

OPINION: Composition Studies Saves the World!

Patricia Bizzell

Stanley Fish has a new book out, titled *Save the World on Your Own Time*, and as usual, any new publication by him is attracting a lot of attention. The book has already received a trenchant review in *College English* by Donald Lazere. I was asked to comment on the book at a panel during the 2008 Modern Language Association (MLA) conference, and I had to gather my courage before I could try to score on someone as quick as Stanley Fish. I've admired his work and, indeed, been shaped by it for a very long time. He once said something nice about my work; but unfortunately, in his new book he also says that composition studies presents "the clearest example" (49) of what's desperately wrong in the academy, because in writing classrooms, he says, "more often than not anthologies of provocative readings take center stage and the actual teaching of writing is shunted to the sidelines" (40). Therefore I ventured at MLA to defend my field and see whether I could block a few of his shots; I expand here on those remarks.

To be sure, Fish's title exemplifies the logical fallacy of the straw man. Wishing to argue against those academics who claim, or at least seem to desire, that their work as teachers will foster social justice, Fish characterizes them as making a much larger claim: that their work will "save the world." Alas, it's pretty easy to demonstrate that no one's work is saving the world these days. But as the Rabbinic saying has it, "If we are not privileged to complete the task, neither are we allowed to desist from it." Certainly, composition studies hasn't been privileged to save the world—I admit

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that the title of this essay is intended to be provocative. Nevertheless, composition studies has aimed to make the world a better place, I think, and we have even been willing to engage in self-criticism about our ability to accomplish any part of this task. Indeed, I will suggest that some caveats were raised in my own *Academic Discourse and Critical Consciousness* (1992). But in the face of Fish's wholesale condemnation, I'd like to explore here whatever resources we have for defending ourselves against such charges, testing the field against the critique Fish sets up in his new book.

I

Once upon a time, I actually had the nerve to teach a seminar at Holy Cross titled Composition Studies and Social Justice. Where did I get the idea that my field had anything to contribute to social justice—where, that is, beyond my own annoyingly patronizing, “can-I-help-you” liberal individualism? To address this question, we need to take a trip back in time. Let's review the main trends from earlier decades that established the social justice agenda of our field. I will deliberately refrain from naming the names of the most important scholars, in order to avoid the appearance of neglecting their more recent work, and also to avoid the inevitable criticism about who is left out. The broad outlines I will sketch here, however, are familiar to most specialists in rhetoric and composition studies. This will also be the kind of work most likely to offend Fish, as I will explain below.

Let's start around 1980. This was the time when the contemporary field of composition studies really started to coalesce and grow. Its development was sparked by the changing demographics of the college classroom, bringing more and more students who seemed to have unusual difficulties writing Standard English and shaping academic arguments. Perhaps in the past, teachers had simply established certain levels of writing and thinking ability that students were expected to meet, and flunked out the dullards who could not meet them. This approach seemed self-defeating, however, when in the face of our new classroom populations, it might require us to send half of them home by Thanksgiving break. Composition teachers just didn't want to do that. Were we bent on saving the world? I don't really think so; just on doing our job, which was to teach writing. But we realized that we needed new ways to do that, to address the new students' needs.

Cognitive psychology and psycholinguistics, where we turned first for help, were misused to diagnose struggling students as mentally retarded, arrested in what Piaget and Vygotsky call the *egocentric stage* of cognitive development, aka *dualism* in Perry's scheme. Some of these students, scholars claimed, were further handicapped by speaking a native language, Black English, which was structurally inferior to Standard English and actually contributed, therefore, to their cognitive delays. So-called interference from native languages other than English also came in for

some blame, and an elaborate “cognitive process theory of writing” was put forward to remediate these students.

These early approaches are now thoroughly outmoded and mostly rejected by their former proponents. I was a brand-new teacher when I was reading this work, and it just did not make sense to me. Teaching first-year writing at a big state university, I had plenty of students who had trouble with Standard English and academic argument, but they did not seem to be impaired in any way at all, cognitively speaking. They struck me as extremely bright and unusually mature and sophisticated for traditional college-age first-year students. They just had trouble doing college writing.

