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STUDENTS’ GOALS, GATEKEEPING, AND SOME QUESTIONS OF ETHICS

Jeff Smith

I

When writing for composition journals, speaking on MLA or 4Cs panels, or discussing departmental affairs with colleagues, one of the terms one had best not use too casually is "gatekeeping." In recent years gatekeeping has become something most of those in our field either don’t discuss or mention not to praise, but to bury. This remark, from a book review in College English, is typical:

Offering "an emancipatory response to the widening fissure between day-to-day experience and institutional conventionality," [Kurt] Spellmeyer [in Common Ground: Dialogue, Understanding, and the Teaching of Composition] concludes with a utopian ideal of classroom practice that maintains "a balance of communicative power" that silences no one, teachers or students (22–23). If a freshman paper, for instance, were seen as a "threshold between two distinct contexts of social life and meaning," teachers could stop serving as "initiatory gate-keepers, barring the way to pollution by the 'nonacademic.' “ (Bloom 846)

Spellmeyer's reported view, seemingly endorsed by reviewer Lynn Z. Bloom, is that to eschew gatekeeping—at least in first-year college writing courses—is a “utopian” aim, but in the good sense: the shimmering ideal at the horizon of current practice, the thing to keep moving toward. Gatekeeping is all caught up in power imbalances, silencings, the imposition of one value system (the “academic”) on another and presumably more natural one—an imposition seen as part of a misguided and perhaps even fetishistic concern for purity (and consequent anxiety over “pollution”). Compared to such a practice, any ideal is better, even one that’s a bit pie-in-the-sky.

Views like these are such commonplaces that they are rarely defended in detail, or even fully articulated. Bits of explication, however, lie here and there in any

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number of seemingly unrelated discussions. Thumbing further through College English quickly produces examples:

Because many of us who teach writing also write, we think of ourselves as more than technicians whose task is to bring our students' writing into line with a service model imposed from a culturally monolithic outside. To think otherwise would be to concede that almost everything about education in America is none of our business: We teach students to write grammatically correct sentences; somebody else—the corporate elite, the knowledge brokers, the guardians of culture and knowledge, the moneyed ruling class—tells them what those sentences should say. (Walters 822)

This comment of Frank D. Walters's, though not mentioning gatekeeping by name, summarizes the political critique that underlies suspicion of it. By the terms of this critique, gatekeeping would be seen as one of the "service" functions imposed on teachers and colleges by the corporate powers—that-be. To accede to demands for it is therefore to serve the corporate powers' oppressive, elitist, and (some would say) white-Euro-male agenda. And to resist that agenda presumably includes refusing to gate-keep.

Or consider this, from an adjacent piece:

It is the object of this essay to suggest a plagiarism policy that would respect the textual values expressed in existing policies but that would also revise policy to allow for alternative approaches—and specifically to enable pedagogy that is a response to contemporary theory. . . . Such a policy is of necessity a compromise; traditional textual values attribute proprietorship, autonomy, originality, and a corollary morality to "true" authorship, whereas a substantial sector of contemporary theory denies the very possibility of associating any of these qualities with authorship. (Howard 789)

Here Rebecca Moore Howard discusses, not gatekeeping in general, but one of its attendant practices (penalizing students for plagiarism) in light of the revelations of "contemporary theory." Such theory, it is widely believed, has revealed traditional views of student writing to be a kind of textual Ptolemaic model, a creaky old orthodoxy from which the radically decentering labors of our latter-day Copernicus and Galileo—Derrida and Foucault—have finally freed us. It stands to reason that this new, better understanding of the textual universe has obvious and probably drastic implications for our teaching practices, many of which must now appear hopelessly old-fashioned. Indeed, on this account, even if we set aside Walters's political critique and decided—like some early Copernican still bound to the Church—that we were content to serve the corporate elite, it would be theoretically naive to gate-keep, for the gates lead not only to the land of the powers-that-be. They open, too, onto a less enlightened past.

I cite these views not for their uniqueness but for their utter typicality. Dismissiveness toward gatekeeping and all it implies goes well beyond College English. Thus Denise David, Barbara Gordon and Rita Pollard, writing in CCC, link gatekeeping to an outmoded view of writing courses as something skilled students
might just as well skip (529). In the same journal, Tom Fox unapologetically refers to composition’s “strong commitment” to “political goals” that seek “social transformation,” noting that it must therefore refuse to “polic[e] students’ language for purposes of stratification” (576, 568, 577)—policing and stratification being, of course, gatekeeping’s close cousins. In *Rhetoric Review*, Marshall W. Alcorn, Jr., takes issue with James Berlin’s theory of the “postmodern subject,” but only to keep that theory from interfering with the programmatic goals he and Berlin share. Since these goals include undercutting “the commitments students have to ideology,” and since ideology in this postmodern sense is more or less the whole existing social order, it must follow that the agencies of that order have no business gatekeeping—that is, screening and choosing among students. And so on.

