Not Just Showing Up to Class: New TAs, Critical Composition Pedagogy, and Multiliteracies

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[. . .] critical literacy approaches to composition emphasize self-reflection, multiperspectival thinking, explicit consideration of ideological issues, rigorous development of ideas, and questioning of established ways of thinking.

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- Russell Durst

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I guess my "agenda" is that I want them to see themselves not only as students, not as spectators; I want them to see themselves as citizens in a democracy, because I really believe in that. But until we realize that we are, we just simply showing up to class.

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- Chad, a first-year teaching assistant

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New TAs, who teach most first-year composition (hereafter FYC) in major universities, gamely take on a variety of new experiences during their first semesters in the classroom (Bettencourt; Duffelmeyer "Learning to Learn," "New Perspectives"; Farris; Marback). These TAs, despite their often-unacknowledged or overlooked teaching role in the university, can and do participate in achieving institutional and programmatic goals by further "renegotiating the definition of first- and second-year composition courses from 'service courses' in the academy to sites of intellectual activity and forums for sharing world views" (Neeley 26). Their experiences combine the challenges of being a university instructor for the first time with teaching assignments that today include technological, oral, written, and visual literacies integrated into FYC curricula, acknowledging the powerful and sophisticated nature of the texts our students interpret and generate in their academic and civic lives.

An instance of this renegotiation of writing program curricula is underway at my own institution, a process that has taken place over five years, involving many English department faculty and graduate students as well

as committed members of other colleges and departments who support the "vision of communication education appropriate to a changing world of communication practice" ("Iowa State University Communication Vision, Mission, and Means"). A motivating belief of this move is that our students benefit from a pedagogy of explicit engagement with oral, written, visual, and electronic literacies in the twenty-first century. These moves at our institution and at others pursuing similar curricular changes are clearly responses to changes in our notions of literacy and the realization that educators need to provide more than print-based skills.1 Douglas Kellner and others describe educators' pedagogical space as expanding to encompass "a variety of new types of multiple literacies to empower students and to make education relevant to the demands of the present and the future" (197). In courses like FYC, the present and the future denote an expanded and exciting notion of critical engagement with multiliteracies (for example, Faigley; Handa; Hill; Kress; New London Group; Selber), because, as Sean D. Williams asserts, we now engage a broader definition of literacy in the twenty-first century:

> [Literacy now] means possessing the skills necessary to effectively construct and comfortably navigate multiplicity, to manipulate and critique information, representations, knowledge, and arguments in multiple media from a wide range of sources, and to use multiple expressive technologies including those offered by print, visual, and digital tools. (22)

Gunther Kress refers directly to these important changes—from strictly print-based to multiple literacies—when he asserts that literacy cannot be separated from a "vast array of social, technological, and economic factors," and he identifies two major changes we must grapple with pedagogically: "the broad move from the now-centuries-long dominance of writing to the new dominance of the image and [. . .] the move from the dominance of the medium of the book to the dominance of the medium of the screen" (1). Not surprisingly to those who have long counseled the "importance of paying attention" to these new forms of literacies in our FYC classes (Selfe 414; Duffelmeyer "Critical Work in FYC"; Hawisher and Selfe; LeCourt; Takayoshi) and in our TA preparation seminars (Duffelmeyer "Learning to Learn"), critical composition pedagogy emerges even more prominently as a valuable means to engage the questions that these changes bring front and center: "questions of a profounder kind, about human potentials, wishes, desires—questions which go beyond immediate issues of utility for social or economic needs" (Kress 8). As a means to address these more profound questions and also deal with the transformed communication environment, current critical composition pedagogy scholars, such as Russell Durst, Ann

George, and Amy Lee, present critical composition pedagogy less as something radical or rarefied than as a pedagogical approach aimed at "helping students develop ways of thinking about the world and their place in it, and their understanding of the role of language as an integral part of this process" (Durst 94). Lee describes critical composition pedagogy in similarly pragmatic terms, referring to a classroom that helps students acknowledge

> [. . .] their concepts of self, other, world as constructions, as one concept along a range of choices. The aim then is [. . .] the development of a critical process. This process, in turn, aims to enable the demystification of texts and contexts, allowing students to enter into the process of constructing meaning, rather than to believe it is done for/to them or that they might inscribe meaning unproblematically or naturally. (153)

Indeed, our own organization of Writing Program Administrators has stated among its outcomes a series that pertains specifically to what is identified as "Critical Thinking, Reading, and Writing," asserting that

> By the end of first-year composition, students should use writing and reading for inquiry, learning, thinking, and communicating; understand a writing assignment as a series of tasks, including finding, evaluating, analyzing, and synthesizing appropriate primary and secondary sources; integrate their own ideas with those of others; understand the relationships among language, knowledge, and power. (http://www.english. ilstu.edu/hesse/outcomes.html; emphasis added)

In light of our WPA colleagues' belief in the importance of critical work and, further, because of our increasingly complex communication environment, Durst pointedly and not surprisingly asks, "What composition teacher today could argue against a pedagogy of understanding, reflection, dialogue, and transformation, the critical literacy equivalents to motherhood, apple pie, and the flag [. . .]?" (173).

TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY COMMUNICATION ENVIRONMENT: "MEDIA CATECHISM - PERPETUAL PEDAGOGY"

Critical composition pedagogy's concerns with understanding the ways identities and ideas are constructed by texts around us and its attendant emphasis on multi-perspectival thinking are central in the twenty-first century communication environment that occasions curricular changes such as the one Iowa State University is undergoing. Our TAs and their students work in an environment made at once more vital and more complicated by the proliferation of types of texts that they encounter daily. Understanding

how the very notion of text has changed in ways that affect our teaching means acknowledging that *text* no longer refers strictly to print, but to a rich variety of "audio, visual, and electronically mediated forms of knowledge that have prompted a radical shift in the [. . .] ways in which knowledge is produced, received, and consumed" (Giroux, "Is There a Place" 51); and grasping this shift in knowledge production, reception, and consumption calls for critical composition pedagogy. Giroux calls this transformation nothing less than a "sea change" (45) in thinking about multiple literacies rather than one literacy that privileges only print. Referred to as "multiple literacies" (Kellner 196) or "multiliteracies" (New London Group 63–64), this changing textual environment demands our attention, according to composition scholars (Duffelmeyer and Ellertson; Hill; Kellner; Selfe, Williams)—an explicit theoretical and pedagogical focus on the "increasing *multiplicity and integration of significant modes of meaning-making*, where the textual is also related to the visual, the audio, the spatial . . ." (New London Group 64; emphasis added).

