significant loss of innocence for students, forever calling into question notions like "I'm no expert on that, so I can't be asked to think about it" or "Somebody's dad must be taking care of all that."

Many comp/rhet scholars have articulated this moment in the life of a student. I'll mention only a couple of them here: Juanita Rodgers Comfort and Alan W. France. Comfort argues that student writers need to see their roles as both dialectic and radical:

if imagining, through composing, is something more significant to students than exercises in critical detachment, and if we do not expect them to remain essentially unchanged by their encounters with the ideas they write about, then composing text must be . . . *becoming* insurgent intellectuals . . . who are personally invested in the world of ideas. (2000, p. 543)

In order to introduce students to their role as "insurgent intellectuals," France proposed the enactment of a "theoretically informed, meta-discursive writing pedagogy—for both composition and literature—that focuses on students' understanding of the dialectic between self and culture" (2000, p. 149). Ideas of insurgency and dialectic, put forward here by Comfort and France, have been foundational for me during the past two years, during which I have sought to create a pedagogy for raising students' awareness of the tensions and oppositions, advocacies and resistances involved in the "knowing" that is central to "writing."

Possible conflicts, debates, and controversies for such a pedagogy abound; the interactions between and among institutions and individuals serve here as only one useful example. There are authorities (representing the law, the military, and business and industry,

among others) and entities charged with accumulating wealth and/or power. Facing them are spokespersons for social welfare (individuals such as parents and groups like the PTA or neighborhood associations) responsible for meeting human needs of housing, child care, education, and spiritual and religious growth. These opposing forces are ubiquitous, permeating day-to-day decisions, actions, and beliefs. I wanted a pedagogy that would help students in their efforts to engage such conflicts, better prepare them to participate in public discourse, take their place in the work world, and meet the challenges of their personal lives, all central outcomes of a liberal arts education. I needed a plan for making students more aware of ideology, helping them recognize how it shapes pop culture and contributes to their life practices, and—finally—articulating what all of this has to do with writing class, anyway. To accomplish these goals, I have focused on the ideologies—students', mine, and others'—that are maintained, challenged, or otherwise negotiated in language.

For example, in the spring and fall semesters of 2003, I taught a second-year general education writing course entitled "Critical Writing: Approaches to Popular Culture" and two sections of basic writing. In these classes, I kept the focus on language *as language*: what it can do (in terms of enabling or constraining thought) and what it tells us (about who we are as a people and the kind of society we have created). As the threat of war with Iraq intensified and then became a reality in March and April 2003, my students and I were drawn irresistibly, it seemed, toward critical examination of the nation's response to these developments. Depending on what person in the street one asked, or what media report one read, the response might be abhorrence and resistance, validation and support, or something in between.

I had students bring to class reportage of the war in newspapers, editorials, cartoons, and other media, with the goal of identifying ideologies articulated in these information sources. They also considered other popular culture texts, powerful because of their saturation-level presence in everyday experience: toys such as the Forward Command Post and GI Joe, the near-disappearance from country-western radio air time of the Dixie Chicks, and President Bush's increasing use of Christian symbolism in public addresses. In addition, students examined popular culture texts that rejected or

negotiated the validity of war: signs at peace rallies and use of the flag or the cross either to motivate war resistance or to encourage support of the nation's actions.

Enabling students to understand writing as knowledge-making involved sharpening their awareness of the many sites of struggle we encounter in everyday life and, against the backdrop of the war in Iraq, scrutinizing the ways the words and images of popular culture shape what we as a society do, think, or believe. Maintaining that focus on language's power to construct, rather than simply reveal, what we know as "valor," "character," "beauty," or "wisdom" meant that class discussion could not be allowed to drift into pro- and anti-war sentiments as values in themselves. Instead, our time had to be reserved for identifying and analyzing discursive conventions in word and image that constitute pro- and anti-war stances.

As a class assignment and activity, I asked students to create a Search and Seizure Report, an idea I borrowed from Colleen Tremonte's *Gravedigging: Excavating Cultural Myths* (1995). The assignment reads:

A "text" is something that people put together out of signs, by "unify[ing] the meanings of several signs" (Brummett, 1994, p. 27). Larger texts can be made up of both signs and artifact. Cultural critics search for the signs and artifacts with interrelated meanings that all contribute to an overall set of effects or functions of the text; that is, they search for a text and "read" it. Their purpose is to help others identify texts, so that we may see more clearly how power (defined by Brummett as "the ability to control events and meanings" [4]) is held by some groups and kept away from others. Your assignment is to look about in your everyday world and "search" for a cultural text that you can identify. Then "seize" the text so that you can analyze it (break it into its parts to determine how the whole works). Describe your findings to the class in a five- to ten-minute presentation.

