

Equality of Bias: An Approach to Teaching Feminism in the Composition Classroom

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“Crime is a relative thing and should be treated that way. In my country women are physically disciplined but not in America. In one place it is right but in other place it is wrong.”

I came across this sentence during a recent tutoring session as I proofread a paper for Paul*, a freshman composition student. Paul’s paper was about the nature of crime, specifically the idea that there are good crimes and bad crimes. His teacher had shown his class *Natural Born Killers*, a movie which tells the story of two serial killers and the havoc they wreak as they murder their way across the United States. After the entire class had seen the film, Paul’s teacher asked them to write a paper answering general, open-ended questions: “What ideas does the movie present about the idea of crime? What determines the meaning of ‘criminal’? Were any of the crimes committed in the film more justifiable than others?” The first murders committed are of the sexually abusive father and mother of the female lead, and the teacher’s questions suggest a desire for the student to consider the nature of crime, what makes some actions acceptable and some not.

* Name changed at student’s request.

In interpreting the assignment, Paul was quite perceptive; his entire argument, of which the above quote is a tangential snippet, hinged on the idea that crime is determined by morality and morality is not universally defined. Yet, while I was impressed by his astuteness, this sentence troubled me. It bothered me partly because it stuck out as a possible late addition, an idea he thought might sound good but didn't really feel like explaining, but more because it was just wrong. At least to *me* it was wrong. It pained me to see an unfortunate truth about humanity, a declaration of discrimination against my own gender, in a single, poorly written sentence. I wanted to shout at Paul and say he was mistaken, that the fact that women were beaten in his country did not make it right, and that it was a crime everywhere. But I didn't. I did tell Paul that there was a problem with this sentence, but not because of its implied ideology. Rather, I said that it was inadequately developed and that he was not being, in the words of Shannon Carter, rhetorically dexterous.

In her article "Living inside the Bible (Belt)," Carter proposes the use of rhetorical dexterity as, "an approach that trains writers to effectively read, understand, manipulate, and negotiate the cultural and linguistic codes of a new community" in composition classrooms (574). She details her own experiences teaching at Texas A&M University, where a large portion of her students are evangelical Christians. Her article makes clear that, like my own attitude toward Paul, Carter initially interpreted the beliefs of these students as narrow-minded and "irrevocably at odds" with her own academic and pedagogical objectives (572). She admits that she found herself wanting to enlighten them, open them up to the many possibilities available in the objective world of academia. Yet, she developed the idea of rhetorical dexterity out of the

realization that, as a teacher, it is not her place to dissuade students from their religious beliefs. She has no right to “save” them from their religion because her beliefs, in the grand scope of universal truth, are no more valid than theirs (Carter 573). Likewise, my belief that women and men are equal is no truer than Paul’s notion that they are not. Feminism, like evangelical Christianity, is a belief system.

In “The Other ‘F’ Word: The Feminist in the Classroom,” Dale M. Bauer asks a question expressed in one way or another by many composition instructors: “How do we make our authority as feminist rhetors available to our students for their language and thus contravene their resistance?” (356). The resistance she speaks of comes from those students who are uncomfortable or in disagreement with the notion of the necessary breakdown of patriarchal dominance. She is asking, then, for a way to use feminist discourse to oppose patriarchal dominance as it manifests in the minds of students. Yet, this question presupposes the idea that gender equality is superior to patriarchy, an idea which, though defended by members of both genders throughout the world, is a matter of opinion insupportable by any rigorous proof. In other words, it is possible that, with their many biological differences, males and females are not equal, just as it is possible that God truly intended for the “Great Commission” of the Gospel of Matthew to be spread throughout the world (Carter 581). What, then, is to be done with feminist beliefs in the pedagogy of composition?

Catherine E. Lamb makes an important point when she speaks of the power of classical rhetoric and notes that “the speaker, in constructing an enthymeme, must take the audience into account since it is the audience who supplies the unstated premise” (284). This is significant in

the sense that it not only addresses the problem of overtly setting a political or social agenda such as feminism in the classroom but also the possibility that even an expressivist composition instructor, one open to all ideas, might also, albeit inadvertently, attempt to shape students' beliefs. As one such open-minded academic, Shannon Carter faces head-on her own position as a molder of beliefs disguised as an impartial professor. In an assignment given prior to her work with rhetorical dexterity, she asked students to "consider the ways in which literacy is often unfair; sanctioned and endorsed by those more powerful" (587). In hindsight she confesses that with this assignment she had, "perpetuated the singular, 'autonomous' model of literacy that [she] thought [she and her class] had been resisting all along" (588). Her questions forced the students to consider a single notion of literacy and thus place their own individual literacies (for her evangelical Christian students their church sayings and practices, for example) in opposition to this universal. Moreover, by implying this singular notion of literacy, she discouraged her students from identifying the practices of their own communities as literacies and further developing them as such. These "unstated premises" of her assignment expected students to devalue and de-center ideals which, particularly for evangelical students, are fundamental to their very existence.