A useful way to think about multiliteracies—one that points to the centrality that critical composition pedagogy should assume in our current communication environment—is found in the literature of media ecology. Scholars in that area describe a tight weaving of relationships among our systems ("environments") of literacy, language, and communication. A media ecosystem is defined by Robert K. Logan "in analogy with a traditional biological ecosystem as a system consisting of human beings and the media and technology through which they interact and communicate with each other" (19). Mary Hocks emphasizes that, in this communication environment, "students need to learn the 'distanced' process of how to critique the saturated visual and technological landscape that surrounds them as something structured and written in a set of deliberate rhetorical moves" (645). Specifically, then, we need to help FYC students in our writing programs understand and enter the process by which knowledge is produced and consumed in the twenty-first century - a process that is so intense, pervasive, and influential that McLaren and Hammer call it "media catechism—perpetual pedagogy" (106).

Because of this new process by which knowledge is produced and consumed, for new TAs who, with their students, are engaging multiple literacies in their FYC classrooms, we need a broader understanding of pedagogy, one that flexes beyond what Giroux calls simply "the mastery of techniques and methodologies," to an understanding of "pedagogy as a configuration of textual, verbal, and visual practices that seek to engage the processes through which people understand themselves [. . .] *expanding the possibilities for democratic life*" (Giroux, "Is There a Place" 52, emphasis added).

Such an expanded and vital definition of pedagogy necessarily invokes critical composition pedagogy's possibilities in a multiliteracies environment, and importantly, reminds us to regard critical composition pedagogy as a process that an instructor develops, not as a finished condition that can then be imparted to one's students, helping ultimately, I believe, to develop TAs who feel more successful, confident, and independent.

NEW TAs AND CRITICAL COMPOSITION PEDAGOGY

Although I have found, over the course of ten years of teaching and mentoring new TAs in our large FYC program, that they are strongly attracted to critical composition pedagogy, evidence (both anecdotal and scholarly) shows that, for many reasons, these newest instructors tend to lean too heavily on more familiar but less progressive, current-traditional notions of teaching writing (Bishop, 1990; Duffelmeyer "Learning to Learn"; Klem and Moran 1992). Some of their pedagogical conservatism no doubt results from the lack of authority and confidence they feel as new instructors, but it is also surely attributable to conflicting accounts in the literature of others' experiences with critical pedagogy. Some of these accounts can be described as unalloyed success stories that present a "complete and contained vision of commitments and goals," without providing concrete ways to realize that vision (Lee 5). Durst's compelling *Collision Course*, on the other hand, recounts the primarily negative experiences of one TA and her class, stemming from what Durst sees as an underlying mismatch between the career interests of the students and the civic and cultural interests of the instructor. Durst ultimately rejects the false dichotomy between what he refers to as "instrumentalism and understanding" (177) that can present an obstacle—what Ann George calls "bamboozlement" (92)—to those who believe in helping students develop the analytic skills and predilections to look at the world in a more complex way. Even experienced teachers have angst about whether their pedagogy is either oppressive in imposing a particular political agenda on students or, conversely, not "radical" enough by failing to result in real-world changes effected by their students after a single semester of FYC. Thus, George poignantly calls for ways of thinking about critical composition pedagogy that release us from unrealistic "radicalness requirements," adding that "there's a place in critical pedagogy for the not-yet-radical among us, although it's a place that remains unimagined in the scholarship" (104).

I suggest that, because of the exciting opportunities attendant on the changing notions of text and literacy and the fresh and valuable role TAs play in composition teaching and in curriculum development, as described above, TAs and their WPAs and mentors are uniquely positioned to "imag-

ine" this place in the scholarship by providing what Lee calls the "real stories of our teaching" (8). It is vitally important to explore the perceptions and experiences of new composition TAs as they think through and incorporate critical composition pedagogy in their classes with the guidance of a mentor and the support of a peer community of TA colleagues. Using qualitative research methods, I conducted such a study with five TAs (each teaching two sections of FYC), exploring with them specifics of their engagement with critical composition pedagogy as new instructors of FYC at a major midwestern university.2 In contrast to studies that document *student* reactions to critical pedagogy in primarily *print*-based composition classes, this study focuses on the experiences of new composition TAs and their work in integrating *multiliteracies* with critical composition pedagogy. After a brief overview of the reasons these five new TAs felt critical composition pedagogy is important to their teaching of FYC in an increasingly multiliteracies curriculum, I describe the decisions the TAs made as they confronted central issues in their pedagogy (assignments, instructor persona, student reactions). Because this study has implications for ways WPAs and mentors can support TAs in these efforts, I conclude with suggestions for TA development programs.

