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Issues of Tolerance and College Writing Courses

JACQUELINE JONES ROYSTER

IN THE essay "Genre as Social Action," Carolyn R. Miller does a superlative job of situating the concept of rhetorical genres as a useful springboard from which to understand language, learning, and expressive form. About halfway through the essay, however, she makes a point that resounds in a different way. Discussing Kenneth Burke's notion in *Permanence and Change* of "motives" or situations for rhetorical action, she states:

Burke observes that in an age of "marked instability" such as ours, typical patterns are not widely shared and hence the matter of motivation is "liquid" [. . .]. We may not know our own motives, we cannot name them, what recurs for me does not for someone else; with a wealth of stimuli and a dearth of shared knowledge, we hardly know how to engage each other in discourse. We have many and confused intentions, but few effective orientation centers for joint action. (31)

In addition to shedding insight about genre as a problematic area for critical inquiry, this quotation also suggests another contentious moment. Miller's statement highlights how complicated it is to define problems of instability and to identify solutions for them.

One sign of contemporary instability on college and university campuses is the consistency of incidents of bigotry and intolerance. At best, in our highly mobile and complex modern world, we operate with competing viewpoints, interests, and agendas, a situation filled by multiple opportunities for misunderstanding, insensitivity, and hatefulness. We have, therefore, a critical need to develop better means and mechanisms for engaging with one another and our problems across differences and for negotiating both individual and community actions. But, even if we manage to generate more effective discourse practices, we still need neutral ground for engagement, that is, sites for the monitoring and managing of positive actions. Colleges and universities, like the society that they mirror, are fully challenged to rise to this occasion as well.

For a while in English studies during our infamous culture wars, we focused attention on ideological differences and their implications in revitalizing educational values and processes (see, e.g., Graff). Increasingly, however, as we have acknowledged the dynamic nature of ideological conflicts, we have been compelled to face on a practical, day-to-day level the realities of existing in the

presence of others who do not share our reference points, personal histories, alliances, and preferences and who quite frankly are just different from us. What is increasingly evident is that the lines that have historically divided us (e.g., race, class, gender, sexuality, culture, geography, age) remain even when we enter campus gates. Academic institutions, as protected spaces for intellectual enterprises, cannot be assumed to be without the harmful effects of worldly habits and concerns. With the changing contours of higher education, there are growing opportunities for conflict, not just in questioning or upholding the sanctity of traditional academic values and interests but also in relation to a more fundamental level of positive human interaction and its assumptions of civility and respect, rights to participation, and personal safety.

In response to the challenges especially of this fundamental human level, institutional systems and processes are pushed to shift and reconfigure. We search for new paradigms. As teachers, scholars, and administrators, we are compelled as never before to mediate the intellectual conflicts and the epistemological enterprises of knowledge acquisition and knowledge making. We are compelled as well to be attuned to personal interactions; to codes of public behavior; to codes of respect among strangers, friends, and adversaries; to classrooms as places that can be used to explore, reflect on, and interpret problematic social conditions, political issues, and cultural tensions. We need both to acknowledge the trajectories and consequences of values, experience, and action and to chart a future in which we try harder to live and work in relative peace and harmony with others.

An obvious point for mediation and intervention along these lines is the general curriculum because it consists of the courses that all students take. At this level we have the opportunity to reach our largest audience in the most sustained way possible, and we also have a reasonable

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expectation for what might be labeled “bang for buck” or, differently stated, a higher yield for a relatively low investment. One of the most convenient places in the general curriculum for such activity, though certainly not exclusively so, is the writing classroom. The reasons are rather obvious but worth articulating here. In addition to being required for almost everyone, college writing courses have been by tradition protean in that they serve the will of the particular institutional context in which they exist. Generally these courses are shaped by a balancing of interest and power as negotiated among departmental, institutional, and societal mandates. From another point of view, in writing classrooms we have, in effect, competing alliances and competing ways by which those of us who are teachers of writing are held accountable.

