The Intent/Effect Tactic: A Practice of Rhetorical Listening

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Like many English instructors, I have taught in predominantly white classrooms and heard well-meaning white students utter racially problematic statements like "I'm not a racist but…" (Bonilla-Silva and Foreman 50, Williams 164) and "My ancestors didn't own slaves…" (Trainor "'My Ancestors'"140). Terrence Tucker's reports from the classroom sound similar: "[T]he students who enter my classroom believe that instances of racist activity are isolated incidents, residue from a bygone era that no longer affects them or their thought processes" (134). When working in these kinds of classrooms, it's not always clear how to most effectively respond. As an antiracist teacher, I don't want to let problematic assertions lie untouched; neither, however, do I want to discourage students from sharing their evolving thoughts in class. Jennifer Seibel Trainor describes this conundrum: "I do not consider direct confrontation or argument to be a useful classroom strategy, but I am haunted by the idea that such [racist] sentiments go unchallenged and by my desire to teach more effectively against them" ("My Ancestors" 144). In 2005, Krista Ratcliffe offered rhetorical listening as a tactic for "interpretive invention" (1) that enables users to develop multiple meanings behind racially problematic assertions, thereby enhancing the possibilities for teaching against such statements. By encouraging rhetors to invite

multiple interpretations to problematic statements, Ratcliffe expands the possibilities for productive communication.

In this article, I offer a researched, theoretically grounded tactic (derived from Ratcliffe's rhetorical listening) that teachers can use to disrupt racially problematic statements while avoiding the confrontation that can stymie productive conversation. I use the term *intent/effect tactic* in two ways: first, as a technique a rhetor can use to evade accountability for the negative effects of a racially charged action by highlighting racially neutral intentions; and second, as a pedagogical tactic teachers can use to expose such evasion. The intent/effect tactic is already implicitly present in various discursive contexts, though it is not deliberately acknowledged. After illustrating its presence and arguing that instructors should recognize and deploy the tactic intentionally, I explain how the tactic is an extension of Ratcliffe's rhetorical listening that allows teachers (indeed, anyone analyzing discourse) to bring to light some of the unstated assumptions underlying racially loaded statements. This enables teachers to introduce complexity into classroom situations without needing to be confrontational.

Origins of Intent/Effect

I identified and developed the intent/effect tactic as a result of analyzing a conversation among four first year composition (FYC) students as they talked about racial topics. After detailing the origins of the intent/effect tactic, I demonstrate how this tactic can be used to frame and analyze discursive tactics that have long been present in conversations, public discourse, and scholarship.

To explain the difference between intent and effect as I am using these terms (and to introduce an example that I will return to later in discussing the focus group I studied), consider the Cleveland Indians, a major league baseball team, and their mascot, Chief Wahoo. The

controversy over the mascot can be productively analyzed by considering the intent behind the mascot and the effect of the mascot. First, consider the history of the mascot. The Cleveland team took on the name "Indians" in 1915, shortly after the death of Louis Sockalexis, one of the first Native Americans to play baseball professionally (Steinhaus). Native American activists object to the team name and mascot, calling representations like Chief Wahoo "the last racist icons" of American sports (Bean). Team owners, on the other hand, assert that the intent is not to offend, calling the "Indians" name "more of a tribute than a racial slur" (Bean). For the supporters of the Chief Wahoo mascot, the *intent* to honor Native American contributions to baseball means that the mascot is above reproach. Activists who critique Chief Wahoo, however, argue that the *effect* of this popular mascot is the perpetuation of an offensive, racist caricature of Native Americans. The implicit framework of intent and effect underlying this controversy allows the team owners to retain the name and mascot by asserting good intentions and disregarding negative effects.

During the discussions that were a part of my larger research study exploring the ways in which white FYC students make sense of race, when controversial racial topics arose, the student participants tended to be more sympathetic to the intent behind a controversial action than they were to the effect of that action. Once this difference in personal stances became evident to me, I began to think of the students' words in terms of intent and effect.

I assembled a focus group comprised of four self-identifying white students who were enrolled in FYC at the time of the study. I solicited volunteers to participate in a two-hour videotaped group discussion and a follow-up audio-taped individual interview. I started the focus group session by asking the four participants to read Brent Staples's 1986 article "Just Walk on

By: A Black Man Ponders His Power to Alter Public Space"[1] a piece widely anthologized in composition textbooks and identified by Lynn Z. Bloom as one of the most frequently anthologized essays in composition (410). Its ongoing popularity is also evident from a quick scan through the contents of the textbooks on my office bookshelf, which reveals this article in five different current editions.

