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FULL DISCLOSURE / NOW WHAT?

Daniel P. Richards

FULL DISCLOSURE

Say what you will about teaching evaluations, but I take them very seriously.

And, if I'm being honest, never *more* seriously than I did when reading over the student feedback from the Fall 2016 semester. I had just finished teaching an introduction to rhetorical studies course at the third-year level, which I had themed around presidential rhetoric. The course was never wanting for conversation as students were processing the lead-up to the November 8 election through classical and contemporary rhetoricians. They were asked to write rhetorical criticism of presidential speeches, from State of the Union addresses, to convention speeches, to impromptu speeches given from the rubble of domestic terrorist attacks. We covered campaign rhetoric, religious rhetoric, and invocations of Cicero on the Senate floor. We would end class early and head over to the local movie theatre—which was streaming the final three debates for free to a public audience—to watch the debates leading up to election day, even noting and analyzing the mild heckling from those in the seats behind us using our backchannel app. I had articulated early on in the semester that their final paper would be a rhetorical analysis not of the presidential *victory* speech but of the *concession* speech, insisting throughout the semester that it would make for a more intriguing analysis and have them explore an undertheorized genre.

I was right.

But as much as I would (or would not) like to share with you the impressive twenty essays analyzing Secretary Hillary Clinton's poignant concession speech, the feedback I was rabid to read was about how I handled negotiating the various viewpoints held by the students. Within the class were outspoken supporters of both major candidates as well as more subdued or even apathetic support for third-party candidates, ranging from Gary Johnson to deceased gorillas from the Cincinnati

Zoo. There were—as you might either imagine or have experienced yourself—contentious, impassioned moments near the end of the semester to go along with the detached analytical frames I was trying to craft for all students near the beginning. I wanted to see if I met my goals of treating each student with the same degree of respect, granting each student the same platform, and not revealing my own preference for the electoral outcome. I wanted to be elusive, even playfully performative in attempts to counter student expectations and student readings of me as a person. I was curious to see if students gave positive feedback of this approach or if, considering the unique circumstances of the election, they wanted something different, something more. Did they want more disclosure, as a person, a private citizen[1] who has strong politics? Or were they content and actually pleased with some semblance of the opposite?

As I read through—and now reread through—the written comments of what our institution maddeningly calls "student opinion surveys," I was searching for any specific comments related the student perspective of my "some semblance of the opposite"—whatever that means, if it might be construed as opposed to disclosure, or vain attempts at abstracted neutrality. In response to the standardized question, "What did you like most about the class and your instructor?" I found, among others, the following comments (I have italicized some key words and phrases):

- "Appreciation of *conversation* and student contribution."
- "He was always respectful of others' viewpoints and at one point when some controversy arose, he handled it and *reeled everyone back in.*"
- "He is approachable and welcomes your thoughts and gives you insight on how to think *objectively.*"
- "The *diverse* readings and class discussions."

In response to the standardized question, "What factors about this class contributed the most to your learning? What aspects of this class helped you to learn to think critically?" I found two more:

- "Group discussion helped flush [sic] out ideas and *variety of viewpoints.*"
- "The class discussions were, by far, the most helpful. I really enjoyed *talking* and *listening* to the other students, and the articles we read in addition to our textbook readings helped me apply what we were learning to contemporary contexts."

I can safely assume in the second point to the first question, the reference to the "controversy" that "arose" was during the class on November 9

where emotions were the most evident. At one point there was one student crying, sharing fears; another attending at a distance via WebEx, whose joy was only more pronounced by the cheerful shouting of "Make America Great Again" by the young daughters of the student; and another, in class, jaded, who would share near the end of class that they were tired from having all their professors that day unload their opinions and tell the students "how to think and feel." With the class starting at 7:00 pm, this student had already attended three classes before mine that day.

Of course, it is impossible to know which student wrote that comment, and I don't recall the specific strategies associated with "reeling students back in," but it reads as though I was trying to temper any emotional outbursts and reinforce what comment number three articulates: giving students "insight on how to think objectively." I find it hard to believe that I would say anything like, "Let's calm down for a bit here," but I could imagine myself saying something along the lines of, "I understand. Why do you think President-elect Trump would choose to frame the issue this way?" I do know before class on November 9 I reached out to a mentor over Facebook and posed the following question:

ME: Do you have any advice on how to handle a political rhetoric class tonight? I feel the need to open up a space for emotional inventory and immediate reflection. Any thoughts on this?