Lamb goes on to say in "Beyond Argument and Feminist Composition" that knowledge should be something "that people do together" (287) and that power should be "something that is available to both and has at least the potential of being used for the benefit of both" (288). In terms of the classroom, this means that the teacher should no longer be the keeper of knowledge and power, but should instead be more like a facilitator, at once a sounding board and a designer

of questions. If power is granted to students as well, the teacher's questions would have to be of the kind that require students to validate the arguments they have chosen, rather than those that imply another argument might be more suitable; such an implication suggests that the teacher knows best and believes that a universal truth is available if only the student could dig deeper and think differently. Reliance on such insinuations echoes Bauer's notion of "contraven[ing] ... resistance" and her approval of the collective intent of feminist teachers to "get ... students to identify with the political agenda of feminism" (353). Yet, the work of feminist composition teachers should neither be to teach students the value of feminism nor to imply this value by placing the ideologies of feminism in a position of power; i.e., at the forefront of available analytical tools.

Bauer begins "The Other 'F' Word" with quotes from various student evaluations of a fellow teacher who had an apparent dedication to feminist principles. Students disliked the way that the class was "overpowered by feminist doctrines," found it "offensive" that their readings all revolved around feminist themes, and "didn't appreciate feminist comments" on papers (Bauer 351). Some called feminism "something that should be left outside of class" and an issue that "needs to be confronted on a personal basis, not in the classroom" (Bauer 351). Bauer reacts to these comments by saying that teachers must show students that "the personal is public," that it is wrong to assume "that gender issues are based on perspectives unsuitable for the labor of the intellectual" (352). What she seems to miss, however, is that, for the most part, the student comments cited reflect as much, if not more, of a problem with the teacher's avid endorsement of feminism as with its general presence in the classroom; it is a misrepresentation, then, to

conclude that, generally speaking, the students wished for feminist analysis to be lifted from discussion entirely. The problem was primarily the way that the teacher presented feminism as *the* mode of analysis, rather than as one possibility among many. In this way, feminism was communicated as truth, not belief, and the arguments of those students who considered it differently were treated by the teacher as wrong or incomplete.

It is possible that the teacher discussed by Bauer had forewarned her class of the subject matter's spotlight on feminism, making her intentions for the course clear. With this plan in mind, the students could have chosen whether feminism was a topic they wished to study further. Their surprise and resentment suggest, however, that this was not the case and that, while they had expected a fairly open, objective learning environment, the teacher's own ideological interests ultimately "dominated" (351). By only encouraging one method of study, the teacher was avoiding conflict and, according to Susan C. Jarratt, teachers who do so "minimize unforeseen possibilities for using argument to reconstruct knowledge" (264), which echoes Lamb's notion of power as something meant to benefit both teacher and student. Both Lamb and Jarratt express a sense that argument is helpful, even necessary, to creating a unified idea; to invite conflict, then, feminist discourse must be presented plainly, as a collection of beliefs and assumptions, not a system of truths and certainties beyond the reach of dispute.

How we allow such conflict is a different matter, though. Teachers like Jarratt seem to think that it is best to openly establish an agenda, in this case a feminist one, mainly because without it "the teacher [is] at a disadvantage in any attempt to assert a counterhegemonic authority as a woman" (Jarratt 268). Without establishing a feminist position, a female teacher

“invites” patriarchal attitudes into the classroom (Jarratt 268). While this is possible, there are two implications contained in this idea that Jarratt fails to adequately address. The first is the scope of her own authority as the classroom leader. As Lamb rightly points out, the student audience fills in the gaps of logic in the classroom, but it is the teacher who presents the initial logical framework and, thus, influences the gaps within it (284). Thus, if Jarratt declares her own loyalty to feminism, whether by blatant admission or discreet comments or assignments, to a certain extent she is attempting to persuade students to share her beliefs. An incomplete line of reasoning leads students to believe feminism is the most valid viewpoint for a given situation since it is the one adopted by the teacher and the teacher, as a general rule, is *supposed* to have a more complete understanding of the subject. Jarratt preempts this issue somewhat when she says that teachers can’t affect the social positions of their students simply “by fiat,” but she fails to see that establishing her own position, without forcing it upon students, still generates potential for undue influence (270).

The second problem of Jarratt’s call for the establishment of feminist authority is the embedded affirmation that gender equality is a universal truth, that patriarchy is “bad” and equality is “good.” Her belief in the fundamental correctness of egalitarianism is as relative as Shannon Carter’s belief in the values of open-mindedness and religious freedom; as teachers, by encouraging either idea, they would be trying to “‘save’ ... students ‘from themselves,’” a practice they might expect from the supporters of patriarchal and religious dominance with whom they disagree (Carter 573). This is not to say that the proper composition classroom is the “harmonious, nurturing” one that Jarratt seems so against (Jarratt 271). Such an environment,

where “uncritical openness” is the method of authority, could indeed become a playground for oppression, discrimination, or even fear (Jarratt 268). What is needed, then, is a classroom of *critical* openness, and not critical in the sense of finding fault but rather of making skillful judgments, of evaluating not ideas but the *argument* of ideas. A teacher in such a classroom would not offer answers, only questions that do not lead students in particular directions but rather force them to think critically about the arguments they have presented.