I chose to foreground a nonwhite race in the focal text because I was interested in soliciting the rhetorical and discursive tactics the participants employ in racial discussions. I approached the subject of race in a way that is likely to be familiar to them—by reading something directly about race, written by a person who is obviously (via textual declaration) not white. In her 2005 review of "multiculturalisms" in English studies, Marilyn Edelstein explains that "'[m]ulticulturalism' has often been used, especially in educational settings, to mean 'including many races,' and sometimes even a synonym for 'racialized,' 'nonwhite,' or 'including people of color'" (18). This familiar method of bringing up race can open up space for participants to join in a discussion that mimics those they've likely had in school before.

The group discussion lasted almost two hours and followed a rough outline I had prepared ahead of time. I encouraged the participants to speak freely to each other and to share whatever ideas came to mind as they talked. I remained relatively quiet during the discussion. When the group discussion came to natural stalling points, I turned to topics included in my rough outline. I asked questions about their responses to the reading, their experiences in their lives and in their first-year composition classes, and other sources or experiences that came to mind as they thought about race. I designed the questions to be open-ended so as to invite a variety of responses and opinions.

After the group session, I edited the video to a 24-minute visual artifact. I selected moments in the discussion that either invoked or contradicted my own perception of the racial discourse of young white undergraduates in the Northeast. I then met with each participant individually to view and discuss the edited video. In these meetings, I encouraged each participant to reflect on her/his words in the video.[2]

During my individual interviews with the participants, I played the edited videotape while audio-taping the current discussion. Though I stopped the video more often than any of the participants did, each participant did pause the playback to offer unsolicited commentary. At the end of the video, I asked each participant to elaborate on about her/his reactions. I asked them open-ended questions about their dominant impressions of the experience and encouraged them to expand on and clarify anything they said during the initial discussion. By asking these open-ended questions during the follow-up interviews, I created space for each participant to reflect on the group discussion, perhaps "uncover[ing]" or "discover[ing]" their own "tacit" assumptions (Newkirk 198).

Revealing Intent/Effect

By looking at conversations on race and considering the *intent* of each speaker and the *effect* of each spoken unit, we invite interpretations that are discursively and "rhetorically complex," as called for by Thomas West (216). This can help us avoid reductively characterizing students as ignorant "others".[3]

I saw intent/effect several times in my empirical research project. Brent Staples's article was the starting point for a discussion that expanded to include examples of television shows and movies that dealt with race and stereotyping. It is in the responses to Staples' text and in these

pop culture references that I see most clearly the possibilities for the intent/effect concept as an analytical function.

To illustrate the intent/effect tactic, I look at several statements by Michael (pseudonym). This first excerpt comes shortly after the group conversation turned to the ways that race is represented in popular culture. The participants brought up *The Simpsons* as a site where racial stereotypes (among others) are used in an entertaining way. I used this turn in conversation as an opportunity to bring up a then-current topic: real-life Kwik-E-Marts. In conjunction with the release of *The Simpsons Movie* in 2007, several 7-11 convenience stores across the U.S. were temporarily converted into Kwik-E-Marts, the convenience store on *The Simpsons* (complete with *Simpsons* products and Kwik-E-Mart uniforms). One result of this marketing tactic was that several store employees of South Asian descent were quite literally cast into the role of Apu, the South Asian character who runs the store. I asked the group for their thoughts on this. Michael responded:

> I think *The Simpsons* is a successful example of portraying stereotypes in a way that we can not only accept but kind of laugh at. I don't think we're laughing at them; I think we're laughing at ourselves because that's how we see the world. […] It's not just poking fun at *The Simpsons*, we're poking fun at ourselves as a nation.

Michael asserts that Apu (and other characters on *The Simpsons*) are invoking stereotypes, but the intent is not to belittle or deride the groups that are being stereotyped. Instead, his argument suggests that the absurdity of the stereotypes is so extreme that the viewers are laughing at themselves. The intent is not to offend South Asians, but to make fun of "ourselves." This

allegiance to non-offensive intentions allows Michael to avoid engaging the potential negative effects of the stereotype of South Asians as convenience store employees.