Perhaps the first major book that broke this logjam for me, and for many other writing teachers in those days, was Mina Shaughnessy’s *Errors and Expectations* (1977). Essentially what Shaughnessy does in this book is to bring New Critical close-reading skills to bear on the most impenetrable and error-ridden prose of struggling college writers, and in so doing, she makes sense of it thusly: she shows that many of these students’ errors, from the sentence level on up to the level of over-all argumentation, stem from their attempts to imitate a type of prose with which they have had little to no prior acquaintance—what we’ve come to call “academic discourse”—and to claim its authority for themselves. Therefore, Shaughnessy argues, these students should not be thought of as cognitively delayed or in need of remediation, but rather as beginners, writing at a very basic level from which we could hope that instruction would advance them—“basic writers,” she calls them.

Shaughnessy’s insights launched a whole fleet of scholars into research on what we came to call the “academic discourse community.” I’m proud to have sailed in this fleet, and I don’t think anyone needs to be embarrassed to be in this company, in spite of problems with the work that I will mention below. As writing instructors, we came to see our task as initiating students into this academic discourse community, helping them learn its ways of writing and speaking and winning arguments. Arguably, these theoretical developments led to improved pedagogies for teaching clear writing and cogent argument in ways that respected students’ intelligence—and so encouraged their best efforts—as opposed to discouraging them with disparaging labels of deficiency. Did we save the world? I guess not. But arguably, we made the world of the classroom a better place for basic writers.

It was just dumb luck that about the time I was wrestling with these ideas, my then-husband Bruce Herzberg won a post-doc to the School of Criticism and Theory, and he studied there with none other than Stanley Fish. I went along to the University of California–Irvine that summer—we were on our honeymoon, actually—and read everything Bruce read. I argued vigorously against Fish’s version of reader-response criticism. I claimed that texts limited the readings that could be produced from them, if not to a single reading, at least to a narrow range; and that social conventions constrained individuals but did not determine them completely.

Eventually, however (to return to my opening basketball metaphor), Fish penetrated my defenses, and by the end of that summer, I found that I had been converted to the view that meaning did not emerge directly from unfiltered reality, but was constituted by social processes of language use—in other words, that discourse was constitutive. I used Fish's concept of *interpretive community* to enrich my own notion of the academic *discourse community*, and I know it helped my pedagogy.

I did mention, though, that there were problems with early work on academic discourse, and I began to get some sense of what they would be from the other book that was profoundly influential on my own thinking back in those days, namely Brazilian literacy educator Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968). Freire's project was to teach basic literacy to illiterate South American peasants, which, it will be immediately apparent, was at some remove from the task of teaching academic discourse to fully literate American college students, although I tended to elide important differences here and once, Heaven forgive me, actually wrote these words: "Basic writers are very like Freire's peasants" (133). Well, no they weren't, but Freire's ideas did suggest an important insight: that basic writers' initial unfamiliarity with academic writing could be understood in terms of their group memberships, with some groups experiencing social disenfranchisements and exclusions that had kept them from encountering much academic writing in the past. It was no accident, given the deep strains of American racism, that students of color were disproportionately represented among basic writers; or, given pervasive American sexism and homophobia, that many straight women and gay people of all races experienced more discomfort than straight men in adapting to academic agonism.

Fortunately for writing teachers and their students, new scholarship began to emerge that helped to explain the challenges faced by basic writers. New work dealt with women's particular experiences with academic discourse. Other scholars looked at the intellectual possibilities of so-called nonstandard forms of English, and charted the educational obstacles and triumphs experienced by students from African American, Hispanic American, and immigrant Asian communities. We also benefited from new work on sexual orientation and writing. Native speakers of languages other than English met with better composition pedagogy thanks to the work of ESL specialists (English as a Second Language, the field was then called; now ELL, English Language Learning, is preferred). We even began to get a sense of how social class played into the mix, raising issues related to basic literacy acquisition, which, somewhere in the background of every student we teach, may impact his or her interactions with academic discourse.

I think this new scholarship helped to improve composition pedagogy and make the classroom a more productive place for people of both genders and of various races, ethnicities, sexual orientations, and social locations. If you believe that the inequities induced by racism, sexism, and economic exploitation should be ameliorated, then

I think you would have to agree that this composition research, while perhaps not saving the world, did indeed contribute to making it a better place. At any rate, it was, and is, our job as writing teachers to teach all comers, if we can—and this work certainly helped us to do that better.