MENTOR: You are definitely in a different situation than we are here [in Canada]—to some extent, we can step back in ways that will be hard for you. I'm going to have students write for a few minutes about how we might think about what happened purely in terms of rhetoric and the rhetorical theory we've read this semester. Then go to a discussion from there. Of course, more general discussion is going to come out there. Then I'm going to show the NY Times material about the trends in voting. We also have to pick 5 key rhetorical moments in the election for panel discussions in class. So, I hope all of it will allow us to think about it all in terms of rhetoric. But again, a different context here. I hope that helps in some way.

ME: It does. Very good advice and a strong way to allow for reflection but keep it focused on rhetoric. I needed this because I am fearful that I am not thinking straight this morning.

"Keep it focused on rhetoric"—what an odd thing for me to say. It made sense at the time, while I'm sure it is an easily dismissible statement, as if visceral emotions stemming from a response of a politician's rhetoric are not also "keeping it focused on rhetoric." And my fear of "not thinking straight [that] morning," well, that is messy as well.

Like most good rhetoricians, I stayed up right until the final election results were posted and the postmortem was covered by the surprised

and weary faces of the political left. My wife and then eleven-month-old daughter were asleep. For the first time since our daughter was born, I was longing earlier that evening for her to wake up. (She was still doing so three or four times every night, and 2:00 am was the cutoff my wife and I had established: any wakeups from bedtime to 2:00 am were covered by me, anything after 2:00 am, by my wife.) Knowing the final results would be established just before 2:00, I was cherishing the idea of opening the door to pick up my crying daughter, and gently place her over my shoulder, bouncing up and down, and being able to hold her for the first time with the knowledge that a woman was president-elect, thinking of how her first memories in this country to which we immigrated would be of the presidential office occupied by a woman. Having the news on in the background, with images of a female president etched into her malleable memory. Selfishly, my work as a father would be a bit easier, being able to point to President Hillary Clinton as evidence of the endless possibilities of women in America versus having to explain, well, the opposite.

Instead, when entering my daughter's room my eyes were waterier than hers. My spirit broken. Betrayed. I had just, *unlike* most good rhetoricians, posted a Facebook status immediately responding to the evening but also the last eighteen months: At 3:02 am I posted:

> When the Klan is happy and our most vulnerable are fearful and at risk, we will all lose. I came to live here by choice but you've broken my heart and shattered my spirit tonight, America. You are no longer who you say you are.

Choosing to immigrate to the United States. Fathering a young daughter. Sleeping three hours total. This was my fear of "not thinking straight" during class. I, again, genuinely wanted to provide a space for emotional inventory and immediate reflection, as I stated to my mentor, and the final course evaluations seem to indicate that was I generally successful in doing so in what I deemed to be an appropriate manner. I think.

However, when I got home at 10:30 pm after class and was stress-eating in the kitchen, I saw that I had an email from one of the students in the class who underwent a struggle of their own during discussion—trying to put into analytical terms their emotional response, most likely because that was the expectation I set up throughout the semester. It was titled "Parting remarks" (I think referring to remarks after parting that specific class, as this student did stay enrolled and active throughout) and began with a thought on our in-class coverage of Secretary Clinton's concession speech—something they now knew they had to analyze. It began abruptly:

Saying that Clinton seemed relieved to go back to being a grandmother is a touch sexist.

Also, sorry for rambling [during class discussion]. It was hard to articulate in a way that overcame my level of emotion and refrained from making my own political opinions evident.

Lastly, the tenure [*sic*] of the discourse was at times a trigger for me. I believe you do try to foster a safe space, but that isn't always the case.

