Knowing Your Audience and the Limits of Critique

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As If Learning Mattered: Reforming Higher Education.
By Richard E. Miller. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998.

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In a presentation at the 1999 Conference of College Composition and Communication (4Cs) in Atlanta, Richard E. Miller (1999a: 4) argued that graduate educators in composition need to answer the question "What would it mean to consciously train people to work in the system of higher education that is evolving before our eyes, a system where the boundary between academic and corporate culture is being steadily eroded?" with something besides the defiant "we must resist the corporatization of the university with our last dying breath." Instead, he claimed that we need to face, "head-on, what it means to work in the corporatized University of Excellence" (5). To Miller, such a confrontation would mean in part that graduate programs in composition take seriously the responsibility for training Ph.D. students to do administrative work:

> In place of receiving yet more instruction in issues impinging on the composing process, they would take a host of courses designed to prepare them for the jobs Ph.D.s in comp. actually receive—jobs in writing program administration. At this level, students would commit themselves to understanding how institutions work and how they can be made to change, becoming experts in management and institutional culture. . . . [T]he writing program could come to serve as the preeminent site in the university for training the future leaders of the academy—the place for

developing and then putting into practice plans for responding to the forces of corporatization and the shifts in public funding that now exercise such control over the shape of higher education. If such an interdisciplinary program could further train its graduates to see institutional constraints for what they are—namely, an opportunity for improvisation—they could help to foster a habit of mind—dare I call it an entrepreneurial spirit?—committed to having real world consequences. (10–11)

While the piece begins with a relatively pointed critique of a professional tendency to rage against the dying of a university culture that remains above a profit-centered corporate ideology, it ends with what I initially heard as a rather mild, if far-reaching, proposal to teach administration as a focal point of graduate education in composition.

There were several minor revisions in this piece when it appeared in the Modern Language Association's volume *Profession 1999*, but perhaps none was more telling than this: to the sentence ventriloquizing responses to the question I quoted above about consciously training people to work in a corporatized university, Miller (1999b: 98) added: "and we must denounce all who do not join us as collaborators with the enemy." I highlight this addition because Miller was so denounced in the question-and-answer period following his 4Cs presentation: a respondent read a prepared piece in which she compared Miller to those—whom she labeled fascist—who thwarted Communism by collaborating with state power. She most clearly viewed Miller's proposal as more modest than mild.

What's challenging about Miller's call, I think, is not that he wants graduate students to become better trained administrators; such suggestions are common features of the profession by now, voiced regularly, for example, on the Writing Program Administrators discussion list (WPA-L). Instead, the charge of fascism was most likely leveled because of a stance toward university reform that Miller began outlining most clearly in *As If Learning Mattered: Reforming Higher Education*, in which he claims that eloquently and stridently asserting the fallen nature of the university, positing utopian transcendent solutions that will save the academy from one or another threat, do more toward "manifesting and securing the academic's mark as a moral figure" (22) than toward having any effect on the material conditions that legitimately warrant such outrage.

As If Learning Mattered begins with the premise that substantive educational change can occur only within a set of local and institutional constraints, as part of, not agitation against, bureaucracy: "To pursue educational reform is thus to work in an impure space, where intractable material conditions always

threaten to expose rhetorics of change as delusional or simply deceptive; it is also to insist that bureaucracies don't simply impede change: they are the social instruments that make change possible" (9). When it thus ends with a call that professionals learn how to be "good bureaucrats," Miller is already prepared for a version of the strong reaction his paper engendered at the 4Cs conference: "As noxious as such an idea is sure to sound to most, given the negative connotations of the word, this proposal is bound to appear positively repulsive to those for whom the virtues of bureaucracy are inconceivable" (210).

Different versions of this attitude appear in nearly all the case studies Miller presents, in the actions of would-be reformers who can't quite make reform happen, visionaries who can't reconcile their visions with practical constraints and the inevitable resistance those visions provoke. His first such example is Matthew Arnold, inspector of schools from 1851 to 1886, whose failed opposition to an increasingly mechanized educational system, Miller claims, gave rise to "Matthew Arnold, Cultural Critic," who proudly asserts that the critic's most important role lies not in "lending a hand to our friends and countrymen in their actual operations for the removal of certain definite evils, but rather in getting our friends and countrymen to seek culture" (qtd. on 78). As inspector of schools, Arnold argued loudly against a proposal—the revised code—that would pay money to schools only upon the performance of a set standard in reading, writing, and arithmetic examinations. He saw the proposal as ignoring local circumstances, as the low quality of the educational materials further reduced the time poor children spent in schooling; for Arnold, making this proposal law would mean that the rich schools would get richer, the poor poorer, and that education would be reduced to a series of mechanical preparations for a meaningless test.

