Critical thinking and ideology: A study of composition's secondary curricula

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CRITICAL THINKING AND IDEOLOGY: A STUDY OF COMPOSITION'S SECONDARY CURRICULA

A Thesis
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
English:
Composition

by
Jonathan Barney Anderson
September 2002
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ABSTRACT

In 1992, Maxine Hairston's "Diversity, Ideology, and Teaching Writing" claimed that instead of teaching writing and critical thinking skills, First Year Composition (FYC) instructors were instead using their classrooms as coercive political platforms that were detrimental to students' educational needs. Hairston's solution was to limit writing classrooms only to student-text production. This thesis enters the discussion at this point by exploring Hairston's position, explicating the practices of those instructors Hairston claims indoctrinate students, critiquing the theory Hairston condemns for supporting those practices, and finally explaining possible ways to distinguish between teaching critical political and social inquiry and advancing lopsided political agendas in FYC classrooms. Findings conclude that although the use of political material does increase the possibility of coercive teaching practices, social-epistemic rhetoric (the primary theory proposing the use of political material in FYC) does not encourage political or social indoctrination. Furthermore, social-epistemic rhetoric expands on traditional composition theories and practices by including multiple perspectives on controversial topics, an understanding of discourse as social and political, and a shift in traditional power
relationships between students and instructors, all of which, as argued in this thesis, are necessary for productive critical inquiry into social and political discussions. Conclusions maintain, contrary to Hairston, that as long as certain criteria are utilized, FYC is a legitimate environment for discussions concerning political and social topics.
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CHAPTER ONE
HAIRSTON’S POSITION

Instructors and administrators’ assumptions regarding what makes writing instruction “good” often are anchored in firm but unarticulated beliefs, experiences, and actions—what Stephen North refers to as “teaching lore.” This uniquely positions the study of writing in the academy. Unlike science or math, where curricula and assessment are often agreed upon and universalized, composition scholars and teachers have rarely been able to agree upon a single set of effective and appropriate strategies for teaching writing. As a result, conflicting scholarly theories and an emphasis on pedagogical research riddle the field of composition; in fact, no other college discipline, aside from educational theory, pays as much attention to pedagogy as does composition studies, nor does any discipline disagree as much about instructional practices as do composition scholars and practitioners.

Contributing to composition’s disagreement on scholarship and practice, writing is rarely isolated. Instead, writing is understood through relationships with other “borrowed” subjects that help facilitate the skills necessary to reinforce the different elements of writing. Because of this, and for the purposes of this thesis,
writing pedagogy will be examined in two categories: the specific principles of writing and the subjects or vehicles through which those principles are facilitated (for similar distinctions, see Brodkey's "visible and invisible curricula" (193)). I will refer to the former category as the primary curriculum and the latter as the secondary curriculum. The primary curriculum assumes qualities that can be found within the structure and style of writing itself: diction, form, syntax, mechanics, rhetoric, argumentative structure (deductive/inductive reasoning, supportive evidence), etc., while the qualities of a secondary curriculum include the examined topic (literature, feminism, foreign policy), along with its particular conventions. For example, the secondary curriculum may include reading, understanding, and responding to a variety of sources on multiculturalism, from which students may derive an essay on twenty-first century suburban racism. The primary curriculum then includes the writing objectives encouraged by these activities.

Over the years, debates over the intersection of composition's primary and secondary curriculum have created much controversy. White and Polin's 1986 California Report exemplifies the contention between primary and secondary curricula in its six most common patterns of composition
instruction: 1. Literature Approach. 2. Peer Workshop Approach. 3. Individualized Writing Lab Approach. 4. Text-Based Rhetoric Approach. 5. Basic Skills Approach. 6. Service Course Approach. The six approaches, however, reduce writing instruction to three basic assumptions: 1. Writing should discuss student texts (primary curriculum only); 2. Writing should discuss professional writings (primary curriculum is taught through a secondary curriculum); 3. Writing can be reduced to its respective parts and should therefore consist of instruction in correct grammar and usage (White 42-44). The classic Elbow/Bartholomae debate over "writers" and "academics" articulates the theoretical parity of the first two, while the third, almost in contempt of consistent findings on non-inclusive grammar instruction, speaks simply to the difficulty and frustration instructors encounter when reading error-filled student texts.

Currently, as in the past, all three vie to become the vanguard of composition instruction. However, both current traditionalism and expressivism, particularly in their pure forms, have lost favor with contemporary scholars. For example, although many compositionists believe that personal writing is an important element of good writing, most composition scholars at least envision a need for students
to understand and participate within the academic stadium—rife with conventions, forms, voices, and ideas that are often alien to students and consequently important for their participation within the academy. Few contest the importance of this kind of practical orientation to post-secondary education. Yet, as composition courses enter the domain of other disciplines, genres, and political proving-grounds, issues surrounding the bias present in these secondary curricula become more endemic to the conversation.

The slow demise of current traditionalism, the myopia of expressivism, and the greater acceptance of postmodern theories such as social-epistemic rhetoric (and the community of voices and influences it represents) have led compositionists to devote more instructional time to essay content (Brodkey 193). In turn, this places a greater responsibility on instructors to teach critical thinking within the context of multiple discourses and their discordant social and political voices, a skill that is often expected of instructors but is usually neglected in pedagogical training and traditionally in theory as well. Adding to this responsibility, during the last decade, as composition curricula have become more politicized (Hairston 180), composition theory has battled to stay abreast and is only recently—within the last decade or so—struggling with
the importance of distinguishing between critical thinking and pushing preset political/social ideologies (Halasek 117).

Perhaps the most controversial article on the topic, Maxine Hairston’s *Diversity, Ideology, and Teaching Writing* criticizes compositionists for inundating First Year Composition (FYC) with overt leftist political ideologies:

I see a new model emerging for freshman writing programs, a model that disturbs me greatly. It’s a model that puts dogma before diversity, politics before craft, ideology before critical thinking, and the social goals of the teacher before the educational needs of the student [. . . .] It’s a model that doesn’t take freshman English seriously in its own right but conceives of it as a tool, something to be used [. . . . E]verywhere I turn I find composition faculty, both leaders in the profession and new voices, asserting that they have not only the right, but the duty, to put ideology and radical politics at the center of their teaching. (180)

Although the article met with indignation from many composition scholars, who argued that classrooms were inevitably political and that Hairston’s attack itself was
political rather than scholarly, the distinction she implies between encouraging critical thinking and advocating preset ideological agendas raises an important concern in composition instruction and scholarship. Because FYC classrooms claim the responsibility of encouraging critical thinking, and because critical thinking is more recently being taught through social and/or political ideologies, the line between setting an agenda and encouraging critical inquiry can be dangerously thin. Thus, this study proposes to explore Hairston's criticism of composition's political and ideological positioning, to explicate the practices of the theorists she claims "cross over the line," to critique the theory she condemns for supporting these practices, and ultimately to conclude, based on these findings, what are and what are not constructive ways of distinguishing between teaching critical political and social inquiry and advancing lopsided political agendas in the FYC classroom.

Hairston opens her article with allusions to a variety of scholars whom she accuses of "[. . .] asserting that they have not only the right, but the duty, to put ideology and radical politics at the center of their teaching" (180). She calls on linguist John Searle for support, who concurs, stating that
The most congenial home, left for Marxism [. . .] is in the departments of literary criticism [. . .] Many professors [. . .] teach it as a means of achieving left-wing political goals or as an occasion for exercises in deconstruction. (Searle 38)

Hairston validates Searle's position, blaming critical literary theories such as deconstruction, post-structuralism, and Marxist critical theory for "[. . .] trickling down to the lower floors of English departments," and that the justification for using these theories in FYC classrooms are "[. . .] silly, simplistic, and undemonstrable" (184-5). She continues, charging that the goals met through these theories push students to see English as the "[. . .] dialect of the dominant class [. . .] that] merely reinforces the status quo and serves the interest of the dominant class" instead of helping students master the standard dialect, which she posits is a more constructive, realistic, and less politicized goal (185).