As someone who is naturally drawn to Bill Thelin's (2005) reflections on "blundering" through teaching, I know very well that every semester, every class, there are areas for improvement. I was disappointed in myself for allowing a student to not feel as though I had created a safe space—and also disappointed in my off-the-cuff read of Secretary Clinton's speech. I responded a few minutes after reading:

Dear [student],

Thank you for pointing that out. That was an unfair interpretation of the speech and you are correct in saying so. Don't apologize for rambling. Your point [communicated in class] was very well thought out and an accurate assessment in my estimation of how Trump was able to achieve his goal. You are open to making your political views apparent if you wish.

On the last point, how can I foster a more safe space going forward as we will be discussing the results, inevitably, again?

Dr. Richards

The student responded a half hour later:

Dr. Richards,

Thank you for the reply. I apologize that I was so agitated as to not follow appropriate email etiquette and also for [misspelling] tenor/tenure. I'm just not in the right head space. Your email was very kind. I'm reasonably certain I was a mess.

I understand we want to allow for free and open discussion of opposing viewpoints, however as a moderator it isn't enough to just help explore the topic. There was a moment when a student was expressing her friend's fears and another student began to talk over her. The exchange became a little elevated. Imagine that the first student was expressing her own fear, to be seemingly attacked at that point only validates that sentiment. I think a small interjection there was required to keep anyone from feeling threatened.

Best,
[Student name]

The "moment" referred to here I am quite sure is the same "moment" mentioned above where another student claimed I was able to "reel things in." This student read that transaction differently, and interpreted

my "reeling in" of things as an implicit validation of the perceived attack and a way of handling the situation that ignored the real emotion of the student. My objective reeling to one student was a lack of validation to another, my own personal success a failure to protect an emotionally vulnerable student.

The student's email also, read closely, communicates a nuanced vision of the role of the professor. First, the student adapts the metaphor of "moderator" when referring to the behavior of the professor during class discussions. This certainly is befitting of my own teaching philosophy (most of the time) and I would contend the vision most students have of what a professor ought to be. Second, there are circumstances for this student in which being a moderator "isn't enough," where exploring the topic should not be the only role taken by the professor. The student then recounts her experience as an observer of a Clinton supporter expressing the fears felt by her friend, an immigrant, whom she met at college, but being "talked over" by another student, the Trump supporter with the celebrating children. The concerned student notes that this was a time for "interjection"— one I thought I took in my head but either (a) did not do or (b) did not do in a way appropriate for the situation at hand, a situation the concerned student thought epitomized or validated the fear being expressed by the student.

My follow-up email is one I regret. Still do. Not all of it, mind you—I did think it was important to reply back and thank the student for their honest feedback, and it helped me make sense of the complexity of blunders. But the part where I disclose. Daughter in the other room, and salt on my fingers from my stress-food of choice, I type on my phone the following response about 15 minutes later:

[Student name],

Again, no apologies necessary. Full disclosure, tonight's class was the hardest I've been through, and the last 24 hours the darkest since I moved to the US, so I really value your thoughts.

I spoke with [student expressing friend's fears] afterwards. I will follow up with [her] to ensure. I take pride in being attuned emotionally to students, but I lapsed there. Thank you for pointing that out and for looking out for your fellow classmates.

Thank you, [student name], for the conversation and the initial email.[2] I'm not offended by the original format. Proper addressing in emails is the least of our concerns right now.

Dr. Richards

I regret the email because of the extent to which and nature of how I disclosed my own emotional state. And my pedagogical challenges. And my political inflections. And my teaching philosophy, although to a much lesser extent. I read this email now as an attempt to genuinely forge a personal connection with a student, perhaps as a way to assuage the situation. That is my personality—I avoid conflict. My personality is perhaps why I am sympathetic to Maxine Hairston's (1992) aversion to intentional conflict in the classroom. But I digress.

Disclosing to students—even to only one of them, and even only via email—the emotional difficulties of teaching and the "darkness" of immigration life is certainly not common practice for me, and a part of my life I did not want to make evident during that particular semester. I am sympathetic to Lad Tobin's (2010) thinking on teacher disclosure as not having a set answer but defined by the approach: "It depends." This student was provided insight into my emotional state that the others did not get. While the "why" behind this decision is more appropriate for a book of another kind, and one that should be based in psychological research, I responded to the open and honest feelings of a student with those of my own. Selfishly, perhaps I did this because I wanted sympathy and understanding for not giving an appropriate interjection. Less cynically, perhaps I did this because I was longing for an emotional connection with the students I just spent three months processing politics with and consistently putting my own emotions aside. Or perhaps I did it because it is my natural inclination outside the classroom to be vulnerable interpersonally, especially when first showed vulnerability by another. Frankly I'm not sure, but I am grateful for senior scholars in the field providing reflections on "blundering" to make me feel better about the on-the-ground contradictoriness of my own pedagogical practice.