Uncovering Real Stories of New TAs and Their Experience with Critical Multiliteracies Composition Pedagogy

I recently taught an advanced composition pedagogy seminar in which we deliberately focused our reading, discussions, and assignments on concrete ways to realize the sort of pedagogy George suggests, that is, a realistic and sustainable "imagination" and enactment of critical composition pedagogy as suggested by the critical compositionists highlighted earlier (Durst, George, Lee), namely, the exploration of cultural influences on identity and development of skills to demystify texts. I invited five TAs from this seminar—two women and three men—all of whom were still considered novice TAs; four were in their second semester of teaching FYC in our program (Amanda, Brenda, Chad, and Greg), and one was in his second year (Gene). All five were teaching two sections of FYC, totaling 52 students per instructor. I selected these five to participate in the study with me because each could bring valuable insights to our combined, unfolding understanding of the experience of enacting critical composition pedagogy among novice TAs. For instance, although all first-year TAs are provided a general syllabus to use for FYC and each is allowed to customize it, these five TAs had shown the inclination to be experimental in their teaching, finding ways to balance their natural anxiety about doing something new with their strong desire to teach in ways that were meaningful and exciting to them and to

their students. These inclinations and interests were discerned by more than one factor, including my knowledge of the TAs from their first semester of work in our program (I team-teach the required proseminar they took in their first semester and had been a mentor to two of the five). Written and oral comments they made early in the seminar about their beliefs about composition instruction also helped identify them as prospective participants in this study.

Data collection included acquiring these TAs' educational autobiographies, teaching materials and accompanying rationales and presentations completed for the seminar, as well as conducting individual interviews with all five participants, in which they discussed their specific experiences with critical composition pedagogy in their own classes, providing access to "the real stories" of their teaching. The interviews were held late in the seminar semester, concurrent with or immediately following the TAs putting at least one concrete critical composition pedagogy assignment into practice in their own sections of FYC. 3 Analysis of these several kinds of data revealed important points of intersection in four areas of obvious interest to new TAs enacting critical composition pedagogy in a multiliteracies FYC curriculum. The analysis is of equal interest to WPAs and mentors, for it points to emphases we need to consider as we support their theorizing and enacting of this pedagogy in their FYC classrooms: 1) developing assignments and activities that meet the goals of critical composition pedagogy and remain appropriate for the general objectives of FYC; 2) facilitating students' skills of close reading and analysis and transferring those to development of students' own texts (written, oral, visual, electronic); 3) projecting an appropriate instructor persona; and, closely connected to the persona, 4) handling student apathy or student resistance.

CRITICAL COMPOSITION PEDAGOGY AND THE NEW TA: "I'M INVOLVED IN SOMETHING PROFOUNDLY PRACTICAL AND PROFOUNDLY IMPORTANT."

Each of the five TAs mentioned three overlapping areas of concern and objectives for their students, concerns that fueled their desire to pursue a pedagogy that would engage positively one or more of these areas. The three areas are obviously connected, but a separate description is necessary, for each TA had something specific to say about one or more of these three common concerns and objectives, and each area contributed to each TA's passion about critical composition pedagogy in a multiliteracies FYC curriculum. All five TAs in this study perceived what, to them, was their students' lack of basic civic information, a deficiency that contributed to students' lack of interest in civic discourse and removed their will to participate in these discourses even at a micro-level. Closely connected to this lack of

specific interest, the five TAs also mentioned a more general apathy in their students (described as an "I don't care" attitude). Finally, the TAs were all concerned about their students' stated feelings of powerlessness, alienation, and a lack of agency.

In discussing ways they might address these common areas of concern within the FYC curriculum, 4 the five new TAs in this study indicated they had been particularly affected by certain authors they read as part of the work of the seminar. For instance, as Brenda put it, they were "blown away" by Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which George describes as the "ur text of critical composition pedagogy" (93); none had read it before this seminar. The TAs described being strongly affected, as new university instructors and with fresh memories of their own recent experiences as high school and undergraduate students, by Freire's description and rejection of the banking model of education. As a result of that and other seminar readings,5 all five participants reported a determination (I call it a passion) to create classrooms for their students that did not encourage such passivity and did not cast the students as "spectators" (Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 75), but which instead involved their students in active creation of knowledge while instructors served as facilitators.

Lack of Interest in Civic Discourse. Valuing of civic discourse was common among all the new TAs in this study; indeed it was the concern or objective most frequently mentioned for two reasons: civic discourse has overarching connections to the communication ecology environment, and it is particularly this use of language that connects our students to their larger world and to their potentials, as the statements of critical compositionists like Durst, George, and Lee assert. Thus, all five TAs were concerned about their students' ability to see themselves as active citizens in a participatory democracy. Gene, for instance, a former undergraduate journalism major with a strong interest in the social sciences, expressed his strong interest

> [. . .] particularly in government and history classes. As a result of this I have a keen interest in politics and the democratic process. This latter led me into a career in journalism and *has now resulted in a career change to teaching.* The respect for the [democratic] process and for free speech and participatory government has caused me to identify strongly with the concepts and ideas expressed by Berlin in regard to literacy and its importance in a democratic society. (Gene; emphasis added)

Chad had a similar interest in American history and government as an undergraduate English and history major; he saw these interests as fueling his passion to "[. . .] give [his students] information from America's past

while keeping relevant and current. By viewing historical works my students can *begin to see themselves in a process* while keeping their feet firmly on the ground":

> [. . .] I guess my "agenda" is that I want them to see themselves as not only students, not as spectators; I want them to see themselves as citizens in a democracy, because I really believe in that. But until we realize that we are, we just simply showing up to class. (Chad)

Similarly, Brenda expressed her belief that a course like FYC is a natural place to address her students' lack of interest in civic discourse and that critical composition pedagogy is an eminently practical, as opposed to an assumed and necessarily "radical" way to begin to cultivate both a new, more mature interest and the skills necessary for students to begin to accomplish Lee's "demystification" of texts (153) - as Durst says, to "develop ways of thinking about the world and their place in it (94). Brenda says, "I've arrived at teaching and learning about writing—about communicating ideas—a place where I feel like I'm involved in something that is both profoundly practical and profoundly important in the individual lives of students as well as society." Both the notion of multiliteracy's role in students' understanding of the world and the TAs' desire that students see themselves as more than spectators in the twenty-first century's communication environment are at the heart of TAs' concerns and objectives for their students.

