

2011

## Challenging the Literacy Policy of the Other in College Composition

Gregory Shafer  
*Mott Community College*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/lajm>

---

### Recommended Citation

Shafer, Gregory (2011) "Challenging the Literacy Policy of the Other in College Composition," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 26: Iss. 2, Article 14.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1802>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Language Arts Journal of Michigan by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@gvsu.edu](mailto:scholarworks@gvsu.edu).

Gregory Shafer

# Challenging the Literacy Policy of the Other in College Composition

“Radical educators have a responsibility to present students with critical choices about the places they might inhabit in the larger society.”

(Henry Giroux, 2000, p. 152)

**O**ur nation has grown from its infancy with the concept of the “other” as an entity to revile, oppose and eventually acculturate. Throughout the centuries we have hung witches, enslaved Africans, and displaced and re-educated Native Americans, all under the banner of manifest destiny—all with the idea that difference is evil and must be supplanted with the sanctifying influence of the white man. Derrida referred to it as binary oppositions, reminding us that these contrasts do not simply evince a structural difference but are “always a relation of power, in which one term is in position of dominance with regard to the other” (as cited in Storey, 2006, p. 100). Actor Ossie Davis (2004) touched upon this notion of culturally designed hierarchies when he lamented the many negative uses for the word black and the way culture had created this pejorative image. “The word blackness has 120 synonyms, sixty of which are distinctly unfavorable, and none of them even mildly positive” (p. 51), wrote Davis, describing the political aspects of language. The fact is, much of our history—and this includes our language arts curriculum—has been committed to reinforcing certain power structures, certain narratives by proving their inherent goodness and superiority and giving them special privileges in the college classroom.

Foucault addresses this in exploring how power is created through the discourses we practice each day. Indeed, it was Foucault’s contention that we do not fashion original ideas through language but simply reinforce the realities given to us by years of inculcation when saying, “Power produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth” (cited in Storey, 2006, p. 102).

It was this idea of power and otherness which became a dominant theme for my English 102 class, as I invited the students to challenge time honored notions of good and bad, right and wrong. Specifically, I asked students to do a critical paper in which they would choose a concept, movement, or word and consider the unpopular or culturally rejected perspective as a point of exploration. In the process, I added, I wanted students to reflect on the basis for the ritual of truth they were confronting and the possibility for change. Most importantly, I wanted students to

use language to probe the networks of discourse around them, learning to question, to deconstruct the status quo, coming to terms with their place in a culture that has given them much of what they believe and revere. Perhaps this should be a priority as we teach our students not only reading and writing but critical language for a political world.

Again, the impetus for such an assignment emanates from the vast amount of scholarship that has been dedicated to the idea of language specifically and knowledge in general as a social and political endeavor. While many would like to embrace the notion of

objective truths when it comes to academics in general and language specifically, it seems increasingly clear that our world is constructed by political and linguistic communities that package truth and

goodness for mass consumption. Blackness is not objectively negative but is the product of centuries of propaganda, where people were engaged in a concerted effort to teach a hegemonic truth that was used to control the masses. In the same way, there is nothing intrinsically wrong with the double negative, as it is used formally as a part of both the French and Spanish language and informally in a plethora of English contexts. There is no objective reason to oppose the split infinitive since it is nothing more than a remnant of our historical fascination with Latin. However, American students who fail to make these scholarly decisions are often situated as uneducated, dumb, basic, or simply in need of remediation—as if they are literally sick and seeking a remedy. With few exceptions, any form of African American English—or other dialect outside of the academy—is dutifully expunged from “proper English,” and the idea that there are other valid truths or discourse communities is often never discussed. What seems clear, to me at least, is that our teaching of literacy should include a critical look at the construction of truth and the impact that has on our image of the world.

We are reminded by Kelly Ritter in *Before Shaughnessy* (2008) that students who came to Yale and Harvard from 1920 to 1960 without the requisite language pedi-

**I wanted students to use language to probe the networks of discourse around them, learning to question, to deconstruct the status quo, coming to terms with their place in a culture that has given them much of what they believe and revere.**

grec were quickly deemed part of the “Awkward Squad” and placed in “Bonehead English,” so as to quickly label them as outsiders, as the other. Indeed, teaching English was not about nurturing a critical consciousness about language and its possibilities in various contexts but “reinforcing the hierarchy of sanctioned literacies in the first year course and introducing students to the political process of social construction in that they were marked as deficient” (p. 42). James Paul Gee (2007) might best capture the theme by arguing...

