Guest Editors' Introduction

Ideological Transparency across Landscapes of Learning

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For most readers of this journal, the question is not *if* our teaching is political but *how*. This distinction can be evidenced in many ways, but perhaps none is more contentious than when someone describes a teaching approach as "neutral" and is inevitably met by indignant colleagues sharing both reminders of the impossibility of apoliticality and a robust reading list including such scholars as Howard Zinn, Jane Addams, Thomas Kuhn, and Paulo Freire. The assertions of Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* ([1970] 2000) that there is no such thing as a "neutral" educational process resound in the halls of English departments, giving faculty the brashness to unabashedly incorporate political goals in writing classrooms, on personal and programmatic levels, and feel justified in enacting various tenets of critical pedagogy. Further, messaging in social justice work, past and present, frames the concept of political neutrality as siding with the oppressors at worst, with the status quo at best. These, among a host of other reasons, most likely explain why neutrality as a pedagogical position in the humanities is scoffed at unrelentingly or, at the very least, met with skepticism. "There is no such thing as neutrality in teaching," a colleague might say. "Everything is political, and every pedagogy is inherently ideological in *some* way."

To be sure, the goal here is not to argue with our indignant colleagues. They are in our estimation not wrong. But the claim itself is not useful—the statement means very little in and of itself. Akin to how slews of teachers of first-year writing programs use Andrea A. Lunsford and John J. Ruszkie-

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wicz's chart-topping text *Everything's an Argument* (2016), once students become cognizant of the rhetorical residue underlying (and including?) even the most mundane of objects, there comes the next step of getting students to see the varying effectiveness or viability of some arguments over others. The contention that "everything is political" or "everything is an argument" has a distinct end point, after which we must ask, So what? Lodged and, we would argue, even masked within our eulogizing of neutrality are the justifications and rationales we use to teach how we wish to teach, with even the most banal standardized curriculum leaving room for the personal inflections of the instructor. Our eulogizing of neutrality is not terribly useful because it does not respond adequately to urgent questions surrounding such matters as public conversations about teacher politics, specifically the persistent expectation from incoming students and their parents that teachers be "neutral"; what teachers really mean when they use the word *neutral* to describe their teaching; and our rationales for the daily performative decisions we make, indeed, the reasons why and how we choose to act on our ideological allegiances. Does the impossibility of neutrality justify telling our students who they should vote for, or for whom we are voting? Does it justify our retweet of a *Huffington Post* article? Does it justify our sharing before class an experience at a political rally last weekend? Or, more subtly, does it justify choosing readings that represent only one point of view?

Answers to these contested questions are difficult and do not emerge from a dualistic neutral/nonneutral framework or, as Patricia Roberts-Miller (2004: 207) phrases it, a "neutral versus advocate dichotomy." That is, identifying oneself as neutral or nonneutral does not give sufficient guidance or justification for our behavioral decisions as teachers through the course's design or on the classroom floor. In carefully merging political theory, composition pedagogy, and argumentation to posit a more productive vision of teaching argument in the writing classroom, Roberts-Miller invariably rails against neutrality as a viable stance, but she is also just as wary of the notion that instructors openly advocate their own perspectives to students:

> While it is true that neutrality is a mask, so is the stance that the instructor's arguments have equal status in a classroom; the instructor's voice always carries more power, whether coming from authority or coercion. Some instructors, especially ones who are charming and charismatic, do manage to engage students in argument, but some also (and I count myself among these) have found that being forthright with one's point of view unhappily silences some students and can unproductively inhibit class discussion. (207)

For Roberts-Miller the neutrality/advocate dichotomy has the propensity to obscure some other options, such as "being fair," by introducing a false comparison between epistemology and behavior in that "'neutral' is an epistemological term, describing how one thinks about something, but 'fair' is a behavioral term, describing how one treats students. Whether one is neutral (even were such a stance possible) is not nearly as important as whether one is fair" (207). Being fair is a characteristic of a deliberative democracy. Following the rules of discourse of a deliberative democracy as a pedagogical framework asks both teachers and students not necessarily to mask their politics but to integrate them into course content using the fair discursive ground rules established by the standards of our public discourse. Thus, Roberts-Miller argues, if our classrooms mirror these standards, then we can articulate fair grading criteria, treat students with equal respect, and ask the same discursive demands of all students in our classrooms. What we believe and how we act on those beliefs are distinct.