Apathy. Early in her FYC teaching, Amanda expressed surprise and concern that her students seemed neither able to describe nor to be interested in basic differences in the major political parties in our country. Neither were they informed about nor particularly interested in what she saw as important current events, even those with the potential to affect students directly, such as a reinstatement of the draft. Amanda experienced this as a generalized apathy in her students - as did all of the TAs in this study - a baffling and frustrating general attitude TAs described as simply "I don't care." Amanda noted that "they had these beliefs, but they didn't seem to know what they meant [. . .] like they had sort of inherited them." Although Durst suggests that such an attitude is a function of student careerism, all five TAs in this study perceived it as stemming primarily from lack of information, lack of analytical practice, and from what students described as their feelings of "powerlessness." Chad also commented on the "I-don't-care" attitude of his students: "I could see that they were [. . .] quite complacent. [A]t first they were like zombies in my class—like math class! They were like, "Agh. I don't care."

Powerlessness. Intertwined with the TAs' perceptions of student apathy and the notion of "inheriting" beliefs but not understanding them or applying them meaningfully to their own lives is Lee's urging that our pedagogy help students "enter into the process of constructing meaning, rather than to believe it is done for [and] to them [. . .]" (153). Chad connected such passivity to Giroux's idea of a "fugitive culture"—a characterization of FYC students that Giroux describes as feeling little or no connection to the values and issues that a modern democratic society and system of government wrestle with, but instead "hav[ing] been shuffled into an in-between somewhere" (Chad), where they seem alienated, apathetic, and uninformed about issues that affect them. Because of their own experiences and resulting beliefs, supported by reading in theory, the TAs thus wanted to "support a pedagogy which draws from our students' experiences rather than isolates them and makes them feel out of place" (Chad).

An especially important implication of this student powerlessness in terms of multiliteracies was described by Greg, who, with his undergraduate degree in literature and film, brought to his FYC teaching a passion for the goal of "showing [students] the work, effort, and *intentionality* behind a text. I wanted to increase their understanding of 'Where does this stuff come from?' I don't want them to feel like, 'Oh, this professionally edited, slick, prepared material [. . .] is beyond my comprehension.'" Greg further describes his intent for his students as "simply to make them comfortable being critical with it [a text]. I think [. . .] *the more you see that process broken down, you are more comfortable looking through it or behind it.*" Much like Brenda's observation about critical composition pedagogy's being "profoundly practical and profoundly important" at the same time, Greg's summary of his underlying philosophy of learning and its connection to critical composition pedagogy is consonant with that of all the other new TAs:

> The great shock is in learning that ultimately we have to decide, that is, to think for ourselves in life. Our parents, our church, our government, our friends cannot do it. The media cannot think for us. And along with this is the realization that our sources are flawed. (Greg)

Exploring Student Identity and Demystification of Texts Through Assignments, Critical Reading, Instructor Persona, and Student Reactions

Assignments: Historical Documents. The course of which the TAs taught ten sections during this study is described in the current Iowa State University Department of English *Instructor's Manual* for our program as "[. . .] focus[ing] on the most intense forms of rhetoric—argument and persua-

sion [. . .] Students analyze arguments, they respond to arguments, and they construct their own arguments" (4). Students write summaries, rhetorical analyses, arguments, and documented research papers with an increasing emphasis on integrating oral, visual, and electronic literacies with the written. Working within these curricular parameters and also encouraging their FYC students to become more keenly interested in the cultural texts that surround them and affect their lives—a goal that also addresses the TAs' concern about students' alienation from and lack of interest in the cultural discourse that critical compositionists say shapes our identities and sense of our potentials—these five TAs had different ideas of how best to enact their pedagogy. Three (Amanda, Chad, and Greg) worked together, pooling their ideas and their teaching materials to turn history as a critical lens on the present because "[b]y opening students to ideas put forth in our country's founding documents, they can begin to *see themselves as part of something"* (Chad; emphasis added). Brenda and Gene had other ideas, equally well theorized and carried out, to accomplish the same critical pedagogical objective: prompting students to look at how their subjectivities have been formed.

Using the Declaration of Independence, Bill of Rights, and Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* as starting points, Amanda, Chad, and Greg devised strategies to make these expressions of foundational American values meaningful to students, to demystify them in the way critical compositionists urge, encouraging their FYC students to become more aware of the process of their development of identity, worldview, and agency. Said Chad:

> I am interested in politics [and history] and those sorts of writings. And I wanted to introduce them to the class [because] I could see that they were becoming quite complacent. Because at first they were like zombies in my class—like math class! They were like, "Agh. I don't care." So I showed them the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights, because it is something that is theirs, it is part of our culture. It [is] hard to be complacent with it [. . .]. We started out by looking at the Declaration of Independence, looking at it line by line. And they came to enjoy it because it is calling on *them*, as citizens [. . .]. I was trying to dissuade them from this idea of "I can't write. I have nothing to say." (Chad)

Concerned about their students' lack of knowledge about and interest in the cultural texts that surround them and implicitly form their subjectivities, Amanda, Chad, and Greg identified five terms that would serve as pivot points for the activities and assignments that would accompany their students' analysis of the Bill of Rights, the Declaration of Independence, and Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*: these central terms were *justice, freedom,*

truth, democracy, and conformity. After analyzing and writing about what these documents say about these concepts, students then examined more recent events in different kinds of texts, representing different perspectives on these events than students were likely to have encountered. By choosing events that were "recent" (that is, within the lifetimes of the students) but not immediate, the TAs anticipated students would be somewhat interested in them, have some knowledge about them, but perhaps not be as invested in one viewpoint about them as about very current events; the TAs also, however, chose an essay by Arundhati Roy, "The Algebra of Infinite Justice," about the then-pending war in Iraq, for a more recent event. A video about the events at Waco and an interview by Gore Vidal with Timothy McVeigh presented students with the opportunity to move from their critical reading of the historical documents and their inferences about the key terms in those materials to thinking about the terms in light of these very different contemporary texts. These activities led to summaries, rhetorical analyses, and research papers in which students explored an idea (rather than providing the routine pro-con arguments), applying their enlarged understanding of these terms, so central to our civic and cultural discourse, to a question or issue of interest to them.

