Teaching My Class

And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.
John 8:32

Religion, morality, and knowledge being essential to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged.
Northwest Ordinance

PROLOGUE

I was born to teach. I knew this without a doubt from the moment I learned to read and write. Maybe earlier—I can remember trying to teach my baby sister how to crawl, and my younger brother how to dial the telephone. That my pretty flapper mother had taught eight grades concurrently as a one-room country schoolteacher did not escape my notice, even though she had hated the job because every day she had to chop wood for the school’s potbellied stove and scrub its manure-caked floor and put up with the sass of the pupils bigger than she was, hulking on the back bench.

That I grew up in a college town where my father was a chemistry professor was heaven on earth. There was lab glassware to be used as doll dishes. There were giant, dripping 5-cent ice cream cones from the college creamery to be devoured after our daily swimming lessons in the college pool. There were music lessons, piano first (I learned to read music before I learned to read words), then violin. There were enticing stacks of books to bring home from weekly trips to the university library. With a mixture of delight and trepidation I often tried to linger as long as possible in the children’s room before they turned out the lights, in hopes that I might get locked in overnight and, undetected, could read the whole night through. But, ever obedient to the rules, I always wimped out when the austere librarian hissed, “Closing time.”

That we lived across a large field from the elementary school was a bonus. With the welcoming, red-brick Georgian building itself ever in my field of vision, what went on inside was perpetually on my mind. I loved to play school. As the oldest child of three in my family, I was a Lucy long
before Peanuts immortalized this juvenile scold and nag. Before I began first grade I was so fearful that I’d misspell a word and flunk out that I asked my mother to teach me a hard word as a security blanket. She came up with a-n-t-i-c-i-p-a-t-e, which I memorized. Thus armed, I knew it all.

On the pretext of telling the neighbor kids—even towering third and fourth graders—a story they’d never heard before, I would lure them to the row of Campbell’s soup cartons I’d arranged as desks under the pines in our New Hampshire neighborhood. I’d hand out the bright Crayolas (broken crayons affronted my sense of propriety), fist-fat pencils from my Detroit grandfather’s print shop, and to write on, empty bluebooks discarded by my father’s students. Then I’d proceed to impart the lesson du jour. I do not remember the substance of a single one of these impromptu discourses, but there were enough occasions, with pupils lured by shameless bribes of jellybeans and chocolate chip cookies smuggled from home, to let me know from the age of six on that teaching would be the great love of my life.

I do, however, remember the need to come up with material of sufficient interest to keep my roving clientele in one place for at least fifteen minutes; if I wanted them to play my game I had to make it worth their while. And I particularly remember the thrill of authority—I knew more than my students did, at least when I chose the subject. I spoke in impeccable Standard English. I could spell better than everyone, except for my arch-rival Patty Towle. (How I got sweet revenge is another story, to be hinted at only in its denunciation. Having convinced Patty that I could make her walk on water, I didn’t have to push her into the nearby brook—she fell in of her own volition.) I could read faster than the others, and I could read harder books. Not only could I pronounce all the words, I knew what each one meant, I could use them in complete sentences—and, as self-styled teacher, I could correct the other kids in my Palmer-method handwriting that flowed in precise hills and valleys across the page. I even squandered two weeks’ allowance (ten cents) on a package of foil stars to adorn perfect papers. Although I was chosen last on every basketball, volleyball, and softball team throughout my entire elementary school years—was it nerd’s fate, or revenge for my insufferability as pedagogue?—my own teachers always picked my eager pencil for every writing chore that came along. What the rest saw as work was to me but child’s play.

And, I confess, it still is.

I have proffered this picture of my earliest days as teacher on the assumption that many of us share a number of common characteristics (though maybe you were nicer than I), and that these are what impelled us
to choose careers as teachers. Where else could we have so much fun? Among these conspicuous features are:

- A respect for learning, both the substance and the process.
- A "holy curiosity"—as Einstein says—and a general love of learning.
- A mastery of the standard language.
- A love of words and facility with them, in speech and in writing.
- An appreciation of the context(s) in which learning can take place, formally and informally.
- A sense of mission—that we should and must teach.
- Recognition that we have some wisdom, information, skill to impart to others.
- Confidence in our ability to communicate what we know.
- The belief that students want (or ought to want) to learn what we have to teach them—that it's good for them.
- Acknowledgment of the system of order in which learning takes place.
- Respect for the authority which the teacher brings to the classroom.
- The sharing of values, ethics, and point of view of the systems—cultural, political, national—in which the school is situated.
- Expectation that this system and its incorporated values will prevail and endure, in public policy and civic life.
- Later I would add the spirit of critical inquiry, the value of questioning authority, of engaging in dialogue and debate in the pursuit and advancement of knowledge, but at six I was an autocrat.

