DEVELOPMENT OF CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS IN COMPOSITION STUDENTS

By

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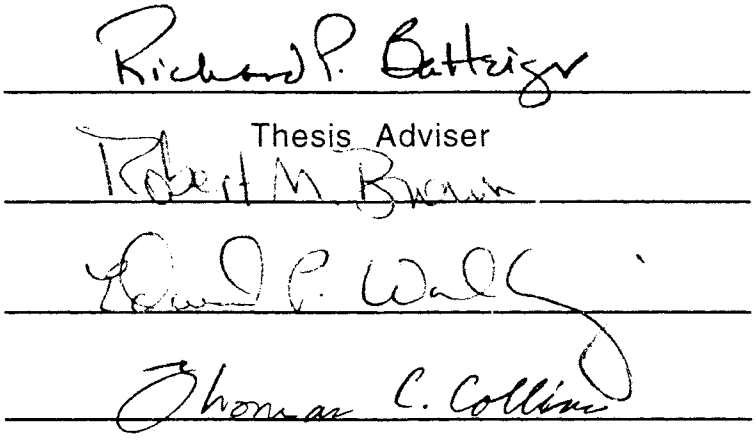

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One

Introduction

"Human fitness to survive requires the ability to talk, write, listen, and read in ways that increase the chances for you *and fellow members of the species* to survive *together* "
(Hayakawa 12).

Interaction with Composition students cultivated my interest in the roles of received knowledge and critical thinking in teaching writing. Along with this interaction, personal experience allowed me to witness myself move from a dualistic perception of the world to a more pluralistic one. Close alignment with my subject enables me to offer some fresh and honest insight into the topics of received knowledge, and critical thinking and writing.

Before graduate school, I received a Catholic school education. This environment suited my dualistic perception of the world. All my friends were Catholic and we all basically came from the same socio-economic background. Since we shared similar beliefs and values, we did not have many questions for each other, or doubts about what we thought. I knew where I stood, and I knew where everyone else stood too. Furthermore, the majority of my teachers also held the same beliefs and had similar backgrounds as we students. This was comfortable, really, because I could predict a teacher's reactions and opinions and consequently their expectations of me in their classes. This provided me with a secure, safe, homogeneous setting. Although my situation was comfortable, in

retrospect, it was stifling to critical inquiry because I did not learn to think for myself. I did not ever challenge myself to see things in a light different than what I was accustomed to. I did not have the need, desire, or ability to view situations from a variety of perspectives because my belief system and the authorities around me told me what and how to think. As a result, I did not develop the skills necessary to question or to consider viewpoints different from my own. For example, as an undergraduate, I always received A's on my compositions. I would write about personal experiences, satisfy the length requirement, and submit my papers. I would always receive the papers back dripping with red or green ink. These corrections were reworked sentences and highlighted grammatical errors. So, I would rewrite my essays, paying careful attention to those green and red marks, never having to rethink my views or my reasoning. I thought I was doing fine by satisfying those ink marks because when I received that draft back, I was rewarded with an A. Although I was doing fine insofar as a grade was concerned, I realize now that I was not developing my critical thinking and writing skills.

When I was a senior in college, one of my history professors asked to read my Senior Creative Writing project. When he returned it to me he said, "Not bad for a beginning writer! I'm sure you'll improve as you write more in graduate school." Improve? What did he mean improve? I was the next Flannery O'Connor! I dismissed his comment, deciding he didn't know what he was talking about since his discipline was history, not English.

Soon thereafter I was on my own in graduate school. Here, an amazing thing occurred. Miles from home and away from the protection of Catholic school, I had no one to tell me what to think and write about. Suddenly, the responsibility for my ideas and thoughts was my own. In the graduate program at Oklahoma State University, I felt perfectly equipped to study, write, and learn alongside my peers. In my first class, Teaching Freshman Composition, the professor asked us to write a short essay based on personal experiences. Still under the seductive influence of the sun and sand, I wrote about my wild and crazy summer. My draft grade was a C, but I did not ask for help or an explanation because I found that everyone around me received grades in the same range. I didn't feel so bad. Our professor explained that we all needed to make a point in our essays and we needed to concentrate on our audience. "Point? Audience? You mean our papers need to have a reason for being written? Isn't the fact that it is an assignment enough? I have to figure out *why* I should be telling you these things? And, I have to know *who* would want to read about them? I have to turn my papers into something meaningful?" These requirements stunned me. But, the act of answering these questions did not bother me as much as what lay behind this act -- thinking. My "C" paper, void of any green or red correction marks for me to follow, forced me to try to figure out why I thought the way I did. This concept amazed me, and I experienced some difficulty grasping it. Prior to this point, my world had basically been black and white. I could confidently express my opinions and not even think that anyone would disagree with me. For example, I figured everyone knew living by the ocean

was preferable, animal rights were worth supporting, and Roman Catholicism was, without discussion, *the* true religion. It had not occurred to me that many people enjoyed being land-locked, slaughtered animals for a living, and openly expressed their interdenominational religious beliefs. Accepting these differences, and the process of evaluating my beliefs, required some time and an abundance of energy.

All alone in graduate school, I had no one to tell me what to do. I reacted by shutting up and really listening to people and their differences in opinions. I listened to my peers, who shared their undergraduate experiences with me, and to students, who shared some personal hardships with me. These experiences and struggles of others made me realize how unique my own experiences had been and how much these other people had to offer in terms of new insights and different outlooks on life. They offered so many things to consider and think about, I barely knew what to make of all this new information. So, I constantly wrote in my journals and on my computer, and I saw my thoughts take shape, contradict themselves, and take shape again. I came to realize that the values and experiences of my friends and I represented only a small percentage of the population. Our beliefs were not common to, nor even understood by, everyone.

Thus began my own, difficult journey of reconsidering the beliefs I had readily accepted since childhood, and developing critical thoughts. This process was time consuming and confusing because I began to question everything and slowly accept new ways of looking at the world. I worked right alongside my students trying

to develop our minds. We all wrote, and discussed together, which is where I further discovered how different everyone (not right or wrong, but different) is from everyone else. I brought my northeastern, Catholic school beliefs to a classroom that was saturated with a mix of kids who grew up on farms and in small towns, and carried a laundry list of religious affiliations. Since this realization slapped me in the face so hard, I quickly learned not to put any limits on how or what my students should think and write about. I also learned not to put limits on myself. I found it more beneficial to allow my students to learn through writing, because my telling them something wouldn't allow a lesson to sink in as much as if they learned it on their own. Since my students knew I would not judge them, I received papers about a variety of subjects. My students explored and defended all sorts of positions from paying college athletes to justifying the death penalty. Some students ultimately decided to hold tight to their home grown beliefs on such issues, while others altered their beliefs because they investigated their subjects and discovered some things they had not previously considered. At the end of this semester, a student of mine told me how amazed she was at the amount of "stuff" she had figured out throughout the semester. On paper, she had worked through and developed some half-baked ideas that had been plaguing her. This student was so astonished and excited about her discoveries that I had to keep saying, "I know, I know! Isn't it refreshing to figure things out?" Her enthusiasm gave me a real sense of accomplishment. I was glad that someone else had seriously thought

through some issues and had grown as a result of their hard work, and was excited enough to tell me about it.