The import of this balancing process as we look across institutional sites is that we have the habit of defining the purposes and content of writing classrooms in flexible, some would say amorphous, ways. The range of definitions, therefore, for what constitutes an appropriate course is wider in writing courses than in many other courses, even those in the general curriculum. In an effort to simplify the categories within this range, however, we can think of the purposes as threefold. A typical purpose of writing courses is to serve as a gateway or a moment of general transition between high school and college, functioning much as a college orientation process in which the students settle themselves into the institution, develop a loyalty to that institution, and construct a sense of academic self. A second purpose is to teach the specific skills and abilities that will be necessary for successful participation in the rest of the college curriculum, to serve in a substantial way as an introduction to academic discourses, whether institutions define academic discourses as disciplinary or cross-disciplinary. A third is to look more comprehensively at the ways that language, and particularly writing, works in academic and nonacademic environments, so that the courses are substantially defined in terms of literacy development and practical applications of literacy knowledge rather than in more traditional terms of development of language abilities.

This range offers tremendous choice of reading materials, writing assignments, teaching and learning strategies, and assessment mechanisms. Again, such flexibility permits writing courses to respond not just to multiple agendas as a curricular concern but also to special agendas as defined by the social mandates of the college or university. So it should come as no surprise that college writing courses have become primary sites for addressing the concerns that we now associate with the need to help our students to value tolerance and to act accordingly. At the same time that we should not be surprised by writing courses as sites of engagement around issues of tolerance, however, we should listen to the urgent imperative that

we not take this agenda lightly, as yet one more thing that teachers of writing are being asked to do. Instead, we should note the inherent volatility of this mandate as we consider carefully the implications of writing classrooms as the site of choice. The imperative is not business as usual, though much of what is demanded fits well within our habitual categories of interest; we are asked to develop ways for doing more successfully and more systematically what we need to do and are generally well suited to do.

I became interested in teaching tolerance in 1992, when I moved to my present university. There a second-level writing course had as its focus writing and related skills, research, and issues related to identity in the United States. I considered such a multilayered purpose a tall order for any writing classroom and certainly for one operating on a quarter system. Setting aside the issue of time on task, however, what I was particularly drawn to was clarified in a conversation with a graduate teaching assistant whom a student had asked, “Why should we care about others?” The question, a springboard for provocative discussion in her class, became for me a defining moment for a textbook project, which I have since entitled *Writing and the Public Good: A Casebook for Thinking and Writing*. As I worked on this book, many issues emerged that underscore ongoing challenges if we are to use writing classrooms as sites for mediating differences and for nurturing a capacity for tolerance and coexistence.

First on my list of issues was the need to clarify my own ideological viewpoint. The student’s question permitted me to restate my interests in issues of tolerance through four basic questions, some of which were certainly part of a long-standing research agenda but became reenergized by the student’s concern:

1. What is the role of society and its institutions (e.g., colleges and universities) in generating a culture that would permit citizens (and others) of various personal histories, alliances, and values to live and work in peace and harmony?
2. What does a society that is made up of people from multiple cultures need in order for a sense of community to form and for the participants in that community at various levels of local and national identity to articulate common mandates and carry these mandates out fairly and equitably across all stakeholders in the process?
3. What does an individual need in order to function well as a user of language in the presence of others whom she or he may not know or even particularly care to know?
4. What happens to classroom dynamics and classroom decision making in the light of such concerns?

If we start with the last question first, that is, with classroom dynamics, my inquiries have certainly been enriched

by my experiences teaching our second-level course. Each term that I've walked into my classroom—in every single instance—I've entered an overwhelmingly white space. I find that for many of my white students, I am the first and only African American teacher whom they have personally encountered and sometimes the first and only African American person whom they have encountered in a position of status and authority. Some of them, to say the least, are anxious about being with me, an African American woman, in a course in which they know ahead of time that they will need to talk publicly about contentious issues.