These characteristics, in combination, label us as members of what I'll call the teacher class—a blend of some attributes of the intellectual class (if in America there is such a thing) and the middle class. Teachers share the intellectuals' values of a life of the mind, the search for truth, the free play of ideas, the spirit of critical thinking and reasoned inquiry that are the hallmarks of a liberal education. At the same time, perhaps more bourgeois than thoroughgoing intelligentsia would be, teachers also value skilled use of our standard (i.e. national) language—in speaking, writing, reading, and the host of middle-class virtues implied in such standard language usage. Teachers value their authority, relative classroom autonomy, and the continuity of the systems—social, political, familial—that put them at the head of the classroom and keep them there. Although class status has conventionally been tied to economic or social status (Marx, Veblen, and others), class extends its tentacles into every aspect of life, in and out of school.

That for most of my lifelong career as a teacher I took these teacher-class values for granted should come as no surprise to those who share them; I've never met a teacher who thought otherwise. Members of the teacher class are like Texans looking at New Mexico; we can hardly see beyond the vast range of our own territory. We rarely examine our class
status unless painful or pointedly political circumstances insist that we do so. Why try to fix what ain't broke? In fact, only during the writing of this paper have I felt obliged to extract and scrutinize these strands that have been deeply woven into the fabric of a lifetime.

Each of the items on the above list embeds a complex of values; even before we were teachers we were living the values we now teach. As teachers, well-educated and thoroughly socialized, we—by and large—uphold the values of our class, our respective disciplines, and those of the institutions where we teach, even when we cavil and carp about the day-by-day trivia. If we didn't we wouldn't do what we do or be where we are. It is beyond the scope of this paper to identify how congruent the values of the teacher class are with those of the students at any particular institution; would it surprise math majors, say, or marketing or leisure science or computer science or family studies majors to learn that the values, say, of critical thinking and clear communication are embedded in whatever discipline-related courses they're taking?

With all of the above as preamble, it should be clear that our overriding agenda may be identified in a single succinct sentence:

WE WANT OUR STUDENTS TO SHARE OUR CLASS VALUES

That is the thesis of this paper. When we teach composition (and anything else to undergraduates) we teach a complex of the teacher-class values (read virtues) embedded in every mainstream institution of higher education in the country. Even at the risk of sounding politically incorrect, the message is plain: we want our students to share our class values. That is the overarching purpose of innumerable American colleges and universities, as articulated in their mission statements and implied if not expressly stated in their curricular descriptions. It's all there in the catalogs.

From this agenda, all else follows. It is taken for granted that teachers in every field try to clone their majors, for an academic major is a concentrated means of transmitting not only the state-of-the-art in any given discipline, but its particular ethos and values—necessary to prepare the students for life-after-graduation. Moreover, all teachers of non-majors who care about their students—that is, all of us—try in ways that transcend disciplines to convey the values that matter most to us as human beings. And why not? We're an admirable bunch, as we are fond of saying on occasions of institutional self-congratulation.

When the warm rhetoric of convocations and graduations is translated into cold print in college catalogs it assumes legal status, for students enrolling in the school are entitled to the promises made therein.
Consequently, in an effort to look more closely at who we are and what we teach for, I have examined the mission statements and curricular rationales of a random sample of colleges and universities around the country, as expressed in their undergraduate catalogs.

No discipline or college has a monopoly on the life of the mind that is reflected in "the pursuit of all truth" (Brigham Young University xiii); in "sustaining a spirit of free inquiry directed to understanding the nature of the universe and the role of mankind in it" (University of Virginia iv); or in "seeking and applying truth, and testing whatever truth one believes one has found" (Swarthmore 8). Academic institutions agree on the general principle contained in the Catholic University of America's mission statement, "The only constraint upon truth is truth itself," however diverse the manifestations in particular curricula (15).

Likewise, no discipline or college has an exclusive claim on teaching students to develop their "creative abilities" (Sweet Briar 3) or to engage in "critical thinking" (Eastern Connecticut State University 5)—defined by the University of Massachusetts as consisting of "the ability to imagine the consequences of one's choices, to articulate those consequences, and to increase understanding of one's relation to the worlds of nature, politics, and work" (12). Such "analytic and creative problem-solving processes . . . form the central bases of intellectual inquiry and cultural achievement," asserts Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (26). But the ways in which "the capacities of discernment, appreciation, and criticism" enable students to "make informed judgments about complex issues" are translated into specific skills and academic accomplishments have a distinctly teacher class orientation (26).

All college rhetoric books reveal the essentially middle-class advice about writing in standard English offered to freshman writers, as I demonstrate in the next chapter 1. Virtually every American textbook advocates self-reliance, respectability, decorum, moderation and temperance, efficiency, order, and cleanliness. This advice is epitomized in Strunk and White's normative precepts that favor "plainness, simplicity, orderliness, sincerity" (69)—and patriotism ("Avoid foreign languages" 81). A comparable middle-class orientation characterizes the descriptions of Freshman English throughout American college catalogs, as well.