I disclose this narrative to you, the hopefully generous reader, because I want to paint a picture of some sort that relays the complex facets of non-disclosure and disclosure in the context of teaching rhetoric and writing in a way that helps better approach the maligned and increasingly magnified concept of *teacher neutrality* from the perspective of someone who strives, often haphazardly, towards its dim light, though it leads me to an impossible location.

NOW WHAT?

I do not claim that the above perspective is correct; I'm not even entirely sure myself how and why I have come to believe what I believe about higher education and my place within it.[3] I know in my mind that I try

to make myself gray—or in the case of presidential rhetoric courses, perhaps purple—to direct student attention towards something other than me, something bigger than the class, something beyond us. I have books and mentors and inspirations and experiences that have shaped me but to claim that my approach is the most effective, the most justified, or the most accurate would be very uncomfortable. And I think that any one of us who claims to be teaching the *right* way in whatever capacity we operate as political agents in the grand operation of American higher education is on shaky ground. For as this collection reveals, the landscape of higher education is so kaleidoscopic, our institutions so different, our politics so divergent, our students so diverse that working towards any uniform model of political self-disclosure would be pretty short-sighted.

Given the exigence of the collection and the external pressure we feel from the outside, I'm wondering if our efforts would be better invested not in grappling with each other but in bringing our students more directly into this wild ride. I have my own reasons for how I teach the way I teach. So do you. And that's fine. In fact, it's more than fine—it is perhaps the most beautiful picture of academic freedom there is. But given the lack of stasis in this treacherous notion of teacher neutrality and the fact that students might not see the beauty in such a multicolored portrait, and that so much of what we do and teach and talk about and grade is ineluctably political, might explicit conversations or prompts or projects or courses not be a remedy for it? At least in part? I'm not necessary talking about a first-year writing course where the theme is *The University* and the readings are populated with various theories and critiques of American higher education (although, maybe?), but more about foregrounding the classes we teach with meta-institutional, meta-curricular, and meta-performative conversations about why we are or are not choosing to be political in a certain way and what our "rights"[4] are to do so. Would students resist as much if they knew the role of tenure, historically, in its original design and purpose? If they knew of the existence of the AAUP and its tenets and our relative alignments with them? If they knew the difference in social function between K–12 and higher education, and how public K–12 teachers, as spokespeople[5] of the boards for which they work, cannot really be political in the ways university professors can? Would students resist as much if we ourselves knew more about current theories of cognitive and moral development from psychology research? If we were more empathetic and reflective about, for example, how we as youthful nineteen-year-olds would have responded to a radical libertarian first-year writing teacher implicitly encouraging students to compose essays about the social injustice of government overreach

on individual liberty after just getting out of twelve years of education where the main presence of anything political was in the border art of the classroom walls? I mean, sure they would—they're students taking a writing course. And if we're being honest, we might even find some of ourselves in the resistive students (I know I do). However you answer these questions, if you humor them at all, I sense it is becoming near-imperative that we enter into these birds-eye-view discussions about higher education and our collective places within it *with* students and guide and co-explore more educationally the language of teaching performance and politics.

So, how to do this? There are myriad ways, and the authors included in this collection provide various levels of guidance on what this work might look like. I myself, in line with how Patricia Roberts-Miller speculates in the foreword, like to think of this work potentially being done through metaphor. As Roberts-Miller writes: "If we stop talking about teacher neutrality, what are more useful models or metaphors?" The word *useful* here rings true here for me, and this is the pragmatic intellectual space in which I'd like to end this book. Scratching and clawing each other to the bone about the possibility of neutrality is not a useful endeavor because teacher neutrality never was and never will be an epistemic or ontological claim. Students know this. They know we're political creatures. The concept of teacher neutrality, even when uttered by those outside the academy, still reads as metaphorical not epistemic. It reads as an operative metaphor for being fair, considerate, self-aware, and critical of all standpoints. It reads as a way of acting, not being. And this really might be where useful metaphorical connections might be made between the embattled parties in this larger conversation about higher education.