As a solution, Hairston proffers a twofold schema:

First, students' own writing must be the center of the course. Students need to write to find out how much they know and to gain confidence in their ability to express themselves effectively [. . .]
Second, as writing teachers we should stay within our area of professional expertise: helping students to learn to write in order to learn, to explore, to communicate, to gain control over their lives [. . . . ] We have no business getting into areas where we may have passion and conviction but no scholarly base from which to operate. (187)

Hairston’s position is accurate insofar as FYC, like any other course, should not become a forum for political and social indoctrination. In most universities and colleges, FYC is a mandatory course used to introduce students to writing at the post-secondary level. To use the class to "enlighten" students about the benighted position of various liminal groups or to force them into seeing the inherent oppressiveness of capitalism is, as Hairston claims, to "[. . . ] severely limit [. . . the] freedom of expression for both students and instructors" (191) while relegating FYC to nothing more than eighteen weeks of exactly the kind of closed-ended investigations and argumentation that FYC is assumed to remedy.

The difficulty, however, exists when FYC is divided into its respective functions. On many college and university campuses, FYC is used to introduce students to
academic forms, styles, structures, language communities, grammatical conventions, and perhaps some of the concepts they will encounter in their other courses. In addition, FYC is expected to introduce students to writing as an exploration, to understanding and using various rhetorical devices, and to very specific levels of analysis, critical inquiry, and support necessary to proactively complicate the political and social ideologies students encountered in their secondary education. In other words, composition courses are often given the duty of teaching students how to critically investigate a topic—something that is difficult to facilitate without the various ideological positions of other academic and/or professional writers.

Hairston’s antidote for the political pressure of influential writers and the teachers who may espouse their theories is to establish a student-centered curriculum, where students draw from their own experience for writing topics. To exemplify her aims, she creates a fictional Malawi student who discusses tribal legends of his homeland and the significance of the ivory bracelet he wears on his arm (192). The student, I assume, will tell the story of his heritage, highlighting the significance of the bracelet, then attempt to make that knowledge important to others who may be interested. On one hand, because the topic is
student-generated (with the student being the assumed authority), the sample assignment does to some degree safeguard teachers from espousing political/social ideologies. This, in turn, also neutralizes students' tendencies to follow the political ideologies of the instructor for a grade, because the only agenda established will be the student's own. The assignment could, in fact, also generate more interest than one assigned by the instructor, as, at least theoretically, students will write on what interests them most—all of which are important considerations for FYC instructors.

The problem, however, still lies in the expectations of a FYC class. As stated earlier, FYC is more than functional literacy or basic skills. Most composition classes have either a basic writing prerequisite or a placement score that assumes students are already to a large degree functionally literate. Although they purport to address issues of coherence, punctuation, proofreading, and editing, many colleges and universities focus the class on improving students' ability to write intelligently, and to read, think, respond, and write reflectively about what they read. Thus, writing at the college level means more than form, grammar, and reiterating what students have already
learned; in short, writing classrooms become a space for the early stages of scholarship and intellectual struggle.

One essential element, and perhaps the only generally accepted tie to the different disciplines of post-secondary scholarship, is the presence of conflicting ideas, which are also at the root of critical thinking and ideological formation. Although Hairston does indeed mention critical thinking and its importance in her article, she excludes political and social theories from this lens, because of the dangers of inculcation they present. However, she assumes that these theories will be touted without complication. If she is correct and these theories are maintained without multiple voices, then I would agree with Hairston’s fears, because, without challenge, political and social theories can be maintained without complexity, and students’ choices are left to the whims of creativity and belief. Thinking critically about any topic shapes the way it is constructed, deconstructed, and then reconstructed with a more knowledgeable base of information from which to speak and make further inquiry. Traditionally, critical thought requires students to at the very least find a position (thesis statement), while mustering requisite evidence to support the discovery of new information and conclusions (Brodkey 236). To take this further and situate it within
the specific influence of social and political theories, students' claims, if conflicting voices are present, become partial and provisional statements about the world. Without the presence of other voices, their positions become stacked claims masquerading as unarguable and immutable truths with which readers must either agree or disagree whole-heartedly (Brodkey 236). In this situation, if they do not consider dissenting points of view, students risk leaving the argument without having examined it from more than one position, a move that leaves students without the critical and rhetorical authority needed for sustained inquiry into difficult topics. Including a variety of dissenting arguments on the same issue ". . .] encourages students to step back and walk around a proposition, examining its construction and looking, in particular, for the gaps and fissures, the telltale signs of covert interests, dogmas, and desires" (Fitts and France 15). Thus, "Avoiding political issues [. . .] even if possible, would fail to engage students in those very rhetorical practices that articulate and validate knowledge" (15).

This conclusion, however, may present the dangers for which Hairston condemns many current writing programs. As Hairston concludes, instead of allowing a fair and substantial range of diverse interpretations of topics,
composition teachers, because of their own political biases, may inevitably force those biases onto students as the correct or plausible answer to the topic, even if several conflicting voices are present. Or, presenting even more of a danger, students will pick up the hints of bias and attempt to parrot that point of view. Either of these is possible. Yet, the question is whether this is as dangerous or as universal as Hairston claims.

An ideological stance, according to Hairston, only includes the student’s or teacher’s position without the validation of other perspectives; thus, Hairston uses ideology as a four-letter word, connecting it to phrases like “radical politics” or opposing it with undefined notions of critical thinking (180), both of which relegate ideology to the level of dangerous opinions and/or unsupported beliefs. Although the word has these connotations, if taken literally, ideology lays out a pattern of argumentation that supports its conclusions and discloses its weaknesses. In other words, exposing an ideology would not only highlight the conclusions but also the premises, their sources, the construction and ordering of those sources, and the inferences drawn to form the conclusion(s). If taken in their complexity rather than their ends, ideologies become the intellectual spaces for
negotiating claims and information, "[. . .] environments [. . . that] provide [. . .] a continual source of critical tension (Fritts and France 22). In other words, if instructors are to take an ideological stance on an issue, all of the elements of that stance should be laid out together with the conclusions as a position for students to negotiate in and around instead of as absolute truths. The ideology, therefore, must necessarily "[. . .] view [. . .] argumentation as a prologue to further inquiry [. . . instead of] as performances that invariably end with winners and losers, and, ultimately, in silence" (Brodkey 236). This does, however, require instructors to relinquish a significant amount of authority in the classroom, as their ideological positions become as unstable as their students'.

Although few compositionists would openly discourage students from becoming critical readers of difficult texts—as this allows them to position and negotiate within the dissenting views of an argument—what may be less obvious but more dangerous is when instructors indirectly discourage students from critiquing the instructor's authority, which can be looked at as its own text. Thus, the double standard of asking students to be critical of all ideological positions except the instructor's may contribute to the mimicry that Hairston posits. To defend a position as
immutable truth sends a twofold message to students: 1) that knowledge is static once it is described by an authority or institution, and 2) that critical inquiry is based on unwarranted assumptions that reduce education to a game of inquiry only to the point that students reach prescribed conclusions. Thereby, students’ only inquiry is into the instructor’s biases, and making the grade becomes knowing the roads that the instructor took to get there. This is especially dangerous if the instructor does not fully recognize the bias present in his/her own position, or if the instructor’s biases are constructed under a more elaborate and less visible umbrella of weakly-supported claims that work together to equal a narrow, immutable vision of a particular topic.

Recently, during one of my FYC classes, I queried students on what the introductory lectures to the class had to do with writing in general. The preceding lectures had been rough political critiques paired with a quick probing into students’ understanding of and access to information from a variety of popular media. I used two primary examples of which I was sure few students were aware: the fairly recent and successful protest against President Clinton’s Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI) and President George W. Bush’s “Gag Order” on giving federal
monies to international free clinics who discuss abortion as a reproductive alternative. My initial intent was to show how superficial information or a lack of information altogether could lead to a disparate reading when compared to a deeper look at a variety of sources. On a larger scale, I wanted to provide students with a broad-strokes look at their responsibilities as FYC students and as students becoming scholars, as their task would be to take headlines and bylines (surface readings), understand their initial reactions to them, then complicate their reactions with further research and a revision of their original position. Ultimately, students had to compare their "gut" reactions to their "informed" understanding of the topic and discuss the changes and the reasons behind them.

However democratic I assumed the lectures and the assignment to be—after all, I was using presidents from both popular parties, and my only bias seemed against a lack of investigative integrity on the part of the media—when questioning the students as to what this had to do with the class or with writing in general, one brave soul raised her hand and said, "It seems your class has some kind of political agenda."