Use the following questions to guide your analysis. 1) What related signs and artifacts compose this text? How do they work together to contribute meanings to the overall effects or functions of the text? 2) What power relations do you perceive to be at work in this text? Who has power? Who does

not? How does this text grant power to some, withhold it from others?

In addition to implementing characteristics of the assignment that were specific to this new pedagogy (the search for manifestations of the swirl of conflict in which they write), I folded into the semester's work several other instructional aspects common to all of my writing classrooms.

In the first of these, students were to decide who needed to know their findings and why, select an appropriate genre for communicating with this audience, and create a written text that would fulfill their purpose. This assignment requires students to make conscious choices about purpose, audience, and genre; *ethos* or persona; diction, syntax, and style; and organizational structure. By orienting them to these choices, I aim to help broaden the scope of their vision; not only will they see themselves writing but also they will take in the fact of their audience. This shift from narrowly writer-focused to more broadly writer- and audience-focused planning involves building on their abilities to connect the rhetorical situation (the circumstances that call for them to use language aimed at a particular audience in order to get something done) with a fitting response. In other words, they begin to recognize that they are taking part in a dialogue.

Second, to encourage students to see writing as process, I have them complete and talk with their classmates and me about working drafts, revised drafts, and completed drafts. At different points in the semester, I meet with large groups (12–13 students, or half the class at a time), small groups (3–5 students), and individual students. The larger groups are better for earlier stages of writing such as free writing, webbing, or brainstorming. Small groups are more effective for working with drafts-in-progress. To these meetings, I ask students to bring an early or “working” draft and some “talking points” for representing their work to the group. I ask another student or two to evaluate what they’ve heard by describing (1) one thing that is working; (2) one thing that is not working so well; and (3) one thing the writer could do to improve his or her text. I reserve the use of one-to-one conferences for the final stages of a project. The focus here moves from large-scale issues of what the writer wants to say

toward how she or he is saying it: relation of title to the whole, effectiveness of introductory and concluding sections, use of transitions between ideas, choice of style, and so forth. This is also the time for identifying any patterned grammatical issues and usage problems the student exhibits. If he/she can't seem to use apostrophes correctly, for instance, I open the handbook to that page and we review it. This shows the student how to do, and stresses the essential importance of doing, this part of the process.

At any and all of these stages, students can work on their own or ask for assistance from me, their classmates, or tutors at the university's writing center. One of the benefits to students of general education writing courses is that these classes can introduce them to the idea of a "trusted reader," a person who will give balanced feedback on their work. When this relationship is negotiated successfully, it bolsters students' resolve to establish a writing community for themselves. In this way, the Search and Seizure Report (like most assignments I use) portrays writing as "making" rather than "finding" answers, depicts it as a recursive process, and illustrates the importance of a writer's community.

To illustrate the Search and Seizure Report, I "seized" for presentation to the class a then-current issue of *Newsweek* (March 31, 2003) with the title cover "Shock and Awe" and presented the following to the class:

Part One: *Identity of the U.S. military*. The news magazine contains seven photos of U.S. service personnel in Iraq. This count doesn't include four photos showing the first U.S. casualties of the war, three white men and one African American man. There is *gender ideology* in this coverage. All service personnel shown in the news magazine are male, although approximately 15% of service personnel are female. There is also *race ideology*. All are portrayed as white with the exception of two photos (in which the hands of African American service personnel are shown), although 28%–32% of service personnel are of minority ethnic heritage. The depictions of U.S. military in these pages of *Newsweek* are quite different, therefore, from images of those killed in action, as indicated both by the four photos of the first U.S. casualties of the war (mentioned above) and by pictures in Jim Lehrer's final segment each week, in which he pays silent tribute to the newly deceased. As I passed the

journal around the class, a student noticed that *all* the pictures concerning the war were exclusively men, including various “decision-making” and “leaders-at-work” photos.

Part Two: *Images of damage and death*. Graphically, this issue of *Newsweek* indicates that U.S. troops inflict damage to buildings but they don’t kill anyone, military or civilian. In the one picture showing U.S. and Iraqi soldiers together, U.S. troops are releasing an Iraqi soldier’s wrist restraints, apparently because he has surrendered to the U.S. in protest of the brutality of the Hussein regime. The images show U.S. soldiers pointing guns at inanimate objects (a tank and a building) but not human targets. They carry weapons but only in noncombat settings such as while sitting down to eat. One complete double-page spread is composed of photos of soldiers praying, being baptized, and taking communion.

