

Letters

Reply to Bizzell and Trimbur's "Letter on Linda Brodkey Case," Radical Teacher Number 39

Though the triannual publication of *Radical Teacher* makes dealing with immediate issues difficult, I still must protest the letter of Patricia Bizzell and John Trimbur about the recent controversy (now somewhat cooled) over the required first course in composition at the University of Texas at Austin. As a former director of freshman English there, and now an emeritus with a detailed knowledge of years of debate over the writing program, I have to say that Bizzell and Trimbur have given a grievously biased account of a grievously muddled situation. The "Linda Brodkey Case" is not and was not a struggle between good liberals and bad conservatives. For brevity's sake, I will confine myself to a single illustration of Bizzell and Trimbur's misinterpretation, which must not pass unchallenged.

As their one source, Bizzell and Trimbur cite an essay by UT students Scott Henson and Tom Philpott in their useful but aptly named little publication, *The Polemicist*. Presumably, Henson and Philpott provided the material for the Bizzell-Trimbur "Chronology of Events," from which I quote just two entries:

March 1990: LDEPC [Lower Division English Policy Committee] approves adoption of Paula Rothenberg's *Racism and Sexism*, *Scott-Foresman Handbook for Writers* and packet of supplementary readings as course texts.

April 1990: LDEPC meets again. Again approves adoption of course texts.

I call particular attention to the entry for April.

To the Henson-Philpott account, one may contrast the opposing essay "Class Warfare," by Geoff Henley, in the UT student publication *Images* for April 18, 1991. On April 3, 1990, according to Henley, "LDEPC member James Duban" informed the committee of his "serious reservations . . . about the potential undermining of pluralism entailed in such a single-text policy." Duban presumably meant the requirement of the Rothenberg book, with no

initial alternative, for every assistant instructor (graduate student) teaching any section of the first composition course. Again according to Henley, on April 17 another committee member, John Ruskiewicz, "made four different counterproposals": (1) that Director Brodkey "compose a syllabus on 'difference'" which would first be "tested in selected sections" in 1990-91 by teachers "interested in the topic" and which would then be evaluated "to determine if it should receive more general implementation"; (2) that whatever new syllabus might be adopted "should encourage 'diversity of approaches to teaching writing, including process methods that emphasize genres or modes'"; (3) that instructors who so wished might continue to use the already established syllabus during 1990-91; (4) that the LDEPC "adopt *Racism and Sexism*" as just one among several possible texts, from which teachers might choose. Each of the four successive counterproposals was defeated, Henley says, by a vote of four to two.

If I were willing to argue, like Bizzell and Trimbur, from just one student polemic, I would have to conclude that the Bizzell-Trimbur entry for April 1990 is grossly misleading and that a majority of the LDEPC set out to encourage the study of diversity by prohibiting diversity. I will not argue in that irresponsible way; but on my own authority I can assert that the least knowledge of the history of composition at Texas should have warned the uncompromising majority that their action might provoke mud-wrestling, and it is simply untrue that "writing program administrators" have "the right," as Bizzell and Trimbur claim, "to design curricula. . ." It is rightly traditional, at Texas, for the number and nature of required composition courses to be widely debated both inside and outside the English Department. Dictatorial administrators, at every level, should be resisted.

So on whose side in the mud-wrestling do I enlist? On neither. The mud-wrestlers have done serious damage to the university and to its writing program. Bizzell and Trimbur, with their biased, second-hand

account, have been no more helpful than the noisy critics of "political correctness." Readers seriously concerned with "the Brodkey Case" will know that an informed opinion cannot rest on a single student essay, on just two student essays, or even on two student essays and two professorial letters. Those serious readers will either reserve judgment or plunge into the deep, deep well at whose bottom they might, with luck, discover the truth.

Meanwhile, instead of befouling itself with arguments about an introductory textbook in sociology, the UT English Department should take steps to end its customary dependence on underpaid, overworked, ill-prepared graduate students as the principal teachers of freshman composition. As Director Brodkey said on May 8, 1990, "Students do not seem to be convinced that the course is valuable or that the instructors are in command of the material" (Minutes of the Department of English). At the same meeting, assistant instructors remarked that "they often did not have time to prepare their classes and choose texts" and that most of them "were literature students with little preparation for teaching" the course in question. To my certain knowledge, those exploitative conditions have existed for years, yet efforts to end them have been met with stubborn resistance and loud derision. For both Left and Right, patriarchy and feminism, it is much easier to rage about other folks' isms than to clean up their own messes.¹

—James Sledd

NOTES

1. To my request (May 2) for corrections of any inaccuracies in Henley's account, James Duban replied with two documents and one correction (now incorporated) of my reading of his position. John Ruskiewicz called Henley's story "factually accurate" and supplied fuller documentation. As I write (May 7), Brodkey has not answered my request. Neither she, Duban, nor Ruskiewicz has any responsibility for my statements.