Although I quickly explained that the only political agenda I had for the class was for students to become
active, critical participants in an ongoing conversation, I felt for the first time that any suggestion of political content could, as Hairston presents, be viewed as politically dangerous and that I, in turn, could be viewed as an ideologue, pushing an unwarranted agenda onto students who did not wish to or who should not wish to accept it. More importantly, however, I began to question what Kay Halasek explains as "The unexamined assumption [...] that people who take the time and make the effort to become informed will necessarily turn to critique what the critical pedagogues themselves define as injustice, discrimination, or oppression" (118). Said another way, although I wanted students to become critically engaged with issues that had multiple viewpoints, I was also pushing that they accept politics as inherently corrupt and media as the vehicle for maintaining that corruption.

Looking back at some of the old essays I have kept from previous classes, I begin to understand that although the comments suggest a variety of stances on the arguments and support surrounding the issues, I do pressure students to accept my world view that power is corrupt and oppressive, that social systems can work to reduce corruption and inequality, and that critical engagement—with a bias toward corporations and government—is essential to a functional
democracy. In short, I push an ideology, and although I am critical with those students who share my views, I am less so than with those who dissent.

In my defense, I could call on aid from resistance pedagogues such as Paulo Freire, bell hooks, Patricia Bizzell, Nancy Welsh, etc. to validate my position. However, to do so would be more of a justification than an exploration, with the obvious conclusion that what I have been doing is morally, politically, and theoretically sustainable. Instead, I posit that my own ideology, although perhaps better supported than many students', is as fraught with emotional and political bias as any other. The difficulty, of course, is what to do with that understanding. To simply state my bias, as I did to some extent when my student raised the issue, is not enough to dispel the possibility that students will mimic me for the grade. Yet, the fact that some students are willful enough to stage such resistance may contribute to a resolution.

According to Kay Halasek, "Coming to critical awareness (and with it critical reading and writing ability) is a process constrained by social forces and institutions" (119). Inversely, critical awareness is a process unbound by those same forces and institutions. Said another way, confinement exists only in relation to freedom; the converse
is true as well. Thus, an inmate who has lived a year in solitary confinement will recognize the need for freedom in a variety of ways different from one whose confinement consists of the general prison population. Each one, depending on the severity of the punishment, will recognize freedom as a set of rules that s/he must abide by, or, in other terms, in relation to what s/he can or cannot get away with. Students in FYC are under similar circumstances insofar as they enter at differing levels of "ideological becoming," with diverse levels and means of negotiating authoritarian discourse (qtd. in Halasek 120). Some students have already developed rigid ideologies, while others are still searching for theories to support their world experience. In either case, compositionists have a responsibility to offer "[. . .] situated writing through which a student struggles to engage and orient herself and her beliefs," even though the acquired ends may differ significantly from student to student (emphasis Halasek 120). The assumption that instructors can understand the sundry ways students will put their FYC experiences to later use supports an egotistical fallacy that works only as far as it justifies the instructor's practices. Students, though walking out of our classes with similar skills, will put those skills to a variety of purposes suited to their
needs. Thus, students entering FYC, though perhaps ignorant of those purposes at the time, will utilize the class depending on how they understand their own needs, strengths, and deficits in writing and thinking. For some, the class entails reading with and thereby understanding texts. For others, who may have developed a critical stance against authority, the class will become a "resistant form of discourse" (124). The composition instructor then becomes another text in which students, depending on their critical outlook, will accept as "the authority" or as simply another position with which students must negotiate.

According to William Perry and Mary Belenky et al., students move through a relatively systematic intellectual and ethical development that begins with a basic duality and ends with a kind of ethical relativism. "Each stage in the process represents a different epistemological mode or stance through which students progress in their roles as learners" (Halasek 129). Those at the earlier stages of their development may tend to, as Hairston suggests, "mimic" the texts they encounter as they attempt to appropriate the language and ideas present. Those who have moved beyond that position will continue "[ . . . ] building their own self-knowledge, achieving a sense of autonomy and individual voice, a sense of independent choice within a socially
constructed world" (130). Consequently, instructors are left in a somewhat precarious position as they ultimately have little to do with the way students interact with the information they receive. Some students may in fact parrot the instructor, and therefore the instructor's ideologies, while others will already understand the instructor as one voice contributing to a variety of voices on an issue.

What instructors can do, however, is contribute to students' critical development by presenting information in a way that invites critical responses that move beyond a dualistic stance rather than allowing students to sit idle with their initial presumptions. Hairston's Malawi student's report, for example, offers no critical way into the material except through the form and style of the student's prose. These elements are important to forming those skills, but the instruction lacks any attempt to help students move beyond a dualistic response, since the "[. . .] process of critical reading [and thinking], defined as an inquiry into one's relationship with a text [subject] and its hero [position], entails both passive reception and active engagement" (131). Paramount to this process, as Peter Elbow suggests, is information that invites students to both "doubt and believe" (131). Hairston's Malawi student seems to require only the latter, both for the
student writing and for the listening audience, since to engage the writer critically, the audience would have to possess an insight on the subject greater than that which I expect most students have concerning Malawi customs.

To contain the class within the narrow scope of students’ personal preferences and interests seems to renege on composition’s promise to create challenging environments rich in diverse perspectives. This also indirectly tells students that the kinds of writing they will encounter during their tenure will be nothing more than personal storytelling, and that their audiences will be as forgiving of them as were their uninformed classmates, or that their instructors will remain socially and politically neutral on the topics they choose to write. These assumptions, as any student or instructor knows, are false. Students encountering any political and social discourse will be forced to renegotiate personal bias, to include a variety of conflicting voices on the subject, and to construct an ideology based on that information. To assume that there will be no obstruction to their theories if their prose are merely error-free and coherent is like looking at a difficult situation and suddenly declaring oneself blind.
CHAPTER TWO
EXAMINING OTHER VOICES

As established in chapter one, productive critical inquiry into political and social topics within a FYC course depends upon multiple, dissonant voices competing for ideological acceptance. In this context, students' critical tasks are to wade through these voices and understand the parameters of a given discussion, to create an initial position on the topic, and to enter the conversation, with the attendant responsibility of synthesizing the voices with their own to come to a logical, provisional stance on the topic. In doing so, students' nascent views are complicated to form more sophisticated ideologies. The intersection for further controversy, however, is if and in what ways instructors' ideologies directly or indirectly influence the kind of lop-sided advocacy that Hairston claims, or whether the presence of this influence facilitates the kind of fair-handed inquiry that is required to challenge students within competing discourses. Using the above criteria for analysis, this chapter will explicate four of the theorists Hairston claims use the classroom as a political platform to the detriment of students' own ideological becoming.
As suggested previously, even if the deck of the class is stacked in favor of a particular ideological stance, some students, based on the fact that they are intelligent, thinking adults with the capacity to form well-supported ideologies, will challenge the instructor's biases and authority and, contrary to Hairston's claims, come to their own conclusions after reasoning through the position and/or rhetorical power of the instructor. However, only highly skilled, sophisticated, and determined students are likely to successfully do so, given certain social realities of the classroom—i.e. the instructor is the final judge of students' abilities and therefore has the power to accept or reject the validity of students' positions. Regardless of their sophistication, students also come to their classrooms assuming that because teachers are the governing, educated authority, students are there to learn what instructors have to teach. In addition, what students are required to learn is often blurred by the confusing overlap of primary and secondary curricula. For example, if the class is established around the theme of technology, does that mean students need to become proficient users of technology? quasi-scholars on technology issues? proficient writers? or all of the above? And, does a passing grade mean assuming the instructor's potentially biased views on
technology? or, merely supporting a view on technology within the governing bodies of knowledge already established on the subject? To freshman, who think their FYC classes are going to be about "writing," understanding the various permutations of the class in the short span of ten to eighteen weeks while learning to write clear, concise, coherent, well-supported academic essays may be more than they can handle—especially if the course objectives are couched in vague or confusing terms. In this environment, instructors' biases can be seductive alternatives for students who feel like they are flailing inside a conversation that is over their heads, with interlocutors—authors and instructors—who are way out of their league, especially (and this is the rub) when those authorities may not play fairly. Whether we like it or not, instructors have the power of veto; unlike students' arguments, teachers' arguments do not always require adequate support. Thus, within this tricky maze of value, support, and authority, Hairston's claims take on more validity. Given an environment that is particularly fertile for acceptance and indoctrination, compositionists may in fact commandeer their students' ideologies directly or indirectly by asserting weighted political and social ideologies.
To support her position, Hairston invokes four popular composition scholars, whom she cites as both representative of the field and part of the "[. . .] cultural left [who have] claimed writing courses as their political territory" (184). The first of these theorists, Dale Bauer, according to Hairston, not only politicizes her course with a feminist agenda but then dismisses her students' resistance to the theories as nothing more than compliance within "the system." Bauer's article, "The Other 'F' Word: The Feminist in the Classroom," justifies some of Hairston's claims insofar as Bauer's political affiliation at times works to dismiss her students' positions as arbitrary or worse, in need of political "enlightenment."