I always start my course by emphasizing its three focuses—writing and related skills, research, and issues of identity—but I also emphasize that I am not there to convert their beliefs or to pass judgment on their experiences or lack of experiences. I invite difference into the room, and I do not apologize or engage in apologetic behavior for my being different from them or for their being different from me. I try to demonstrate that difference is indeed the focus of discourse in the class, and I do not permit our talk to be disembodied. Instead, I construct a base of classroom experiences (through reading, writing, observing, analyzing, and talking) that bring texture to our discussion and create the shared knowledge that is typically missing between us. We discuss ascribed, acquired, apprenticed, visible, and invisible identities, and I try to shift the paradigm of engagement around these difficult dialogues by shifting the vocabulary away from just the isms to direct and specific searches for the evidence of:

- power, privilege, entitlement, authority, agency
- oppression, discrimination, domination, victimization
- status, achievement, pride, measures of success
- patterns of behavior, preferences, beliefs
- issues of representation and presentation

We focus on issues and ideas as abstract notions and as concrete notions and we deal with language use in its impacts and its consequences. These types of activities seem both manageable and appropriate for contemporary classrooms that have been mandated to respond to a politically charged sociocultural environment in which bigotry might easily rule the day. My experience has been that discussions are provocative, thoughtful, and engaging. I certainly learn more each term about the complexities around us, and my students report in their evaluations of the course that they do too.

How do such activities participate in a larger agenda for raising students' awareness of a need for tolerance? How do these activities help students develop experience and expertise in exhibiting more tolerant behavior in public arenas (e.g., the classroom)? These questions take us back to the student's question, "Why should we care about others?" When I thought about this question, I allowed

my most jaded view to emerge. My sense is that, despite whatever altruistic views we might hold of ourselves, we do not really care that much about others. What we do care very much about is ourselves and what we perceive to be ours. Turning this jaded view on its head, I decided that one challenge of writing teachers is to help students extend their definitions of what constitutes "our" in ways that do not necessarily violate their personal preferences but that permit them to situate those preferences within a matrix of private, social, and public interests. Using this perspective, then, I chose as the theme of *Writing and the Public Good* an interrogation of what constitutes public discourse and how individuals can function responsibly and well as participants.

The choice to focus on public discourse (the arena for bigotry and intolerance) responds to current educational purposes for college-level composition courses in two ways. First, for several years now teachers of writing have been concerned, some might say overly so, with cultural, personal, and ideological differences. We have shaped curricular and pedagogical strategies around such notions as multiculturalism, diversity, and difference; we have paid particular attention to contentious topics; and we have done so in full recognition of the increasing acts of intolerance and bigotry many have perceived on campuses and in classrooms around the country. Embedded in all these efforts is the notion that language can be viewed as cultural capital, that is, as a basic resource with which we negotiate life among others and find ways to grow and prosper, to learn about the ways in which other people are like and unlike ourselves, and to learn to be watchful of the world around us in the interest of assuring the quality of life that we desire. Seeing language in this way as cultural capital requires that we pay attention to the thoughtful use of language as a resource of power, a power that is exercised in both public and private arenas (Habermas; Fraser; Ryan).

Further, focusing on public discourse is responsive thematically to current educational purposes in that it draws direct attention to the critical role that language plays in forming attitudes, articulating viewpoints, and carrying out social, political, and cultural mandates (Bonvillain). Once we draw direct attention to language use in this way, we are inevitably placed within the arena of rhetorical practices and processes. Contemporary research in rhetorical studies, cultural studies, and feminist studies has underscored the need for both theorists and practitioners to articulate the ideological viewpoints from which they make decisions and speak. In this regard, teachers of writing have acknowledged that writing as a process has cognitive, social, and political dimensions. As a cognitive process, writing is tied to our language abilities and the ways in which we've internalized experiences as communicators. By the time students get to college, they have had many, many experiences by which they have learned

language(s) and learned to use language knowledge (oral and textual) in different settings and situations for different purposes. While they are not always consciously aware of their knowledge, they have it nevertheless, and it is there and available to be used in writing classrooms to know more and to do more.