I want to be a little more precise about what the field learned from these scholars. At first, it seemed that the gain would be in understanding the diverse discourse communities from which our students were coming, so that we could better tailor our initiation activities, that is, better devise pedagogies that eased their transition into traditional academic ways of thinking and writing. It soon became apparent, however, that this notion of the necessary project was quite inadequate. It imagined a process that worked all one way, changing all comers into little clones of the traditional, skeptical, agonistic, gender- and race-neutral academic—what I came to see as the “brain in a jar.” But we were not working with blank slates on which we could inscribe whatever discursive conventions we favored. We were working with people who brought their own rich discursive resources to the academy; who did not want to give up their own ways of thinking and using language in order to succeed in the academy; and who found, indeed, that they brought resources that could address academic problems in ways not available to traditional academic discourse.

Teachers and students alike found that what was needed was not a one-way acculturation process, but a two-way, indeed a multidirectional, process of collaboration and change whereby new forms of discourse were incorporated into academic ways of doing things, and new types of intellectual work were thereby enabled. The academy was enriched and the students experienced more success as they moved through it. We now see, for example, that far from being a form of language that retards cognitive development, Black English enables types of academic work that could be done in no other way, as exemplified by Geneva Smitherman, Keith Gilyard, and Carmen Kynard, to name only a few. Here we see gender, race, and class inequities being addressed in even more profound ways—ways that show why they need to be addressed, not only to serve overarching norms of social justice, but also to benefit humankind in direct, practical ways, by enriching the academic disciplines in their research quests. Saving the world? Not quite. Improving it? I’d say so.

I do realize that in all this, I am painting with a very broad brush. I haven’t presented any empirical evidence for the improved student success that I claim these decades of composition research have enabled. But by introducing the topic of saving the world, Fish has encouraged me to take a broad view—to do what our colleagues across the quad call “big history.” Moreover, I feel confident that people who have regularly taught first-year writing over the last twenty or thirty years will attest that we know more now that we did then about how to do it, and we are serving an ever more diverse student body with success. Not enough success, of course, never enough, but progress has been made.

Well, now, wait a minute: couldn't I provide some empirical data for this last claim, at least? Have college graduation rates improved over the last thirty years, especially for members of the various marginalized groups I have been discussing? Such data could be provided; at my own school, the curve has gone waveringly upward. However, the value of such data as evidence is questionable, given the many, many variables that influence academic success. At least we can say that both the student body and the professoriate have become more diverse in terms of race, gender, and sexual orientation over the last twenty to thirty years, and Fish even notes as much (145–46). Presumably, people would not come to the academy and stay in the academy if they did not like it, or could not make a go of it. But it is, in fact, the issue of how we measure the success of teaching that I want to take up in discussing Fish's new book, to which I now turn.

II

Fish's thesis in *Save the World on Your Own Time* is that academics have one job and one job only: to teach the material of their disciplines, the disciplinary methods and objects of study. The goal of this teaching is to help students learn how to arrive at the truth about the objects of study: truth-seeking is the academic activity of highest value, and the only other values that may be taught, such as the condemnation of plagiarism, are in its service. In advancing this value of truth-seeking, Fish does not have to recant his anti-foundationalist principles, because, as he says,

You can be persuaded by postmodern arguments on the very general level of their usual assertion—everything is mediated, everything comes to us under a description, the stipulation of fact is always perspective-specific—and you can still hold firmly to judgments of truth, accuracy, correctness, and error as they are made in the precincts of some particular realm of inquiry. (134)

Indeed, Fish argues that discipline-based truths merit the term *objective*, even though not measured against any universal, transcendent standard of value, because they are measured against the standard set by “tried-and-true procedures and protocols of a well-developed practice or discipline” (139).