As for the strengths of Bauer's class, establishing the lens of feminism within the course legitimately challenges students to see the world through a narrow perspective founded on specific governing assumptions, and thereby, it teaches the difficult lesson of analysis, a skill all students will find useful in other classes and in their lives. For example, Bauer may ask her students to analyze a particular article or situation while assuming a feminist's position and the attendant doctrines that govern it. This kind of practice is important and does not on its surface represent any particular bias. Furthermore, its particular
utility comes from the fact that many of the essays students write for classes in and outside the humanities will ask them to take one or several theories and apply them to a particular situation. The practice also asks students—who often operate within the guidelines of personal experience, beliefs, and traditions—to see the world through a different perspective, which is useful in helping them reposition their argumentative stance in respect to social bodies of knowledge, a key element to productive analysis and critical inquiry.

One of the theoretically challenging aspects of Bauer’s class, however, is that she seems to take analysis one step further by asking her students to accept feminism not merely as one of several possible lenses or ways of looking at society but as the correct perspective, without offering them any constructive ways of criticizing the social theory. In other words, she asks students to be critical of the hegemony but not of the authority that she maintains on the subject. For example, Bauer states, and I agree with her on this point, that “Precisely because [students] insist on [the separation between private or personal and the public space], our first task should be to show the personal is public” (385). Part of students’ resistance to theoretical discussions is based on the individual exceptions they see
in just about any theoretical framework presented. Especially regarding feminism, these individual exceptions will be particularly insistent, since, as Bauer suggests, feminism is often "[. . .] identified with an alien, radical, and threatening political position" (386). Yet, Bauer strains the course's integrity when she asks, "[. . .] how do we move ourselves out of this political impasse and resistance in order to get our students to identify with the political agenda of feminism?" (387). Although I, too, have seen the sudden and often aggressive resistance to offering feminism as a valuable socio-political stance, I would also contend that feminism, like any other conglomerate of social theories, "[. . .] has its own inevitable limitations, which render it part of the dialogue of rhetorical statements rather than a transcendent position looking piously down upon an otherwise benighted fray" (Knoblauch 136). Thus, Bauer's position suggests some level of coercion, as it looks for ways to persuade students to identify with, rather than critique, the feminist perspective. Furthermore, when students do engage in resistance, Bauer pigeon-holes their opposition by suggesting that "[. . .] students seem often quite unambiguously committed to the 'system'"(387). I would posit here that their commitment is much more than unambiguous or "ambivalent," as Bauer also claims.
In order for students to accept feminism as an accurate depiction of American culture and institutions, they must first accept—depending on the different school of feminist theory—that American social, political, and corporate institutions are patriarchal, sexist, and oppressive, premises that are easy to exemplify but difficult to prove, especially to someone (male or female) who is sitting in a college classroom (American social institution) on his/her way to what s/he sees as a successful career. That in itself may appear contrary to what the feminist instructor is saying. To take it to the statistical level, if students look around, or move beyond the classroom in their research, they will also find that college populations around the country are, based on those numbers, equally balanced—tipping slightly in favor of the females. This, in turn, implies that men and women are both equally empowered to move on to compete in the job market and thereby choose careers that are based not on their gender but according to their qualifications. This is not say that this is a complete view of feminism, American educational institutions, or corporate hiring practices. Much more research is necessary to support this claim; it does, however, confirm a valid angle students may see and feel compelled to study in terms of understanding gender equality
in higher learning. To me, this level of inquiry proves useful in the context of critical thinking, because it not only questions the so-called hegemony but feminism as well. The example also supports the notion that because students should be rightfully leery of accepting assumptions without adequate support, Bauer’s class needs to at least study students’ resistance to feminism as a potentially valid and supportable position.

Furthermore, I could validate Bauer’s position if the course was an introduction to feminism. However, it is not. It is governed instead by the pedagogical assumptions of a writing classroom. Although, as stated before, those assumptions are malleable, what is imperative is that the secondary curriculum should be a means to improve critical inquiry and writing rather than an end to justify the political platform of the instructor. Bauer agrees on the surface, at least when she claims to foster critical thinking, but the agreement is complicated when she also proposes offering the goal of “emancipatory critical action” (389). The word emancipation means freedom from constraint; it does not, however, include a definition of those constraints. Although no realistic writing class should allow students absolute freedom, emancipation can mean freedom from a feminist construct, especially if established
within the context of FYC and its goals of teaching analysis and critical thinking. This does not mean that students can merely react to feminism with half-cocked, home-grown truisms and prejudice and be allowed to establish that perspective based on a whim. It does, on the other hand, mean that resistance to feminism is a possible ideological position for students to legitimately attempt to argue.

One could reasonably argue that other classes do not offer students the choice to disagree with their theories, so why should Bauer’s class be any different, especially given students’ general ignorance of the tenets of feminism? The answer lies both in the subject being taught and in the situated position of FYC. In a "content" course, instructors are advertised as scholars specializing in the course’s subject and therefore are assumed to be familiar with the dominant and competing theories informing the topic, as well as with their limitations. If these instructors wish to promote critical analysis of the competing theories in their disciplines, then they too have the responsibility of including multiple perspectives on the topic. However, their positions are different to the extent they are not always expected to teach critical thinking, as is composition. Because of the students’ expectations of a composition course, and because of the critical goals that
most composition courses claim to help facilitate, secondary curricula is, by default, not governed solely by the instructor but by the authority of the collective audience. In this way, the accuracy or truth regarding the theories studied becomes contextualized and relative, based on relevant support and justification of the participants, instead of on mimicry and regurgitation of the hegemonic views.

Still, Bauer, as well as Patricia Bizzell—one of the other four implicated in Hairston’s article—view this position as somewhat wrong-headed or inhumane, claiming that teaching critical thinking without promoting an ideology inadvertently asks students to be critical of theories without giving them something to believe. Bauer states, “In my defense, I would say, following Charles Paine, that we [teachers who promote an agenda] must accept our roles as rhetoricians” (388). Bizzell concurs and supports baldly indoctrinating students, arguing that critical thinking does not offer anything for students to believe in beyond anti-foundationalism and its ambivalent conclusion, ethical relativism. As Bizzell states,

We exercise authority over [students] in asking them to give up these foundational beliefs, but we give them nothing to put in the place of these
foundational beliefs because we deny the validity of all authority, including, presumably, our own. (670)

Bauer takes this one step further, introducing feminism as the lost key to the puzzle:

It is not enough to foster critical thinking; we need to suggest something in the place of what we tear down when we ask students to resist cultural hegemony [. . . .] In short, I would argue that political commitment—especially feminist commitment—is a legitimate classroom strategy and rhetorical imperative. The feminist agenda offers a goal towards our students’ conversions to emancipatory critical action. (389)

The implications of this interchange are as frightening as they are complex. There is no doubt that ethical relativism for students is much like feeling schizophrenia descend over a once well-ordered pattern of thought. It is equally disturbing in that relativism is not an acceptable conclusion to critical thinking about political or social discourse. Instructors rightfully and willfully demand answers to the puzzles—whatever the puzzles may be. Bauer and Bizzell are not only accurate, but I would say compassionate, in their assumptions that students need to
believe in something and that teachers need to offer a so-called “way out” for those caught in the anti-foundationalist void.