As a social process, writing, like all communicative and expressive forms, makes sense mainly in the presence of others. From this perspective, the purpose of writing is to communicate expressively, informatively, even persuasively in text and to elicit response from others, a process by which students learn to sharpen abilities and enhance communicative success. Further, writing functions by conventions, by the ways that a particular group of people have agreed, in the interest of communicative exchange, to use it. Unlike speech, writing also needs the flexibility of transcending both time and space: to convey thoughts, feelings, and ideas without the person who is writing being physically present with readers in order to explain. Ideally, writing conventions operate in the interest of positive exchange and apply at all levels of the enterprise. We have conventions for everything from the way that we choose and spell words, put in punctuation, and make sentences to the way that we make decisions about what is appropriate to talk about, who our audiences are, how we establish credibility with those audiences, and how we structure ideas and the evidence for them that are informing and convincing. What seems worthy of emphasis here is that our attempts to maximize quality in communicative transmissions benefit from an acknowledgment of the habits and preferences that form the conventions of the communities in which we participate.

At this point, the political dimensions of writing certainly come to the table. First, we recognize that language practices vary across communities. Further, we recognize that the choices that we make at all levels of language use, from commas to establishing credibility, are rooted in the habits and preferences of particular communities, some of which have more political power and social prestige than others. In symbolically invoking a community through our language choices, we also convey images of ourselves (often stereotypical ones, both positive and negative) that are embedded in the social and political history of the community itself.

We know from recent research that the assignment of value to the quality of language engagement and performance operates, therefore, within systems of belief, privilege, and power (Bonvillain; Foucault; Bahktin; Vygotsky; Hymes). We know that this laying on of value applies both to language practices and to the people who use them (Wolfram; Scott; Crawford). As language practices are categorized as prestigious or nonprestigious, respected or not respected, valued or not valued, and so forth, so are the people. Both the practices and the people are deemed

effective or ineffective based on the ways in which the particular speakers or writers satisfy a sense of the norm—in following expectations and sometimes in creatively and innovatively subverting those very expectations. In the world today, these habits of valuing create problems—for example, problems of equity and fairness in access to possibility, social gains, and economic reward.

From my point of view, these three dimensions of writing (cognitive, social, political) urge us as teachers of writing toward two concerns. One is a better understanding of what constitutes the cognitive, social, and political implications of our own field, rhetoric and composition, which is an interesting quest in and of itself. A second, though, is a commitment to both clarity and flexibility on the part of contemporary teachers as we create contexts for learning and choose learning resources. If we are to be successful in teaching the varieties of students who occupy writing classrooms, then we certainly need to be thoughtful about what exactly we are trying to do and why, and we also need to be flexible in using a broader range of techniques and resources (readings, assignments, expressive forms) to help students cross social boundaries and gain experience using language for many purposes, in many forms, across many contexts, for multiple audiences.

This brings us full circle in the sense that this ideological perspective for the teaching of writing signals complexity, a complexity that suggests that in contemporary writing classrooms, as primary sites for cross-boundary engagement, we face new imperatives:

- learning to live in a complex world rather than a simple one
- learning to live in the presence of others as citizens simultaneously of the earth, a nation, and our multiply defined local communities
- learning to use language as cultural capital, as the legal tender for social and political negotiation within our own preferred groups, as well as in various cross-boundary interactions with others
- using language respectfully, rather than violently or abusively, in learning to coexist in peace and relative harmony

On the one hand, then, in writing classrooms students need to enhance their language abilities; on the other hand, they need experience in using those abilities well in the face of modern social, cultural, and political complexities. In our efforts to help students garner such experiences, the imperative is not just for them to do more writing but also for them to write with a conscious and specific regard for purpose, context, audience, as well as for their own multiple and sometimes competing interests. If we help students think of themselves as members of various types of communities, as people who will inevitably

be called on to use language flexibly, then learning to think and write well in the presence of others is not simply a display of academic achievement. It is a necessity. In other words, this viewpoint positions writing as part of an array of resources for getting jobs done that are important, even essential to the quality of our contemporary lives.