Assignments: Visual Texts. Brenda and Greg used visual texts (either by creating them, analyzing them, or both) as pedagogical space, seeing this approach as especially necessary to helping students understand how the texts that surround them reflect and reinforce cultural messages about who they are, what we value, and what is possible. Toward this end, Brenda asked her sections of FYC to "consider how senders of a message, particularly advertisers, capitalize on cultural knowledge and create and re-create cultural knowledge through the use of visual communication in popular culture" (Brenda). Brenda showed her classes media ecologist Douglas Rushkoff's PBS-TV *Frontline* documentary *The Merchants of Cool*, a thought-provoking, even alarming, look at ways marketers target teens to create business profits—heightening their desire for certain clothes, music, and lifestyles - desires which then are made to seem natural even while what they consider "cool" constantly changes. After the video, Brenda asked students to revisit an essay they had written earlier in the semester: an analysis of their own image. The image-analysis assignment originally asked students in effect to look in the mirror and consider "What am I trying to say with how I look (dress and present myself visually)?" Although in their earlier responses, Brenda's students had for the most part insisted that their "look" was a purely individual, unconstrained choice, and certainly not the result of any media or advertising influence, after viewing *The Merchants of Cool*, many of her students were surprised and even indignant at the extent to

which they were quite personally made vulnerable to marketing manipulation. Brenda noted that particularly the women "talked in terms of being *angry* about it," and many of the resulting revisions of the essays, Brenda felt, demonstrated Lee's goal of encouraging students to begin to "acknowledge [. . .] their concepts of self, other, world as constructions, that is, as one concept among a range of choices" (153).

Taking critical engagement with the visual a step further, Greg's students actually created visual arguments, but rather than asking them to "sell" a consumerist product or service, he asked them to create an ad promoting an idea (often one connected to a social justice issue). Part of his classes' preparation for this was to study Goya's painting *The Third of May, 1808* as a historical example of a visual argument. In response to this assignment, Greg's students created and presented to the class some very compelling and insightful ads for peace, Title IX, "safer" sex, and environmentalism; they also wrote reflective essays about their composing processes (visual, oral, and electronic) and their thinking as they constructed their own visual arguments. When I asked him if a project of this nature seemed daunting to students because of the multiliteracies involved (oral, visual, electronic, and written), Greg said, that on the contrary, they seemed to be engaged in it because they could connect with it:

> This is something very exciting to me: *It has to come from them.* It has to be what they're interested in, and if they're interested in it, the technology is not an issue, the research is not an issue, the homework is not an issue, the effort is not an issue— because it's theirs and they have ownership. And if it's not, then you might as well just play the game. (Greg)

Rather than just "playing the game," FYC students in the five TAs' classes clearly were reading actively and analyzing the texts that shape their lives; they began to make inroads into some of the apathy and powerlessness the TAs had been concerned about, and doing so in ways arising from the passions and strengths of each individual TA.

Critical Reading. As the above section indicates, all of the assignments these TAs created depended integrally on critical reading of texts in various media (print, video, electronic, and single visual images). Pedagogically, the TAs were guided by Jane Gallop's notion of "ethical" close reading:

> Reading what one expects to find means finding what one already knows. Learning, on the other hand, means coming to know something one did not know before. Projecting is the opposite of learning. As long as we project onto a text, we cannot learn from it, we can only find what we already know.

> Close reading is thus a technique to make us learn, to make us see what we don't already know, rather than transforming the new into the old. (Gallop 11)

This concept of the purpose and process of reading complements critical composition pedagogy perfectly because it slows students down and encourages them to make the familiar strange by asking them to consider carefully what is actually present on the page, screen, and in visual forms, not what they assume is there and what they assume it means. Therefore, following Gallop's notion of reading-as-learning rather than reading-as-confirmation-of-existing-beliefs, Amanda's, Greg's, and Chad's students came to a more sophisticated understanding of the key terms (justice, truth, democracy, etc.) by engaging with the content of the historical documents in ways that did not permit reading-as-projection. For instance, her students' work with the Declaration of Independence, was successful, Amanda believed, because it encouraged her students to think about documents and core American values they thought they already knew all about:

> We went line by line. I asked them, "What is this document *saying*? Does it allow for rebels? What is it saying about conformity? About truth? What is it saying about freedom?" They were really shocked at what it said, because [these documents] say, basically, that Americans have the right to overthrow the government. One student said, "Isn't that what they call treason?" I said, "In today's society, yes, it would be." So it worked. (Amanda)

Through Gallop's process of "seeing what we don't already know," Chad's students came to a similar realization about the suggestions that these selected historical documents make about our values:

> It [the Declaration of Independence] shows [. . .] that we were founded on radicalism; we didn't like being told what to do. So I asked them, "How do our society or our elders feel today about radicals and people who question the government?" And they said, "They don't like it." I said, "Well, what would Jefferson have said about that?" I had them read a little bit of Tom Paine's *Common Sense* because I wanted them to see a "good" radical; I didn't want them to think that a radical is just someone like Timothy McVeigh. Paine was someone who challenged the government and his ideas helped get the Declaration of Independence written. (Chad)

Gene also addressed the objective of helping his students develop the habit of looking beneath the surface of cultural texts and messages, so that they wouldn't accept a monolithic version of events (one official version of reality) as their only interpretation of the world. Gene says that, for instance, "the news is often presented to the American people as if it is gospel. And with my journalism background, I want them to understand that. I want them to know they have to be a little more skeptical, and that one source of information is usually not enough." Gene jokingly recounted to me a conversation with one of his students who had happily told him her "research" was going quite well because all the sources she had found agreed with her already-decided-upon point of view on the topic. He told her that she ought to be worried about that much agreement, that her view of the issue was not being challenged at all, and to dig deeper.