Toward the end of the group discussion, Michael offered another intriguing statement. I had taken the last few minutes of the session to explain my research interests and to invite the participants to ask me questions. In this explanation to the group, I indirectly present the intent/effect concept (though at this point the concept hadn't gelled in my mind under this terminology):

> Meagan: That's one of the things I'm most interested in-- the way that people can be harmed by things that they feel are racist, that are committed by people who don't mean to be racist.
>
> Michael: Right, it's kind of-- you've got this passive racism. I'm not meaning to be racist and yet I'm walking around being racist without even realizing it. I totally agree that that probably happens more often than the stereotypical run-around racist who's standing on a soap box and telling everybody how superior they are. I think that the majority of people are racist to a minute level and don't realize it. That just comes from being not informed but I'm sure if you went to any other country in the world, you know, they'd have just as many stereotypes as America.

I'm interested in Michael's use of the term "passive racism." This wasn't a term that I used at any point in the conversation, nor have I encountered it in the literature on race. In this use of the term, being passively racist seems to refer to actions that were not intended to be racist but that

can be construed as such. According to Michael, plenty of people are racist but "don't realize it"; they do not intend to be racist.

I tried to get a better understanding of this unintended, "passive racism" when I met with Michael two weeks later. In this follow-up interview, we watched the edited video of the group discussion. I stopped playback at the end of Michael's statement that is excerpted directly above. I asked him to talk more about passive racism in the context of our discussion of Apu and *The Simpsons*:

> Meagan: I wanted to understand that. I thought the whole conversation about *The Simpsons* was pretty interesting. When you said there "we're not realizing what we're taking part in," what were you getting at?
>
> Michael: I wish I could think of another example because I was thinking of that as I was watching this again. It's blatant racism, and yet because everybody agrees on it, we're ok with it.
>
> Meagan: Ok?
>
> Michael: Do you know what I mean? When I say "everybody" I mean the majority class/group. The majority thinks there's nothing wrong with it, so we get away with it. We see *The Simpsons* and we think it's—I'm not sure—we see it as a TV show, we see it as funny, we laugh but we don't really realize what we're participating in.
>
> Meagan: Ok-
>
> Michael: I don't see any difference between laughing at *The Simpsons* and laughing at a movie that's meant to be serious but has typical racist themes in it. I

think they're one and the same. It's just that we've been desensitized to *The Simpsons* over the years so we can laugh at it and say it's harmless. It's the same issue.

Meagan: Do you think it is harmless?

Michael: I think the whole notion itself is harmless, yes. I think you should be able to laugh at all of it. People take it too seriously at times, so no, I don't think there's anything wrong with watching *The Simpsons* or watching anything like that and laughing at it. I think that I don't understand why it's ok to laugh at some things and not at others. I feel like you should be comfortable enough with yourself or your race where you realize that everyone gets made fun of at some point and you can't take yourself too seriously.

Here, Michael is acknowledging a non-active racism, one that can exist without the motivation of hateful intent ("we don't really realize what we're participating in"). Because the intent to harm is not present, any harmful effects should be disregarded. In this excerpt, Michael echoes the assessment he had made of Native American activists who were upset over the Indians and Chief Wahoo ("I feel like the Native Americans shouldn't be offended"). If indeed they were "comfortable enough" with themselves and "realize[d] that everyone gets made fun of" sometimes, then in fact they wouldn't be upset by Chief Wahoo and the Indians. Based on my conversations with Michael, I am convinced that he earnestly desires racial accord, and the way he sees this happening is through people choosing not to respond negatively in such instances. Michael states that viewers should be able to laugh at *any* sort of racist themes that appear on television or in movies. Being "comfortable" with yourself makes it possible for you to laugh at

racist themes, regardless of the group being mocked or the egregiousness of the mockery; it

makes it possible for you to eliminate any negative effects of racist caricatures, merely by

choosing not to be offended.

The recurrence of this allegiance to intent indicates that although Michael is able to

examine racial statements by considering both intent and effect, for him, the intent trumps the

effect, to the extent that varying logics will be employed in order to maintain this dominant

position. Here, as is often the case, when the intent/effect tactic is used by speakers, it is

generally to assert the rightness of good intentions and to minimize or deny any negative effects.