But what if the mirror shatters, and the standards of public discourse our students see in their daily lives no longer resemble what we wish our classroom discourse to be? What happens when the rules of fairness and listening and respect and care we thought connected us all are read by our students as inflected by partisanship? What happens when our already inscribed politicized bodies are seen not as they are but as refracted inaccurately, perhaps dimly, through the shattered glass of democracy? These questions are not necessarily new ones—perhaps *re*newed ones—but are in our estimation worthy of critical reexamination. Does a continued commitment to critical pedagogy have what it takes to see us through our sociopolitical moment? Or do critical pedagogies just instantiate new inequities, new resistances, as Irvin Peckham (2010) has argued? Does Karen L. Kopelson's (2003) proposed "cunning" technique, in the Burkean sense, of performing neutrality assuage at all the student resistance we experience today? Or have we reached a moment when performed neutrality has met its bounds? Might we need a less political and more ontological envisioning of writing, as Robert Yagelski (2011) argues, challenging us to revisit the ideas of Walter Ong and Marshall McLuhan and grapple with the fact that in many ways writing itself disconnects us from the world? Channeling a bit of Peckham ourselves, and the stance of humility he advocates, we are not quite sure what the answers are. But we were insatiably curious to look outward and take stock of how others were answering these questions.

When we sent out the call for papers in the early months of 2017, we had an inkling that many teachers of writing and literature had ideological transparency on the mind: *How much of my own politics should I share with my students? Should I adjust my teaching and double-down or go about my business as usual?* We had ourselves informally observed even within our cozy, cordial English department a wide array of reactions—or lack thereof—toward how to "deal" with electoral politics in the classroom. There were myriad ways to frame the call for papers, but ultimately we decided—given the uptick in professorial surveillance, the rash of controversy and violence surrounding campus speakers, and the less than subtle influx of political partisanship—to take stock of and revisit Karen L. Kopelson's argument for the value of performative neutrality as a way to disrupt transparency in the writing classroom:

> It has been over a decade since Karen L. Kopelson published her article "Rhetoric on the Edge of Cunning" (2003), in which she proposed the *performance of neutrality* as a potential strategy to address ideologically driven student resistance in the writing classroom. Overtly politicized critical composition pedagogies, she argued, might exacerbate student resistance—in particular if those pedagogies are enacted by marginalized teacher-subjects—and thus looks to theories of "radical resignification" to explore the value of performing the type of objectivity many students expect in university classrooms. Situated, as Kopelson's article is, in Richard Boyd's (1999) notion that the field of rhetoric and composition has long been preoccupied with student resistance as evidenced by its "incessant return" as a narrative, this special issue asks scholars in the field to do just that: return incessantly to thinking and theorizing about our own ideological commitments and political inflections in our teaching practices and performances.
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> While we might have consensus in the belief that there simply is no teaching without ideology, indeed, that ideology is inherently inescapable, there is ample room for conversation about the degrees to which we make our commitments and political affiliations apparent and what role these various approaches play in the larger conversation of public perception of higher education and, more urgently, the changing nature and forms of student resistance in our current sociopolitical moment. Have the manifestations of student resistance changed, and if so, what does this mean for our own pedagogical performativities? Need they change? In what ways? For whose interests? And for what ends? How much of our own ideological allegiances do we make transparent to our students, and what are the reasons we give? What are the bounds of pedagogical neutrality in the shifting landscapes of higher education and politics?