I do not believe that education should simply be the acquisition of facts. Learning should be a process, often slow and difficult, but a process of growing and thinking and deciding. I accept the philosophy that critical thinking plays a central role in higher education. I agree that the goal of education is to develop greater reasoning skills in order to cope with and make decisions about life and society, and reasoning is impossible without critical thinking (Kurfiss xv). Furthermore, I agree with Linda Flower and John Hayes, who say, "...*discovery* carries an implicit suggestion that, somewhere in the mind's recesses or in data outside the mind, there is something waiting to be discovered, and that writing is a way to bring that something out" (21). I believe that through the thinking/writing combination, the process of critical inquiry is within our students' reach. I know this critical thinking process well because I have lived it and still am living it. The fog I have lived in is slowly being lifted. It is my experience that people don't like to think. It is easier to have someone else think and make decisions for you (i.e., teacher, parent, preacher). Thinking takes time and energy, but there is a wonderful power in thinking, believing, and developing on your own.

As a Practitioner I present my findings to you. Stephen M. North sees Practitioners as knowledge-makers who work at Composition in a variety of settings: classrooms, writing labs and centers, and consulting environments, for example (22). I have worked with students in each of these situations where we

concentrated on writing and knowledge-making. As a Practitioner, I have been concerned with what has worked, is working, or might work in teaching, doing, or learning writing (North 23). Through constant interaction with students and fellow-Practitioners, I have had the opportunity to draw on and contribute to the body of knowledge North defines as *lore,* which is, "the accumulated body of traditions, practices, and beliefs in terms of which Practitioners understand how writing is done, learned, and taught" (22). I did not conduct any clinical studies or lengthy experiments for this thesis. Instead, I chose to apply what I have observed and learned in the classroom, both as a student and as a teacher. It is my hope that my thoughts and discoveries will benefit those interested in the thinking and writing skills of students.

Two

Critical Thinking vs. Received Knowledge

The attempt to encourage critical thinking brings teachers into conflict with students. Some teachers want to foster critical thinking skills in their students, while students ardently defend the belief systems they know best: their received knowledge. Students defend their received knowledge, unaware that these belief systems exist as received. They see their beliefs and opinions as reality and truth, as quite simply, "the way it is." They adopt their beliefs from people and other authorities they trust and respect, not knowing that other trustworthy, respectful people might disagree and not sensing that views other than their own can be equally plausible. Since students don't see a reason to reconsider what they have been taught, the process of teaching critical thinking becomes quite difficult. Students resist change and come into internal conflict over the authority of various belief systems and ways of knowing.

Furthermore, widespread insistence on the use of politically correct language intensifies the critical thinking versus received knowledge dilemma. The PC movement encourages people to use and accept often euphemistic terms such as remembering to call your manicurist a *nail technician.* These terms include a mindset as well; that is, to ignore everyone's differences and concentrate on viewing everyone in the same light. This politically correct ideology poses a difficulty for teachers who encourage critical thinking because PC

language acts as a form of received knowledge to the extent that it closes off or substitutes for critical inquiry.

Critical Thinking

Kurfiss defines critical thinking as "*an investigation whose purpose is to explore a situation, phenomenon, question, or problem to arrive at a hypothesis or conclusion about it that integrates all available information and that can therefore be convincingly justified*" (2). Based on my classroom observations, students do not enter our classrooms with many critical thinking skills. They have relied on a "risk-free" way of life, where they depended on received knowledge to make their decisions for them. Received knowledge is information students have absorbed from their trusted "Voices of Authority," these voices being parents, professors, and the printed word (Kurfiss Handout). These students depend on authority as the source of all knowledge (Kurfiss 53). Further, they view the world dualistically; that is, they regard information as either correct or incorrect, true or false, good or bad (Kurfiss Handout). As a result of their reliance on received knowledge, students stick with their received knowledge and write and repeat the views which they are accustomed to. Their confidence in received knowledge stifles original/creative thought and free thinking. "In fact, their existing beliefs are so powerful that they can inhibit learning of concepts that do not "fit" (Kurfiss 26). Teachers who understand this about their students, and remain aware of the encouragement students need in order to think and to create, can help them become critical thinkers who are receptive to new ideas.

Kurfiss believes there is "...increasingly compelling evidence of serious deficiencies in the ability to reason among college students and the limited influence of college education on critical thinking skills" (Kurfiss 1). I tend to agree. Not only have I recognized my own inability to think critically after my undergraduate education, I have noticed this same inability in my students. For example, while conferencing with students, I will often ask them to tell me why they hold the position about which they are writing. Typically, their responses do not define their own, developed thoughts and perceptions. For instance, students writing about moral issues will refer me to the Bible, and students writing about political issues will refer me to the Constitution. When I tell them I still can not see their reasons for agreeing with the Bible or the Constitution and I press for further explanation, my students become flustered and confused and can not understand why *I* can not see things as clearly as they do. Kurfiss tells us that "College students make judgments on the basis of unexamined personal preferences, even after four years of higher education" (1). Based on my classroom experiences with students who encounter a great amount of difficulty when asked to explain, in detail, the reasons for the decisions about which they write, I agree with this assertion.

However, this is not to imply that critical thinking skills can not be taught. To teach students how to think critically, teachers need to understand both where students are (developmentally) when they enter the classroom and the cognitive growth teachers would like to see by the end of the course. Perhaps instructors could emphasize, through classroom discussions and examples, that

critical thinking can result in a new way of approaching significant issues in one's life or a deeper understanding of the basis for one's actions (Kurfiss 3). And, a result of this deeper understanding will be the reward of thinking, formulating, deciding, and writing about ideas on one's own. Students are at college to get an education and should understand that critical thinking is one facet of intellectual development which includes good thinking, reasoning, and understanding skills. If students understand that critical thought can help their cognitive skills across the board, perhaps they can place some fear aside and become more receptive to lessons and exercises in critical thinking.

I have found that students appreciate a classroom where they have the freedom and encouragement to think on their own without worrying about the constraints of a grade or judgment. Writing which is not personal, not free and self-sponsored, is restrictive and repressive (Hillocks 114). "Students...respond without commitment or engagement to...'school-sponsored' writing, that is, writing assigned by teachers" (Hillocks 114). Once they feel permitted, students are more easily able to think and to create and to know that they too can make important decisions and contributions. They come up with all kinds of ideas (some outlandish no doubt, but developed nonetheless). For example, I recently had a student submit a paper advocating procrastination. I found his topic choice significant because few students want to admit to their teachers that they procrastinate. The fact that he selected this topic, and admitted to procrastinating his Composition papers, showed me he felt uninhibited enough to be honest and

straightforward. I was glad he felt he could write about the topic of his choice. Furthermore, his paper exhibited a formal tone and factual, convincing arguments which showed me that he took his topic seriously and tried to think about why procrastination could be beneficial.

