

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 381 797

CS 214 810

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 TITLE "Read My Lips" and Other Rhetoric: A Qualitative Ethical Study of TAs Using Standardized Syllabi in First-Year Composition Classes.
 PUB DATE Mar 95
 NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (46th, Washington, DC, March 23-25, 1995).
 PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
 EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
 DESCRIPTORS Attitude Measures; *Curriculum Evaluation; *Ethics; *Freshman Composition; Graduate Students; Higher Education; *Intellectual Freedom; Politics; Qualitative Research; Surveys; *Teaching Assistants
 IDENTIFIERS Educational Issues

ABSTRACT

Much has been written on the ethics of teaching syllabi that pursue a particular social agenda. Depending on the commentator, these syllabi have been characterized as transformative, socially responsible, political, politically correct, unethical and immoral. Throughout this literature, however, the assumption is that the teacher presenting the syllabus has designed it and feels invested in its goals. However, at many universities, a majority of the first-year English composition sections are taught by graduate teaching assistants (TAs) who did not create the standard syllabus but are required nonetheless to teach it. This poses a unique set of ethical questions as yet unaddressed. A paradigm from Iris Marion Young's "Justice and the Politics of Difference" suggests that a politically-driven syllabus designed by someone higher on the academic hierarchy than the TA teaching the course is unethical. The graduate student is placed in a position in which economics forces a decision she is uncomfortable with. A study sent questionnaires to 49 TAs at a major midwestern university; 19 were returned. The questionnaire asked the TAs to reflect on the syllabus from the point of view of their ethical and moral beliefs. Responses showed both ends of the spectrum, both those who did not find themselves ethically troubled and those who were deeply troubled. The strongest response came from a first-year TA who found the department "ethically reprehensible." (TB)

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**"Read My Lips" and Other Rhetoric:
A Qualitative Ethical Study of TAs Using Standardized Syllabi
in First-Year Composition Classes**

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Paper Presented at CCCC, March 1995 (Washington, DC)**

Much has been written on the ethics of teaching syllabi that pursue a particular social agenda. Depending on the commentator, these syllabi have been characterized as transformative, socially responsible, political, politically correct, unethical and immoral. Throughout this literature, however, the assumption is that the teacher presenting the syllabus has designed it and feels invested in its goals. However, at many universities, a majority of the first-year English compositions sections are taught by graduate students who did not create the standard syllabus but are required nonetheless to teach it. This poses a unique set of ethical questions as yet unaddressed: Should TAs be required to use a standardized syllabus? If so, should the syllabus have overt and/or a one-sided political agenda? If a standardized syllabus is used, who should design it? Should first year composition classes teach students how to write or should the focus be on politics as a means to teach students to write?

As a new first year graduate student during the 1992-93 academic year who was required to teach a standardized departmental syllabus in a first-year composition class, I was driven to explore these ethical questions. My paper will examine the ethics in three ways. First, I will examine feminist ethical philosopher Iris Marion Young to see how her distributive paradigm applies to TAs in the classroom. I will follow that up with a review the current literature of ethical issues in composition. Finally, I will share the results of my qualitative research study to determine how TAs perceive the ethical issues involved. By uncovering any ethical dilemmas

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and understanding them, I hope that TAs can discover opportunities to deliberate and come to judgment about the pedagogies we are required to embrace.

In her book Justice & The Politics of Difference, feminist philosopher Iris Marion Young begins "Chapter 1: Displacing the Distributive Paradigm" by defining what the distributive paradigm is. It

implicitly assumes that individuals or other agents lie as nodes, points in the social field, among whom larger or smaller bundles of social goods are assigned. The individuals are externally related to the goods they possess, and their only relation to one another that matters from the point of view of the paradigm is a comparison of the amount of goods they possess. (Young 18)

While Young's paradigm is something she argues to "displace," it is something that has not been displaced in first-year composition classrooms taught by TAs (Young 15). If one were to take a closer look, a common classroom relationship can be portrayed in Young's paradigm in composition classes taught by TAs. The TA and her students would be the "individuals...[who] lie as nodes, points in the social field...." (Young 18). Teaching a standardized syllabus becomes "the goods [the TAs] possess" (18). If this is true, and "the only relation...that matters...is a comparison of the amount of goods they possess..." then what binds TAs to the university (and department) is mainly (if not solely) the syllabus they teach (Young 18). While there should in fact be a link between the TA and the department (as well as the university), most would think the above description is unethical, as does Young.

An ethical dilemma occurs when "the goods they possess" are not their own but those of someone else's (Young 18). Most of the decisions about what TAs in English departments teach

are guided by the ethics of others located at a higher (and more often than not a tenured) place in the hierarchical power structure. Even if some TAs aid in designing the syllabus, the ethics of all who would teach it cannot possibly be taken into consideration.