Damage and death is meted out in the photos, however, by Iraqis. In fact, the magazine suggests that when Iraqis die, it is at the hands of Hussein’s regime. One photo is of a partially decomposed woman and two children lying in a side street, victims of lethal gas; another is a close-up of a man, the victim of torture, bare stomach, chest, and arms showing burns and wounds, mouth open and eyes staring unseeingly. The overall effect or function of this text is the empowerment of the white male warrior ethic. In this moment of national crisis, we are being saved by white men while women and minority men, relegated to the margins of the struggle, are represented as irrelevant (at best), useless, or even cowardly (at worst). In a perverse twist, however, these white male warriors are not violent; they only contend with dark-skinned people who are. They release right-thinking Iraqis, patrol empty lots and buildings, and pray. *Newsweek* homogenizes the U.S. military and sanitizes the war with Iraq, representing it as a struggle between one army that doesn’t kill and another that does.

In this “news” format, there is no explicit declaration of a pro-war stance. There are, however, implicit assertions that our presence in Iraq is compassionate and nonviolent. *Newsweek*’s coverage thus attempts to manage the U.S. public’s fears rather than explore questions or problems posed by use of military force. A culturally literate public would challenge this.

Following this modeling of the Search and Seizure Report, students prepared their own reports. One young woman, analyzing

board games, noted that parents like buying board games such as Battle Cry or Risk because they support family togetherness and keep children out of trouble. While this is an admirable civilizing motivation, she commented, the games take on a more sinister aspect when critically examined. The games have army figures that, the student argued, “represent real men who fight in war.” Players decide whether these men live or die. They quickly learn that one effective strategy is to sacrifice a couple of men to win the game. Another goal is to conquer territory, which is accomplished by killing the other player’s men. In the game, men are expendable and it’s acceptable to gamble with their lives. The student reserved her harshest criticism, however, for war video games. These are the worst because

you are the one who shoot[s]. . . . Every other person you find in the game is a bad guy and you shoot them. Video games . . . put you in [the action]. You walk around looking for people and when you find them, you kill them and watch them die; [they’re] often squirting blood and sometimes their guts fall out or their head pops off. . . . The more people you kill the better you did. [The effect of] the game is [that] it desensitizes you If you were going to fight, it might be necessary to be desensitized, [or] prepar[ed] . . . for what you might see. The problem with this is . . . why prepare people for war while they’re growing up? Especially since we need to solve problems peacefully and without resorting to violence.

In an effort to rewrite toys as a cultural text more in line with the values we profess as a society, the student then points out that “another toy you might pick up at the store is a water gun. This teaches kids how to run around, pull the trigger, and shoot each other. . . . My mom chose the elephant that squirted water from its trunk, so I didn’t learn that it’s fun to kill but learned that it’s fun to get people wet.”

Another student seized the terminology of “collateral damage,” arguing that use of this phrase in the media rather than “homicide” or “murder” manages public reaction to the news. This young woman commented that

the [phrase] “collateral damage” . . . has been used to describe the pain and anguish that America has inflicted on other countries. It is a nicer word than “kill” or “murder,” and that is why it is a more acceptable term. . . . Using . . . language that softens the meaning of a word is a long-used tactic of people in power. It persuades people to think differently.

Both students rose to the challenges I had set for the class. The first of these was becoming more aware of our daily encounters with language in multiple sites of struggle that—if not contested—overdetermine what we as a society think. The second also maintained the focus on language: if we obscure the act of killing with the softer term of “collateral damage,” we set aside basic questions concerning national conduct.

Another student said, after examining the issue of *Newsweek* I passed around, that the news journal probably just printed the best pictures they had. She wasn’t convinced that *Newsweek* should be seen as a site of struggle. To make sure that her classmates and I understood her comment, I asked why she thought this; she responded that that’s how she creates her own photo albums; I nodded; and we went on to other things. By critiquing ideology wherever she encountered it, in *Newsweek* or from her teacher, this young woman made an important contribution to the class. She modeled the critical attitudes necessary to a democracy and offered a different perspective on *Newsweek* coverage of the war, one that a number of students in the class possibly agreed with but had not yet expressed.

In his *The University in Ruins*, Bill Readings speaks to this issue when he argues for recognizing the academy as a “community of dissensus.” He identifies pedagogy as an important arena for making a space for thinking by breaking out of the restrictive, idealized overvaluing of consensus. In the pursuit of “excellence,” teaching is reduced to management of knowledge (by dividing it into ever-smaller pieces and parceling it out to students). This requires belief in the idea that knowledge is neutral and that communications are transparent. Readings argues that we have to decenter teaching—which can be done by “refus[ing] the possibility of any privileged point of view so as to make teaching something

other than the self-reproduction of an autonomous subject" (1996, p. 153)—in order to prevent it from being diminished in this way. When students are asked to help create a community of dissensus in the classroom, they are more likely to see themselves as authors (authorities) engaged in critique of popular culture and in the rewriting of their own life practices.