...the most striking continuity in the history of literacy is the way in which literacy has been used, in age after age, to solidify the social hierarchy, empower elites, and ensure that people lower on the hierarchy accept their self interest or group interest to do so. (p. 61)

And so, our class was based on exploring the many historical and linguistic truths that have been given to students and often employed as a way to bolster inequalities. Students were told that they could choose any truth, any tradition, any piece of conventional or cultural wisdom that has

**Indeed, teaching English was not about nurturing a critical consciousness about language and its possibilities in various contexts but “reinforcing the hierarchy of sanctioned literacies...”**

become a part of American lore and schooling. Students were encouraged to look at cultural models, historical facts, and “rituals of truth” and interrogate the language they are expected to use in the classroom. In simple terms, I wanted students to critically explore what Gramsci (as cited in Storey, 2006) called hegemony, or the manufacturing of consent through the use of media, education, language, or other outlets for knowledge and power. I wanted an interrogation of the world in which they live and a questioning of the verities upon which their lives are often based and judged.

To do this, it is important that students be given a short lesson in Gramsci and the notion of “false consciousness,” which is, according to Gramsci a truth fashioned to privilege the powerful and passed on as a set of unquestioned ideas. In doing this, I tell students about the theory presented by the Frankfurt School, Gramsci, and others, explaining that these thinkers sought to analyze the political elements of information and the way that society is controlled through traditions and conventions. I ask students to think critically about the celebration of certain great men, the messages given in commercials, television programs, movies, and in the simple mores of their lives. I talk briefly about media and propaganda and the involvement of Frank Capra during World War II as a part of the American propaganda machine. More specifically, we look at past examples of how people have been manipulated by those in positions of power to fashion truth in a way to manipulate rather than educate the masses and to reduce an enemy to a monolithic other.

Lewis Lapham is a precious resource for this. In his book *Gag Rule* (2004), he discusses the many political ruses used by politicians and educators to keep people passive and ignorant. According to Lapham:

No American schoolmaster ever outlined the lesson at hand quite as plainly as Woodrow Wilson. While he was still president of Princeton University, Wilson in 1909 presented the Federation of High School Teachers with explicit instructions... We want one class of persons to have a liberal education and we want another class of persons, a very much larger class of necessity in every society, to forgo the privilege of a liberal education and fit themselves to perform specific difficult tasks. (p. 104)

Lapham (2004) goes on to explain the objective of American education and how it chose to “rig the curricula in a way that discouraged the habits of skepticism or dissent” (p.104). Indeed, the goal was not to emancipate students or empower their ability to participate richly and debate assiduously in a democratic system but the “training of a contented labor force” (p.104). It was Wilson who worked with universities to create a canon that would quiet the unrest of an unpopular war and a suspension of the basic rights of free speech.

Most of our students don’t know about Wilson’s Committee on Public Information or the fact that Eugene Debs was imprisoned for a decade because he made a speech decrying the injustice of a war that was fought by the poor so as to serve the wealthy. Most don’t know that the media today—the basis for information in society—is controlled by the smallest numbers of owners than ever before. In 1983, according to Ben Bagdikian, (2004) “there were fifty dominant media corporations; today there are five. These five corporations decide what most citizens will—or will not learn” (p. 16).

And so, one begins to see the importance of such an assignment. It is critical to our democracy that students learn to question and explore, to probe with a cynical prism how their lives and values are shaped and how the other is manufactured to form many of our collective values. Heidegger (as cited in Krell, 1993) argued that language speaks through us, meaning that we do not control or shape the language we speak but absorb and reinforce what centuries of discourse have prescribed for us. Foucault (2001) took this one step further, suggesting that entire discourses come with embedded restrictions and expectations that we simply and blithely fulfill. If this is true, it is imperative for our students to consider the truths they have embraced their entire lives.