Extending the Scope of Intent/Effect

As I have just shown, the split between intent and effect first became evident to me during my

research study. At this point, I'd like to offer an example of the intent/effect tactic from public

discourse. Intent/effect is particularly common in the public apology for a verbal gaffe. Consider

the 2002 controversy over remarks made by Senator Trent Lott at the 100th birthday celebration

for Senator Strom Thurmond. In a speech honoring Thurmond, Lott referred to the elder

senator's 1948 presidential campaign as a Dixiecrat, a party which endorsed racial segregation to

maintain "racial integrity" (Mercurio). Lott remarked that if Thurmond had won that election,

"we wouldn't have had all of these problems over all these years." Though Lott left "these

problems" unspecified, his comments generated strong criticisms from colleagues and in the

media, who understood his remarks to mean that racial integration had been the cause of many

current societal ills. Lott issued an apology, saying "a poor choice of words conveyed to some

the impression that I embraced the discarded policies of the past […] Nothing could be further

from the truth, and I apologize to anyone who was offended by my statement" (Mercurio). By

saying "nothing could be further from the truth," Lott asserts that he did not intend to say that he advocated racial segregation. In other words, Lott did not intend to offend anyone. Instead, the "poor choice of words" led some individuals to a particular impression. Lott apologizes *to* "anyone who was offended" but he circumvents a direct apology *for* anything. While Lott acknowledges a negative effect—some people were offended—he asserts that his lack of malicious intent trumps any negative interpretations or effects.

With an eye toward employing the intent/effect tactic pedagogically, consider another public apology, this one occurring on a college campus. On March 2, 2009, Dartmouth College announced that Harvard professor Dr. Jim Yong Kim would be the college's next president. The next day's "Generic Good Morning Message" (GGMM), an informal daily listserv written by students, contained the following:

> Yesterday came the announcement that President of the College James Wright will be replaced by Chinaman Kim Jim Yong. And a little bit of me died inside. It was a complete supplies [sic].
>
> On July 1, yet another hard-working American's job will be taken by an immigrant willing to work in substandard conditions at near-subsistent wage, saving half his money and sending the rest home to his village in the form of traveler's checks. Unless "Jim Yong Kim" means "I love Freedom" in Chinese, I don't want anything to do with him. Dartmouth is America, not Panda Garden Rice Village Restaurant.
>
> Y'all get ready for an Asianification under the guise of diversity under the actual Malaysian-invasion leadership instituted under the guise of diversity. It's a

> slippery slope we are on. I for one want Democracy and apple pie, not Charlie
>
> Chan and the Curse of the Dragon Queen. I know I sure as shit won't ever be
>
> eating my Hop dubs bubs with chopsticks. I like to use my own two American
>
> hands. (Estes)

Political blogs such as *Resist Racism*, *Angry Asian Man*, and *Racialicious* are just a few of the

public voices that immediately reported this incident. The GGMM organization issued an

apology and the student who penned the message, Tommy Brothers, also delivered a public

written apology. In his apology, Brothers identifies the distinction between intent and effect and

acknowledges that the negative effect outweighs his purely satirical intentions. This example

therefore stands out as a model teachers can consult when introducing intent and effect into the

classroom.

> I hope you can all understand that my intent was never one of malice against the
>
> Asian community, but an extremely crass attempt at hyperbolic satire. I was
>
> initially trying to criticize what I perceived to be surprise among many at the
>
> naming of an Asian-American President-Elect, Dr. Kim. I then tried to broaden
>
> my attack to encompass all of the reactionary, xenophobic, neo-Patriotism that
>
> exists in our post 9/11 America. I tried to create a narrator that would be viewed
>
> as ignorant, and I hoped that by removing any semblance of subtlety, this voice
>
> would not be taken seriously. I realize now that somewhere in that transformation,
>
> the specific target of my satire was lost, and all that remained on the page were
>
> my extremely racist words.

That being said, I now know that I can't hide behind my "intent." Intent and
execution are two entirely different things. I know I hurt many people personally,
and damaged the reputation of the College publicly. I deeply regret my actions
and the harm I have caused. I had no right to spread a message that alienated and
belittled one ethic group, particularly one to which I do not belong. (Brothers)

Brothers begins by explaining that his intent was to be satirical, not offensive. In this regard,
Brothers's and Lott's apologies are similar—neither intended to offend anyone. This apology is
significantly different, however, from that delivered by Lott. Brothers proceeds to acknowledge
that there is a difference between "intent and execution." In doing this, he accepts responsibility
for effects that he did not anticipate or intend. While Lott asserts a lack of ill intentions as the
metric on which he should be judged, Brothers uses the intent/effect tactic to validate both the
intent and the effect, ultimately conceding that his words were ill-conceived. While the
intent/effect tactic is most commonly used by speakers to distance themselves from the negative
effects of their words, Brothers's statement shows how it can be embraced by speakers as a way
to demonstrate both good intentions and personal accountability for negative effects.