Similarly, in their journals, students enjoy the freedom to openly and plainly express opinions on topics of their own choosing. Often, these pages contain their most expressive, developed ideas. Students are constantly telling me things like, "Writing in my notebook is fun because I can write about anything I want to." Again, journals are a "place" where students do not have the fear of a grade looming over them. Students need to learn that they can take their journal writing, which encourages honest, personal thoughts and revelations, and create essays suitable for discussion. At least for the purpose of the Composition class, and hopefully beyond, students need to take their discoveries and move them out of the personal realm and into the societal front so that their writing will benefit other people, and so they may gain an appreciation for writing for an audience. In order to accomplish this, students need to understand the importance of audience assessment, and know how to convey their opinions without offending their readers. Last year, a student explained to me that he (and hopefully most students) felt he needed to get to know the self. He felt that our class was helping him realize this goal. He was excited because he felt like he was growing as a result of the writing he did on his own, and for this he was grateful.

Received Knowledge

Based on the research of Joanne Kurfiss, the Dualism/received knowledge stage is the first level in the "stages" of intellectual development. Dualistic thinkers have an uncomplicated, polarized view of reality. They mistake their personal views for "truth" and do not question personal beliefs (Kurfiss Handout). Level 1 thinkers depend on authority as the source of all knowledge, and believe the "right" answers come from looking things up in a book (Kurfiss 53). They do not realize the degree to which the information presented in a textbook or course is selected, interpreted, and systemized. "They view the professor as the authority, presenting factual knowledge known to all experts in the discipline" (Kurfiss 52-53).

As a result of my experience in the classroom, I agree that most freshmen Composition students are dualistic thinkers who rely quite heavily on their received knowledge. Studies have indicated that for college students, depth of argument on controversial topics is minimal and increases marginally as a result of college instruction (Kurfiss 1). "Seniors are more adept than freshmen at evaluating position papers, but their overall level of performance is low" (Kurfiss 1). Perhaps if freshmen can learn some of these skills, then by the time they are seniors they will have developed stronger reasoning and thinking skills. "Longitudinal studies show an influence of education, but when reasoning about everyday questions, . . . only graduate students seem to recognize that different points of view can be compared and evaluated through contextual reasoning" (Kurfiss 1). However, students' reliance on received knowledge is no fault of their own. Children and

adolescents search for and need structure and guidance. They need to feel secure and accepted by those around them. Without this security they may have difficulty developing self-assurance and self esteem. In order to answer this call, parents, teachers, preachers, and mentors offer their ideas and beliefs. If the student has respect for, or trust in, these individuals, the student will readily adopt the beliefs of their elders. For example, if students are confused about politics or political parties, they may ask their parents for their views and convictions. If parents take the time to explain what they believe and why, students may accept these opinions as their own, figuring that their parents probably know "the right" answer. Hence, students enter the classroom with such beliefs. It makes sense then that students would be perplexed and resistant when a college instructor or a peer asks questions and challenges what these students have held to be true. Students may experience some difficulty in explaining why *they* are Democrats or Republicans, or why *they* are for or against censorship of art sponsored by the NEA. If students can gain an appreciation for the energy and thought process involved in formulating opinions on one's own, they might understand why each author of a book on writing processes advocates a different approach, or why someone writing about effective advertising strategies can not offer only one, formulaic method. Perhaps students will see that many people hold, and support a variety of opinions, none of which are exclusively right or wrong. "For these students, the concept of interpretation, essential to critical thinking, is puzzling. Doesn't the text mean what it says? Why can't the author just say what he or she means? They

may become confused or indignant when professors ask them to reason independently" (Kurfiss 53).

According to Kurfiss, most Composition 1 students are at this Dualistic stage and are confident in their received knowledge. They are intolerant of ambiguity and prefer absolute, categorical language (Kurfiss Handout). They prefer prescriptions or formulaic approaches to learning. For example, at the start of my Composition courses, students often ask an overabundance of questions about the mechanics of the essays. They want concrete answers about such matters as page length, number of paragraphs, permitted topics, where to put their name on the paper, and the like. This emphasis on mechanical questions indicates to me that they need a shift in emphasis. These students lack, and consequently need to develop, confidence in their own beliefs and opinions. They need to move beyond mechanical concerns. If they do not learn critical thinking skills, their ability to cultivate and write about new ideas will be limited. That is, they will constantly be writing and rewriting someone else's beliefs and will not be able to offer new insights to issues. In order to be a good writer, one needs to be a good thinker. Historians who have studied the development of literacy have cited the acquisition of writing within a culture as a fundamental factor in the development of modern thought-promoting (Langer and Applebee 3). "They attribute this development to the fact that the act of writing facilitates a logical, linear presentation of ideas, and to the permanence of writing (as opposed to the fleeting nature of talk), permitting reflection upon and review of what has been written" (Langer and Applebee 3). When we consider how closely

related writing and thinking are, the college Composition classroom presents itself as an appropriate place to begin learning how to think and reason for oneself.

Because student essays and class discussions too often reflect the opinions and beliefs of "authorities" such as parents, preachers, or teachers, I developed a class activity in the hopes of getting students to venture out and think freely on their own. During one class period in the Spring 1993 semester, I asked my students to persuade me that it was a positive action for the Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Club to chalk their beliefs on the sidewalks throughout the campus for everyone to read. Students immediately began to ask, "Huh? You mean you want me to tell you why that is *good*? There is nothing good about their messages. Why should I be forced to read them?" When I asked students to put their prejudices aside for just twenty minutes (an activity I predicted would be painful), I could not get even one student to take me seriously. When I asked them to use their journals to advocate privately the Club's sidewalk writings, again I found much resistance and many blank pages. Such experiences indicate to me that students need to practice idea-making and looking at all sides of issues in order to make informed decisions. If they take the time to examine their current convictions, they may discover that they hold different viewpoints than their parents, peers, teachers, etc. This may sound simplistic, and commonsensical, but it is not an activity in which our freshmen composition students readily engage. It seems that this reliance on received knowledge is easy and comfortable. Thinking critically is not only hard work, it is also risky. Students become vulnerable to

scrutiny if they offer opinions that disagree with those of their peers. The possibility of ridicule is a threat students take seriously.

If teachers address this threat and work to create the environment where students feel "safe" discussing and writing about their own ideas, perhaps students will gain confidence in their critical thinking abilities. It is not easy to create a non-threatening environment. Students need to know that their grade will not be contingent upon their ideas mirroring those of the instructor. Perhaps a few exercises encouraging them to defend unlikely positions (i.e.: the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual Club) are good places to start because they force students to become aware that what they hold to be the truth may be the truth only for them. Others may not share their beliefs on such subjects and, perhaps by listening to other viewpoints, students can learn to reconsider their tenets. Once, I had a student tell me, "This class has a fresh approach. You can discover something about yourself you did not know was there." This comment helped me understand that students do like to think for themselves so long as they know they are encouraged to develop their own ideas.