To say the political climate has changed since 2003 would be a quaint understatement, and we were curious to see how teachers' ideological commitments and the extents to which they make these transparent in the classroom have also changed, shifted, or stayed the same. We envisioned an eclectic special issue populated by different perspectives on the topic—not with the intent of categorization but to show the variegated nature of our community's ideological commitments (which, from our perspective, at times can get rather hegemonic in nature). What we experienced instead was that the rational framing of the call for the special issue—indicative most likely of our own assumptions and dispositions—elicited emotional responses. What we envisioned as a collection of essays covering the neutral/nonneutral spectrum, with each one representing a "tick" along the gradient scale of the spectrum, evolved into something else, with the authors presenting unique, often emotionally charged perspectives into the challenges of teaching in our sociopolitical moment, largely written to audiences who were assumed not to be in need of persuasion.

Thus what started as a call for authors to theorize the notion of ideological transparency in the classroom and on campus turned into a more refined picture of an entire landscape of how the question of transparency permeates all of our own learning ecologies, as well as those of our students. Our perhaps rather narrow expectation that we would receive a number of articles that spoke exclusively to teacher performativity and associated theoretical rationales was challenged, as the interested authors and eventual contributors to this issue put forth pieces that encompassed a variety of different learning processes across and within a variety of landscapes.

In terms of organization, we decided not to cluster the articles by topic but, rather, sequence them in a way to have them respond to each other, in order to invite readers to encounter an idea and then perhaps experience destabilization. We encourage readers to experience the issue sequentially, then, as we the editors tracked and ordered the issue dynamically, intertextually. We found topical clustering to be inadequate, even stifling, masking the nuances and subtext and emergent themes existing within and between the articles that went far beyond just what the article was about. Take, for example, the question of how the writers construct the students they teach, and therefore the students' modes of resistance. Across the articles, readers will find students constructed in various ways: as hostile, reflective of the polarization in culture; as representatives or products of a racist, misogynist neoliberal culture; as objects of cunning manipulation to get them to learn and accept teachers' values, perspectives, and ideologies; as agents with their own goals; as developing learners at a particular moment in their own lives; as individuals with unique trajectories within complex learning ecologies; and even as performers of their own semblance of neutrality. So many of the types of responses to addressing student resistance were founded in visions of just what was causing the resistance. Choices made about curriculum and pedagogical goals—indeed, a decision to act on the teacher's own ideology—were invariably tied to the teacher's projections on the students' bodies and their identities, which for some were static and deterministic and for others were part of our larger, reciprocal "dance of neutrality."

The reasons for resistance are, for several in this issue, inextricably related to the notion of *when* they are our students—both the *chronos* and *kairos* of teacher-student interaction. There were stark differences in how authors applied this acknowledgment. Some spoke of "time" during the course, during psychological development, during curriculum, during futures, and during our sociopolitical moment. The theme of learning processes (or development) was perhaps the most surprising that we saw among the submissions, as more and more scholars are attending to the *when* of pedagogy as much as the *what*. (This attention to time also plays into our own maturation as teachers, as Kopelson, who begins this issue, indicates.) In the context of resistance, transparency, and politics, it would be unwise to overlook the role of cognitive, moral, and social development in the context of the teaching of writing, critical thinking, and argument. As several pieces in this issue contend, perhaps we are reading student behavior as intentional political resistance rather than developmental growing pains.

Related closely to how we construct and understand students, and our decision to acknowledge and learn more about their larger learning ecologies, is our decision to engage in empathy. In this issue empathy relates to the learning of both teachers and students, specifically in our desire to understand the forms of student resistance. Several authors are trying to cultivate empathy in students, while others are trying to better practice it as teachers, no matter how difficult it might be, through self-reflection and careful observation. Empathy, like neutrality, is an active position and not one that comes naturally. Engaging in empathy and perhaps moving away from transparency takes real work, real emotional labor to bracket the emotional and political forces driving teachers in other arenas of their lives.