Having an undergraduate education in journalism and mass communication, Gene stated, "has also helped engender an appreciation for the application of popular culture and visual communication techniques and analysis to literacy studies." For instance, Gene noted that "students today are becoming more visually oriented." With his concern - heightened by his journalism background - about students assuming what they find in media sources and on the Internet as Truth, Gene spent a significant amount of time in classes helping his students realize the need for analysis. He then taught them to develop strategies of careful analysis of information, especially visual information, found on the Internet. Dissatisfied with the formulaic lists of criteria for judging the reliability and credibility of Web sites, Gene pushed his students to a deeper critical engagement with the sources they chose for research projects, reflecting his abiding goal of encouraging his students to "look beneath the surface [because] while those checklists are good, I also pointed out [. . .] that a site may on the surface meet all those criteria and still not be any good."

Using a Web site that espoused the supposed accuracy and value of Hitler's views, Gene's students explored how, in all regards, from page layout to visual presentation of the author and his "credentials" to the use of a scholarly-looking presentation of "facts," the site looks authoritative and trustworthy. All the visual cues were in place for the uncritical reader to absorb this particular text without questioning its reliability and validity, unless a reader was *already* predisposed to question it (Gallop's "finding what we already know"). Gene's students realized that they had to dig beneath the authoritative visual appearance of the site to analyze the text and context. For instance, Gene's students discovered that the author's credentials were not at all relevant to the subject and that his claims, when read carefully, were clearly outlandish: "I pointed out that the Hitler Web site makes a very big

deal of presenting the information non-judgmentally[. . .] it is given an over-lay of credibility" (Gene). Gene's students clearly had to engage in ethical, close reading to move beyond their expectations triggered by certain visual cues, and he indicated that their resulting research papers made better use in general of sources of all kinds, because students had begun to develop the idea of reading to learn, not projecting—and more important, had begun to apply it to their own projects.

Helping FYC students to engage in critical reading of both print and visual documents worked for the TAs as one way to realize Lee's objective of assisting students to see that meaning is constructed. Certainly, as Foreman and Shumway suggest, we look at a visual text as an "assemblage organized [. . .] into a coherent perceptual whole" which will "be grasped quickly as a total gestalt and its aspect as assemblage will be effaced" (252). Thus, as Brenda asserted, carefully identifying all the elements of any text is abso-lutely essential to arriving at more than the culturally privileged "assem-blage" of meaning:

> By ask[ing] students to slow down the process [. . .] even if it might seem easy and "obvious" to just jump right into mean-ing, if we slow ourselves down and rather than say "What does it mean?" *then we have an opportunity to notice absolutely every little thing that's there* before we get excited about what it might mean. (Brenda)

Clearly, this skill as enacted by the new TAs is important for students who learn in a world of multiliteracies and media inundation, because of what Greg (echoing Barry's *Visual Intelligence*) called our characteristic "mode of defense against [such] bombardment. I see this as a way of sort of back-tracking through that defense." Reading-to-learn increases the potential for students to open up meaning, rather than prematurely to close it down, to analyze what would otherwise be hegemonically effaced. Even as novice instructors, these TAs developed their own ways to bring this skill into the FYC classroom in ways meaningful to them and their students.

INSTRUCTOR PERSONA AND STUDENT REACTIONS

The last two areas of TA concern and objectives are most productively discussed together because concerns about instructor persona and student reaction to critical composition pedagogy, at least as these TAs talked about them, are really two sides of the same pedagogical coin. In considering these two issues, the five TAs of this study clearly felt most acutely Lee's descrip-tion of critical composition pedagogy as a "complicated and uncertain pro-cess" (8). However, it is also precisely at this point of greatest complication and uncertainty for novice instructors that I believe they also most effec-

tively and thoughtfully advanced their responses to George's call to create that "unimagined place" in the scholarship for those who believe we can effect change in our students' ways of thinking without creating an unrealistic (and perhaps self-defeating) "radicalness requirement" (104).

As an important step in encouraging students to develop the critical process described by Lee and other critical compositionists, the five TAs were united in wanting to bring to their students' attention some ideas and materials that some classmates might consider controversial. This objective can be seen even in the necessarily limited samples of their assignments and activities provided here. However, a common, concurrent concern among the TAs was that their students would think they were being "indoctrinated" toward a particular view on political issues, that is, that the TAs had another, subversive agenda they were implying students should adopt. This raised attendant concerns among the TAs that these students would openly challenge or resist their instruction in ways that as new instructors they would not be able to handle effectively; for example, these new instructors tended to worry about large, whole-class discussions that could degenerate into fruitless arguments of shouted opinions. The TAs thus tended to avoid large-group discussions, favoring using smaller groups that would focus on textual analysis rather than on questions of "right and wrong." More serious to these TAs, however, was the concern that student reaction to perceived manipulation would result in entrenchment of existing, impermeable student worldviews, thus defeating the goals of critical composition pedagogy altogether.

These new TAs found the best approach to their concerns about negative student reactions to critical composition pedagogy was to adopt as a standard practice the pedagogical habit of being transparent about what they were doing and why; they also decided to share with students that instructors and "authorities" often have changing, conflicting, or ambiguous views about some issues. For instance, Greg said, "I try to present the idea to them that my own views do change, and they change all the time. And I also told them, 'I want you to know that you influence me, and I think that's a good thing.'" Citing Freire, Chad stated that he wants his students to "view education as a process and not a destination," and all five of these instructors, for these reasons, stated that they felt most comfortable taking a fairly non-authoritarian role in their classrooms. While this willingness to share authority might seem intuitively to be difficult for a new instructor, these TAs' experiences support the contention that this is an element of critical composition pedagogy that inexperienced TAs should be encouraged to integrate into their teaching—giving up, in other words, the very intimidating notion of needing to be the absolute authority. For instance, Amanda described this characteristic in her pedagogy when she said,

I want to learn something. I told my students that this is their opportunity [research papers based on five key terms] to learn something and then teach me. I don't know everything there is to know about all these topics. I am not an expert on all these topics. So, #1, I don't like to read boring papers. And #2, I am a pretty flexible teacher. I remember - for a teacher education class and then for a cooperating teacher - having to map out everything I was going to do in terms of minutes each activity would take. And I wanted to just scrap this because I don't think it ever works. My students always take me someplace else. (Amanda)

When I said that I thought this attitude and experience would be tremendously reassuring to new TAs who are "worried about standing up there and not having 'an answer,'" Amanda agreed: "My students have told me explicitly that they respect me more because I admit that I don't know everything."