Increasing students' awareness of the origins of their beliefs is no easy task. Class exercises and discussions can help students challenge themselves and force them to examine why they believe what they do, and from where these beliefs came. For example, I stage debates as an in-class activity. As a group, we decide on a debatable topic, then I assign nearly half of the room to support one side, and almost half of the room to support the other. I then ask the

remainder of the students to "ride the fence" and sit in the middle. I give these "middle" students the power to govern the debate, ask questions, mediate, interject, etc. By having a "middle group," students can turn to their peers to help resolve disagreements or difficulties. This way, they are not pressured to, nor reliant upon, looking to the instructor for the perceived "truth" about issues (thinly disguised as received knowledge). I will not tell them my position, nor what is factual or otherwise (if I know). Instead, they are forced to make decisions about issues on their own. It is my hope that such debates help students take an active and public part in exploring positions, origins, and reasons for their beliefs. I also hope that by having a "middle group," they will begin to see that they are capable thinkers who do not need to rely on the opinions of perceived authorities.

It is my hope that after four years of higher education, college graduates should be on their way to thinking for themselves and be able to express, rather than stifle their opinions. D'Angelo comments, "My own experience with students...leads me to believe that they often lack powers of discrimination, that their thinking tends to be undifferentiated" (170). Unfortunately, this critical thinking task increases in difficulty when we add societal encouragement to use politically correct language to the battles of learning to think critically. Students who subscribe to and blindly operate under the PC umbrella are at a disadvantage because political correctness and received knowledge walk hand in hand. If students are tied to received knowledge, they will probably not force themselves to think critically about issues.

Political Correctness

In the Introduction to their book, *Are You Politically Correct?*, Francis J. Beckwith and Michael E. Bauman refer to a 1991 article by journalist John Taylor who asks the question, "Are You Politically Correct?" Beckwith and Bauman describe Political Correctness (as discussed by Taylor) as "...beliefs that have challenged the traditional nature of the university as well as traditional curriculum, standards of excellence, and views about truth, justice, and the objectivity of knowledge, while accentuating our cultural, gender, class, and racial differences in the name of campus diversity (9). Although a multitude of definitions exist for political correctness, I find this definition appropriate for this discussion because I am considering how the political correctness movement affects students. After listening to my students repeat the PC jargon they have received from the media (i.e.: *Native Americans, Cosmetologist, Disabled Students*), I have found that the political correctness movement does affect their vocabulary and their viewpoints.

Society encourages us to accept politically correct terminology and ideals. We are expected to be sensitive to other people's needs, opinions, and differences. An array of PC language has been developed and used so that no one will feel insulted or labeled. For example, freshmen are *first year students,* and a handicapped person is *physically challenged.* A few, more extreme, examples my students have shared with me include: a hyperactive person is a *person with high needs*, women are *people of gender*, and a corpse is a *nonliving person* (Leo 29). Since sensitivity has woven

itself into our social framework so prominently, now more than ever writers are urged to carefully survey their audience, and their language. In his article, "The Politics of Race, Gender, And Sexual Orientation; Implications for the Future of America," Irving H. Buchen wonders, "If I find fault with a number of feminist positions and organizations, and so proclaim my criticism in print outside the sanctity of the inner circle of the group, will I be accused of undermining feminist positions and giving aid and comfort to the enemy?" (222). If professional writers are concerned about their language being politically correct, it is easy to see why students would have the same apprehensions.

Thus, we can examine the tension in our Universities. On the one hand, students are encouraged by some professors, peers, and the media to be politically correct, to select their words and opinions carefully so they do not offend anyone, or any group. On the other hand, we have the fundamental beliefs of the education process, learning, and the University. That is, a college graduate should learn how to develop his/her mind and critical thinking skills. Introspection, idea-making, questioning, and discovery, should all be inherent in the educational experience. Students should be able to explore and develop their own thoughts.

Developing their own thoughts, opinions, and ideas seems to be an activity students have some difficulty with. And, with the added pressure to be politically correct, tension is intensified. Should students rely on their received knowledge and work to fulfill PC ideals? Or, are they free to think and write critically and hold strong opinions even at the risk of not being PC? "At a time when

our colleges and universities are under challenge from nearly every direction, the charge that they are dispensing not knowledge or reasoning skills but ideological doctrine-doctrine rooted in the 1960's, moreover-is a dangerous one" (Trachtenberg 6). If this charge is accurate, teachers need to carefully consider how this affects students. "We are in an environment of political correctness, a way of judging behaviors and positions as appropriate or inappropriate" (Buchen 222). Once again, how can students possibly feel comfortable developing their own ideas and opinions if they have the fear of judgment looming over them?

This concern raises the question, How can teachers teach students to deal with this tension? Perhaps a good way is through classroom discussion. Talking about PC terms, and looking at how and why they are used may be a good place to start. Are such terms appropriate? De-sensitizing? Stifling? Inaccurate? Do they make people feel more comfortable, or less? Are we sacrificing our true thoughts and opinions? And, more importantly, how do such PC terms and ideologies affect you as a student? Have you considered if it is indeed best to use these words? Are we robbing ourselves of our human-ness and of our differences, or are we in fact doing each other a service by using these terms? Are we decreasing or increasing sensitivity? Or, are you afraid not to use these terms at the risk of unintentionally offending someone? Teachers can learn about their students' thoughts, perceptions, and beliefs. Once teachers acknowledge that much of student's knowledge is received knowledge, and that they maintain largely dualistic thought structures, we can build from there. We can begin by discussing

their existing belief systems, and ultimately gauge how flexibly they will react to accepting and writing about other opinions.

When we introduce other opinions, other realities, and other views of the world, we can ask students to think critically, evaluate, talk about, and write about what they hear. What will be absolutely key here is to let students know that whatever they think will be fine so long as they can support their opinions with something that counts for evidence; be it personal authority, experience, research, deduction, logic, whatever. They need to be in possession of good reasons for what they hold to be true.

I am not suggesting that received knowledge/PC thought and critical thinking can not co-exist. Perhaps they can. "Politically correct outlooks aren't to be wholly accepted or wholly rejected but to be learned from" (Trachtenberg 26). A balance is necessary. In order to achieve this balance, writers need to first think critically about their subject. Once writers have developed their own ideas and formed opinions, they can write about these opinions. In their writing, they can select which terms to use being mindful not to let go of their beliefs and decisions. If writers so desire, they can take PC language into account. They can still express their thoughts accurately so long as they select their words carefully. If writers want their audiences to believe them, they can strike a balance to persuade them to accept (or at least consider) the writer's thoughts. It is important to learn this balance so that student's skills of effectively communicating with others can be practiced.

Conclusion to Chapter Two

The encouragement and teaching of critical thinking and writing is the central theme here. But, teachers are faced with some roadblocks as they try to engage students in critical thinking. First, students are too closely tied to their received knowledge, which has been cultivated all their lives. This knowledge includes the most trivial opinions such as the type of toothpaste they believe is best to major convictions such as their religious affiliation. Getting students to see that their reality is not everyone's reality is not easy. Their received knowledge is what they've been raised with, is what they know, what they respect, what they have relied on, believe to be true, and find solace, security, and acceptance in. Even if teachers can get through all those blocks, they are faced with yet another roadblock--political correctness. Political correctness discourages developing one's own opinions about others and about society in that pre-decided upon terms and euphemisms have been presented to us telling us these are the words to use now.