Even the term “gatekeeping” itself expresses distaste, suggesting as it does both barriers (“gates”) and selectivity (“keeping”)—not to mention the barbarians said to be just outside. Granted, gatekeeping can’t help but surface as an issue when we discuss what goes on in college, since colleges grant degrees: “tickets” through one or more gates. But even without the objections from politics and theory, many teachers would want to disentangle gatekeeping from instruction in writing. Doesn’t good writing demand a lack of inhibition? Doesn’t inhibition arise from having to meet requirements? And isn’t gatekeeping all about imposing requirements? How, therefore, could threatening students with failure—the slamming shut of gates—possibly free them up to write well? Linda Brodkey, who disparages composition’s role in “guard[ing] the gates of the professions” (it has traditionally served, she says, to screen out “class interlopers” and “class malcontents”), speaks for many in our field when she wonders whether these “regulating” functions haven’t “succeeded best at establishing a life-long aversion to writing in most people” (221, 220).

What interests me isn’t just whether these critiques of gatekeeping are correct, but the fact that they seem to share two unexamined assumptions. The first is that questions of gatekeeping—is it good or bad? should we do it or not?—can be settled by writing teachers themselves. (Usually, of course, with the answers “It’s bad and we shouldn’t.”) The second assumption is that we can settle these questions without ever asking students what they think. What these two assumptions suggest about our posture toward students, and our ethical obligations to them, is what I would like to explore here.

II

However little it may be discussed, it’s obvious that after our students leave our writing classes, most are likely to have to pass through gates: graduation, graduate-school admission, professional certification, job searches, performance and partnership reviews. But even if this weren’t so, gatekeeping would still be part of the
picture. For students have already passed through gates en route to our classrooms. To read the compositionist literature, one would almost think that students simply materialize in our classes on Day 1 of each new term. No doubt many teachers agree, with Tom Fox, that composition "wants" a curriculum "that invites participation from those who are excluded from the political mainstream" (577). But most, like Fox, fail to ask whether "those who are excluded" are for the most part the people we're dealing with. Some of the excluded do find their way to campus, but most, presumably, are somewhere else: in our ghettos and barrios, for instance. It's unclear what a writing teacher can do solo to "invite" those larger numbers into anything. Until they place themselves, or are placed, before us, teachers qua teachers have zero impact on the mass of "excluded." (That is part of their exclusion.) The fact is, we do not encounter our students in a random, unselected way, like Socrates bumping into his next interlocutor while crossing the Agora. The gates students must pass through bracket our efforts like bookends. And the existence of both kinds of gates, pre-composition and post-, has implications for what we do.

Let us first be clear on just what these gates are. Consider two groups: the one-fifth to one-quarter of young people who earn BAs, and the similar proportion who work at jobs which the government classifies as "managerial and professional." These groups are not identical, but certainly there's a lot of overlap. (For compilations of the relevant statistics, see Adelman; Chronicle 28–46; Roberts 199.) And to the extent that the two groups are related causally, as a function one of the other, these numbers suggest the role college plays in American gatekeeping: It is the gate-in-chief to the professional-managerial occupations, and hence to the social class those occupations define—the one Michael Lind, in his recent book The Next American Nation, calls "the overclass."

Our pedagogical discussion looks considerably different once we recognize that our students—the people at the discussion's center—are not randomly chosen members either of the US population at large or of their particular race, class, gender, and sexual-preference communities. Only a fraction of each of those groups ever shows up on campus; college teachers never come in contact with the greater part. What defines the people we do encounter is, minimally, that they have (a) chosen to attend college and (b) been admitted. In other words, they have some shared goal or aspiration and have at least preliminarily met the requirements set down by the powers-that-be, within the university or beyond it, for those who have that aspiration in view. Nor is this simply the aspiration of students at elite colleges; as the numbers make clear, it is held by large majorities of students.

Could this shared goal be a wish to join that "overclass"? Obviously many students come in with career goals that are vague at best. It's not uncommon for them to change course—to decide, at some point, "You know, I'd really be happier as a marketing director than I would be as a journalist." But what virtually none ever says is, "Instead of doing journalism, I'd rather drive a newspaper delivery truck,"
or “Hey—rather than becoming a marketing director, I think I’ll seek a career as a checkout clerk at World O’ Bargains Discount.” The difference between the one kind of occupation and the other may not be one they can fully articulate. But they know it’s something other than just higher pay, that it’s some greater likelihood of feeling rewarded in the broad sense. Of doing something responsible, something that offers some scope for creative thinking and decision-making.