Using Intent/Effect Pedagogically

By naming intent and effect in the classroom, teachers have a straightforward discursive tool
which can be used to introduce complexity into the sometimes overly simplified statements made
by well-meaning white students in the classroom.

A teacher could use the tactic to respond to a statement like this one made by Michael: "I
feel like you should be comfortable enough with yourself or your race where you realize that
everyone gets made fun of at some point and you can't take yourself too seriously." If uttered in

a classroom setting, this kind of statement can draw approval from other students who are uncomfortable discussing race and are looking to eliminate any discord and are looking for a singular, pat interpretation. As a teacher, however, I would find it difficult to let a discussion come to a close on this assertion. I might use the intent/effect tactic to open up the question to the class: "Why doesn't a speaker have a responsibility for all the consequences of her words, both intended and unintended?" Or, "While Michael is correct that we can exercise some control over our individual responses to the words and actions of others, when a large group comes together to assert that they are negatively affected, then shouldn't that merit a reconsideration?" Posing questions in this way models the practice of rhetorical listening—it invites students to try on multiple interpretations by forcing them to "listen" for a mindset different from their own. Ultimately, the intent/effect tactic is a practical and specific pedagogical tool grounded in the theory of rhetorical listening.

I have found the intent/effect tactic most useful in the course of spontaneous classroom conversations as a way to respond to racially troubling statements made by well-meaning white students. I have also deliberately brought the tactic into the classroom through an activity based on the Dartmouth incident. I explain the context to the class then ask them to read the GGMM and Brothers's response. Then I ask the students to work as members of one of the following groups: the college administration, the Asian American student organization, or a mixed group of undergraduates talking over lunch. I ask each group to talk through their understanding of the situation and how they would respond. This eventually leads to a full class discussion.

This exercise requires students to rhetorically listen to the incident and invent possible reactions given their understandings. The students end up generating interpretations that they

would not have conceived otherwise. Though this activity can elicit some student resistance, it generates far more productive thinking about audiences and unstated assumptions.

As I have shown, the intent/effect tactic is already underlying all kinds of discursive interactions. Although this tactic is present across a variety of situations, it is generally not consciously deployed by its users, nor has the tactic been presented directly as a pedagogical option. What antiracist teachers can now do is introduce the tactic as a pedagogical and analytical tool. Teachers can employ the tactic as a way to practice and model rhetorical listening for their students and invite a bit of complexity into discussions that are fraught with tensions for students and teachers. When we acknowledge the multiple possible intentions behind a statement—either in writing or in class discussion—we invite "rhetorical complexity" (West 216) and "interpretive invent[iveness]" (Ratcliff 1) that students can use in our classes and beyond.

Notes

[1] This essay is sometimes anthologized under the title "Black Men and Public Space." It is Staples's first-person account of his experiences walking in big cities at night. He describes several encounters in which he is assumed to be dangerous because of his skin color. Staples explains that the fear that he saw directed toward him created a fear in himself. "Where fear and weapons meet—and they often do in urban America—there is always the possibility of death" (54).

[2] I modeled this process on the procedure Thomas Newkirk used in his study of writing conferences. He met with each student in a one-on-one interview with two tape recorders in the room—one to play back the student's conference with her teacher and one to record the current session. Newkirk explains a feature of this process: "By having participants comment specifically on parts of the tape, I hoped to provide a way for [the students] to uncover (or discover) strategies and reactions that are tacit and intuitive" (198). Similarly, I was looking to elicit discursive data on how white students make sense of race while minimizing my influence as the researcher to guide the results.

[3] Trainor explains that such "Characterizations contribute to static, stereotypic pictures of white, middle class students and their values and beliefs. In doing so, they violate Henry Giroux's injunction that critical teachers avoid 'good/bad,' 'innocent/racist' dichotomies in their dealings with students" (Trainor "Critical" 632).

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