

PROFESSIONAL ADVOCATES

WHEN IS "ADVOCACY" PART OF ONE'S VOCATION?

I recently received two student responses to my teaching that shed some interesting light on my classroom practices and my students' expectations. The first was from a student who wrote on one of my evaluation forms that he or she was glad that I had discussed the question of whether gay or lesbian sexuality was an issue in the work of Willa Cather, Hart Crane, and Nella Larsen. The student was pleased that my class even broached the subject, and praised me for being unlike "those politically correct professors who never bring up controversial topics for fear of offending someone." I admit I was not merely happy with but actually amused by this evaluation, since, of course, it is much more common to hear the term "politically correct" hurled at precisely those

professors who *do* bring up the subject of gay or lesbian sexuality in the literature classroom. Then again, I thought, it's also quite common to hear the term applied in the culture at large to people who seem dominated by the imperative not to offend—as when “politically correct” is used more or less as a synonym for liberal hypersensitivity to words like “handicapped,” “Indian,” or “woman.” So here, I decided, I inhabited a nice conundrum: in asking my students whether they thought a writer's sexuality does or does not have any influence on their work or on the way we read it, I was certainly politically correct, in the pejorative sense used by the Right, and, better still, I was also politically correct in avoiding politically correct squeamishness about offending my students.

The second student response got back to me only indirectly. One of our graduate students told me that he had assigned my essay “Public Image Limited” to his class in introductory composition, whereupon one of *his* students asked him whether the Michael Bérubé who'd written that essay was the same Michael Bérubé who taught English at the University of Illinois. Upon learning that the two of us were indeed one and the same, the student was mildly astonished; apparently, he or she had taken a class of mine in the recent past, and would never have guessed my political orientation. At first I was entirely pleased with this report, thinking, well, if there's one thing I'm not guilty of, it's advocacy in the classroom. But then I began to wonder whether in fact I was doing such students a disservice by *not* making it clear to them that I have a stake in American cultural politics, and something of a record of weighing in publicly on various issues of concern to my profession. Not that I should wear my politics on my sleeve or announce my various positions on the NEH, NAFTA, and NATO in the hopes of converting my students to my causes; but perhaps students would be better served if I did not pretend to a form of political “objectivity” I cannot profess and do not even believe in.

I should note that I am skeptical of claims to epistemological objectivity not because I believe that everything is political (on the contrary, I believe that many things are *a*political) but because I believe, with Hans-Robert Jauss and Hans-Georg Gadamer, that “interest” is a precondition for knowledge, and that the surest way to trap yourself inside a narrow,

parochial, “subjective” view of the world is to believe that you have transcended all merely subjective worldviews. Indeed, the reason hermeneutics demands of us that we theorize our own historical and epistemological positions is that if we *fail* to do so, if we attribute to ourselves the Archimedean point beyond history and mere “interest,” we will almost certainly lapse into dogmatism and intransigence. When Gadamer critiqued the “Enlightenment prejudice against prejudice,” therefore, he did so not to defend parochialism but precisely to guard against it—as any responsible teacher and scholar should do.

Still, the question remains: even if I eschew claims to “objectivity” on hermeneutic grounds, does that mean I am entitled to say anything at all in the classroom, or even to address any topic I desire? In the past, when I have strayed from the syllabus and addressed contemporary politics directly, I have largely confined myself to mentioning or describing various issues, policies, figures, or statements; the only social activity I have ever directly advocated is voting. (Of course, I have no doubt that assiduously paranoid conservatives could find systemic bias in my courses merely because I address some issues and not others, and because I do not condemn communism with every other breath. But my courses try to tackle serious subjects in a fifteen-week semester, and therefore I have no time for placating the demands of assiduously paranoid conservatives.) But what about recent Republican plans to cut student aid? Is it not within my ambit as a college teacher to inform students of such measures, and to urge them to write their elected representatives so as to make their feelings known on the subject? I cannot consider that an illegitimate form of “advocacy,” since federal student aid policies directly and materially affect the classrooms in which I teach, and I am certainly within my rights as a citizen to advise students that they should participate in the political process, especially insofar as their interests *as students* may be at stake.