This critical thinking is not necessarily fostered simply by asking students to tackle a situation from a new perspective, a common practice among composition teachers. Lamb claims that students “cannot hope to negotiate a solution with integrity unless they are first clear about the characteristics and values of the viewpoint they are presenting, especially...one with which they do not agree” (290). Bauer takes this idea even further by suggesting that, as “ideological critics,” teachers must “show how [different] positions contradict each other and, in practical terms, demand a choice” (357). Yet, demanding this adoption of a different viewpoint has the same effect as writing “feminist comments” on a paper (352); both force students to de-center, and thus devalue, their chosen positions, and this is something that, quite often, students do not wish to do. Carter mentions a student named Luke, introduced in a study done by critic Amy Goodburn, who, after being lectured by academics about valuing difference, declared “‘I don’t need the university telling me that I should tolerate everybody [...] because not everybody’s tolerable!’ (qtd. in Goodburn 346)” (573). Luke’s exclamation rightly reflects the paradoxical quality of much academic indoctrination; in order to open minds to the value of different positions, academics believe that they must first preach the superiority of this open-mindedness.

Tolerance, however, is like religion in that it is a debatable idea, and composition teachers cannot make claims about gender equality or religious self-determination in the same way that a math teacher can say with certainty that perfectly parallel lines will never cross. For this reason, Carter's tool of rhetorical dexterity is indispensable to the composition classroom.

Her goal with rhetorical dexterity is merely to train her evangelical students to write in a way that speaks to those readers who do not "live inside the Book" (Carter 578). As believers in the "Great Commission" of the Gospel of Matthew, these students have plenty of experiencing expounding on the glories of their faith but, as Carter found out, they often fall short when attempting to communicate with readers like her who do not identify with evangelism (Carter 581). As an example, Carter uses one such student, Keneshia, who wrote a detailed paper about the sensory atmosphere of her church community but did not explain the significance of the songs or vibrant clothing or "unpack" the lengthy quote from Exodus which she included to support the description of her faith (590). In short, what Keneshia did not do was think critically about her church community. She did not keep in mind that some readers, like her teacher, would be illiterate to its signs and thus would not automatically see meaning in its practices. In order for her to be rhetorically dexterous, Carter required Keneshia to become more literate in the academic community by learning to analyze her faith in such a way that allowed her to explain it to members of communities different than her own. It is important that, as I noted earlier, this approach requires writers to "read, understand, manipulate, and negotiate" new literacies, *not* accept or value them (Carter 574). Carter did not ask Keneshia to consider her church community from a different perspective, as this would serve to devalue her own, but rather asked

her to explain her community in a way that could make sense to those unfamiliar with its signs. With such assignments, Carter achieves her ultimate goal of allowing students to preserve “both their faith-based and their academic literacies without being required to substitute one for the other” (Carter 574). In fact, she gives them the tools needed to better defend their own beliefs as they progress in their academic careers and lives in general, which, considering her admission that these beliefs are “completely and irreconcilably at odds with [her] own pedagogical and scholarly beliefs,” is rather amazing (572). From this display of pedagogical fortitude, I return to my own struggle with Paul.

When I told Paul that his sentence about physical discipline posed a bit of a problem, I sensed that he had anticipated opposition. Without further prompt from me, he began to defend his statement, saying mainly that different religions have different ideas concerning men and women and that, in his religion, the relationship was not meant to be equal. I nodded in acceptance of this statement and he continued to explain himself, saying that, for him, rendering the sexes equal is like labeling parts of his holy texts inaccurate or misleading. When he finished, I asked him why he had not included these ideas in his paper. Clearly surprised that I said nothing about the sexism of his religion, he told me that he had chosen not to elaborate on his original statement because he knew his female teacher would not like it; he had only included it because he needed another example and could not think of anything else. With Carter’s idea in mind, I told Paul that, as the sentence was presently situated in his paper, it did not make sense to me. Yet, when he elaborated on why it made sense to him, because his religion looks at the relationship between men and women differently than mine does, I understood. I did not mention

that I disagree with his belief with or without his explanation; asserting the value of my own beliefs was not the goal.

What I asked him to do was include his explanation in the paper, so that the relative morality of physical discipline that he was trying to convey would be well supported and his paper, as a whole, would be more developed. Without further details, I reasoned, readers like his teacher, who might not know how to interpret the practices of his religion, would have difficulty with his argument. He appeared to easily understand this idea and, in an interesting twist, my refusal to refute his sexism seemed to make him more open to my further suggestions about his writing. By asking him to think critically about his argument, to employ rhetorical dexterity, I allowed him to maintain a belief that conflicts with my own faith on a very personal level. In terms of composition pedagogy, however, my belief in the freedom of expression retained utmost importance; such freedom does not mean the relinquishment of authority, for teachers must reserve the right to demand explanation, as I did from Paul. It means only a true recognition of difference, a recognition that does not end with those differences that defy the broadmindedness of traditional academia.

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