Fish believes that if academics would heed his call, they would be in a much better position to defend themselves from those who would like to do their jobs for them. Fend off these attacks, Fish asserts. Don't let right-wing agitators argue that the academy needs to include professors from the greatest possible number of political positions, in the interests of fairness: professors' political views, says Fish, are completely irrelevant to their ability to teach their disciplines—if all they are teaching are their disciplines, as he urges—and hence there's nothing unfair about the current situation, in which the great majority of the professoriate is politically

liberal. Furthermore, don't let right-wing agitators claim that minority views such as Holocaust denial or intelligent design need to be included in the curriculum so as to serve the liberal value of "teaching the conflicts." There are plenty of conflicts among legitimate, respected scholars to teach, if one wants students to learn how academic argument is conducted; there is no need at all to represent arguments without academic disciplinary validity. Remember, Fish prepared for this line of defense by establishing that what academics do is search for truth; it may be only a certain kind of truth, but it is sturdy enough to judge Holocaust denial and intelligent design as intellectually disreputable (see 124–31).

Above all, says Fish, don't let parents or legislators or other kibitzers tell you how academe should be run or demand from you practical justifications for the money required to run it. Universities should not be run like corporations because universities are devoted to seeking truth, not making money or doing anything else of immediate social benefit. Again, it will be seen how Fish has prepared for a particular argument by starting from the premise that what academics properly do is seek truth. Because we can't know which of our quests for truth will produce practical benefits for society, such as technological or medical advances, and because, according to Fish, we can't know whether our teaching will accidentally, as a byproduct, make some students better people or better citizens, we should not offer such outcomes as justifications for the academy. Rather, we should simply say we do what we do for the pleasure of the search for truth, and tell outsiders who attack us that they simply don't know enough about what we do to be legitimate critics (see 103–04, 164–65).

In doing their job of discipline-based truth-seeking, Fish argues, academics are not to try to do someone else's job: and he regards as someone else's job both the character-forming activities that have traditionally been part of liberal education and the progressive political agendas of contemporary leftist academics. You are not to try to make your students better people or better citizens, or help them with profound life choices. Just teach rhetoric, or literary criticism, or chemistry, or economics. It is not for you to say what changes in attitude or behavior would in fact make your students better people or more responsible citizens.

Those who are unwilling to give up character formation or political enlightenment as goals of teaching are sorted by Fish into three categories of error. One of these he calls "the 'network' mistake" (100). This is the argument that everything that happens in the academy—including what goes on in the classrooms—is always already political because the academy is immersed in the larger sociopolitical network of our nation and our world. Fish's answer to this objection is that while academe is indeed immersed in a larger system, it has its own distinct functions within that system—he uses the metaphor of different parts of the human body—and the function of academe, as he reiterates, is to seek discipline-based truth. There is no need to attend to any larger political ramifications. You may, however, make politics the

object of your disciplinary study. Fish calls this process the *academization* of contemporary social and political issues. Studying an issue is not the same as devoting class time to attempting to persuade students to take a particular position on it. As an example of academization, Fish mentions that he analyzed a speech by John Kerry in one of his classes and pointed out its many flaws in reasoning, even though a few weeks later, he voted for Kerry (25).

A second category of error Fish dubs the “objection of unworthiness” (29). This is the view that “even if it is possible to set aside one’s political convictions when conducting a class, it would be unworthy to do so because it would be a dereliction of one’s duty as a human being concerned with the well-being of the world” (29). Fish’s answer to this objection is contained in the title of his book: save the world on your own time; that is, be as politically active as you like after class hours—but keep out of the classroom everything but what is specific to your discipline and its methodical search for truth.

A third category of error Fish calls the “objection of impossibility” (22–23). In one form, this argument claims that politics must enter the classroom because the course material itself is political, for instance in classes dealing with law, government, political science, and so on. Fish’s answer is that it is not the material that makes the class inappropriately political, but rather what is done with it. As noted above, he has no problem with the academic study of political material, if it is studied, that is, academized, rather than used to promote or denigrate particular political views.

Another form of this error holds that it is impossible for academics to separate themselves from their own political, religious, moral, and ideological commitments when they enter the classroom, and therefore, these commitments must inform their teaching. Finally, Fish admits that an objection holds some water, that indeed such complete separation is impossible—he calls this the “unavailability of purity” (23). But basically, his response to this position is that even if you cannot completely separate yourself from your commitments, you should try to do so as much as you can when you are teaching. He considers that it is “proper” to do so—that’s his word—just as “proper behavior at the family dinner table differs from proper behavior at a corporate lunch” (23). What you must do is compartmentalize.