However, I would argue that offering students a variety of choices within a topic is offering them an array of ideologies to choose from and at least the freedom to argue a variety of supportable standpoints—certainly this is a way out of anti-foundationalism. Although students’ standpoints will still only be provisionally true, students will at least have explored the topic to the extent that they find a girded authority in which to validate their positions, whatever those positions may be. In this construct, students are still required to grapple with difficult and provocative ideologies, while retaining the respect and authority necessary to deconstruct positions that are antithetical to their personal or political needs. In this way, instructors will in fact ask students to put their beliefs on hold when they invite students into the polyvocal arena of academic argumentation. Instructors will also ask that students defer judgment until they have a richer understanding of the subject; however, authority is validated, not by instructors agreeing with the students’ positions but instead by acknowledging the way students support and construct valid arguments, regardless of any
political affiliations they assume. And I would add here, in concert with Bizzell, that "[. . .] a consensus can only be achieved through collective participation in the rhetorical process" (673). Yet, the instructor's—and arguably the students'—rhetoric should at least attempt to be equally effective on multiple fronts instead of "[. . .] openly exert[ing . . .] authority [. . .] to try to persuade students to agree with [the instructor's] values" (672). Although Bizzell contends that open persuasion will "[. . .] collectively generate trustworthy knowledge and beliefs conducive to the common good" (671), Bizzell's position and Bauer's assume, without support, that they know what is ideologically best for both our culture and our students—positions that are fundamentally complicated and diverse.

This is not to say, however, that instructors must stay completely neutral on a topic, for at least to some extent, this may be unrealistic. Arguably, even if composition instructors choose to incorporate contentious voices—as they should—they may still end up indirectly championing their own. The question instead becomes, what can instructors do to offer the richest environment possible for a fair and rewarding interplay between contending theories? C. H. Knoblauch and Charles Paine—the other two scholars most
indicted by Hairston—argue for similar reasons that the way truths are constructed and deconstructed in the classroom is perhaps the most important element for achieving a robust and uninhibited debate.

Paine, on the one hand, champions the notion of inculcating students into the teachers’ ideologies:

[. . .] it is of course reasonable—if it is what we believe—to try to inculcate into our students the conviction that the dominant order is repressive, that they should feel angered by the injustices done to others, that an emancipatory vision be formulated, and its praxis should be exercised. (564)

Yet, he qualifies the statement, suggesting that the harm in such a position exists more in the way knowledge is constructed than in the instructor’s belief in a particular ideology: “If [. . .] theorists [. . .] truly believe all structures of knowledge and evaluation are relative, they must realize their vision for emancipation is also relative, or [. . .] radically contingent on their personal economies” (563). Thus, according to Paine, “If we wish our students to remain open-minded, we need to demonstrate our openness to the ideas of students and others” (564). Knoblauch offers a similar position on the persuasive power of
instructors' ideologies and their limitations, when he states,

[. . .] since conversations seldom entail equal distributions of power or authority, our speech may well have to be boldly denunciative at times if it is to affect its hearers in the midst of their intellectual and political comfort. At the same time, if we are not, like Pogo, to discover that the enemy is us, we are also compelled to review our choices and monitor our commitments, scrupulously, not in their abstract sufficiency, but in their "consequences" as we exercise them in the world. We are obliged to announce ourselves so that, through the very process of self-assertion, we grow more conscious of our axioms and submit that awareness to public debate. (139)

Therefore, both Knoblauch and Paine accept their "role[s] as manipulator[s]" (Paine 563) but with the caveat that ideologies, especially the dominant (teacher's) ideologies, must be transparent and subject to the same critical attention as those the instructor is attempting to admonish for their oppressive qualities. Although I am personally less comfortable with overtly manipulating students into accepting my view as the correct view, I agree with
Knoblauch’s and Paine’s positions insofar as they offer students a critical model of acceptance and a constructive way of doubting, because they treat knowledge as contingent, changeable, and yet something to fight for. Their positions also address Hairston’s concerns that leftist composition instructors do nothing more than champion their own beliefs. Instructors can potentially maintain political positions as long as those instructors who do accept leftist constructs are not so deeply entrenched in their own ideologies as to support the notion that

[. . .] when students understand that they are oppressed by the structure of capitalism, the light bulb will turn on, and they will become critical thinkers; that is, the development of critical thinking skills is unnecessary because the truth has been revealed to them. (561)

On the contrary, to help students resist indoctrination—in this case the hegemony of the classroom—instructors must assume that "[. . .] emancipation conveys different visions to different persons and groups, and the means to that emancipation and what exactly it consists of must therefore be explored during the process of education" (562).

Thus, to accept Bauer and Bizzell’s view that feminism, or any other ideological construct, is an acceptable
ideological position for an entire class is to set one socio-political theory above all others, to create a limited and biased view on a topic, and to distrust the dialectic process. The position also assumes that instructors know what is ideologically "best" for a varied group of sophisticated adults with diverse experiences and needs—a position that is itself oppressive and better left, I believe, to the students themselves. In these regards, if instructors are to assume stances on subjects, in order to overcome the seductive desire for the pots to call the kettles black, instructors' positions need to be "realistically" challenged to the extent—or perhaps more so—than the other so-called oppressive theories that are critically examined. In this vein, instructors are not forced to relinquish their ideological positions, nor are they championing their cause to the detriment of their students' critical needs; instead, they are simply forced to challenge and support their own ideologies in the same ways they ask of their students, and thus, model the very processes they teach.
CHAPTER THREE
EXPLICATING THE THEORY

Although levied at individual practitioners and scholars, Hairston’s claims indict social-epistemic rhetoric as the cornerstone of instructors’ political coercion in the classroom. Her concerns are at least partially justified, given the practitioners she has represented—at least half of whom, upon further study, openly supported not only the desire but the right to foreground their political views in the classroom and even to “manipulate” students into agreeing with them. However, the question remains whether the theory connecting these practices rationalizes these actions. James Berlin’s work with rhetoric and social and political studies—in particular “Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class” and Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures—is considered by many to be the center of social-epistemic rhetoric. Thus, this chapter will explicate these works in order to decide whether social epistemic rhetoric pushes instructors to practice political coercion in their classrooms.

A quick overview of social-epistemic rhetoric places political and social ideologies as the focus of study. According to Berlin,
Social-epistemic rhetoric is an alternative that is self-consciously aware of its ideological stand, making the very question of ideology the center of classroom activities, and in so doing providing itself a defense against preemption and a strategy for self-criticism and self-correction. ("Rhetoric . . ." 478)

Berlin’s justification for placing ideology at the center of the writing class comes from his view that any rhetoric is "[. . .] always already ideological" (477). As he explains in chapter five of Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures, "[. . .] no set of signifying practices can lay claim to a disinterested pursuit of transcendental truth; all are engaged in the play of power and politics, regardless of their intentions" (77). Because language is layered in social currencies, no use of language can be considered politically neutral. Thus, the ways we study language in classrooms, according to Berlin, would need to include an analysis not only of the uses, forms, structures, and styles of language but also the politics supporting those dominant and recurring elements. To state it more succinctly, Berlin concludes that we need to study the ways we create, use, and profit from language as well as the ways language (and, therefore, the people, relationships, and systems who
control and guard it) use us. In short, instead of ridding language of ideology, he argues that we must recognize that it is an inextricable component and make it a part of our study.