Miller reads *Culture and Anarchy* and much of Arnold's later writing as Arnold's ultimate reaction to the passage of the revised code in 1862, "mark[ing] his retreat from the sphere of direct political action to a safer place where he could identify problems, detect patterns, produce his own loose system of categorization, and refrain from the brutally disappointing business of proposing actual plans for enacting the reforms he supported" (75). Miller argues this withdrawal from political action, and not Arnold's status as defender of high culture against the effete barbarians, as the mark of his professional significance: "This willed impotence, emerging in response to a *single* failure in the political sphere, is surely the central legacy of Arnoldian criticism, for here we find the all-purpose and apparently irresistible justification for the necessity of writing about the world but not acting in it, save through the production of more prose about the failure of the world and the people

who live in it to meet one's high expectations" (77). For Miller, Arnold failed not because the proposal he opposed became law but because he ultimately retreated from the domain of political action after—Miller wants to make clear—only one setback.

This theme of retreat resonates throughout the book, though it comes in different forms. For Robert Maynard Hutchins, president of the University of Chicago from 1929 to 1951, the "great books" protected "the cultivation of the intellect for its own sake" from the forces of vocationalism (qtd. on 96), and he worked with Mortimer Adler and several others to make the great books the center of general education at the university. But he did so without large-scale faculty support and managed to pull it off as long as he did, Miller argues, in part through brute institutional authority and in part because World War II proved enough of a distraction to keep opposition to the program ineffective. But after Hutchins left Chicago, his reforms were summarily dismantled, leading Miller to conclude that "it is impossible to judge [his] attempt to establish a unified undergraduate curriculum grounded in the Great Books as anything other than a complete failure" (102). For Miller, this episode "vividly illustrates the dangers of dismissing the demands of the resident workforce, since Hutchins could sustain his sweeping reforms only as long as he wielded enough power to silence and terrorize his foes" (205) in a community that just bided its time until things could get back to normal. The retreat here (and in a later example Miller provides about the great-books curriculum at St. John's College) takes shape as a refusal to take into account local politics, a refusal Miller sees as guaranteed to doom any reform effort.

Miller also emphasizes a retreat from the very object of educational reform, the student, who he argues appears commonly as "an absolutely anonymous, deracinated, ahistorical, malleable, infinitely penetrable being, as quick to embrace cynical relativism as critical, self-reflexive thinking; conservatism as conscientization; a pedagogy of despair as one of possibility" (16). While his interest in representation of the student runs throughout the book, it becomes a particular focus in his chapters about the Open University's course on popular culture, U203, and ethnographies of schooling. Designers of the Open University, established in Great Britain in the late 1960s, sought to provide greater educational opportunity to nontraditional and working-class students by developing innovative approaches to distance learning, and U203 appeared from 1982 to 1987 as a course specifically meant to introduce theories of popular culture to a wide audience. Tony Bennett, who directed the course planners, promised students they would be able to engage critically with popular culture and its role in their lives, in society, and in politics in a

course they would find "intrinsically interesting" (qtd. on 144). But Miller argues that the course failed on both counts, using student evaluations and course materials to demonstrate that the course was not intrinsically interesting and did not allow students to engage critically with popular culture. For one thing, an institutional and delivery structure made it difficult to imagine student work beyond the boundaries of recitation. In combination with a perceived need to further develop a complex theory that the course planners themselves were in disagreement about, the course ended up being a highly theoretical endeavor in which students were given little opportunity to do more than parrot ideas given to them in lectures and course packs. In other words, what began as a course intended to engage students in a critique of the culture around them, in a university founded in part on the premise that education could become available to all students in all cases, instead turned into a class that alienated students through excessive theorizing and gave them little outlet to respond, or to deal with their resistance to the material, beyond giving the theories back in responses to factual questions.

This operates as a retreat from the student because it fails to account for the very real challenges of providing complex theoretical material replete with an oppositional political agenda to students unaccustomed to such texts and who declare themselves uninterested in the political project. So regardless of the planners' intent to provide students with a unique educational experience, Miller argues that ultimately "the course team's stance toward popular culture and its reliance on the pedagogical apparatus provided by the OU combined to ensure the delivery of an educational product whose primary features were its theoretical sophistication and the antagonism it provoked from the students" (150). Thus, Miller presents this foundational moment in the history of cultural studies as grounded in an untenable relationship with students.