But here’s where things get tricky. As a limit case, let’s take the hypothetical example of an astronomy professor who used his or her introductory cosmology course as a vehicle for recruiting students to support the Strategic Defense Initiative or Phil Gramm in ’96, on the grounds that Gramm’s candidacy and SDI—or, if you like, Clinton and

his national service program—were materially relevant to the future of introductory courses in cosmology. It might be possible to argue that that kind of political advocacy is clearly illegitimate, since it violates the boundaries of a discipline whose object is the study of phenomena that predate any human social organization; this is, in rough form, the rationale most people rely on when they distinguish the “objectivity” of the natural sciences from the inevitable “fuzziness” of the human sciences. (I myself would not consider it proper to advise students to write their representatives about proposed cuts in the NEH or the NEA, since public policy concerning those agencies does not materially *and immediately* affect the students in my classroom, however much it may affect teaching and learning in the arts and humanities in the long run.) But then let’s consider the position of a teacher whose job it is precisely to make judgments about various forms of human social organization: how indeed can such a person eschew “advocacy” and remain a responsible member of his or her profession?

The difficulty of this quandary was brought home to me once my second child, James, entered the public school system in Illinois, which he did at the age of three. For the purposes of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1975, I am legally Jamie’s advocate; this poses few ethical problems either for me or for my classroom, of course, but it has introduced me to the possibility that if I were a professor of education whose work concerned the disposition of what’s currently known as “special education,” I could not possibly carry out my professional and pedagogical duties without advocating one form of social organization over another. Not merely because my job depended on it, so to speak, but because I could not responsibly represent current research in my field without simultaneously attending to the ramifications of that research for public policy. Indeed, among the public policies I would be called on to adjudicate is the very question of whether “special education” should exist at all, or whether the policy of “full inclusion” offers superior educational programs and potential for people with disabilities.¹

Now as it happens, the study of literature, the way I practice it, rarely bumps up against controversies in public policy or political disputes over

the reauthorization of acts of Congress. Literature is after all one of the fine arts, and not an explicitly social discipline like, say, anthropology, history, political science, or law; and it is on these grounds that cultural conservatives have criticized teachers like myself, who stress the social ramifications of literary works, for underemphasizing aesthetic considerations at the expense of political considerations. But literature cannot avoid being a *representational* art, which is why the ancients, in their wisdom, spoke not merely of its capacity to delight but of its potential to instruct as well. Literature, more than music and dance, tends to be propositional, and on occasion it even contains specific propositions about the disposition of human social organization. I find it impossible, in ordinary classroom practice, to discuss literature in ways that do not involve worldviews, even when I am trying to make the simplest case about authorial intentionality.

Let me take a specific example—culled from a novel I teach with some regularity. The great black critic Darwin Turner once wrote of Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* that the scene in which Janie speaks her mind to her second husband, Joe Starks, on his deathbed, is a profoundly disturbing exchange, since, as Turner put it, nothing about Starks's treatment of Janie merits the cruelty with which she treats him on his dying day. Turner's judgment reads as follows:

Either personal insensitivity or an inability to recognize aesthetic inappropriateness caused Miss Hurston to besmirch *Their Eyes Were Watching God* with one of the crudest scenes which she ever wrote. While Joe Starks is dying, Janie deliberately provokes a quarrel so that, for the first time, she can tell him how he has destroyed her love. During the early years of their twenty-year relationship, Joe Starks jealously sheltered her excessively; during the later years he often abused her because he resented her remaining young and attractive while he aged rapidly. But in a quarrel or two Janie repaid him in good measure by puncturing his vanity before the fellow townsmen whose respect and envy he wished to command. Never was his conduct so cruel as to deserve the vindictive attack which Janie unleashes while he is dying. (108)

Not a single one of my students, male or female, has ever agreed with this assessment; most of them have disagreed even with Turner's characterization of Janie and her "attack," and, far from being sympathetic to Joe, were outraged that Janie had failed to speak her mind in twenty years of marriage. But that's not the point. The point is that you cannot even begin to broach discussion of that scene, regardless of what you think of Turner's critical judgment *and* regardless of Turner's invocation of "*aesthetic inappropriateness*" (my emphasis), without reference to some notion of what constitutes normative behavior between a husband and a wife—any more than you can teach Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* without engaging the meaning of various representations of race, or *Measure for Measure* without engaging students' understanding of social phenomena like justice or gender. Nor is it possible, as I have argued elsewhere, to broach a book like James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* without delivering yourself of propositions concerning unpleasant things like the Atlanta race riot of 1906 and the inconceivable ubiquity of the practice of lynching at the turn of the century.²