Although there are many tools teachers can turn to, I have selected environmental advertising as a tool to use to try to get students to develop critical thinking skills and eventually improve their writing skills. As a result of critical thinking, students should gain better insight and develop larger subjects to write about. Why environmental advertising? Environmental advertising contains both received knowledge and political correctness, yet it is not a subject students are too emotionally wrought about (i.e.: unlike the gay/lesbian debates). So, we can use it, examine it, discuss it, and look at different opinions and sides and see if students' received

knowledge and political correctness ideals hold up--or, have they thought critically and decided to create and advocate some new ideas of their own?

Three

Applying Critical Thinking to Composition Teaching

> "Sometimes my best students...write most like advertisements. They are usually unaware of what they are doing and of how it affects their attitudes toward subject and audience, their personas, and perhaps even their ideas" (Sharpe 488).

When teachers want to emphasize the importance of critical thinking skills, they need to utilize tools that hold significance and meaning for their students. I recommend using environmental advertisements in the classroom. Environmental concerns have permeated our society, from the recycling and conservation of materials, to the adoption of animals, mammals, wetlands, and highways to name only a few. As a result, an abundance of written material has been produced, and this material has become a part of students' daily world. Looking to literature such as advertisements, brochures, letters, and text books provides us with a wealth of information for students to explore, think, and write critically about.

In addition to offering students a familiar topic to probe and think critically about, environmental materials, specifically advertisements, warrant our classroom attention and analysis for a couple of other reasons. First, students will discover that advertisements illustrate many of the writing lessons we teach students. For example, classes can explore audience analysis,

establishing credibility, creating interest in a subject, informing readers, persuasive appeal, diction, and word economy.

And second, it seems that environmental propaganda has escaped extensive rhetorical analysis because it is dismissed as a subject which justifies itself, that is, environmental advertising appears altruistic. On the surface, the motives seem innocent enough -- who would scoff at someone for helping a whale, or for adopting a rhino, or an elephant? After all, the generous contributions people make show their concern and respect for our earth. Although this may be true, it does not negate the fact that persuasive rhetoric exists in environmental advertising. It seems that the writers are promoting an ideology that encourages a clean, healthy environment where all life forms are united and at peace with one another. Hence, rhetorical strategies do indeed exist in such material, making it worthy of our attention and examination.

Specifically, I have selected written materials from the *Whale Adoption Project* for scrutiny. Intense attention on one area and one type of advertising coupled with class discussions and activities will help teach students how to think critically about the environmental issues this advertising raises. In the classroom, students will be afforded the opportunity to seriously consider a myriad of positions dealing with our environment. They will learn that opinions about issues are neither right nor wrong; they are simply different. For example, when discussing whether individuals should send money to help save the whales, students should realize that there is no conclusive yes or no (dualistic) answer to this question. Group A may argue that we have an obligation to the

whales who are helpless to help themselves. Group B may believe that whales are at the bottom of our priority list and our monies should be spent on the thousands of homeless people in the world. Group C may believe that we need to save the whales because without them our food chain will be askew. Group D may hold that we definitely have to help the whales because we humans are the ones who disrupted their safety. And, Group E could care less about the whales, the homeless, or any other group unable to take care of itself. Illustrating that these different groups of people hold different opinions may help students begin to recognize multiplicity and diversity.

I agree with Morgan and Okerstrom who tell us, "The writing course is also a thinking course. Focusing on the wide topic of environment offers endless possibilities for critical thinking and writing" (xv). A thorough examination of the rhetorical strategies used to promote environmental causes will equip freshman writers with the ability to examine the delicate dance among writer, reader, and message. Students will see how writers place themselves into the position where they are confident with their message, and are equipped to clearly illustrate their point(s) to their audience. Since environmental advertising is a combination of both received knowledge and politically correct ideals, it is appropriate for classroom use. Students can learn that it is possible to take received knowledge and political correctness and think critically about the issues these subjects raise.

Rhetorical Analysis of the *Whale Adoption Project* Newsletter

Since I find a rhetorical analysis of *Whale Adoption Project* material effective in the classroom, I have selected for analysis a letter that was mailed in early Spring, 1993 to people who are supporters of the *Whale Adoption Project* (a program of the International Wildlife Coalition). A rhetorical analysis will show the strategy the writer used in this letter and illustrate the elements common to both advertising material and Composition writers' essays. This analysis will also afford students the opportunity to challenge their received knowledge. Students will most likely defend the opinions and viewpoints about saving the whales that they bring with them to the classroom. For example, if the student grew up with people who advocated animal rights, sent money to help save endangered species, and refused to use products that had been tested on animals, perhaps these students would be more apt to agree with this letter and support the whales. Reviewing, examining, and discussing the letter in class and the possibility that it is misleading or contains faulty logic (i.e., the *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* fallacy) provides an opportunity to challenge student's received knowledge beliefs and press them to consider, or even just recognize, other points of view. If students are posed some direct questions dealing with this subject, like, "What do you think? Why? Do you find yourself in agreement with the information in the letter? Why? Why not? Give some background, support, and reasons for your assertions," they will

have some guidance to help them analyze the issue and draw some conclusions of their own.

In addition, this analysis will allow students to think about and discuss their opinions about the political correctness issue. Students can observe that the writer included no offensive language in the letter. He illustrated his points with the use of politically correct terms and phrases. But, the larger emphasis on political correctness in this letter is that saving the whales is a politically correct action to take. It is politically correct to acknowledge that animals have rights. "Now we have to recognize that other species have rights, that other mammals-like whales-are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights" (Ackerman 145). The *Whale Adoption Project* letter gives students an opportunity to deal with and think about a politically correct subject. Today, saving almost anything is politically correct. This letter and subsequent discussions offer students the opportunity to examine this. Is the political correctness of saving the whales presenting itself as a form of received knowledge? That is, are students living in a world/environment where it is becoming accepted, without question, to save animals, wetlands, or bays, for example? If so, and if "authorities" are advocating this movement, it can be treated as received knowledge, especially if students are willingly accepting this ideology. What is important is for students to think about the political correctness movement. Whether they decide to agree or disagree is not the goal. The goal is to get students to think about political correctness at length and decide if they are accepting PC attitudes and beliefs without really understanding or questioning

why. Students may begin their inquiries by considering that those advocating political correctess are operating under the belief that language shapes our reality and our perceptions and the ways in which we see and think about people and society.

I have adapted a "model" for this analysis from the suggestions Herbert W. Simons gives in his book, *Persuasion: Understanding, Practice, and Analysis.* I have selected a Message-Centered analysis which searches to uncover meaning, methods, and motives. This *Whale Adoption Project* letter (see Appendix A) was mailed to those persons who have adopted a whale. This letter serves several functions. First, it informs its readers of the news, events, happenings, and dealings with whales. Second, it explains the problems which are threatening the whale population. And third, it asks its readers for support, both monetary and written, to help maintain whale-saving endeavors.

What it is

This is a letter containing information about whales and a plea for support of these mammals.