Miller closes his case studies by discussing two ethnographies of schooling: *Coming of Age in New Jersey* (Michael Moffett) and *Ways with Words* (Shirley Brice Heath). Both texts, Miller argues, albeit in critically different ways, highlight the limits of the ethnographic perspective and thus of ethnography in general. But, in a characteristic spin in perspective, it is precisely those limitations that Miller sees as one of the primary benefits of ethnographies of schooling:

> [Ethnographies] can be shown to detail how the "expert observer's" understanding of the observed event is inescapably circumscribed by disciplinary and personal commitments that, in turn, reveal the research project's equally inescapable complicity

with dominant systems of constraint. Such an approach is particularly productive when directed to ethnographies of schooling, giving the lie to the seductive vision of the educator as a free-floating entity and providing in its place a more grounded, perhaps even "fallen," account of how educators and their students work within and against reigning material and discursive conditions. (189–90)

Miller acclaims Heath's study of three communities in the Piedmont region of the Carolinas more highly than Moffett's study of undergraduates at Rutgers, largely for the respect she shows to the subjects of her research, but he reads both studies to demonstrate the allegiances ethnographers, and reformers, must make with dominant systems in order for their visions to be persuasive. Heath retreats from addressing issues of race, Miller argues, but it's a retreat he can live with for two reasons. First, he reads the backgrounding of race as making *Ways with Words* more accessible to teachers working in newly desegregated conditions, and second, one of the reasons he values ethnographies is that the generic proliferation of voices necessary makes these sorts of retreats visible and available to counterinterpretation.

Perhaps it's my training, but I found the experience of reading this book slightly odd. For one thing, there is a level of specific bureaucratic detail that is so unfamiliar to me as data: discussions of committee meetings at the University of Chicago, for example, or shake-ups in the board of *Screen Education* around the relationship of pedagogical to theoretical issues. Miller means, as he writes, to take these kinds of bureaucratic situations out of the "critical darkness" (203) in which they typically occur, to suggest that at least as much as anything else we do in our intellectual lives as academics, our bureaucratic role figures highly in our professional lives. To deny that, or fight against it, or look for situations in which the bureaucratic is nonexistent is both impossible and undesirable, for, unless one wants to retire "to the security of one's own classroom or office, where one's designs can, presumably, be realized more immediately" (204), it is in the bureaucratic arena that change happens. Miller (1999c), who recently focused on the issue of what counts as evidence in composition studies in a short piece in *College English*, here challenges those of us interested in academic reform to consider what we should value as data, what counts as meaningful evidence. Miller is convincing on this idea that what can read like arcana is *not* arcana, that these sorts of details matter, and he deftly handles these details; his narration of them is compelling, even if the nature of the data makes it occasionally difficult to follow.

A more vexing challenge for me was tracing the threads that linked the aspects of the work. As this review should indicate, Miller moves freely across

historical, pedagogical, and textual terrains, and it can be difficult to keep track of how, for example, the ethnographies of schooling relate to the analysis of Matthew Arnold's work as inspector of schools. In part, I think this comes from Miller's desire to center his book on figurations of the student within academic reform, the rhetorical constructions of students that undergird any attempt to reform education. The problem, and one that Miller acknowledges early, is that this means getting some kind of a fix on an actual student, and "the absences, gaps, and shortcomings in our knowledge about how the student has figured in and been figured by educational reform is intimately related to institutional decisions about what educational materials warrant preservation. . . . [R]eady access to the small body of relevant materials doesn't make up for the absence of representative bodies of student work completed within any of the educational systems I study here" (45). It's an absence that's felt throughout the work, I think, since actual students appear only through course evaluations and the eyes of ethnographers. But Miller's interest in the student, he claims, allowed him to recognize the inevitable function of "higher education's bureaucratic apparatus" on a microlevel—"where teachers see a liberatory practice and rising opportunities, most students see a set of requirements, an arbitrary system of assessments, an impediment to advancement—a bureaucracy, in short" (19)—a realization that informs his analysis of the bureaucratic apparatus at the macrolevel, which I read as his primary goal in the book.