On the other hand, Hairston posits that a writing class should

[. . . .] teach writing for its own sake, as a primary intellectual activity that is at the heart of a college education [. . . .] Writing courses, especially required freshman courses, should not be for anything or about anything other than writing itself, and how one uses it to learn and think and communicate. (emphases Hairston 179)

To exemplify, Hairston creates a student-centered environment, using "students' topics" to create "multicultural" student writing in a safe environment (192). Curiously, however, almost as an addendum, Hairston later revisits these "student topics" and states that personal writing is not enough, that a "broader range of discourse" is necessary. Her suggested themes for the course include:

"[. . . .] family or community rituals; power relationships at all levels; the student's role in his or her family or group; their roles as men and women; the myths they live by; cultural tensions within groups" (193).
Even at a glance, the contradictions between Hairston’s theoretical position, the practical application of her curriculum, and her condemnation of social-epistemic rhetoric are glaring. For example, it seems unlikely that students could study men’s and women’s roles without mentioning sexism. Even a cursory examination of gender reveals the potential for and justifications of unequal power distributions within gender relationships. Even more difficult to reconcile are Hairston’s claims that compositionists need to move beyond personal writing but without including any professional or academic writing. As Hairston suggests, “[. . .] the focus should be on writing, not reading” (191). She proceeds, saying that

[. . .] we can help students articulate and understand [their] experience, but we also have the important job of helping every writer to understand that each of us sees the world through our own particular lens, one shaped by unique experiences. In order to communicate with others, we must learn to see through their lenses as well as try to explain to them what we see through ours. (192)

Within this context, it appears both logical and necessary to include a variety of perspectives, both students’ and
other writers’, for the reasons that Hairston states and for the well-documented connection between writing and reading. Indeed, understanding our own as well as others’ lenses seems to invite just the kind of study of ideology Berlin describes. Yet, Hairston hedges. A final contradiction, however, and perhaps the most important, exists in Hairston’s denial of social-epistemic rhetoric in the classroom, while still proffering parts of it as an example for a course theme. Obviously, she finds social-constructionism (the root of social-epistemology) a worthy theoretical construct—at least she attempts to practice it—and clearly discussions of power relationships are endemic to social-epistemology; yet, she claims that a classroom should remain politically and ideologically neutral, both from the teacher’s standpoint and from the topic’s standpoint. According to Hairston, we can study anything, read anything, discuss anything—including politics and ideologies—if, and only if, the topic(s) are generated and sustained by the students’ interests. This is not only impractical and naive, but it is also antithetical to any college or university’s description of FYC as an introduction to academic writing. In short, although Hairston’s curriculum would, as she claims, create a potentially safe place for students to compose, her attempts
to practically establish an ideologically-neutral classroom seem flawed, not only by their practical and theoretical contradictions but by what appears to be a misunderstanding of social-epistemic rhetoric and its goals.

In reference to social-epistemic rhetoric, Hairston states that

Those who want to bring their ideology into the classroom argue that since any classroom is necessarily political, the teacher might as well make it openly political and ideological. He or she should be direct and honest about his or her political beliefs; then the students will know where they stand and everyone can talk freely.

(189)

These statements imply that any study of political and social positions is necessarily a study of the instructor’s ideology. Furthermore, according to Hairston, studying ideology is then necessarily reduced to a battle of wills between the instructor and the students. A closer look at social-epistemic rhetoric maintains almost a direct opposition to Hairston’s understanding. According to Berlin,

[. . .] instead of rhetoric acting as the transcendental recorder or arbiter of competing
ideological claims, rhetoric is regarded as always already ideological. This position means that any examination of a rhetoric must first consider the ways its very discursive structure can be read so as to favor one version of economic, social, and political arrangements over other versions. A rhetoric then considers competing claims in these three realms from an ideological perspective made possible both by its constitution and by its application—the dialectical interaction between the rhetoric as text and the interpretive practices brought to it. ("Rhetoric . . ." 477)

To break this down, Berlin posits that rhetoric itself is situated within and therefore acting for (and against) a confluence of political or social interests. In other words, the power play and economic exchange between convictions is what facilitates the need for the rhetoric in the first place. To accept any truth, even the lens through which one attempts to establish truth, is to indirectly portray one set of beliefs as more correct, useful, or perhaps better than another. Thus, the first step in understanding the rhetoric is to ask, in terms of power, who or what do particular rhetorical conventions seem to favor? Endemic to that process is an exploration of how its forms,
structures, and patterns attempt to serve its purposes. For example, Berlin claims that "[... ] the rhetoric of cognitive psychology refuses the ideological question, resting secure instead in its scientific examination of the composing process" (483). Yet, he suggests that

It is possible, however, to see this rhetoric as being eminently suited to appropriation by the proponents of a particular ideological stance, a stance consistent with the modern college's commitment to preparing students for the world of corporate capitalism. (483)

The class' study, therefore, is to discover whether cognitive rhetorical patterns shape the relationship between higher education and corporate culture. Although Berlin proffers a potential conclusion to the study: that cognitive rhetoric supports the fallacy that "The existent, the good, and the possible are inscribed in the very nature of things as indisputable scientific facts, rather than being seen as humanly devised social constructions always remaining open to discussion" (485), this conclusion remains tentative and open, as only one of many competing ideologies in a forum of other contentious theories. Other theories, if adequately supported, become, at least hypothetically, true to the
extent that they function to establish and support a particular interplay of power relationships.

Within this socially-constructed public arena, ideologies, including the lens through which the positions are studied, "[. . .] provide [. . .] a defense against preemption and a strategy for self-criticism and self-correction" (478). Thus, Hairston’s claim that social-epistemology suggests "[. . .] any teacher should be free to use his or her classroom to promote any ideology" (189) seems myopic. Given the necessity to foreground the ideology inherent in any claim, the instructor’s claims, if promoted, must be discussed and fall under the same scrutiny. For example, to use one of Hairston’s topics—that she claims represents the "logic of the cultural left" (189)—abortion can in fact be discussed without the instructor’s position preempting the students’. For example, if the instructor believes and puts forth the argument that anti-abortion laws relegate women to social vessels to be manipulated by patriarchal notions of "family," the "truth" of the argument, according to the ways it is studied, must resist conclusion based on individual belief or desire. Its accuracy or primacy depends instead on the critical understanding of who benefits socially and
economically from that position and the justifications on which the argument relies.

To take it a step further, the instructor’s position may be different from the students’ given the difference in power between the instructor and the students, the allegiances and duties each attaches to and fulfills within the academy, and the individual cultural and political currencies that inform their positions. Although students can in any situation potentially mimic the instructor’s ideology, if their critiques are conducted with a firm understanding of social-epistemology, they have little choice but to analyze the topic from multiple situations, including the instructor’s and their own, and come to somewhat different conclusions based on their uniquely situated locations. Social-epistemology, if it holds to its theoretical aims, attempts to complicate any ownership of “truth,” including the instructor’s. Hence, Hairston’s question, “Can’t any professor claim the right to indoctrinate students simply because he or she is right?” (189), becomes moot. “Truth” is established not according to a particular ideological position but as an understanding of the way the position is constructed and maintained through relationships. Ideologies thus become transient and situated, or, as Berlin states, “imbricated,” i.e. layered
in the particular relational lenses through which they are studied.

This understanding complicates Hairston's position that "[. . .] diversity and ideology will not flourish together [. . . .] By definition, they're incompatible" (189), which seems to be her justification for her claim that "[. . .] we [instructors] shouldn't even have to mention [. . . political topics such as] racism and sexism in our society—that's a given, as is our commitment to work to overcome it" (188). Diversity, by definition, assumes multiple perspectives on any given position. Multiple perspectives assume multiple voices; otherwise, the dialogue is silenced before it even begins. Thus, diversity exists fundamentally on voiced ideologies, however naturalized those ideologies may at first appear. According to Berlin,

    Ideology always brings with it strong social and cultural reinforcement, so that what we take to exist, to have value, and to be possible seems necessary, normal, and inevitable—in the nature of things. This goes for power as well, since ideology naturalizes certain authority regimes—those of class, race, and gender, for example—and renders alternatives all but unthinkable. In this way, it determines
who can act and what can be accomplished. Finally, ideology is minutely inscribed in the discourse of daily practice, where it emerges as pluralistic and conflicted. *(Rhetorics . . . 78)*

Contrary to Berlin, Hairston’s position assumes that all people understand inherently what is culturally just and unjust and that we all have some kind of built-in locating device that will naturally ferret out the multiple ways that societies and individuals produce, reproduce, and extend cultural injustice. As they apply to the intersection of FYC and social-epistemic rhetoric, cultural power structures are, like any other power structures, rooted in firm convictions and the language that delivers them, both of which are difficult to discover, to understand from multiple perspectives, and to resist if necessary. Social-epistemic rhetoric, as Berlin describes it, accepts this position and attempts to complicate the understanding by uncovering the relationships in terms of who benefits and in what ways. Thus, the result of this kind of examination, although complex and multifaceted, is not, as Hairston suggests, to establish a hierarchy of ideologies—with the instructor’s on top—but to critically examine and understand “[. . .] the subtle effects of signifying practices as key to egalitarian decision making” (79). And because FYC assumes at least
part of the responsibility for facilitating this kind of exploration and critical inquiry at a level appropriate for college and university study, to alienate the instructor from this process is in essence to foreground any justification offered by students, regardless of its irrationality, as correct. Thus, we renege on our responsibility as instructors to teach the skills necessary for developing critical thinking not only in a post-secondary educational setting but also in a diverse democracy, in which diverse and contentious views are constantly in disagreement.