Chad also described this element of his pedagogy when he characterized the classroom as a community to which the teacher and the students all contribute:

And I really believe in that. The only authority I ever take is leader or resource. I'm interested in this stuff and I feel that I'm still learning. It's not that I feel inadequate in the classroom, but there are some teachers who seem to know everything. So I feel like by doing this [critical composition pedagogy], I'm not *teaching* them necessarily, but, it sounds sort of idealistic, but [. . .] if I go in the classroom and *share* with them, it goes a lot better than if I "*teach*" them. If I had said, "I'm going to *teach* you today about the Declaration of Independence," that would have been a horrible class. But when I say, "Look at this!" *they realize they have really never seen it before*. If I did it like "banking," that would be awful and then they would hate the Declaration of Independence. But if *they see* that it's written for them—the wording *shows* it is written for us—it explains what our country is founded upon and what is expected of us. (Chad; emphasis his)

Conceiving of their roles as guides and resources—and articulating their willingness to learn (indeed, as new instructors, they *are* learning!)—was extremely important to these TAs' comfort levels with their new role as TAs and with their critical composition pedagogy. These new TAs felt that reframing their roles helped avert some of the possible negative student reactions they worried about. For instance, as mentioned above, after the

analysis of the Bill of Rights, Declaration of Independence, and *Common Sense*, Chad, Amanda, and Greg moved to more recent historical events that strongly influenced our country's consciousness but about which their students either knew very little or had only a generic, hegemonic understanding. These new TAs chose three contemporary texts to complement their work with Paine, the Declaration of Independence, and the Bill of Rights; in doing so, they hoped to challenge students to deepen their understanding of events in recent American history that had been largely unproblematized in the public view. As Gallop says, TAs want students to "see what [they] don't already know, rather than transforming the new into the old" (11). These texts were Gore Vidal's 2002 essay, "The Meaning of Timothy McVeigh"; a 1997 video, *Waco: The Rules of Engagement*, and Arundhati Roy's 2001 essay "The Algebra of Infinite Justice," about the then-pending war in Iraq. These three TAs said their purposes in using these texts were several. Not only does each contemporary text comprise an argument and support it in different ways, they all present less promulgated and more nuanced views than their students would likely have been exposed to before. In addition, the Waco video "showed them [students] the historical event in documentary form—film form—and not just reading, to let them see that you can form arguments in other than written texts" (Chad).

To understand the nature of these texts, the TAs' rationale for including them, and their concern about student reactions, TAs' thoughts about the Waco video and Vidal's essay are helpful:

> [Students] had a fairly low awareness of Waco. They'd heard about it and they had a few ideas, but they hadn't really *seen* it. And the video was electrifying. I had to fast forward a lot, but if I had not used that [fast-forward feature] and then dismissed the class, I think they would have stayed as long as it took! This video is a documentary about, really, a civil war, in terms of our own models, and it's very shocking and very disturbing. It takes *all* the romance out of war, and it takes *all* the "us" and "them" out of war because then it's back to Pogo: "we have met the enemy and it is us." (Greg)

Chad felt his students were similarly intrigued by Vidal's essay but could not fully incorporate it into their previously monolithic, unquestioning view of the event:

> They were interested in "The Meaning of Timothy McVeigh." Some of them said they don't know why Vidal would waste paper on Timothy McVeigh. And I was quick to say that I didn't think McVeigh should be a hero, but this is a well-written argument and a position they would not have been exposed

to before. We had some interesting class discussions. [. . .] they didn't like the *essay* because of what McVeigh had done. And I said, "Well, let's look at it for what the essay *says*. I understand that he did this horrible thing. But let's look beyond that." And I don't think they can sometimes. I don't know how you get them to sometimes. Their thinking is, "He did this monstrous act; government's good," and that's all they see. (Chad)

One possible response to Chad's concern - that students can't gain critical distance from what they disagree with and may then react only with resistance - was demonstrated by Brenda, who, in her work with students on analysis of visual arguments, adopted a strategy of directly asking and reminding students about their process:

"Now, *what is my goal* by having you look at these ads? Am I trying to get you to *demonize* these people?" My point in asking that is to remind them that I am not trying to get them to [completely change their worldview], but to say, "Hey, there's a *lot* going on here. Let's look at *all* of it: this part is honest, but this part is deceptive." So that, I hope, answers a lot of their questions about why I am doing this. (Brenda)

IMPLICATIONS

For our new TAs to succeed in our writing programs, we must move away from the paradigm and the language of TA *training*, favoring TA *development* instead, a shift that has also been called for in preparing new teachers to use computer technology (Duffelmeyer "Learning to Learn"). Contrasting the training and development paradigms clearly highlights the need for the shift, given the demand for multiliteracy and critical pedagogy emphases. Rather than advocating a one-time process of gaining a discrete and readily transferable set of skills and techniques—a view of TA preparation often held by new TAs but which may actually undermine the development of characteristics the profession values—teaching professionals and WPAs need to remind themselves and show new TAs that "teaching is an ongoing process of experimentation, critical and collaborative reflection and inquiry, and revision" (Lee 134, Duffelmeyer "Learning to Learn"). Etienne Wenger provides one of the best frameworks for thinking about the TA development process in his notion of communities of practice, asserting that

people in organizations contribute to organizations by partici-
pating inventively in practices that can never be fully captured
by institutionalized processes [. . . and we want to] minimize
prescription, suspecting that too much of it discourages the
very inventiveness that makes practices effective. (10)