Ernest Morrell discusses the implementation of this lesson in his book *Linking Literacy and Popular Culture* (2004), suggesting that students can be given an abbreviated version of the critical theory practiced at the Frankfurt School and its premise that “ruling classes in Western societies were quite successful in promoting a set of ideas and values that maintained power in the hands of the precious few to the detriment of the overwhelming majority” (pp. 26-27), and that this must be critically contested

through a measured approach to knowledge and its origins. Morrell argues that the goal of Gramsci and the Frankfurt School was to awaken the passive elements of the population that obediently accepted the verities of their institutions. The same, of course, can be said for our students, who spend much of their lives, immersed in pop culture and monolithic notions of history, education, and language. My idea was to encourage students to read against these texts and the powerful interests that they represent.

To support this lesson, I often include quotations from critics, such as Noam Chomsky (1987), who simply and provocatively spells out the controversy I am inviting students to probe:

Democracy in the United States rhetoric refers to a system of governance in which elite elements based in the business community control the state by virtue of their dominance of the private society while the population observes quietly. So understood, democracy is a system of elite decision and public ratification, as in the United States itself. Correspondingly, popular involvement in the formation of public policy is considered a serious threat. (p. 15)

Quotations such as these tend to enkindle an alacrity towards the assignment, as students begin to understand both the issues and theories and see themselves as victims in this context. Many want to expose the injustices in their lives and stop their own victimization. In Freirian terms, they want to become involved in pedagogy that transcends banking and includes them in self actualization and praxis, which includes both practice and critical knowledge of the politics surrounding them (Freire, 1988).

### The Projects

**Ralinda.** Many of the students began their search by looking at specific institutions that seemed to touch them as participants in a cultural or racial group. One of the intriguing research projects was done by Ralinda and involved the rap music that was an important but troubling aspect of her teenage son's life. As an African American mother, Ralinda wanted to explore the origins of rap, the changes, and the people who control it. She presented her paper early in the discussion and introduced her plan by telling the class she wondered about the hegemony involved in rap and how its control has changed. "I wonder," she continued, "if the rap that started in the Black community has been appropriated by the big corporations that tend to market everything." Ralinda further wondered if powerful corporations had appropriated the culture of African Americans to make money off of rap, a genre of music that emanated from Black families.

In exploring this and staying true to the idea of deconstructing the hegemony in our culture, she researched the messages being disseminated in rap and the people in control of these messages. "I want to know," she declared when we went around the room and shared plans for the paper, "if the rap being produced today, especially the gangster rap, is being created by Black artists and their experiences or

if it is being pushed by white executives who want to exploit Black people as violent." Further, she added "I want to know if the music started in our communities has been taken and used to make us into a villain for others to fear."

Ralinda's paper began with the acknowledgement that the violence in rap music has continued to increase throughout the years. Further, she found research to show that ownership of record companies, with few exceptions are in the hands of White men. "I wonder," she wrote tellingly in her paper, "if America's continued vision of Black people as violent has been exploited by rap executives who want

**It is critical to our democracy that students learn to question and explore, to probe with a cynical prism how their lives and values are shaped and how the other is manufactured to form many of our collective values.**

to make money off of this deleterious and frightening image." To enliven her paper, she referred to the killing of a Black man in Oakland, California by a police officer and the notion that Black people are inherently scary, dangerous, and deserving of physical and even deadly force. Such questions, of course, are exactly what one wants to induce in leading a class through the complex world of hegemony. "Educational work," argues Henry Giroux (2000) "is both inseparable from and a participant in cultural politics because it is in the realm of culture that identities are forged, citizenship rights are enacted, and possibilities are developed for translating acts of interpretation into forms of intervention" (p. 25).

Clearly, as Ralinda scrutinizes the power and influence of the music industry and its connection to violent and destructive images of African Americans, she is participating in an exploration of power and how it is disseminated as neutral information. Giroux (2000) is an avid proponent of this, adding that "making the political more pedagogical requires that educators address how agency unfolds within power-infused relations" (p. 25).

Clearly, there are a plethora of power-infused institutions to investigate, and as our students interrogate these traditionally sacrosanct citadels of truth, they begin to appreciate their place in a real democracy. While Chomsky (1987) bemoaned the passive character of most Americans in marching to the beat of corporate drums, students who learn to see the political, hegemonic potential in their lives, begin to see education as transcending memorization of reified facts and replace it with what Freire (1988) calls problem posing. Ralinda's scrutiny of the music industry finds that virtually all of the music produced around the world is in the hands of five mega transnational corporations and that her son's self image as an African American has much to do with these powerful groups and the reality of Black people they want to manufacture. Her conclusion, which she read to the class, was arresting in its plea to have other students look at the other depictions of African Americans and who benefits from these images.