But even in a democracy, decisions must be made. Much of Young's distributive paradigm primarily focuses on the "decisionmaking structure and procedures, the division of labor, and culture" (Young 22). Young states,

Decisionmaking issues include not only questions of who by virtue of their positions have the effective freedom or authority to make what sorts of decisions, but also the rules and procedures according to which decisions are made....It operates to reproduce distributive inequality and the unjust constraints on people's lives.... (Young 22-23)

The TA is, under this paradigm, in an ethical bind. Either she must teach what she is told by her overseeing professor(s) or she may lose her assistantship. The choice is a difficult one--and is in fact, as Young argues, unethical--to ask the TA to make.

Economics plays a large role because without the assistantship, most TAs cannot afford to continue their education. The teaching assistantship, therefore, makes a graduate education possible. With fierce competition of assistantships during an economic recession, most graduate students--myself included--consider themselves lucky to receive funding. Once in a program with departmental and/or university funding, however, the TA finds many strings attached to her stipend. Young states, the

predominant approaches to justice tend to presuppose and uncritically accept the relations of production that define an economic system....[T]he predominant focus

on the distribution of wealth, income, and positions is that such a focus ignores and tends to obscure the institutional context within which those distributions take place, and which is often at least partly the cause of patterns of distribution of jobs or wealth. (Young 21-22)

Here Young strikes a chord. Living on a stipend that borders on the poverty line in most cases, TAs are supposed to "ignore...the institutional context" of the syllabus in order to ensure they keep their jobs (Young 21-22). Through my qualitative research, however, I found that most of the TAs cannot ignore the syllabus' context. While none seemed to fear for their jobs, many did have ethical dilemmas that arose from teaching the syllabus. Instead of the distributive paradigm, Young believes "...judgments of justice and injustice," are relevant, "insofar as they condition people's ability to participate in determining their actions and their ability to develop and exercise their capacities" (Young 22). What was bothersome to most TAs was that there are not any formal channels to do this without going against the department and its syllabus.

In Louise Wetherbee Phelps article, "A Constrained Vision of the Writing Classroom," she sees "a tangle of conflicting rights and responsibilities" regarding ethics in the composition classroom (Phelps 13). However, she believes the conflicting tangle is dependent on its context (Phelps 14). Phelps believes, "we all make decisions about politics in the classroom" and that we should "question what role teachers' utopian social goals should play in writing instruction" (Phelps 14). Our goal should be to make first-year students confident writers who can express themselves clearly in writing. Aren't we as writing instructors ethically bound to this ideal? But instead of teaching writing, a political emphasis takes over the classroom. However, Phelps observes a definite conflict when

[t]he writing teacher is often a graduate student ...whose approach is strongly influenced by the general orientation to the department or graduate program....Alternatively or also, the approach is shaped by curricular choices enacted by program directors and composition committees in the form of required textbooks, test, curricular theories, and syllabus guides, and so on. (Phelps 14)

If the TA is bound to a syllabus that is not her own, then how can she make her own decisions about politics in the classroom? Her hands are tied on this important ethical question.

Teaching is political and teachers all have political stakes in what they teach. Patricia Bizzell states that "...uses of power are politicized--that is, teachers, whether they are conscious of doing so or not, are always promoting various ideological agendas, which are shaped by their social circumstances..." (Bizzell 4). In the case of TAs using a departmental syllabus, the "social circumstances" Bizzell indicates are not necessarily their own. Here is where the syllabus borders on the unethical. For those who designed the syllabus, their "moral sensibility motivates [them] to promote particular ideological agendas, or, if you prefer, particular ethical positions" (Bizzell 4). Bizzell believes that "what we should be doing is frankly acknowledging that we are promoting those values that seem best to us"; we should admit "in good conscience...to teaching virtue" (Bizzell 4). While we should admit that each syllabus projects a certain political dogma, as Bizzell suggests, we need to examine the ethics behind whether the TA should be teaching a virtue that is not necessarily her own.

We need to understand our roles as composition teachers and accept the ethical responsibility that is bestowed on us. "We know much about writers, but very, very little about the teachers of writers," according to Andrea Lunsford (74). Very little is know about the

teachers of writers because no one bothers to ask TAs--who teach the majority of first year college composition classes--about ourselves.

Wanting to bring TAs into the discussion to further explore the ethics behind requiring TAs to embrace the politicized departmental syllabus, I devised a questionnaire which I distributed to all TAs required to teach a standardized socially constructed syllabus in their assigned first-year composition classes during the Fall of 1992 at a major midwestern university. Out of forty-nine TAs, I received nineteen completed questionnaires. I asked the TAs to reflect on the syllabus from the point of view of their ethical and moral beliefs. I also inquired if they encountered any ethical dilemmas while teaching the required syllabus and if so how they handled them, asking for specific details. The responses I received showed both ends of the spectrum as to whether these TAs had any ethical dilemmas on teaching a required syllabus. I promised not to reveal any demographical information on the graduate students who agreed to help me with this project.

After analyzing all of the responses, it became clear that there were 2 main ethical issues that the syllabus encountered. First, many respondents believed it was unethical for the department to require them to teach the syllabus. Second, the political leanings of the syllabus caused an ethical distress in the classroom by hindering the amount of time spent on writing and, at times, intruding on their students' (as well as the TAs') right to free speech.