From this perspective, social-epistemology’s bias is not located in its advocacy of one political or social theory over another. In other words a social-epistemic study of patriarchy or feminism would not automatically place patriarchy as the more oppressive of the two. It assumes instead that all social relationships are constantly struggling for power, and they therefore benefit some to the detriment of others. A social-epistemic study would in fact work to discover who benefits and how those benefits are socially and politically maintained and signified. Thus, Hairston’s claims that social-epistemology favors leftist ideologies are difficult to justify, especially given the shift in power that is necessary to facilitate a productive
study. Yet, the practitioners she invokes to rationalize her claims do in fact violate protocol. This very real contradiction suggests that something about social-epistemic rhetoric or the way in which the theory is read potentially leads to an imbalanced treatment of political and social topics in FYC. Traditional power dynamics established between students and teachers may, however, contribute to the dilemma.

As stated earlier, according to social epistemologists, language is social and therefore political, and the relationships involved in a language exchange, because they are ultimately political, are defined by power struggles, and those power struggles benefit some and relegate others to inferior and oppressed positions in the social structure. Because of this, a social-epistemic inquiry into language will study not only language but the political and social influences impinging upon it. Given the nature of this kind of inquiry, power in the classroom needs to shift from the instructor to the community, because the focus of what function language is serving changes. The student should no longer be impelled to ask the teacher, "Is this right?" Instead, the student and the instructor must ask, "What or whom does this convention serve? and how?" As a result, "[. . .] the responses of an audience are never totally
predictable, never completely in the control of the sender of a coded message or of the coded message itself" (83-84). This necessarily upsets the perceived authority of the instructor and, consequently, the perceived authority of the audience, two positions that are imbued with very specific amounts of social currencies.

Furthermore, even without the lens of social-epistemic rhetoric guiding the class, as established in the preceding chapters, instructors in composition courses studying argumentation through political ideologies must work to resist conclusions until a full and inclusive study justifies them. Instead, what often happens is the adoption of what Linda Brodkey calls a "commonsensical pedagogy": "The commonsense view of language and composition makes any pedagogical practice that exceeds policing student language suspicious because it challenges a hierarchy wherein others claim the right to discipline student thought" (200). Although I believe the position to be somewhat naive—compositionists do in fact share the responsibility of influencing student language and thought—the ways in which we influence language and thought are critical to establishing either a productive or reductive understanding of argumentation and language as well.
Brodkey makes an important distinction between productive and reductive criticism—one that stays in line with social-epistemic rhetoric's goals—when she states,

Frankly, I do not much care whether students believe the arguments that writers lay out against the absolute objectivity of objectivity, but I do care whether they give these arguments as well as those written from other unfamiliar perspectives a full hearing. I care for a number of reasons, foremost among them that I understand the critique of received wisdom to be if not the only at least one of the most important purposes of scholarship. In order to ensure that students at least hear what those who argue that their vested interests are not served by common-sense versions of objectivity or difference have to say, we have privileged what I see as an academically responsible version of argumentation over other forms of argumentation and other forms of writing.

(emphasis Brodkey 201)

In this vein, students are required to listen to, understand, and incorporate arguments, some of which will be antithetical to their versions of the "truth" of the argument, and the responsibility of the instructor is to
interpolate to what extent those positions have been evaluated and used to justify the conclusion. The instructor’s authority is then necessarily resituated to view and judge the support sustaining the argument instead of merely the conclusion the student accepts as true. Juxtaposing this understanding with Bauer’s class from the previous chapter, feminism does not have to be a reductive argument. Rather, Bauer focused more on the conclusion—that students needed to accept feminist theory as a viable alternative to patriarchy—instead of evaluating the students’ support and the ways in which it led to their conclusions. As Berlin states on the same subject, "[. . .] the different forms that patriarchy assumes in different social classes make for correspondingly different patterns of behavior and consequences for power and privilege" (Rhetorics 84). As a result, different readings are not only possible but necessary for a full understanding of the topic. In terms of Bauer’s class, instead of asking her students what led them to reject feminism, she assumed it was their entrenched and somewhat benighted positions within the patriarchy that forced the rejection, which may in fact be true; but it is her responsibility to complicate the position only to the extent that students use that information accurately within their arguments. If they
merely reject the information without incorporating it, then her reading may be accurate. If they incorporate it, then refute it, that argument—at least in theory—is justifiable, sound, and the democratic goal of sustained critical inquiry is performed in an ethical and educational manner. In short, Bauer's responsibility regarding secondary curricula in the FYC classroom is not to teach students feminism but to teach ways of critiquing academic, political, and social theories, which in her case happen to be studying feminism and patriarchy. In this way, the instructors maintain a governing authority over the ways arguments are formed and supported but subsequently relinquish authority over what is correct and incorrect regarding the topic of inquiry. Consequently, social-epistemic rhetoric retains its integrity as a constructive way of critiquing a topic instead of reducing the argument to binary judgments of what is correct and incorrect.

As often occurs, difficult theories offer a variety of interpretations, and those interpretations become even more awkward when enacted in practical situations. Social-epistemic rhetoric is certainly no exception, as its position is not only complex but also proposes a restructuring of classroom authority and propels students and instructors into the potentially uncomfortable situation
of critiquing their own allegiances to political and social institutions and traditions. As often happens, any critique of politics and normative behaviors is dismissed as radical and liberal, which is what I believe Hairston's generalizations imply. Yet, as Berlin explains, this is a much more egalitarian way to create an informed society with citizens who are not only able to understand but also to criticize and act on social and political injustices. As it pertains to the specific responsibilities of FYC in facilitating critical inquiry, social-epistemic rhetoric lays the groundwork for students and instructors to explore and critique their relationships within a given framework without forcing them to accept particular ideological positions. Although it is possible for demagogues to usurp its platform in the name of "truth" and "justice," if understood in its scope and function, social-epistemology provides a practical and theoretical environment conducive to studying and critiquing such claims. The theory, then, holds up to criticism but, due to its subject matter—society and politics—may offer certain political platforms the illusion of safety for espousing their lop-sided political convictions. This danger, however, is inherent in any theory and its application. To ignore the politics of language and rhetoric is to assume that both are neutral in
their functions, a platform inimical to a complex understanding of either. This, too, is a political stance and is no less coercive or reactionary. Rhetoric, as Berlin explains, was founded on its political and social functions in fifth century Athens. Its uses today are no less political. To understand its influence and service in argumentation is therefore no less important to us than it was to serving a functional democracy in ancient Greece. To disallow students the opportunity and therefore the responsibility to act within this arena is to disallow them access to their roles in the university and in society, roles that they are repeatedly told rely specifically on their active involvement.
CHAPTER FOUR
CONCLUSIONS

The bulk of this thesis maintains that FYC is in fact a suitable environment for political discussions, as long as those discussions are treated fairly and critically, and as long as instructors make a significant shift from traditional patterns of authority. As explained earlier, composition instructors have a greater amount of authority over primary curricula, to the extent that they presumably know what conventions are acceptable within the academy and why. I would add here that a certain amount of negotiation is possible and necessary in this area, as well; however, most practitioners agree that, with elements such as grammar and format, productive negotiation can only occur after certain conventions are understood. Secondary curricula, on the other hand, must be authorized to a greater extent by the audience, with ideological positions critiqued by both students and instructors. In order to do so, as explained in detail in chapter two, FYC classrooms need to nourish an anti-foundational approach to knowledge. Fundamental to this position, multiple perspectives on any social or political topics must be reviewed for a full and robust ideological debate.
The importance of a vibrant debate over ideologies, however, should not stop with FYC. Perhaps of greater magnitude, composition scholars must maintain the same open-mindedness to political discussions within the discipline. As discussed throughout, Hairston's position, although politically motivated, offers an important critique that composition must incorporate into the discussion. Her insistence that composition is being overrun by leftist ideologies, although greatly overgeneralized, has some merit, as chapter two demonstrates. Thus, composition scholars, instead of rejecting the position outright, need to understand what productive contribution her claims might offer. On the other hand, Hairston's heated charge to cleanse composition discourse of all political interests is not only naive but near-sighted in its objectives, and instead of supporting an all or nothing position, it must incorporate the reality of impinging political forces. Both, therefore, maintain stalwart positions that miss the point of what it means to teach people how to think critically within political and social environments. FYC and composition scholarship must address political influences openly and head-on if either expects to be taken seriously.
Foremost in that address is a closer look at the separation many scholars and practitioners support between essay content and forms. In the first chapter, I draw similar distinctions between primary and secondary curricula in order to demonstrate the change in classroom authority necessary to diminish the potential for ideological coercion. To maintain this distinction further, however, reduces language to a separation of disconnected parts—a reduction that, if sustained, promotes the incongruence this thesis proposes to help reduce. The desire to condense writing into easily codified parts negates the confluence of form, function, and content. Although sometimes necessary to demystify the myriad complications with which writers and instructors struggle, all writing, even the most personal, functions to convey its content. As attempts to subvert hegemonic forms constantly invoke truculent and turbulent rebuttal, content is necessarily tied to its patterns of delivery, or its forms. Thus, the three—function, form, and content—entwine inextricably to the point that to exclude any one fails to address the others.