I want to suggest that we, as students, start documenting the way media defines us as people of color. Because most media is produced by white people, we must wonder what they are doing and how their prodigious influence makes our kids into the people they are.

### A Student Challenges the Redskin

**Claire.** Claire, a Native American woman in my class, traced the deplorable marketing of Native American images in media and the way these images have created our “official knowledge” of Native Americans. Clare pointed to her own community where the high school mascot was the “Redskins” and how complaints from a handful of community members had done little to quell the overwhelming support for this incredibly insulting moniker. “How would you like your school name to be the Blackskins, and how would you like your high school’s helmets to have a spear on its side?” she asked as she began her paper.

Such a provocative start was followed with images of Native Americans and their lamentable place in American media and lore. “In decades past, we were the stupid people who made silly noises and rode our horses in a circle so it was easier to shoot us,” she later wrote. In developing her research on the topic, Clare quoted from Andrew Jackson’s many speeches on Indian removal, highlighting words like

**...[Teachers] want to become involved in pedagogy that transcends banking and includes them in self actualization and praxis...**

savage, ignorant, uncivilized. “They have neither the intelligence, the industry, nor the desire of improvement which are essential to any favorable change in their condition,” wrote Jackson in December 3, 1833 as he addressed Congress. In providing such examples, Clare underscored the way language worked insidiously to create a reality about Native Americans and challenged the students in class to comment on what kind of person they think of when considering a word like savage. This is why, she later wrote in her paper, even in 2010 we can tolerate the word redskin as a way to represent a team. In many ways, she added, the discourse of the past still lives with us today.

The discussion that followed was riveting and included students discussing the images they have of Native Americans and how much they are still influenced by such racist terms. “They are either the silent wise man or the drunk who can’t seem to get off of the reservation. Most of all, they are invisible,” added a student, as she noted how absent Native Americans were from television or other realms of media.

Such remark’s remind us that, as Howard Zinn (2009) argues, history is never objective and that it always serves the interest of someone. When the values of Native Americans are brought to the fore and given an audience, they change the entire physical landscape of American culture. For centuries, we have used Native Americans as fodder for captivity tales, going back to the puritan Mary Rowlandson, so to consider their equal status as people who should not be

reduced to humiliating mascots on the helmet of a football or baseball player, is to redefine the political discourse. It, in short, compels us to examine all of the myths we have promulgated about Native Americans and the genocide that is curiously celebrated each time we exult the “Age of Jackson,” or any other American President of that era.

### Women and Language

**Sarah.** If a discourse is an identity kit, as Gee (2007) argues, then what must one say about the discourse of women and the way this discourse is inherited and used to impede equality? Such questions were the basis for a third paper on language and women. It was the goal of Sarah, a student in my class, to pursue the way language has limited women, not only in how they talk but what they say. Sarah argued that language has been a tool to keep women subordinate for centuries, and this discourse of subjugation has been absorbing women for hundreds of years, telling them how to talk and what it means to be a female, despite the inherent limitations. The challenge, she added, is to reveal the characteristics and the advantages it gives to the patriarchy that has always kept women in check. “This,” she argued, “is an example of hegemony since it comes to us like an invisible hand. It is inherited like the black man inherits the word ‘boy.’”

To do this, Sarah looked at scholarship from Deborah Tannen (2001), Alleen Pace Nilsen (2000), and Robin Tolmarch Lakoff (2002), chronicling the examples of the discourse that defines and limits women. The tag question, according to Lakoff, limits women by turning even imperative statements into questions, thus relieving women from having to be assertive. “The tag question,” argues Lakoff, “allows a speaker to avoid commitment and thereby avoid conflict with the addressee” (p. 438). The same is true of the rising inflection at the end of a statement. Lakoff uses the example of the woman who responds to a question about the time that dinner will be ready. Instead of simply stating six o’clock, she articulates it with the rising inflection turning the answer into a question, “Oh, around six o’clock?” Sarah took such examples and augmented them with personal interviews, showing the class how embedded the language is and how it limits and determines their success and approach to life. “This is a language that we learn early in life, and it undermines our ability to be assertive, which in turn, limits our chances of becoming executives and people who have power.”