The strongest response I received from a first-year TA against the department's requirement that all first year teachers teach the syllabus states:

I believe that coercing a body of instructors to teach a certain political agenda by tying it to the funding source that is enabling them to go to graduate school is

morally and ethically reprehensible. In its own small, shrill way, it is fascist. But I do not believe that I was a victim, because I believe in my deepest heart that I, and I alone, am ultimately responsible for the choices I make. I chose to teach the syllabus and in so doing, betrayed myself and the students entrusted to me, and I am deeply ashamed that I didn't have the moral courage to stand up for what I believe in, even at the cost of my assistantship.

This TA enforces Young's position that economics play an important part of her ethical dilemma. She could not "ignore...the institutional context" of the syllabus and keep her assistantship; without the assistantship, she could not afford to pursue graduate school (Young 21-22). The result of her teaching the syllabus caused her many heartaches and had gotten in the way of her ethical responsibility to teach her course section.

However, two graduate student teachers commented that they did not think the English department was unethical in requiring them to teach the syllabus. One student said,

While the relations between an instructor and the department are complex, the instructor is ultimately employed by the department, authorized by the department, and in the last recourse protected by the department. While I do believe more freedom could have been allowed [to] the instructor in the specific case of the syllabus, I would not classify the department's actions as immoral or unethical.

The second student also responded along the same lines. "I'm not ready to say it's wrong to require them to do so, but I wonder about how we can give [TAs] more leeway to develop the course within broad guidelines." The above two students are, of course, not the only people who

feel this way, but it is interesting that out of nineteen completed surveys, only these two believed that the department was acting in its best ethical interests.

Fifteen of the students who responded questioned the ethics behind the department's requiring of them to teach the standardized syllabus. Requiring TAs to teach the syllabus caused a moral dilemma which arose from the political nature of the syllabus. Those who completed my questionnaire all linked politics and ethics hand-in-hand; while not everyone may agree that politics and ethics are linked, it is important to realize that those who responded did see a connection. Most who encountered ethical dilemmas based them on the overtly political standardized syllabus which left little room for writing in this composition course. One TA said, "I became uncomfortable with the rhetorical and political stance I was asked to adopt that added an overtly ideological dimension to my classroom." He believed that "although no one said it directly, I began to sense that writing wasn't the primary focus; ideology was."

Many other graduate students responded that the politics in the course outweighed the emphasis on writing instruction causing them ethical concerns about what exactly their position entails. One TA said, "I believe that composition classrooms are ethically compelled to instruct students to write for the academy." Are we not ethically compelled to teach students how to write in our composition classrooms?

The purpose of a composition course for first-year students should be to teach them how to become better writers; politics should come second--not first. When politics do come first--or at least appear to come first--ethical dilemmas result. We as composition teachers have an ethical responsibility to our students to teach them to write.

An experienced TA reinforced that "the job of teaching comes with a certain amount of responsibility...." She believes, however, that the political implications of certain syllabi challenge some of the instructors' sense of responsibility. This cause an ethical dilemma:

...the overtly political nature of some of the readings and assignments made many students--and doubtlessly, some instructors--feel as if their part in this dialogue was stifled, especially if their view happened to disagree with their instructors' [view or the syllabus].

It is unethical for the department, another TA, faculty member, or even for me to dictate what a teacher should teach in her classroom. I do agree that we need to reach some sort of consensus on what the course will include--after all, we do have a responsibility to teach certain aspects of writing so that each student--no matter which course section s/he is in--will attain the same basic knowledge. But do we really need to all read the same material, assign the same type of papers, and discuss the same controversial topics? I don't think we do--in fact, I think if we put the political emphasis on the back burner then we can teach our students some wonderful rhetorical tools to enhance their writing.

We should all be allowed the same freedom to decide what works well for each individual teacher in her own classroom. To keep her course from turning into a talk-show format, another TA adjusted the Reader to include different points of view. She claimed,

The department produced reader seemed to lean toward one univocal position.

I added other readers to provide students with "multiple voices" and also offer a means for teaching conflicts on various issues. I believe it to be moral and ethical

to offer a variety of voices and encourage students to locate themselves by teaching critical reading, writing, and thinking.

This graduate student may have the best possible solution. If we must teach a standardized syllabus, then we should be able to alter the assigned readings and assignments to suit our needs.

Of course, requiring TAs to teach a doctrine that is not their own is, I believe, inherently unethical--especially those who disagree with the course's political stance. We need to open up the decision making process to include more people so that we can truly reach a consensus. If we are to continue to require TAs to teach a standardized syllabus, then we must allow them to adapt the readings and assignments to their needs. More options must be left open to the individual instructor. If options are limited or not allowed, we will return to Young's controlling distributive paradigm. Do we really want that? Based on my research, I believe that TAs do not want the paradigm but instead envision a classroom where they have some power, freedom, and responsibility in addition to the department's support.

We need to bring ethics back to the composition classroom. If this fails to occur, both the TAs and the students entrusted to them end up losing.

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