Thus, the literature of critical literacy for our undergraduate students
neatly gives us a useful way to think of critical composition pedagogy for
ourselves and our new TAs as well: just as critical thinking of the kind
described by Giroux, Freire, Lee, and others, is a process to be used by FYC
students, so too is the pedagogy to develop that thinking a process to be
used by instructors. Internalizing the concept of critical pedagogy-as-pro-
cess as a productive approach to their classrooms is particularly important
for new TAs who are understandably anxious about their teaching. New TAs
need to be reassured about their experiences and outcomes, not discouraged
by the pressure to produce unrealistically transformative results—to under-
stand, in other words, that creative, effective, *sustainable* teaching is a matter
of experimentation within the boundaries set by curricular objectives, as well
as reflection about and revision of those practices. Many scholars have said
the outcome of critical composition pedagogy is not intended realistically,
or perhaps even ideally, to radicalize students. Rather, an attainable goal for
new TAs and one that comports well with the rhetorical, civic, and cultural
missions of many first-year writing programs is to provide many opportuni-
ties for FY students to become more aware of ways their identities have been
formed by unexamined cultural texts, without pushing an agenda of radical-
izing their politics (Durst; George; Lewis and Palmer; Thomas).

In various ways, these new TAs' forays into critical composition peda-
gogy reflected and reinforced the expanding pedagogical space in which we,
our new TAs, and our students actively work. Describing this space, these
TAs' experiences in it, and the theory that supports their work is an initial
response to George's call for imagining this place in our scholarship. As
WPAs and mentors, we can assist in our TAs' process by providing examples
of critical composition pedagogy in a multiliteracies curriculum in our TA
seminars, by asking TAs to acquaint themselves with some of the theoreti-
cal material referred to in this article, by providing opportunities in each
seminar for TAs to observe each other and the more experienced TAs, and
by encouraging them to work together to create course-appropriate assign-
ments around common interests, as Amanda, Chad, and Greg did in their
teaching.

Finally, while we, as experienced instructors, may take for granted the
ability to give up some authority, to experiment with different kinds of texts,
and to offer material that will surprise students and challenge their world-

views, it is important in writing programs in the twenty-first century to remember that our new TAs may want their pedagogy to be a finished product—a perfectly timed and orchestrated "performance" (such as that which Amanda discarded) from their first day in the classroom. Thus, reflecting on the nature of their classrooms with peers and mentors—as the TAs in this study did—in ways that value the complexities and uncertainty of the "real stories of our teaching" (Lee 8) and which invoke Freire's injunction to "search and re-search" (Pedagogy of Freedom 35) is an exciting pathway to sustainable, critical, multiple literacies in our writing programs today.

Notes

1. At our university, we are pursuing the additional programmatic change of extending what had been exclusively a first-year, two-semester sequence of composition classes into two, foundational communication courses extending over the first and second years; it will be followed by individual departments and colleges, in consultation with our faculty and graduate students, developing more communication-intensive courses at the junior and senior levels. In this way, we are working to provide students with a more continual and progressive communication-education experience that is linked meaningfully with their major and spanning their four years.

2. In fall 2002 (this study took place in the spring of 2003), Iowa State University enrolled about 23,000 undergraduate and 4,500 graduate students; of new admissions in 2002, nearly 88 percent were identified as white while African-American and Asian/Pacific Islander accounted for 2.6 percent each of all new admissions (Iowa State University Office of Institutional Research).

3. The TAs and I are well aware that one doesn't "dabble" in critical composition pedagogy, using it for only one assignment here or there. However, precisely because of their novice standing and recent introduction to this progressive pedagogy, their design and implementation of these types of assignments could not necessarily infuse the entire semester. Indeed, the point of this study is to help new TAs enact critical composition pedagogy even though it may appear to more experienced instructors to be incomplete and tentative. All of the TAs, whose efforts are being followed this year (after their participation in this seminar and study), are now pursuing critical composition pedagogy from start to finish in their FYC classes. Said Amanda, who was teaching at a community college in the semester following this study,

Once I saw what worked and didn't work, I was able to refine my approach to it and how I both teach and implement it into assignments. I'm doing very similar

assignments and readings in my [community college] class. I feel this approach to composition makes much better critical thinkers and ultimately thoughtful writers. (Amanda)

4. English 104 and 105 comprise the current First-Year Composition two-course sequence at Iowa State University. English 104 is described in the Instructor's Manual for English 104-105 as a course that "introduces students to the fundamentals of academic writing" through a sequence of assignments calling for "observing, inferring, concluding, analyzing, summarizing, synthesizing, and evaluating" (3). English 105 focuses on argument and persuasion and is aimed at "preparing students to participate in the academic life of the university." To this end "[s]tudents analyze arguments, they respond to arguments, and they construct their own arguments" in part through improving their "critical reading skills" (4).

5. The five new TAs also mentioned as highly influential of their developing understanding of critical composition pedagogy Berlin's Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures: Refiguring College English Studies; Lazere's "Teaching the Conflicts about Wealth and Poverty" and "Teaching the Political Conflicts"; and Smith's "Against 'Illegeracy': Toward a Pedagogy of Civic Understanding." These three authors write about FYC as preparation for and practice in civic discourse, offering not only rationales but specific strategies for engaging FYC students in the enterprise of becoming informed participant-citizens in a democracy. The new TAs also found Charles Hill's "Reading the Visual in College Writing Classes" influential and supportive in their critical composition ventures; he writes compellingly of the importance of incorporating production and analysis of visual texts into FYC, explicitly acknowledging the changing nature of literacy for citizens of a twenty-first century democracy.

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