I kept this in mind, then, when a student commented that he felt we should transfer all of the Middle East's oil to the U.S. and nuke the entire area. The ripple of "shock and awe" that floated across the classroom upon his words provided just the opportunity needed for pointing out that speaking and listening to each other—seriously and critically—is one way of assuring that we know where and how we enter the community of dissensus. In such a course, it is important that as many perspectives as possible be carefully examined, fairly summarized, and held up beside others. This democratic exploration of ideas, including those that are abhorrent to other persons in the room, allows for a better understanding of their construction in language (and by extension, of one's own subjectivity). Taking our places in Hans Georg Gadamer's hermeneutic circle, students and I came back to this topic over and over, each time laying over new understandings of ideologies that make the war in Iraq seem plausible or almost so, unacceptable, or precisely right. Engaging these layerings of meaning was possible, I believe, because students had developed their awareness of the class as a community of dissensus—a place in which "agreeing to disagree" took on new meaning.

In the basic writing courses that I taught the following fall, I created a section on "othering discourse." After reading several brief essays concerning the cultural meanings found in naming practices (for mentally handicapped, Native Americans, gays and lesbians, and the obese), I gave the following three-part assignment:

Part One. Make a list of "othering" terms that you hear this week: in movies, advertisements, overheard conversations, jokes, etc. For each term, try to identify the us/them mechanisms that make the "other" inferior in some way ("I'm not like this group, which is defective," "This group presents a threat to our desirable way of life," "Most people that I know respect (education, heteronormativity, discipline, etc.) but this group doesn't").

Part Two. Make a list of words and terms that have been used to put you down. There are plenty of these to go around, regardless of our height, weight, sexual orientation, race, gender, age, and intelligence.

Part Three. Create a poster or other visual aid about one particular form of othering discourse. In addition, describe how the “difference” being called out improves society *because* of its diverse qualities not *in spite* of them.

In end-of-semester self-assessment questionnaires, students frequently commented that they had expected to be bored with this assignment, or to find no information. One wrote that he was certain, as it began, that it would turn out to be “a ridiculous assignment.” However, like many of his classmates, he slowly began to be more conscious of the othering discourse in which, as a society, we are awash. In a letter to her dad (her selected genre and audience for the purpose of initiating a conversation with him about how college had changed her), a young woman wrote:

I never realized why when two white people are talking about a white friend’s boyfriend they always say “her black boyfriend.” By pointing out the fact that her boyfriend is black they are putting down his race and who he is as a person. I was used to hearing and speaking this way, but this project really opened my eyes to the language that people use and the language that I use myself.

To get a sense of the numerous forms of othering discourse we encounter on a daily basis, we made a communal list on the board. In a short while, when every space on the board was filled, we returned to the original issue, which is what meaning is and whether it can be separated from the knower. Does meaning remain the same regardless of who is interacting with it? Notable during this listing phase had been the extended discussion as to whether the “n” word should be written on the board or simply gestured toward. (I learned during this exercise that a variation on the “n” word is “wigger,” a white person who dresses, talks, and acts “in a jivey manner.”) Students

were well aware that, while African Americans may use the word about each other, it is generally not permissible for whites to use it.

The right to choose what one will be called had arisen in discussions of the evolution of the designating terms “Negro” to “Black” (with its 1960s dictum that “Black is beautiful”) to “people of color” and “African American.” A similar evolution in meaning has brought “queer” from a negative term to positive; it also explains why the terms “gay” and “lesbian” are preferable to “homosexual,” a term that focuses on a person’s sexual choices rather than (“queer” or resistant) worldview. Examination of these cases of knowing revises students’ understandings of knowledge, their relations to it, and their places among similar but different others. It enables them to understand “writing” as the making of meaning: a blending of their ideas, positionality, and experience with the information at their disposal.

In their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno claim that “the culture industry . . . [deals summarily] with consumers’ needs, producing them, controlling them, disciplining them” (1944, p. 144). This culture industry includes the educational system. It is essential that we maintain students’ tension with such institutional cultures, interrogating the truisms we hold about the objectivity or subjectivity of language, knowledge, and reality. These are tall orders, requiring no less than helping students redraw the maps of language, thought, and culture with which they enter college. In general education courses, particularly those in writing, they need to acquire an understanding of the importance of critical thinking, as the pages of *JGE* suggest. We can help them do this by drawing distinctions between merely consuming knowledge and meaning and other literate, rhetorical acts: recognizing their place among others in a community of dissensus, taking up their authorial roles in academic and popular cultures, and consciously composing rather than acquiescing in their life practices.

Notes

1. Keneth Burke draws an analogy to entering a parlor (known in recent years as the “Burkean Parlor”): “Where does the drama get its materials? From the “unending conversation” that is going on at the point in history when we are born. Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in

a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending upon the quality of your ally's assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late; you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress" (1973, p. 110–11).

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