

WRITING WITHIN AND AGAINST THE ACADEMY: WHAT DO WE REALLY WANT OUR STUDENTS TO DO?

A SYMPOSIUM

INTRODUCTION

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The following papers were read as opening statements at a roundtable on Writing Within and Against the Academy at the 1989 Conference on College Composition and Communication in Seattle. Our aim at this roundtable was not to present a set of finished or closed positions, but to open up a dialogue about a set of problems that seemed too complex to be resolved yet too integral to our teaching to be ignored. The brisk discussion that followed suggested that we had only begun to explore the various issues involved in trying to forge a more critical practice as teachers of writing. We would like these statements to be read, then, as an attempt to extend the conversation started in Seattle, as a series of darts or provocations on the subject of why and how we teach writing.

The roundtable was set up to look at the tensions between two ways of imagining how we might try to empower our students as writers. The first of these ways we might think of as teaching students how to write *within* the academy, as helping them become more aware of and adept at the kinds of talk and thinking that characterize the various branches of the university. Such teaching tries to empower students by making them, in effect, insiders at the university, familiar with the conventions, commonplaces, and habitual turns of argument that make up the talk of our disciplines.

The problems with such teaching are the same as with any whose aim is acculturation. In trying to get students to learn certain habits or practices of mind, we may also discourage them from criticizing those practices, from trying out (or holding on to) other ways of thinking and writing about the world. And so a second way of imagining our goals as teachers is to see our task as helping students write *against* the academy, resist its accepted forms

of thought and discourse. But simply to oppose is to remain always an outsider, and thus powerless. To allow students simply to ignore or transgress the conventions of academic writing would be to teach them to fail. Rather, the goal for both students and ourselves must be to speak from within a discourse and yet to remain in some ways outside of it, to be able not only to execute but to argue against its claims and practices. There are few teachers, I hope, whose goals are simply and wholly to have their students learn the forms of academic discourse. We want to do more, to inculcate a kind of critical wariness and skepticism. Yet to transform a practice one must first be within it. How then do we teach our students (and ourselves) to write both within and against the academy? What might it mean, in practical terms, to be at once inside a discourse and critical of it? These are the questions that the following statements take on.

IS A CRITICAL PEDAGOGY POSSIBLE?

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Joe has outlined nicely the boundaries of the problem that I see for those of us wishing to construct a critical pedagogy. The pendulum swings easily between a conservative and a liberal position. The conservatives, the "insiders," offer their discourse to the "outsiders" by outlining the shapes and formats, the rituals and manners of this particular discourse, without calling into question the discourse itself. In order to become acculturated, the outsider has no alternative but to give up the behaviors and values of the outside in order to embrace fully the insider's worldview. The liberals, on the other hand, wish to preserve some of the outsiders' "personal" qualities — often named as voice, or cultural heritage, or their unique ideas and experiences — as they grow accustomed to the language practices of academic discourse. Yet for all the liberals' attempts to maintain a portion of the outsider's world, their main purpose is to introduce students to the insider's world, to make that student an insider.

A radical critique of these positions, offered against education in general by Bowles and Gintis in *Schooling in Capitalist America* and against English teaching in particular by Ira Shor in *Critical Teaching and Everyday Life*, places both "camps" within the same ideological territory. It is a territory that allows for academic debate and controversy without ever causing anyone to challenge the social and political structures that sustain and champion the "power" of the academic establishment. While such a critique prepares the ground for the construction of a new pedagogy, even offering images of what a "critical" pedagogy might be, radicals have not discussed what happens to