Tone

The friendly tone is achieved through a combination of qualities. First, the letter is personal as the writer shares local news and uses colloquial phrases such as, "Dear Friend, As I write this letter to you," "...caring people like you," and "Help *me.*" Another quality is sympathy. The writer relays sad, distressing information like, "And they found that the whales are dying at an alarming rate!" and "Then, last year 14 more died!" As can be noted

by the use of exclamation points and underlining, urgency is another characteristic. In addition, the tone of the letter has an informative feature as it provides news, dates, numbers, and facts. For example, the writer explains that 37 dead whales have washed ashore over the past eight years, and he offers an explanation (US Navy shelling) for these deaths.

Metacommunication

Metacommunication is communications about communication. In the *Adoption* letter, the writer navigates his readers through the letter by adding phrases which encourage his audience to read the entire letter, and hopefully agree with his message. For example, at the beginning of paragraphs, he uses phrases such as, "As you read on...," "As unbelievable as it sounds," and "I don't want to be overly critical." These phrases offer the opinions of the writer while encouraging the reader to continue through the page. It is important for students to note the value in such phrases because they help to smoothly lead the audience through the piece while encouraging the writer's viewpoints. In this case, the writer's aim is to educate readers about the goings-on of our oceans, sympathize with the whales, and offer support to change what is unjust.

Structure of message

The letter presents its information in a problem/solution format. The problem is that whales are dying and it seems their deaths can be attributed to US Navy shellings over the humpback whale habitat. The solution is for these shellings to be stopped. One way for readers to help make this goal a reality is to write letters to the US Secretary of Defense and ask that he put a stop to the

killings. Another solution is to send a contribution to fund both the "congressional education campaign" and to pay for the mission which made this discovery.

Supporting materials

Interestingly, when the writer talks about the culprit in the whale deaths, the US Navy, he is careful not to insult this branch of our country's forces. He offers the Navy's shellings as the reason for the deaths of the humpback whales, yet he does not offer any slanderous comments. For example, he writes, "I'd guess the thought of whales passing by has probably never even occurred to the military involved." Even though he may be enraged with the Navy's actions, he remembers that perhaps some of the *Adoption Project* supporters may be Navy or ex-Navy people who could take offense at the accusations and, consequently, cease to offer their support. This rhetorical strategy is important to note as the writer achieves a balance worthy of our attention. Skillfully, he conveys his point in a convincing manner without using offensive language.

Terms used

One euphemistic phrase clearly presents itself to me on the second page of the letter. The phrase "polite assurances" is used to describe the response the Navy gave members of the *Whale Adoption Project* when they called to recommend a change (We've telephoned Navy officials and have received polite assurances . . . <u>but absolutely nothing has been done</u>!). It seems that the writer used these terms almost sarcastically in an effort to show that far more than a few phone calls will be necessary to change the actions of our Navy. The phrase "polite assurances" was a great selection for the writer

because he is not being offensive, yet, he is making his point that the Navy does not seem to be paying much attention to the whales being killed by the shelling. If the Navy was taking action, they would probably provide concerned callers with information about where the new shelling site will be, and would relay information the Navy itself has discovered about whales. Through the subtle use of just the correct terms, the writer was able to communicate several important messages to his readers.

Causal Analysis

In my opinion, the letter is persuasive. The writer offers information about the threats facing the whale population, and he couples it with compassion and concern for the whales. Even though the letter is primarily written to people who are already well-disposed to the writer's cause, the writer creates a captivating document that is well-written and intriguing. This is not to say that all readers will agree that the whales are threatened or that the U.S. Navy can justly be labeled as the prime suspect. Readers will interpret the information in the letter as they wish. However, I find that the writer integrates audience analysis, careful word selection, meaningful facts, data, and numbers to create a convincing piece of advertising for the *Whale Adoption Project.*

By reviewing each element of this analysis in the classroom, peer-group and open forum discussions about this letter and the issues it raises can take place. Teachers can ask students to think critically and offer their opinions and observations about each of the analysis categories. This open interaction will hopefully place students at ease while examining and discussing their views.

Using the *Whale Adoption Project* Letter to Illustrate Lessons in Writing

In addition to using a rhetorical analysis of the *Whale Adoption Project* newsletter to help students think critically about current issues, teachers can also use the letter to illustrate some of the writing lessons we teach our students. For example, classes can discuss the writer's audience and word choices, how writers create interest and credibility, and the writer's use of informative and persuasive appeals. Hopefully, by using this letter, which discusses a current and common topic, students will feel at ease relating and contributing to the lessons at hand.

Audience Analysis

As evidenced in the previous discussion, the writer of the *Whale Adoption Project* newsletter paid careful attention to audience analysis. He created a letter that non-offensively speaks to people from a variety of backgrounds who are interested in the welfare of whales. This business of not offending an audience has become increasingly important. As discussed earlier, with the politically correct movement in full swing, word choice demands careful thought. Even common, everyday terms we typically use are suddenly being deemed offensive. For example, the home economics discipline is now called *Human Environmental Sciences.* Descriptions of any kind must be used with utmost caution because one small slip-up can anger a reader, destroy the writer's credibility, and negate the validity of the argument or idea. Writers must carefully select words and language appropriate to an audience.

I do not suggest that students should compromise their ideas, just as the writer of the *Adoption Project* letter did not fail to relay his beliefs about necessary actions (serious contact with Naval forces) for the survival of the whales.

Obviously, careful attention to audience is no new phenomenon. Since the time of Aristotle, communicators have analyzed their audiences (judges) and have fashioned their messages accordingly. However, it has been my experience, both as a student and as a teacher, that most beginning Composition students have never had to consider their audience, just as I was never required to in my undergraduate writing classes. At the beginning of the courses I teach as a graduate student, students ask questions like, "What are you interested in reading?" and "You mean you won't mind if I write about hunting?" This indicates that students have been accustomed to tailoring their assignments to the preferences of the instructor rather than selecting topics they themselves are interested in pursuing. For these students, the concept of audience analysis is new, and often perplexing. These students need to be shown how to select an audience appropriate for their topic, how to determine the needs of this audience, and how to inform this group of something worth knowing.

In "*Topoi* and the Problem of Invention," Karl R. Wallace suggests that students use the following questions as a heuristic for audience analysis. These questions can be particularly useful for beginning composition students by helping them focus on their writing task, and learning the extent of consideration necessary in audience analysis. As a class exercise, students can look to the

Adoption letter for example, and speculate about the answers the writer decided upon. Possible answers are indicated in italics following each question.

- How old is the audience?

  Probably old enough to have a career because only people who have money may be able to send a donation

- What is the economic or social condition of the audience?

  Economically: able to offer funds to charity Socially: aware of current events because they are interested in the current plight of the whale

- What general philosophies of government or politics does the audience hold?

  left wing, liberal

- What values and beliefs would be common to an audience of this age?

  A high regard for nature and the creatures of the earth, caring individuals who care about the safety of sea mammals

- What value does the audience place on education, religion, work?

  Values education, awareness and working towards achieving a common goal

- Which of these values--economic, social, political, educational--is most important to the audience?

  Educational because without education and information about the whales, their welfare becomes endangered

- Least important?