I have written before about the "active potential" of metaphor to bring about change in student perceptions towards argument and education in the "ruins"[6] of the posthistorical university (see Richards 2017), and my arguments were supported with five decades' worth of work in rhetoric and composition pointing to the value of metaphor for ourselves and our students to bring about *conceptual* and—if you're a believer, as I am, in Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) social cognitivist approach to metaphor—*behavioral* change. My light critique of the field in that piece rested upon the fact that we don't typically bring students as directly into conversations about metaphor as we perhaps should. And this is a problem because, while metaphors can be playful and productive ways to bring students into a conversation, metaphors also develop out of material experience. So, to have your performance

as a teacher inspired by the metaphor of, say, a trickster—as one who playfully stirs the pot with secret knowledge and seems to have ulterior motives but in the end is the hero who establishes a new normative order—is well and good but it might not resonate with students who just had the very real material experience of working with banks and family and the government to scratch by for another semester's tuition. Their financially centric experiences with various institutions might lead them to see you as a job trainer, and college as their ticket out of this mess, and after spending hours on the phone with a bank might not have any energy or sympathy left for trickery.

But rather than paint this picture as cynical, why not as hopeful? Why not as an opportunity to make the classroom space an opportunity to have higher-level discussions of how it has come to this? How it is that the one behind the lectern repudiates the notion of teacher neutrality at every mention of it but ten feet away in a chair there is another who expects such a thing to exist and to be acted upon consistently? What would it look like to theme our courses around the political state in which we all have a stake and a mindset and in which we collectively as institutional bodies find ourselves? What if those willing to email photos of our charming faces to have them pasted on some subversive wanted list for the professoriate are doing so because they've never really had a chance to fully explore and understand the nature of higher education and its histories? And is this our role to do these things? To bring some semblance of stasis? I think, given our expertise in rhetoric and the fact that the loudest wailings and lamentations of our "ruined" campuses can be traced back to English departments, it can be. Maybe it *should* be—I don't know.

What I *do* know is that students are primed to use metaphorical language and have strong feelings about the education they are getting, positive or negative as these feelings may be. For example, the student of focus in the vignette beginning this chapter called my positionality as a teacher "moderator." In the email exchange, the student wrote: "I understand we want to allow for free and open discussion of opposing viewpoints, however as a moderator it isn't enough to just help explore the topic." I did not explicitly state this as an operational metaphor in class; I never shed insight with the students about my own teaching philosophy, particularly the unique one for presidential rhetorics. And yet here was this student, in one mere sentence, shedding insight for me on how they see my role ("moderator"), the purpose of higher education ("free and open discussion of opposing viewpoints"), and the limitations of it all ("as a moderator it isn't enough to just help explore the topic").

We may have shared similar metaphoric structures—something loosely resembling moderation, whatever that might mean—but the details along the contours of this shared metaphor differed. It "wasn't enough" for me just to moderate. No, I needed to "interject" to ensure students did not feel "threatened" by the speech of their peers. For this student, moderation includes more than just rational guidance but about having your finger on the emotional pulse of the room. And then there are still the other students who appreciated my sense of "objectivity" and abilities in "reeling things in" when conversations got too heated, the latter of which offers a different view of the emotional exchange. Metaphorically, these discursive units can be coded under the larger category of "neutrality," not in the perfect, elusive epistemological sense but in the performed sense. There is opportunity here to make clear, transparent[7] connections with students.

In re-reading the email conversation, I was also curious about the statement in the student's initial email: "Also, sorry for rambling [during class discussion]. It was hard to articulate in a way that overcame my level of emotion and refrained from making my own political opinions evident." I was curious as to whether or not my own detached method of teaching communicated or modeled to the rest of the students that, first, emotion is something to be "overcome" and, second, that one should strive to refrain from making one's political view evident. I have no way of knowing, now, but there might have been different outcomes had I had more explicit conversations about the nature of the higher education, our specific contentious course, and our roles within this ecology.