My own imperative in viewing language instruction in this way is to help students read carefully; ask various types of questions of the readings, the issues, themselves, and their classmates; use specific terms and concepts in the interrogation of authentic problems; use reflection productively (i.e., learn to think back and to think again) in determining what they actually think and why; and use writing to accomplish multiple purposes in various contexts to communicate with different audiences. The bottom line, of course, is that the exercising of such skills and abilities responds to the need for all of us to communicate with others more effectively in a world that is complicated. My view is that language is our best resource for negotiating differences, especially in shared space, and for solving complex problems in the light of the competing interests of the many, many types of people in whose spheres we find ourselves needing to operate.

Given the ongoing possibility of various types of instability on college and university campuses and in society at large, academic institutions are challenged to train students to be better able to participate in common space (e.g., a classroom, a work environment, a governmental process) at effective levels of tolerance. Writing classrooms constitute a convenient site in helping students extend their knowledge of others, develop a capacity to be clear and articulate about their points of view, and see and understand the similarities and differences between their views and the views of others. This capacity to think, communicate, and interact well in the spaces that we must share with others encourages social interaction, exchange, and cooperation rather than conflict, and it constitutes a meaningful agenda against bigotry and for tolerance, respect, and compassion. Even when we do our jobs well as teachers and students in writing classrooms,

though, I suspect that this will not be enough. Complex issues require complex solutions, and we are deeply challenged to be responsive not just in writing classrooms but everywhere, across the curriculum and across the institution generally, as we recognize the fluid spaces that now constitute the personal, social, and public spheres of contemporary living and as all of us commit actively to making our campuses places in which we can participate fully in campus life without fear of violence or abuse.

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Tolerance has never been a more important issue than it is today. But in the UK, a recent study shows that over a third of 12- to 15-year-olds have been exposed to hate speak online. In this climate, parents and teachers have a vital role to play in helping children grow up without prejudice and learn empathy. We may think of ourselves as tolerant people, but we make hundreds of judgements every day, and we're not always as discreet about them as we might think. "Tolerance is most needed when we don't agree with someone, or when they are different from us," says Rhian. "It's about learning to discuss things and argue with people without getting angry or upset." College Writing. What this handout is about. This handout will help you figure out what your college instructors expect when they give you a writing assignment. Furthermore, and for many high school teachers, this is the crucial issue—many mandatory end-of-grade writing tests and college admissions exams like the SAT II writing test reward writers who follow the five-paragraph essay format. Writing a five-paragraph essay is like riding a bicycle with training wheels; it's a device that helps you learn. "Closing the Gap between High School Writing Instruction and College Writing Expectations." The English Journal 99.4 (2010): 77-83. Hillocks, George Jr. writing and the suitable language to use accordingly. Thirdly, the students face lot of problems in the UG level, when they fail to discriminate the styles of writing and methods and vocabulary to use under different headings. Fourthly, the causes of not showing interest in writing may be lack of motivation to learn. English, and the teacher's lack of interest. Of course, if all the power remains in the hands of the teacher, we have a traditional approach. of dictation, but dictation could be otherwise. Dictation taking as a potential practical. Teacher Employment and Deployment: The Issues of Oversupply and Undersupply of Teachers. Jan 2011. A Mukminin. Mukminin, A.2011. Teacher Employment and Deployment: The Issues of Oversupply and Undersupply of Teachers. The author discusses how she became interested in teaching tolerance in her university-level writing course. The article highlights classroom dynamics and building experience with tolerance.(Author/VWL). Descriptors: Group Dynamics, Higher Education, Second Language Instruction, Social Discrimination, Teaching Methods, Writing Instruction. Publication Type: Journal Articles; Opinion Papers. Education Level: N/A. Audience: N/A. Language: English. Sponsor: N/A.