In an effort to target and assess one's audience, these questions can be helpful to writers. For example, the writer of the *Whale Adoption Project* letter had to consider the question, "What values and beliefs would be common to an audience of this age?" (Wallace 394). In my estimation, the writer probably figured that his readers hold a common interest in the welfare of whales and other sealife. Perhaps, the writer sees his audience as people interested in a peaceful, harmonious earth (symbolized by the innocent whales), and is opposed to war and warring efforts (symbolized by the US Navy). Since both forces cannot coexist in our oceans, one power needs to be removed. I speculate that the writer fashions his audience as people with a conscience, a strong value for nature, and morality, and he is able to address them as such. By illustrating the "good vs. evil" juxtaposition, the writer has created an effective, powerful, rhetorical strategy.

Building Credibility and Creating Interest

Another consideration of writers, one closely tied to audience analysis, is to present themselves as credible sources of information and offer something of interest to their readers. Edward P.J. Corbett talks about the importance of rendering the audience well-disposed toward the writer and his or her cause, and ready to be instructed or persuaded (290). What does this say to students? As a means of demonstrating the rendering of a benevolent and an attentive audience, we can turn again to the *Whale Adoption Project* letter.

First, it is important to note that we are looking at a letter, which is a personal way to reach someone. The simple greeting, "Dear Friend," suggests a familiarity between reader and writer. The letter's introductory material is also intimate, as it gives details about the weather in New England, and relays good news: "I am happy to say that a few humpback whales have reportedly been seen by fishermen on Stellwagen Bank." The writer has adroitly set up a pleasant, warm greeting coupled with some noteworthy news.

Corbett notes that, "Even when we do not have to rouse interest in our subject, we may have to spend some time in the introduction establishing our credit with the audience" (287). For the most part, *Whale Adoption Project* readers are already interested. The audience receiving this letter has already committed (monetarily at least) to assisting whales. Thus, the writers are not so much concerned with creating interest as they are with maintaining it. In order to maintain this interest, and to show participants that their money is being spent wisely, the letter provides facts, information, developments, etc. This grants credibility to the writer(s), and to the *Adoption* organization itself as they are able to provide their readers with first-hand information and knowledge. "Sometimes writers have to convince an audience that they are qualified to speak on some subject" (Corbett 287). The writer is careful to continue to present himself as a credible source of information. Most probably, the people at the *Whale Adoption Project* are grateful for the support they have received from their clientele and are interested in maintaining this support.

Informative and Persuasive Appeal

Generally speaking, the words *advertisement* and *persuasion* go hand-in-hand. Whether advertisers are enticing their audience to buy a specific product or to believe in some concept, persuasion is a rhetorical element found in their materials. However, persuasive appeal is not advertisement-specific; it is also an ingredient in the essays of our Composition students. Student essays attempt to persuade someone of something, whether it's to believe the position a paper is taking, to promote the writer as a credible source, or merely to entice an audience to read the entire essay. Since similarities exist in the use of persuasion, I find it appropriate to use environmental advertising as an illustration of persuasion in composition writing.

Some advertising can be viewed as an important medium of relaying information. Announcements of new products, discoveries, and events, for example, are often made through advertisements. "But in national advertising directed to the consumer, the techniques of persuasion are rarely informative" (Hayakawa 149). This is true of most "product-selling" ads where the primary interest is to increase profits. However, since "save the whales" and "environmental" type advertisements are often selling an ideology or a way of thinking, it is important to look at such advertising in the classroom. This is not to imply that environmental advertisers are not also selling something; they are, but their primary focus seems to be on earth awareness as opposed to personal, monetary gain. For example, *The Whale Adoption Project* literature can be used as an appropriate illustration of

advertising that informs and teaches. Generally, the writers of "earth awareness" ads, newsletters, and brochures explain what they are selling and why. One of their goals is to educate, to get readers to think of the animals, the environment, and the difference they can make. Writers want people to learn about the world and act in the interest of it. So, the writers of these ads try to inform their readers. Detailed explanations of nearly extinct animals and contaminated water sources for example, are necessary, because most people don't think of running out and buying a whale, or adopting an elephant, or helping to save the wetlands. Environmental advertisers encourage their ideology about our world by urging readers to consider the earth and how we treat fellow life forms. For example, supporters of the Save the Whales campaign advocate the position that "We need to save the whales in their own right, because they are peaceful, intelligent creatures who have been our companions on this planet for thirty million years. But they are also guardians of our conscience, which remind us that the oceans themselves are endangered" (Ackerman 143-144). It is important for the writers of environmental advertisements to emphasize such views and urge others to accept them as well. In a similar fashion, when students write their compositions, they are persuading their audience to agree with, or at least seriously consider, their ideas and positions.

Word Choice and Economy

Yet another consideration of writers is word choice and word economy. Whether writing an essay, an article, or an advertisement, writers need to monitor carefully their language and select the most

concise and appropriate terms. Space is at a premium in modern newspapers and magazines for example, which is why editors insist on strict observance of specified word limits (Corbett 291). Discussing this reality with students is a good way to emphasize the importance of diction and word economy. While selecting key terms, students can consider the use of politically correct terminology. Perhaps classes could discuss the use and aptness of terms and phrases carefully selected so that few people will take offense. Classes can turn to the earlier discussion about the *Whale Adoption* people receiving *polite assurances* from the U.S. Navy. The writer needed to exercise the balance between conveying the message that the whales are in grave danger as a result of the U.S. Navy, yet he needed to be careful not to offend any Navy people. This would be a fitting lesson for students who are thinking about the use of PC language in their writing, and are making sure they are selecting the words necessary to convey the information without sacrificing the validity of the message.

Since advertisers are conscious to select the exact terms necessary to convey their messages, it seems fitting to look to advertisements as an illustration of word choice. Hayakawa comments, "...we have to choose words with the affective connotations we want so that readers or listeners will be interested or moved by what we are saying and feel towards things the way we do (53). The key here is for students to know how they feel about issues and then select the most appropriate language to convey their meaning.

Conclusion to Chapter Three

For the aforementioned reasons, I feel using environmental advertisements and propaganda in the classroom are effective teaching tools for writing teachers. This material is informative and educational. Yet, it is something students can relate to and decide how effective this vehicle of communication has been for them (maybe one of your students is wearing a "save the wetlands" tee-shirt, or has adopted a rhino). In addition, students can take time to think critically about the issues environmental advertising raises, for example, "How much assistance should we give to fellow creatures? Are we unjustly asking far more from our earth than we are giving?" And, students can discuss statements like; "Most of what we will have to use our clever brain for in the next few hundred or thousand years, if we live that long, is undoing the effects of what we used our brains for in the last few hundred or thousand years - cleaning up the environment, for instance" (Ackerman 144). D'Angelo argues that, "If my observations about the lack of critical acuity in many of today's students are correct, then clearly we need critical and evaluative approaches to advertising and the mass media..." (170). The timeliness of environmental advertising ads to ease of use and a common bond. Students should have no problems locating such advertisements and information.