If you are encouraged to pursue such metaphorical musings with your students, I might prompt you to consider the following. First, these conversations might vary by discipline. This book has as its envisioned readership rhetoric and composition, specifically, and the humanities, more broadly, but metaphors will be situated differently depending on the epistemic and methodological considerations of each discipline. Since many students we teach are not English majors, this could be a productive source of conflict and connection. Second, it might be important that we don't overly structure it. Metaphor is steeped in experience but is still creative and generative—a space of what Lakoff and Johnson call "imaginative rationality." Third, metaphor is a strong conceptual space for younger individuals to reside in, since it rests on a form of mental capacity that does not dwell with paradox but with comparison for the sake of highlighting. Fourth, metaphor highlights the characteristics of the thing to which we are drawing comparisons. It highlights what we see and allows for an entry point into higher-level conversations.

And last, it might be less important to work towards consensus of metaphor and more important to merely talk about it. To students: You see education as an orientation for work? You see teachers as mirrors? You see teachers as judges? All great—let's explore why. For while we might all have different backgrounds and experiences and thus experiential metaphors, it is the unacknowledged and underdiscussed set of assumptions behind these beliefs and the utter lack of stasis among them that is fueling a considerable amount of paradigmatic conflict. Can we open up and work together and briefly talk about what the heck we are even doing here? Can we shift this car into drive with everyone on board?

NOTES

1. I'm not a citizen of the United States but of its neighbor to the north. I received my permanent resident card two months before the semester began and still, at the time of writing, am a resident alien. I did find that this form of "detachment," as being able to position oneself as an "outsider," played a significant role in how students read me and my politics.

2. It should be noted that this was not the first email exchange I had with this particular student. This student attends at a distance and, about a month or so earlier, had reached out after the student's spouse overhead one of our discussions in class concerning offshore drilling in the coastal waters of Virginia. I was discussing research I had done on the Deepwater Horizon blowout and for one reason or another we found ourselves talking about the complicated conversations about energy production (so much for "reeling things in"). The student's spouse offered feedback on my thinking, and corrected one of the statements I had made about the nature and scope of the moratorium on offshore drilling along the Atlantic. I felt I had an existing relationship with this student more so than others, given that fruitful exchange.

3. In fact, as I am writing this section I keep having a nagging thought: Why do we even concern ourselves with student resistance, with what students think? I mean, who cares? The English departments on our campuses seem to have produced the most scholarship on this topic but still faces the most resistance from students. Other disciplines and departments seem to care so little about what students think about them and their topics of coverage and get far less flack. Why? I mean, isn't this the purpose of college? To get exposed to ideologies you distrust or despise and just learn to live with the fact that they might exist in places you don't like? Like, get used to it, right? And listen to what we're saying about rhetoric so you can do something about it, right?

4. Insert inexhaustible list of caveats here about the weakening political power of bodies such as the AAUP and the crumbling "pillar" of tenure and the fact that most of us don't have it and never will.

5. Professors are not necessarily extensions of the institutions in the classroom, but they can be in social media and governmental contexts. However, in public K–12 settings, they can be seen as such. The logic, as held by the Supreme Court in *Garcett v. Ceballos* (126 U.S. 1951 [2006]), is that: "When public employees make statements pursuant to their official duties, they don't have First Amendment protection. If teachers are speaking on behalf of the district, they must represent the district's

views. In the context of public education, teachers deliver the curriculum for a school district. Their speech within this curriculum is what they have been hired to do. As such, the district can control speech during the delivery of instruction" (Underwood 2013, 29). This stronger linkage between teacher and institution in K–12 settings provides insight into how courts interpret the agency of publicly paid teachers, which is framed as acting as discursive extensions of the institution. It requires the work of organizations like the AAUP to advocate for a disconnect between the teachers and the institutions, lest the logic of Wisconsin Assembly Bill 299 (see https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/2019/proposals/ab299) gets combined with *Garcett v. Ceballos* in some potentially corrosive K–16 amalgam policy.

6.   Borrowing from the language of Bill Readings's (1994) *The University in Ruins.*

7.   See Anderson et al. (2013).

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