As I read Fish’s arguments, I find that my response, rather than being resolute opposition, takes more the shape of “Yes, but—.” I agree with Fish that the principal task of academics is to teach their disciplines, and I completely agree with his understanding of the sort of truth we seek—indeed, I think I learned this view primarily from him. In the case of composition studies, I agree that the principal task is to teach writing. But as I have tried to show in the first section of this essay, a major trend in the modern development of the field of composition studies has sprung from writing teachers’ desire to do their jobs better, to find more effective ways of teaching the increasingly diverse student populations in our classrooms. I

really have to wonder if Fish knows enough about the field of composition studies to make him a legitimate critic. We rhetoricians may perhaps have been subject to a form of Fish's objection of unworthiness, but I'd put it more in the form of a hope—I think many of us hoped that we would contribute to the “well-being of the world” (29) through our work in the composition classroom. But that work had to focus on teaching writing.

For this reason, one of the “anthologies of provocative readings” (40) Fish scorns, *Negotiating Difference*, assembled by Bruce Herzberg and me, focuses on controversies that have already been decided: for example, slavery has been abolished. Class time in using this book, then, is not to be spent in encouraging students to discuss what they think about slavery. Rather, the focus is to be on the rhetorical strategies employed by the various players in the antebellum struggle to influence events. Moreover, our anthology contains pieces that represent a wide range of views—we made an effort to prevent each controversy we looked at from neatly sorting into two sides; and we included texts that advocate for positions that we find morally reprehensible, some of which are rhetorically quite skilled. Albert Bledsoe, for example, is a remarkably able defender of slavery. Thus I do advocate for what Fish calls the academization of composition classroom materials; and as he recommends, I even teach grammar. But I teach rhetoric as well, which requires analysis of texts longer than a sentence. Indeed, by characterizing my field as “composition studies” only, Fish leaves out a major part of what we do: addressing not only the structure of language but also the rhetorical means of persuasion. I agree with Donald Lazere's observation that “the critical study of political rhetoric,” for example, forms excellent academic content for writing classes (534). From the description of Fish's writing class given in this book, I gather I may do more that is proper to the teaching of writing than Fish does. As Lazere observes in his review, “Fish shows no glimmer of familiarity with a half-century of research on the relation between the teaching of grammar and of writing” (535).

I find more agreement with Fish, however, in what he has to say about fending off disreputable topics such as intelligent design or Holocaust denial from academic curricula. But I am less persuaded that we don't need to care about the diversity of the faculty, along various axes of diversity. In fact, if you are already persuaded that we need to have a mix of genders, sexual orientations, races, social class origins, and more, among college faculty, then you probably also should be concerned to have a mix of political views. This is where I really begin to part company with Fish. I think diversity among the faculty and among the students, too, is good not only because it redresses morally reprehensible inequity, but also because it enhances the intellectual atmosphere of academe. As I suggested above in connection with the diversification of academic discourses, new insights and new kinds of intellectual work are provided by a more diverse population participating in the discipline-based search for truth.

Logically, Fish should deny that this would be so. Logically, he should say that gender, race, class, and so on, are just as irrelevant to the way academics do their job as their political, religious, or moral views. Even if people of different genders, races, social class backgrounds, and so on, do have differences in their values, these differences are irrelevant to the academic enterprise because no matter what their differences, all they will teach will be the academic discipline in which they have been trained—at least, according to Fish. In other words, for Fish, the professor is a brain in a jar.

This is not true to my own experience of the classroom. I believe that when my students encounter me as a writing teacher, they encounter all of me, my entire personality, informed by all my religious, political, moral, and social commitments. I firmly endorse that aspect of the objection of impossibility with which Fish himself agrees, namely that “purity” is impossible and I cannot divest myself of all these commitments when I enter the classroom. I also agree that I can and should behave “properly,” as he says, and not trumpet my convictions or blatantly reward those students who can convince me that they agree with me. But I believe that I can and do make my commitments known without becoming that exaggerated figure of fun, a character out of Dickens or Swift, who is the straw man Fish invokes in advocating the compartmentalization of one’s commitments.