Four

Conclusion

Students should understand that they can look to their own reasoning, habits, desires, emotions, and experiences, and apply their knowledge accordingly. Students often think that only authorities, or those who write professionally, have been published, or teach, have answers. Of course, this simply is not the case. Students rely on their received knowledge rather than taking the risk to think and develop ideas on their own. Just as I relied on received knowledge as an undergraduate, I have witnessed my Composition students doing the same. This is a dangerous practice as it hinders intellectual development and critical thought. Received knowledge is so familiar and comfortable to students, they are resistant to considering or accepting new viewpoints. However, once students are in an environment where they are encouraged to and feel comfortable with exploring and expressing their thoughts freely, perhaps they will be more apt to do so.

Since received knowledge and political correctness appear to be barriers to critical thinking, I believe that teachers need to create classroom exercises and discussions that will give students the opportunity to flex their critical thinking muscles. Teachers can assist students in realizing critical thinking goals by giving students the opportunity to think and talk critically on their own, rather than continuing to spoon-feed them ideas. Looking at environmental advertising provides students with material that

contains politically correct elements, yet offers issues worthy of critical thought and inquiry. Students can work to develop their critical thinking skills if they observe pieces such as environmental advertising with scrutiny. "...our concern in English departments ought to be with the critical reading and writing of all kinds of texts, not just imaginative literature. In its own right, advertising provides a kind of distinctive knowledge about society" (D'Angelo160). I am not advocating that we simply let ads teach students how to write. Instead, I find the examination of environmental advertising language appropriate for illustrating some writing techniques, language usage, and thinking skills to our students.

In addition to thinking critically, students need to know how to state their thoughts accurately on paper. They need to learn how to take their expressive writing and focus it to speak to a specific audience who can read and learn something from their work. This skill requires understanding the sensitive balance that exists between getting one's point across and not offending an audience. Writers must try not to offend their audiences, yet still remain true to their thoughts and messages. Environmental advertising seems to be an appropriate illustration of this balance. In knowing how to "ride the fence," the writer should not "sell out" or come across as weak and conforming. It is essential for the writer to maintain credibility. Understanding this necessary balance, and being able to apply it is a fantastic, powerful skill. Those individuals who are able to use these skills will benefit from their work.

I find the words of S.I. Hayakawa most appropriate here when he explains,

> "Improvement in our ability to understand language, as well as in our ability to use it, depends, therefore, not only upon sharpening our sense for the informative connotations of words, but *also sharpening our insight into the affective elements in language through social experience, through contact with many kinds of people in many kinds of situations, and through literary study*" (53).

Hence, the writing classroom presents itself as a perfect opportunity for learning the power in language and critical thought. An environment can be created which offers students freedom to feel comfortable expressing a multitude of viewpoints and ideas.

It is my hope that my observations and explanations will benefit other teachers of Composition. Should teachers agree with and utilize the suggestions I have made, hopefully their students will be on their way to nurturing and developing their critical thinking skills. I believe teachers will enjoy their Composition classes more if they allow their students the freedom to make their own ideas. Teachers will watch thoughts flourish, and will receive essays of a higher quality, and students will be on their way to thinking in detail about the world in which we live.

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APPENDIX

WHALE ADOPTION PROJECT LETTER

•Whale Adoption Project•
a program of the INTERNATIONAL WILDLIFE COALITION

UNITED STATES
634 N. Falmouth Highway, P.O. Box 388
N. Falmouth, MA 02556-0388

UNITED KINGDOM
P.O. Box 73, Hartfield
East Sussex TN7 4EY

CANADA
P.O. Box 461, Port Credit Postal Station
Mississauga, Ontario L5G 4M1

Dear Friend,

As I write this letter to you, the winter still isn't finished in New England, but I am happy to say that a few humpback whales have reportedly been seen by fishermen on Stellwagen Bank. These are whales returning early from their annual migration to the Caribbean.

As you read on, you'll learn why it's a miracle that any whales made it back here at all.

I'm sure you've read in past issues of your *Whalewatch* newsletter about our alarm at the high number of humpback deaths being reported along the mid-Atlantic coast of the United States.

With funding help from caring people like you, the International Wildlife Coalition (parent group of the Whale Adoption Project) mounted an investigative expedition to the mid-Atlantic coast.

The research cruise involving the R/V NAVAHO and a dozen scientists and crew, traveled over 1,000 miles in the eight weeks we spent on this most unusual whale patrol.

I didn't think we would solve the mystery with just one expedition, but I was very hopeful we would find a few important clues.

By compiling and analyzing data, Project Director Dave Wiley and Biologist Regina Asmutis documented that the mid-Atlantic coast has become an important habitat for juvenile humpback whales. And they found that the whales are dying at an alarming rate!

Prior to 1986, the large coastal area in question had almost no whale sightings. The first substantiated whale deaths occurred in 1986 when two dead humpbacks were found. In 1987 and 1988, no deaths were reported, but since then the number has mysteriously skyrocketed.

In 1989 three humpbacks died, followed by eight deaths in 1990 and another seven in 1991. Then, last year 14 more died!

And already in 1993, another four have washed ashore dead! As you can see from the headline in your *Whalewatch* newsletter, the US Navy is a prime suspect in these deaths.

While Regina Asmutis was standing on the deck of a commercial whale watch boat operated for the Virginia Marine Science Museum, she was looking out over the ocean for whales. Suddenly Regina heard a high-pitched whine overhead. Then, on the horizon, Naval artillery shells exploded as they struck the water.

As unbelievable as it sounds, the US Navy was shelling

(Over, Please)

ocean areas now known to be humpback whale habitat!

I don't want to be overly critical of the US Navy; they probably have been using these areas for gunnery practice for years. I can't say that our team saw an artillery shell actually strike a whale. I'd guess the thought of whales passing by has probably never even occurred to the military involved. But now we have solid evidence that the whales are there, that shelling is an obvious threat, and that the humpback whales need protection, NOW!

We've telephoned Navy officials and have received polite assurances ... but absolutely nothing has been done!

Whales are dying. In January 1993, a dead juvenile humpback was found on the outer banks of North Carolina. On March 7, 1993, another dead juvenile humpback was found at Cape Henlopen, Delaware, a young male approximately 32 feet long.

And again, on March 28, 1993, a humpback whale was found dead in the surf along the North Carolina coast. It measured 42 feet in length. This was the first adult whale known to have died in the area being investigated.

Please help us force the US Navy to consider the shelling of new mid-Atlantic humpback whale habitat a serious high-priority matter.

One person in President Clinton's cabinet who can force a change is the new Secretary of Defense, Les Aspin. Please write to Mr. Aspin at the address noted in your *Whalewatch*. Ask that he take immediate steps to stop the bombardment of humpback habitat. Our members in the United Kingdom and Canada can write Mr. Aspin in care of the US Embassy in London or Ottawa.

If you can also help me on this issue with a donation to fund our policy team and our "congressional education campaign," I would sincere-ly appreciate it. We are still trying to recover the expense of taking the NAVAHO all the way down to Virginia and North Carolina on this life saving mission.

Any contribution you can make will help us in what is sure to be a long battle with the Navy.

In friendship,

Daniel J. Morast

Daniel J. Morast, Director
Whale Adoption Project

VITA

Brooke Patrick

Candidate for the Degree of

Master of Arts

Thesis: DEVELOPMENT OF CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS IN COMPOSITION STUDENTS

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Biographical:

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