American college students are expected to speak and write in the lingua franca of this country; college catalogs reveal no alternatives to English. Their English is to be clear, precise, and to reflect a mastery of the modes of discourse that derive their heritage from Aristotle by way of eighteenth-century Scottish rhetoricians. Although the University of Michigan asserts
that "mastery" of any language "increases subtlety of mind and sharpens sensitivity to the use and meaning of words in one's own language," and the study of literature "reveals the avenues of thought and feeling that language can open," English is the required language for freshman writing courses (emphasis mine, 19).

Michigan's rationale is typical: "An English Composition requirement is common to all degrees, since educated men and women should be able to express themselves clearly in speech and writing in their own language"—presumably, as long as it's English, since the required course is identified as English composition (emphasis mine). Indeed, as in many schools, Michigan students must demonstrate proficiency in standard English, not some other standard language or dialect, in order to pass into—and out of—a wide range of freshman writing courses. Even the rare school that allows students to pass an introductory literature requirement as Georgetown does, with "literature courses—either in the original or in translation—in another language department, ancient or modern," obliges "non-native speakers of English" to fulfill the requirement "with courses whose readings are in English" (61). That such requirements override the racial and ethnic backgrounds of minority students is subordinated to the uniform assumption that standard English is the language of the American academy and the necessary basis for all academic transactions outside of foreign language departments.

Thus freshman writing courses reinforce university-wide goals of "precise communication and experience in the methods of reasoned inquiry" (emphasis mine, ECSU 5) by "introducing students to the interrelated and shared modes of verbal communication that are distinctive to college life—argument, interpretation, analysis, and metaphor—and whose various usages substantially delineate what it means to become broadly educated" (emphasis mine, VPI&SU 26).

Virginia Military Institute, whose undergraduate cadets are expected "to advance through self-reliance, initiative, and strength of character" (14)—traits largely dependent on the individual, rather than background or social status—nevertheless maintains a system that fosters the middle-class (and military) virtues of "punctuality, order, discipline, courtesy, and respect for authority" (emphasis mine, 14). Indeed, VMI is more explicit than many colleges about the ways in which the institutional goal, the "ability to communicate effectively," (3) is enforced: "Every cadet is expected to use the English language clearly, correctly, and thoughtfully. Any cadet who through carelessness, indifference, or lack of preparation
submits substandard written work in any course should expect to receive a reduced grade or even to submit additional written work in order to graduate” (emphasis mine, 9).

At this point, in a sophisticated, cutting-edge analysis, it would be time to spring the surprise, to shed the bourgeois teacher clothes of the ninety-seven-pound wimp and emerge as Supertheorist, whose radically new definition of liberal education—or composition—will forever change the way not only I but everyone else will read and write and teach. Pow! What drama as I sock it to the theory bullies who have been kicking sand into my complacent teacher visage all these years! Scarcely have they suspected the brilliance hidden beneath that 30-SPF sunblock! What power! I savor the thought that my entire introductory narrative could then be read as suave irony, a stance toward which my teacher-class soul has aspired year after futile year.

But alas! For better or worse, when I emerge from that phone booth I’m essentially the same person who went in, inspired and impelled, as are many of my peers, to teach my students from a devotion to the ideals of a liberal education and a love of language which both emanates from and transcends the teacher class. Whether we were born into the teacher class or became wedded to it through years of schooling, it would be hard—perhaps impossible—to do otherwise. The pervasive values that drive institutional and pedagogical expectations of student writing are those that respect standard English as the lingua franca of the academy. To speak and write in English that reflects the conventions of spelling, pronunciation, mechanics, syntax—and larger matters of order, clarity, responsible use and acknowledgment of sources—allows all of us, teachers and students alike, to get on with the business of the academy, including the perennial search for truth that is generated by critical thinking, the questioning of authority, and reasoned inquiry.

In the process of teaching the subject, composition, we are also composing the students. If we encourage—even require—them, in their use of standard English, to speak and write as we do, we are essentially reinforcing American educational norms. America’s great documents of freedom and exaltation of common people, including the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights, Leaves of Grass, the inscription on the Statue of Liberty, “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” are written in the language that inscribes our national values and national character. It is the language that our students, too, must and will write. Just as we do now.
NOTE

1. Eighty-five percent of Americans—all but the super-rich and the very poor—identify themselves as middle-class, says Irving Lewis Allen, a University of Connecticut sociologist. Thus the range of people who at least pay lip service to these values comprehends virtually the entire American populace, irrespective of income, type of job, race, ethnicity, or gender. These are the people who elect school boards and who send their children to the elementary and high schools that use the books which even more emphatically than college textbooks endorse and reinforce these values. That textbooks reflect and transmit community and national values goes without saying.