How do I do that? First there is classroom conduct: what I am telling my students about my own moral values and implicitly modeling for them by how I interact with them; how I word negative criticisms of their work; even whether I come to class on time, and more. Then there is the category having to do with the course content. In planning my courses, I aim to engage students in the kinds of rhetorical analysis that are proper to my discipline, but from among the wide range of materials we could use to pursue these analyses, I choose texts and topics that reflect my commitments. We are not going to argue about whether slavery was right or wrong, for instance. But by choosing this topic, I make it known that I consider race relations still to be an important topic; I imply that I don’t think all racial problems have been solved in this country, and that’s a political view. Moreover, while studying the arguments made on various sides of that issue, I will undoubtedly let fall remarks that make it clear what I think about racial politics then and now.

Indeed, if they are honest, I think all students will admit that they choose professors with whose personalities they want to come in contact, and avoid those they don’t, and I don’t think there’s anything wrong with this.

What I am talking about here are what Fish calls “contingent effects”:

I’m not saying that there is no connection at all between the successful practice of ethical, social, and political virtues and the courses of instruction listed in the college catalogue; it’s always possible that something you come across or something a teacher says may strike a cord [sic] that sets you on a life path you might not otherwise have

chosen. But these are contingent effects, and as contingent effects they cannot be designed and shouldn't be aimed at. (13)

I guess this is exactly where we disagree. As Lazere points out, "one could argue that although not everyone derives the intended value from the study of the humanities, enough students might to justify the stated goals" (529). Fish admits that teaching can in fact have the kinds of consequences that he wants to put out of court—it can "fashion moral character, or inculcate respect for others, or produce citizens of a certain temper" (14)—but it cannot do so with scientific predictability, so therefore, he argues, we should ignore the fact that it can do so at all. Note, by the way, that his principal objection to teaching for character formation does not seem to be that to do so is to tyrannize the students. He does not seem to have ethical objections to such teaching; rather, he doesn't like it because he thinks it makes claims for benefits that cannot be scientifically substantiated and so leaves academe open to all sorts of meddling criticism.

But what kind of evidence for the efficacy of teaching to form values does Fish require? To be sure, there is not an instrumental relationship—I do not expect to be able to shape my students' characters so definitely that the results will be as visible to the naked eye as if I were shaping a lump of clay. If I pour boiling water into the noodle cup, I'll get noodles, but I don't expect that degree of reassuring cause-and-effect in the classroom, and anyway, the noodles don't talk back. These so-called contingent effects of teaching are simply more ineffable than the effects of disciplinary training, and harder to test for, although methods of doing so are being devised (see, for example, the rubric for examining students' moral development developed by Duane Bruce and others at Saint Anselm College). Fish's view seems almost scientific.

If I am right that teachers do have some kind of moral authority, bringing students into contact with their whole personalities, then what do I do with Fish's observation that "excellent teachers can be absolutely terrible human beings, and exemplary human beings can be terrible teachers" (53)? I'm afraid that here again we encounter Fish's besetting logical error, the straw man. I do not claim to be an "exemplary" human being, nor do I claim that this status is required for one to be worthy to teach. The main thrust of my argument is that whatever your personality, your students will experience it in some depth. But I will go further and say that I want to have around me colleagues whose values I respect, not just for my own comfort in department meetings, but because I believe that these values do leach out to students, and I care about my students and want the best for them. If you really are a "terrible human being," you are not going to be able to completely compartmentalize that when you enter the classroom and, I believe, it will ultimately harm your teaching even if you know your discipline backwards and forwards.

I have been puzzling for a long time over this problem concerning the ways the teacher's values come into play in the classroom. So now I'm going to do something I find rather annoying when other writers do it, namely quote extensively from my own earlier work. Here's a long passage from the Afterword of my 1992 collection of essays, which I will read through a Fish-y lens while presenting it as additional evidence that Fish is far from the first to raise issues about what teachers can legitimately do in the classroom to promote values:

I can no longer feel that I am doing enough to promote social justice [here Fish would find evidence of my committing the objection of unworthiness—I stand convicted] simply by helping students to get an education, even if I specify a mission to teach students from groups that have suffered discrimination. This explanation once satisfied me [and Fish says it should satisfy me now] when I could believe that I was giving no direct instruction in values in the classroom, but rather was simply offering students the value-neutral tool of academic discourse. I would have admitted, perhaps, to giving some indirect instruction in values, for example by taking care to assign readings written by members of diverse social groups, but basically I could see myself as the objective scholar that [Max] Weber [and Fish] recommends as our role model. I saw my commitment to social justice being served more by the aftereffects or outcomes of my classroom work (through the academic success of previously disenfranchised students, for example) than by the actual content of my interactions with students. (283–84)

It will be seen that here I summarize two of the ways in which I think composition studies can indeed contribute to making the world a better place. One: by doing our proper work of teaching writing (which we are better equipped to do thanks to the decades of research I reviewed in Part I of this essay), we help students develop abilities that will help them succeed in and beyond college, especially valuable for purposes of social redress if the students come from marginalized groups. Two: while we are doing this teaching and to aid us in doing it, we can assign materials that raise issues of social justice and foster reflection on rhetorical methods of engaging them.

But as implied in the self-quotation I have just given, these two ways of assuaging my sense of unworthiness did not suffice; nor do they suffice me now. I found as I explored my motives in the earlier essay that “postmodern skepticism has taught me” to “see myself as viewing the world through an unremovable lens of beliefs and values” shaped by the culture around me (284). Indeed, this was postmodern skepticism I learned mainly from Fish. The implications for my teaching that I drew then, and still draw, from this philosophical worldview are as follows:

I must see all my classroom work as deeply imbued with my moral values. I certainly do not go into class and announce that we will now commence indoctrination into the following table of laws. Yet everything I do in the classroom is informed by one or another element in my world view, thus potentially conflicting at every turn with other elements in the students' diverse world views and, because of my institutional position at the head of the class, potentially undercutting their values. Service to my

personal morality thus can no longer be seen as an aftereffect or outcome that is neatly separable from the classroom work; in other words, my morality can no longer be regarded as purely private and personal, as Weber [and Fish] would have it. My values take on an ethical dimension because I am always trying to persuade my students to identify with them, whether I always realize I am doing this or not. And my values take on a political dimension because the differences in students' ability or willingness to respond to my persuasive pressure, differences that affect their success in my classroom whether I am always aware of it or not [let's be honest], are differences that tend to spring more from their social group membership than from anything that could still be called personal idiosyncrasy. [. . .] To disavow my moral agenda is simply to cover over my inevitable persuasive approaches. (284–85)

It will be seen that here I refer to the third way in which composition studies “saves the world,” a way shared with every other academic discipline, namely through contact with the professor's personality and values. On the one hand, I acknowledge that it is presumptuous of me to bring these values into the classroom, even though I cannot help doing so, and also, by the way, even though I have never found students to be so biddable and easily manipulated as the agitators against so-called political correctness seem to think they are. And on the other hand, like Fish, I believe that my values are right and true. I cannot help but believe so; why would I adhere to them otherwise? Therefore I feel a little less guilty about dragging them after me wherever I go. And I have one additional little solace, which is that I do change my mind in response to persuasion by others—students as well as colleagues can lead me to see things differently, and I can bring witnesses to prove this. So, an ideological tyrant I am not, but, I hope, a humble writing teacher who is helping her students to write better, to analyze various American rhetorics of persuasion, and to reflect—as every rhetorician must do, as Plato, Cicero, and Quintilian have warned us—on the moral, ethical, and political commitments entailed in wielding the tool or the weapon of words.

If liberal arts education often can affect students' moral and political development positively, then I see no reason not to say so when asked to justify expenditures on higher education; just as I see no reason not to mention the practical innovations that sometimes issue from academic research. We do not have to promise such results in every case—every student enlightened, every laboratory, studio, and tome a beacon—in order to state fairly that good results often are achieved. I side with Fish in his rejection of the corporate model of management for academe, but I think we have a bit more to offer in the way of defense than, “Stand back—you are just too dim to understand what I'm doing—but I want you to pay for me to do it just because I enjoy it.” Indeed, if there were not larger potential benefits to be achieved, even if we know we won't achieve them every single time, I think even the most devoted specialist would become bored with what he or she is doing. The thrill would be gone. And I know Fish does not want that!

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