Historically, however, many composition scholars and practitioners insist on isolating one to the detriment of others. The tired emphasis on delineating modes of discourse is one such example that still greatly influences
students' thoughts about writing. The fact that students often query writing through such questions as "What kind of paper is this?" shows the myopic lens such distinctions, if they are maintained, promote. If we look at the implications of this question in greater detail, function is implied but dissembled within the form; content is all but ignored. If students assume they are writing persuasive papers (as a kind of essay), most often they are referring to proving an argument. Even if students are writing propaganda or an assignment that includes a marketing scheme, persuasion means first producing an angle, then justifying the position (with an argument) that attempts to become structurally, meaningfully, and aesthetically accepting to an audience. To continue using modal terminology, the "persuasive paper" will also require some level of description, and that description may rely on a comparative analysis of divergent interests. Although the essay requires facility with multiple elements, the question the student is asking maintains a distinction that excludes the complexity necessary to proficiently handle the writing situation. The question, therefore, is not so much what kind of writing writers do but what function(s) the form(s) and content serve.
As an old poet once told me, "Writing is a subversive act." Writers are always working for audience acceptance by attempting to change what the audience thinks. As Berlin explains, this interaction is political and necessarily influenced by the content of the essay. Yet, as Linda Brodkey states,

It is in pedagogy that teachers articulate a nexus of language, thought, and reality that is often ignored (as not the content of composition) or deferred (until students have learned the rules) in the visible curriculum. (193)

To many, the scope of composition only includes a maintenance of forms. However, this position excludes writers' choices—as it separates form from its functions—while also sustaining the egregious claim that writing has nothing to do with what is being written, a position I find shamefully inept, especially when our students continuously remind us of its limitations.

For almost four years, I have been working with student writers in CSUSB's Writing Center. In that time, although I have seen many tutors and students come and go, one element remains consistent. Students often insist that writing can be reduced to right and wrong. Grammatical conventions, syntax; argumentative structure, rhetoric, even stylistics,
according to the way students ask about writing, fit neatly into a binary. The binary confirms a relationship that leads new writers to conclude that writing functions solely to please instructors and that rhetoric and argumentation are somehow owned by instructors and professional writers. This understanding negates the authority that FYC attempts to help students find, because it sustains the illogical conclusion that what students write will have no "real" effect on anyone but their instructors and their grades. Students' acceptance of such doctrines, I believe, results directly from English instructors', like Hairston's, insistence that students learn conventions without either explaining or exploring why such conventions exist and how they work to affect an audience. Thus, students are left with only a partial understanding of the writing environment, and instructors are left mystified and angry over the "laziness" they constantly encounter in students' texts.

Although by no means the final word, the arguments laid out in this treatise suggest possible ways of allowing students to experience complex writing situations while exercising authority over the content and forms of their writing, without jeopardizing the integrity of a complex writing experience. Fundamental to that integrity, however,
is a synthesis of function, form, and content and an understanding of how writing instructors should establish and relinquish authority within those elements. As I tell my students every semester, my goal is their independence, but their independence is determined by their understanding of their responsibilities as writers with an audience. Students often resist, but through their resistance, they find, realistically, what works and what does not, based on very real and visible responses from their audience. And that response is only possible when I make my position visible and tie my comments to the content of their essays. For example, when I make a claim that a student’s rhetoric sounds accusatory and may work to shut down the acceptance of the point, or if I claim that the counter-argument is necessary and obvious for supporting a particular position, I also make the claim public and attempt to achieve consensus. And I should note here that sometimes the class sees the situation differently, and I am forced to renegotiate my position openly, providing the same support that I expect students to offer.

This is not to say that I or any instructor should relinquish total control over a class. Reflecting accurately, at least according to the students who voice their opinions about my classes, I establish authority based
on the support I offer for my claims, just as I expect students to do with theirs. My credibility as an instructor therefore depends on my lived experience as a writer and the extent to which I can create realistic writing experiences for students. The most notable contribution, as per students’ comments, is when I “open their eyes to the complexity of the world around them.” This comment reflects not only the theoretical implications that this thesis lays out but more importantly that the theory is made visible in practice, as it inextricably links content, form, and function. In short, what students say becomes entwined with how they say it; both are dependent on what functions their writing serve and how those functions are interpreted by a very real audience. And after some time in this environment, students often begin to preface their writing questions with an explanation of why they made a certain move in their essays. Unlike the questions at the beginning of this chapter, the preface along with the question implies authority and reasoning and suggests that students are beginning to see their choices in response to others. At that point, I smile and instead of giving them a rule to follow, I ask them instead why they are concerned about the move they made. Most often they know the implications, so I
tell them to leave it only if they are comfortable with the consequences of the particular move or statement.

More to the point, however, if the students’ questions are ideological, and if the students persist in asking if the ideologies are “right or wrong,” the only answer I feel justified offering is in the form of a question, “What do you think so and so (whomever we are reading at the time) would say in response to your claim?” This question is possible only if the class is situated between complex, diverse, and competing ideological platforms. To situate Hairston’s Malawi student in this arena, similar questions can only be handled stylistically and grammatically; the content, however, cannot be challenged, as the audience remains ignorant to the larger political or social context. Although Hairston’s exercise can potentially work to teach narrative pacing or vivid description, it fails in its attempts to make writing “necessary” in a larger context, because the audience is only able to enter the conversation on the level of form. Content and function become vague and fictionalized, as the separation of writing elements is maintained.

This is not to say that students’ personal experiences are unimportant. I would argue that they are fundamental but only in relation to others, especially given students’
insistence on overgeneralizing the importance of personal experience. As discussed in chapter two, students often see personal exceptions in any theory; the logical move then is to assume that personal experience is key to reconciling issues of debate. Although logical to an extent, the move evades complexity and excludes audience and purpose. Students’ task in any genre of writing is at the very least to negotiate a confluence of perspectives or voices. Even the most personal writing hinges on conflict and thereby establishes a relationship of competing interests. As I established previously, students need to negotiate their own position in regards to these other interests, then include them to the degree that they influence the position, then restructure the position based on that synthesis. This pattern should not seem foreign to anyone in the writing profession, as it mirrors 19th century German philosopher Georg Hegel’s dialectic pattern of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. Yet, as soon as the interaction is described as “political,” writing scholars and practitioners often hedge, calling the position, as Hairston does, “leftist” and reacting by subtracting the meaning of writing from its forms, while consequently promoting the near-sighted and limited view of academic writing as a perfunctory exercise of memorizing forms.
Although imbued with social and political tension, composition studies must not allow its position to influence its function to the degree that it excludes what it is asked to accomplish. As is, its anti-foundational position situates it perfectly for the kind of robust debate necessary to offer students a holistic view of language and the topics conveyed by its use. This position must be maintained if instructors are to facilitate the practices necessary to allow students access to an active participation in their post-secondary education. Basic-skills instruction, expressivism, depoliticizing the classroom, or a separation of any elements that influence writing not only lead to a limited view of the writing experience but disallow students the chance to engage writing in realistic, complex, and diverse situations. Any one of these, as I have emphasized throughout this essay, also reduces ideologies to entrenched "political" positions without the critical facility necessary to sustain or debunk them.
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