Part of engaging in active empathy is attending to the distance between political allegiances and to the distance between teacher and student. Often framed as polarization, we see many authors approach differently what it means to teach in divided times. While polarization often evokes imagery of loudmouths with their hands over their ears, even recognizing polarization as an issue requires some acknowledgment of more than one perspective or viewpoint as legitimate. What this legitimacy means varies by the individual, of course. Some authors in this issue focus on how to handle polarization as it enters into classroom, as it affects their students—how to keep it from preventing learning or to use it to facilitate learning. Some focus on how pedagogy, at the level of individual classroom or curriculum, has potential to change polarization in culture.

But, of course, there might be limits, specifically in the notion that revealing shades of transparency is always a choice. Transparency implies the agency to choose levels of disclosure, a luxury for some individuals and an impossibility for others. Another theme, connected to all those above, is identity and embodiment, particularly as authors perceive embodied identity (especially their own, but also their students') as it affects choices regarding ideological transparency and as it affects students' responses to them and their ability to learn. The inescapability of identity challenges many of the efforts to make pedagogical decisions student-centered, especially where that involves performing neutrality.

Overall, then, and in light of these emergent themes, this special issue seeks to reexamine discussions about, approaches to, rationales of, and the emotions generated around pedagogical ideological transparency and/or performativity, in order to encourage more explicit discussions of how and why teachers do or do not inflect their politics in the classroom, all the while positioning these choices in the larger topics of student resistance, public perception of higher education, and political surveillance. In doing so we wish to use these articles as an opportunity to draw a more nuanced and much-needed distinction between institutional and performative notions of neutrality and transparency. To respond to colleagues who seek to conduct their work from a neutral pedagogical position with an argument that all educational institutions are inescapably political is to conflate two very different conversations. We, as pedagogues and scholars sitting side by side in our "theater of concurrence" (Teachout 2018), might be able to see a straight line connecting our bodies as teacher-agents directly to the ruined neoliberal landscape of higher education (Readings 1997) and another straight line connecting something as granular as one of our rubrics or activity prompts to our own critical pedagogical goals. But, we humbly ask, do others? Can others—our newly minted college students and their parents, our student newspapers, our media organizations—also see these lines? Freire's ([1970] 2000) insistence on educational institutions as being inescapably political carries less and less rhetorical weight in our decisions to perform in the classroom and even less when thinking about public-facing communications to rationalize our actions. To conflate institutional and performative neutrality and to use Freire to justify wearing a Bernie Sanders T-shirt underneath your blazer is to blatantly ignore the rhetorical ecologies within which we now reside, to ignore what we so often teach our students to attend to: context and audience.

The very notion of ideological transparency assumes we as teachers are pent-up social creatures with bodies and voices already politically inscribed and that what we are *really* talking about when we invoke neutrality are the degrees to which we divulge, inflect, and describe these political inscriptions to our students. The respondents to our call and most of the articles included here interpreted the call for papers in terms of issues of disclosure and not the "rightness" of their ideology. Many authors in this issue assume readers will have a similar ideology, and that theirs is the appropriate one. So, depending on your own position, you will likely find some of the articles intensely irritating, or puzzling, or just beside the point. You may find it hard to read each of them with empathy for the teacher-authors.

But that is the very purpose of this issue: to turn on the house lights in our "theater of concurrence." Our motive is to destabilize our own positions as readers, bringing things into juxtaposition to challenge what we think we know. (In this way, this issue might be useful in teacher training contexts, such as a graduate pedagogy seminar or a faculty reading group.) Our hope is that readers may find themselves challenged when they read a piece they feel most reflects their values and then read one that does not but that makes them question and maybe rethink their position, perhaps becoming more open to competing values or approaches that may shift with time and circumstance. If we are successful, the issue will become—as it was for us—one of your own landscapes of learning.

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