Indeed, in her now classic essay "Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson," Adrienne Rich wrote of literary criticism as a form of advocacy, whereby she tried to retrieve and revivify Dickinson's claims on our attention—or, as Rich puts it, "I have come to understand her necessities, could have been witness in her defense" (158). And as Rich is to Dickinson and Alice Walker is to Hurston, so, once, was T. S. Eliot to John Donne and Irving Howe to Henry Roth: the critic seeking to engage with the writers of the past, if s/he is a responsible critic, will at least want to make those writers intelligible to an audience of our contemporaries, to tell us why those writers are important enough to be considered integral to the history of human expression. And in my teaching, this principle holds true regardless of the writer I am trying to ventriloquize, be that writer a black quasi-feminist conservative Republican like Hurston, a gay midwestern visionary like Hart Crane, or a devout Catholic southerner like Flannery O'Connor.

This is a principle that, under ordinary circumstances, would go

without saying: of course a responsible teacher is expected to be an “advocate” of various writers and their worldviews, even if only heuristically. But in these troubled times this principle does not, actually, go without saying—which is why most criticism of so-called advocacy in the classroom is so slippery and protean. When I have seen professorial advocacy come under attack in recent years, I have found that critics sometimes define “advocacy” to mean a specific classroom practice or pedagogical theory; sometimes the term refers to individual texts whose mere presence in the classroom is thought to entail unacceptable political ramifications, like *I, Rigoberta Menchú* or *Their Eyes Were Watching God*; and sometimes the term applies to entire disciplines or subfields. I suggested earlier that if I were a professor of “special education,” my job might well depend on whether there continues to be such a thing as special education; likewise, professors in programs of women’s studies or African American studies are routinely charged with unscholarly advocacy simply insofar as they advocate the existence—and, on bold days, the growth—of their programs, in a way that no professor of economics would be accused of “advocacy” if he or she advocated the continued existence of departments of economics (or, for that matter, even if he or she advocated the continued dominance of so-called classical free-market models of economics in their field).

For a particularly slippery example of how ordinary scholarship can be refigured as “advocacy,” let us turn to a 1995 *Wall Street Journal* op-ed by Catholic University history professor Jerry Muller, who cautions conservatives to think, before they defund the NEH and the NEA, about how those much-maligned federal agencies may have actually *slowed* the spread of feminism and multiculturalism—“advocacy” movements fostered by radical organizations like the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations. According to Muller, apparently, it is acceptable for women’s studies programs to study women, but not to advance feminist theory (he refers to “*ever more abstruse* varieties of feminist theory,” but I submit that there are those who look upon even garden-variety brands of feminist theory as forms of “advocacy,” and that Muller may in fact be among them):

As those who follow these matters know, the two philanthropies most active in supporting the humanities, the Ford Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation, have for over a decade funneled their considerable largess into promoting multiculturalism, programs in women's studies (the institutional incentives of which have diverted scholarly attention from the laudable aim of the study of women to the lamentable pursuit of ever more abstruse varieties of feminist theory), and the burgeoning field of lesbian and gay studies. Conservatives must keep these in mind when making policy recommendations regarding the NEH. (A14)

I am not sure, given Muller's terms, what I would do if I were in women's studies and the women I were studying were themselves feminists; I surmise from this formulation that it is all right to advocate the study of women so long as the women in question don't sound like Mary Wollstonecraft, Virginia Woolf, or (Heaven forbid) Adrienne Rich, who are, of course, advocates of varieties of feminist theory—advocates who attract most fire from conservatives, of course, when they're at their *least* abstruse.

And as I've suggested, matters become thornier yet when "advocacy" is an integral part of one's field. In a brief essay published in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Stephen Meyer, a professor of political science at MIT and a conservation commissioner in Massachusetts, writes in reference to proposed revisions of the Clean Water Act, "Any study that holds the potential to shift policy, redistribute resources, and influence the relative power of advocates and opponents of environmental protection is *fundamentally political*. . . . For scientists to pretend to be above the political fray is to consign science to irrelevance in policy making" (B2). Since the study in question, released in May 1995 by the National Academy of Sciences, touched on matters at once scientific and political, and since the House Committee on Transportation and Public Works deliberately rushed the bill to a vote in order to beat the release of the study, Meyer charges scientists with acting unethically because, as he writes, "the panel of the academy working on the report had refused to discuss its details ahead of the official release, for fear of appearing 'political' " (B2).