In our daily professional lives as teachers and researchers (teacher-bureaucrats, Miller would have it), we work in arenas where intellectual prowess is not enough to carry the day, where the scholarly legacies we claim in our arguments and citations will not sway political decisions that affect the future of our work and of our students. My own list of political issues I want to rail against includes not only the corporatization of the university, but also the increasing demand for K–12 literacy standards imposed by state bodies, the continued lack of substantive input that adult literacy students in particular have in discussions about what they should learn and why, the increasing vocationalization of curricula at all levels; I invite you to come up with your own lists, and then I invite you to imagine the impassioned and articulate, well-researched critiques you could launch at the practices you find objectionable. No doubt these critiques would be cathartic to write, would educate a sympathetic audience of academic readers, and would even perhaps change a few minds on these issues.[1] But in *As If Learning Mattered*, Miller forces us to consider the viability of these sorts of critiques and the seriousness of our social impulse, and in doing so he joins a growing body of work in composi-

tion studies that places traditional issues of rhetoric in relationship to audiences that have historically been beneath academic consideration.

Peter Mortensen (1998), for example, notes the existence of large-scale audiences interested in literacy and language but comments that "to date that demand has largely been met by commentators not affiliated with universities" who often make arguments directly counter to our professional interest and our training. Such audiences have been neglected in composition's search to gain academic credibility, Mortensen claims, but refusing to "go public" (182) with our expertise means "consign[ing] ourselves to mere spectatorship in national, regional—and, most importantly, local—struggles over what counts as literacy and who should have opportunities to attain it" (183). Krista Ratcliffe (1999: 209) advocates the practice of what she calls "rhetorical listening" as a way of understanding more fully arguments made from unfamiliar positions: "If we recognize not just the claims but the historically-grounded cultural logics enveloping other people's claims, we may still disagree with the claims, but we may better understand the personal and cultural assumptions (dare I say, values and beliefs) that guide other people's logics. And if we also recognize how claims and cultural logics are rhetorically constructed, we may better appreciate the reasoning powers of others even when we disagree with them." And in her analysis of the 1990 controversy involving first-year composition at the University of Texas, Virginia Anderson (2000: 447) claims that composition scholars' "assertion and enforcement of property rights" has affected their "relations both with students and with larger publics" in ways that "have helped constrain their ability to do what they must do if they are to influence U.S. culture: persuade." She is especially interested in how Linda Brodkey and other scholars deny nonexperts the right to make judgments about their work and how that denial keeps these experts from making arguments that those nonexperts will find persuasive: "What good does knowing your audience do when that audience is composed in part of those you would prefer not to honor, even with your gaze" (458)?

This truly rhetorical question can be seen as operating throughout Miller's work as well. *As If Learning Mattered* takes a point of view on academic reform that demands attention to audiences that academics have typically seen as beneath them, the bureaucrats and functionaries that structure academic life: "Teaching undergraduates, working in composition, and being a bureaucratic functionary have all come to circulate as synonyms for disreputable work. All of these activities pose a threat to the notion that employment at the highest levels of the academy leads to a life of relative autonomy" (36).

But this enemy, this bureaucratic functionary, is us, Miller argues, and failing to recognize our institutional position and complicity is a rhetorical failure that will doom attempts at meaningful change in the academy.

In light of his more recent work such as the essay I cited at the opening of this review, I would suggest that Miller's book be read in a way as a prelude, since his call for a restructuring of graduate education in composition seeks to make the composition professional's bureaucratic function a primary object of study, to prepare students to work in a university increasingly focused on profits and relying on labor practices that are questionable at best. This is complicity within a distasteful system, and Miller openly acknowledges that. He would claim that it is his acknowledgment, and not his complicity, that sets him apart from those who want to label this perspective on academic reform as "fascist," for that complicity is a fact of academic life. Miller challenges us to take our basic rhetorical theories seriously in a bureaucratic arena many of us find distasteful, to recognize rhetorical situations, audiences, and constraints, and then to act within them. These notions are part of the stock of our profession, and we would do well to use them in service of professional reform.

Note

1. I recently wrote such a critique, which will appear in the *Journal of Teaching Writing*, in which I argued against a series of educational reforms directed at better preparing students for the changing conditions of work (Branch 2000). My firsthand experience with these reforms made writing this essay highly cathartic, and I stand by the arguments I made there. But I think it is safe to say that my critique will not register anywhere as a threat to the systems it rhetorically dismantles.

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