Sarah also looked at the names given to men and women. While women are named after flowers and pieces of jewelry (Rose, Daisy, Crystal), men are given names like Rex, Richard, or Raymond. Men are bachelors. Women are spinsters. Men are players, while women are loose or promiscuous. Put simply, women are subjected to a language that repeatedly tells them they are objects to be enjoyed, that they shouldn’t speak too loudly, that they should never be assertive, and that they need a man to be complete. This, Sarah concluded is a tradition that few of us know but that clearly still affects us. It is still alive today. “Try to name a movie where a woman is not completed by finding a man, by getting married?” She continued.

Her final essay also looked at a myriad of magazines, enumerating the typical caveat to be more thin and to prepare “yummy” dishes while keeping their waistlines in check. Again, what seemed clear in her paper was the distinctively different language spoken by genders and the conspicuous examples these languages afforded men. In her conclusion, she returned to hegemony and reminded the class that this is something that few people recognize. It is part of our culture—one created by men and rarely scrutinized by women. It is, simply put, a convenient way to keep half of the population in its place.

In his book *Social Linguistics and Literacy*, Gee (2007) argues that “schools have historically failed with non-elite populations and have thereby replicated the social hierarchy” (p. 34). Gee’s argument is based on the failure of schools to nurture a critical consciousness—one that invites students to critique their culture and the many aspects of their existence that makes them who they are. What is intriguing to many of us, is how unconsciously we live our lives, assuming that our values and decisions are autonomous from the political negotiations and historical oppression that has typified much of human history. In fact, as my students learned in delving into the language and histories of their lives, our existence is ideological. It is constructed by epistemological principles and it must always be contested if we are to live lives of liberation.

In asking my students to look at the hegemony in their lives, in asking them to consider the way language, history, and knowledge is manipulated to create certain spheres of power, I was able to make my students more than passive recipients of their existences and nurture a problem-posing, where Freire (1988) argues, “men develop their power to perceive the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves. They come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation (p. 70-71).

At the same time, I am urging teachers to challenge an ensconced curriculum that has historically reinforced narratives of the powerful, whether those narratives relate to Standard English, the canon, or the way we venerate presidents, despite their carefully concealed weaknesses. If we explain to administrators and others who are guardians of the status quo that such assignments are not meant to remove a particular policy but rather are meant as ways to imbue our students with critical thinking skills, we are much more likely to succeed in the rough waters of political literacy policy.

## References

- Bagdikian, B. (2004). *The new media monopoly*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2004.
- Chomsky, N. (1987). *On power and ideology*. Boston: South End Press, 1987.
- Davis, O. (2004). The English language is my enemy. In T.M.Valentine. (Ed.), *Language and Prejudice* (50-53). New York: Pearson/Longman.
- Derrida, J. (1976). *Of grammatology*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1976.
- Foucault, M. (2001). Truth and Power. In J.D. Faubion. (Ed.), *Michael Foucault Essential Works: Power* (131-139).
- Freire, P. (1988). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum Press.
- Gee, J. P. (2007). *Social linguistics and literacy: Ideology and discourses*. (3 ed.). New York: Routledge.
- Giroux, H. (2000). *Stealing innocence corporate culture's war on children*. New York: Palgrave.
- Lakoff, R. T. (2002). You are what you say. In R. Diyanni. *One hundred Essays* (436-443). New York: Longman.
- Krell, D. F. (1993). *Martin Heidegger basic writings*. San Francisco: Harper.
- Lapham, L. (2004). *Gag rule*. New York: Penguin.
- Morrell, E. (2004). *Linking literacy and popular culture*. Norwood, Mass: Christopher Gordon. Publishing.
- Nilson, A. P. (2000). Sexism in English: A 1990s Update. In E. Ashton-Jones, G.A. Olsen, and M.G. Perry. (Eds.) *The Gender Reader*. Needham Heights, MASS Allyn and Bacon.
- Ritter, K. (2008). *Before Shaughnessy basic writing at Yale and Harvard 1920-1960*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Storey, John. (2006). *Cultural theory and popular culture*. Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press.
- Tannen, D. (2001). *You just don't understand*. New York: Harper.
- Zinn, H. (2003). *Artists in times of war*. New York: Seven Stories Press.

**Greg Shafer** teaches at Mott Community College and is a past president of the Michigan Council of Teachers of English.