Meyer's point, and mine, is that some forms of advocacy are not merely *permitted* but positively *mandated* by certain fields of study. Interestingly, Meyer blames narrow professionalism for this state of affairs: professionalism substituting for public-mindedness, academic scientists overly concerned with "publishing an article in *Science* or *Nature*, or giving presentations at professional conferences" (B2). But I would say that the problem with academic scientists who pay no attention to the social ramifications of their work is that they're unprofessional. And what I want to suggest by saying this is that we should rethink what we mean by professionalism when we talk about issues of advocacy and professional responsibility.

In the work of cultural critics influenced by Russell Jacoby, "professionalism" is usually a synonym for mere careerism, an attitude of hermetic self-enclosure that leads academics to think in terms of padding their résumés and accumulating perks rather than advancing the public good. I want to suggest, however, that professionals are supposed to serve clients, and that a professional who does not do so is, strictly speaking, unprofessional. In Meyer's example, scientists whose professional domain touches on the disposition of public funds and natural resources have an obligation to serve the public good as they see it—and that obligation to one's potential clients and constituencies should not be presumed to end at the threshold of the classroom.

My argument, then, is that we must recognize that there are innumerable disciplines and subfields in which political "advocacy" for one form of social organization or another is an integral part of one's professional protocols. Conversely, there is another sense in which "advocacy" is simply the name for whatever practice seems to *violate* the professional protocols: at the turn of the previous century, for instance, teachers of evolution were considered practitioners of political advocacy. Therefore, just as there is a sense in which professors of special education or women's studies are compelled to be advocates, so too is there a sense that in astrophysics as practiced in the 1940s and 1950s, advocates of the Big Bang theory were seen as engaged in a form of special pleading that violated the range of reasonable inferences that could be drawn from the available data. As Sidney Hook suggested twenty-five years ago, then, the

question of advocacy is always and everywhere a question of professional legitimation:

The qualified teacher, whose qualifications may be inferred from his [*sic*] acquisition of tenure, has the right honestly to reach, and hold, and proclaim any conclusion in the field of his competence. In other words, academic freedom carries with it the *right to heresy* as well as the right to restate and defend the traditional views. This takes in considerable ground. If a teacher in honest pursuit of an inquiry or argument comes to a conclusion that appears fascist or communist or racist or what-not in the eyes of others, once he has been certified as professionally competent in the eyes of his peers, then those who believe in academic freedom must defend his right to be wrong—if they consider him wrong—whatever their orthodoxy may be. (36)

There's much to admire in Hook's formulation, not least of which is the fact that so few academic or nonacademic conservatives would dare to second it today. What's all the more remarkable about it, however, is that Hook used this rationale to defend a young, impolitic Marxist named Eugene Genovese, who had recently made public his support of the Viet Cong—and, as Hook notes, became immediately infamous for doing so: because New Jersey's Democratic governor rightly refused to fire Genovese from Rutgers on the grounds of aiding and abetting the enemy, the Republican gubernatorial candidate "focused his entire campaign on the issue of Genovese's right to teach" (42). I suggest we will wait in vain for the day when Genovese extends a similar professional courtesy to those "politically correct" scholars with whom he disagrees. Nonetheless, Genovese should have learned an important lesson from this episode, and so should we: our task is not to ask whether "advocacy" constitutes an acceptable classroom practice, of what, for whom, and by whom; rather, our task is to ask each other across the disciplines, from the natural sciences to the human sciences to the professional schools, what kinds of "advocacy" are legitimate—and, in fact, required—by the standards of responsible professional behavior.

In drawing this conclusion, I am not merely calling for academics to have still more conversations about what it means to be academics.

Rather, I am calling for academics to come up with specific and substantive defenses of academic freedom against the incursions of conservative activists who seek to delegitimize entire methodologies and even entire fields on the grounds that they constitute unacceptable forms of “advocacy.” Such was the argument of the book that grew out of Lynne Cheney’s final pamphlet-salvo from the chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities, *Telling the Truth*: certain “activist” faculty are abusing the principle of academic freedom in such a manner that they can be stopped only by equally “activist” trustees, legislators, and/or alumni groups. (Liberals and principled social conservatives will note that this is precisely the same argument as the claim that certain political dissidents are abusing the principle of free speech and must be censored for the good of the Constitution.) And such is the premise of the latest conservative activist group in academe, not coincidentally led by Cheney and Jerry Z. Martin, the National Alumni Forum. The NAF seeks to bring pressure to bear on liberal and progressive faculty not from within the faculty proper, as is the goal of the National Association of Scholars, but by encouraging alumni and trustees to censure and/or defund “inappropriate” courses and curricula. The guiding idea behind the NAF is simply this: that trustees, alumni, and parents should not support (either financially or politically) the dissemination of knowledges with which they disagree. The NAF is the clearest distillation to date of the ethos of Olin Foundation head and former treasury secretary William Simon, namely, that the folks who pay the piper get to call the tune.

The National Alumni Forum does not portray itself in this way, of course; it promotes itself as bringing “standards” back to academe, and has garnered a great deal of media attention for its “study” that shows how colleges are jettisoning Shakespeare in favor of popular culture. (The survey itself is fraudulent on two counts: one, it compares *required* courses on Shakespeare with *optional* courses on more contemporary or ephemeral subjects, and two, it only counts English department requirements, thus leading its study to the absurd contention that Columbia University, for example, does not have a Shakespeare requirement even though it has two year-long core courses required of all undergraduates as well as a formidable “coverage” requirement of all English majors.)

But the actual appeal of the NAF to wealthy conservative alumni is more forthright: *you should not be paying for these courses on Madonna and gender; you should not have to support illegitimate “advocacy” programs like African American studies.* To many people, in fact, this appeal sounds reasonable enough. Why, after all, should I write checks to a university some of whose faculty criticize private enterprise, when private enterprise has made my generous donation possible in the first place? Why should I not join ranks with like-minded fellow citizens, and try to prune “advocacy” courses from American higher education—or at least from the curriculum of my dear alma mater?

In coming years and decades, I think, progressive educators will not only have to make a principled case for forms of “advocacy” that are intrinsic and necessary to disciplinary formations ranging from political science to biochemistry to special education; we will also have to make a much broader case to the general public, a case to combat the notion that the payer of the piper should be granted his or her every request. That case will doubtless have to look something like this: the distinction between societies that *do* foster knowledges that the wealthy and powerful dislike, and societies that subject such knowledges to the *approval* of the wealthy and powerful, is an absolutely fundamental distinction. It is the distinction, in fine, between free and totalitarian societies. The idea that wealthy alumni and trustees, or elected officials of the state, should be given substantive veto power over the content of a college curriculum is a profoundly authoritarian idea, an idea consonant with autocracy and plutocracy but not with democracy. For those of us college faculty who “advocate” democracy, then, the question of scholarly advocacy will be inescapable—and we should be prepared to advocate for academically free societies at home and abroad.

NOTES

1. Villa, Stainback, Stainback, and Thousand have been among the most energetic of scholarly advocates for “full inclusion” policies, arguing that separate educational facilities are always unequal and therefore always stigmatizing; Carlberg and Kavale, by contrast, advocate “inclusion” in some cases and not others, on the basis of their review of fifty

independent studies of special classrooms, which found that “special classes were . . . significantly inferior to regular class placement for students with below average IQ’s, and significantly superior to regular class for behaviorally disordered, emotionally disturbed, and learning disabled children” (Carlberg and Kavale, quoted in Fuchs and Fuchs 526). Of course, the very categories “behaviorally disordered,” “emotionally disturbed,” and “learning disabled” are themselves open to contestation, such that the constitution of those categories depends radically on our social and professional construction of them. The difference between Stainback et al. and Carlberg and Kavale, in other words, cannot simply be attributed to different “subjective” readings of “objective” data. If I were a professor of special education, therefore, I could not take any stand whatsoever on this set of issues without “advocating” one form of study—and, consequently, one set of findings, and one form of social organization—over another.

2. For my discussion of Johnson, see *Public Access*, 253–62.