College plays an obvious role in credentialing people for those more rewarding jobs. Students often pay hefty sums to attend. They “vote with their feet” by flocking to vocationally oriented fields (even more so, perhaps, at the less selective schools), and they rate career and material goals very highly in national surveys (Chronicle 28–46). Even politically activist students, like those profiled in Paul Rogat Loeb’s Generation at the Crossroads, speak with pleasure of the upward mobility they hope to gain from being in college (Loeb; Smith 86). These national studies jibe with what my own first-year students tell me on questionnaires. More than 80 percent of my students volunteer college-related career goals—and mention jobs, careers, or some form of the phrase “being successful”—when asked an open-ended question about their principal reason for being in school. (A student in one recent class wrote simply: “$.”) While they lack the terminology of social class, some students reinvent it by setting their professional goals explicitly in opposition to less attractive outcomes. “I don’t want to work at McDonald’s my whole life. To succeed in this society you need a college degree,” writes one, echoing many similar comments. Such remarks acknowledge the professions as part of a social structure that rewards some people and limits others. (McDonald’s seems to have entered folk wisdom as the aspiring professional’s bête noire, the particular hell reserved for those who lose out in today’s class struggle.) On another question, virtually all my students rate career-qualifying as a least half of their overall motive for attending college; two-thirds describe it as 70 to 100 percent of their motive.

Perhaps the best proof that students are seeking career advancement is the argument from silence—that is, the very unwillingness of many compositionists, for all their supposed solicitude toward students (and the fact that they themselves are college-educated professionals), to address the question of students’ wishes head-on. If the survey results and other data pointed a different way—if students were on record as saying they positively do want what many in our field are inclined to give—we’d be hearing this fact proclaimed from the rooftops. Student wishes would then be Exhibit A in the case for using writing instruction to question prevailing values, for refusing to gate-keep, and all the rest.

Instead the matter of why students come to college is passed over in silence. Thus Alcorn speaks of disabusing students of their “commitments” without seeming to realize, or care, that he is thereby admitting that students have commitments (not just wishes, commitments!) different from the ones he would like them to have. Fox worries that “we are still uncertain of how to measure, conceive, or actualize
this goal” of social transformation (568), but never asks whether such a goal accords with anything students want. He and Walters both cite cases of feminist teachers discovering that it doesn’t—that at least some students resist their ministrations. Walters defines “victory” as overcoming this resistance, and Fox sees “students’ opposition to their political advocacy” as the very proof of the teachers’ claims (Walters 837; Fox 570). Dennis A. Lynch in Rhetoric Review (350–55) and Denise David et al. in CCC (522–24) accurately summarize recent controversies within the field over politics in the classroom, yet nowhere in all this is it noted that anyone on any side in these debates thinks that some say in the matter should be reserved for students.

Even the rare theorist like Linda Brodkey, who grants that students “are not very large children. They are young adults,” who acknowledges their legal rights as adults and who consults national survey results in defense of some aspects of her teaching (230), falls silent on those surveys when it comes to assessing students’ overall goals for their college instruction. To do so—to inquire into what it is the students want, a courtesy we would normally think adults entitled to—would leave Brodkey’s overall argument in tatters. For the surveys Brodkey selectively cites make clear what she and her many colleagues don’t wish to face: that students seek not to resist but to join an elite which, by Brodkey’s own count, makes up only about 20 percent of the US population. And admitting this would in all likelihood compel her to admit some other things too—for instance that students, pace Brodkey and others, don’t consider the rules of English as mere arbitrary ways of sorting people by social class, rules like those that govern which fork to use (224), but instead would like to learn those rules and assume teachers are there to teach them.

As resounding as compositionists’ silence has been on the question of what students come to us seeking, it’s impossible to repress the issue entirely. Here and there we do find it sporadically addressed. A few would deny outright that students come to college looking to join the dominant class. One colleague of mine once declared that her students are here to learn “the System” so they can devote their lives to fighting it. That strikes me as wish-fulfillment fantasy, and in the meeting where I heard her proclaim this it died, shall we say, for lack of a second. A more common and somewhat more plausible line runs like this: “Students are in writing classes not just to gain a credential but to become ‘educated.’ Though they themselves, perhaps, can’t articulate what that means, we know that education in the best sense includes learning to ‘think critically.’ This in turn means learning to see through the dominant ideology, the prevailing mystifications and race/class/gender biases of US society as it presently exists. So by devoting our writing classes to attacking those mystifications and biases, we are, in fact, giving students something they have, loosely speaking, asked for.” By this sort of reasoning, a textbook or syllabus can justify itself both in traditional liberal-humanist terms—as striking a blow for “crit-
ical thinking”—and, at the same time, as a trendier, poststructural-style assault on oppression and “hegemony.”

A third argument takes this effort a step further. It’s the argument another of my colleagues, a postcolonial theorist, summarizes roughly this way: “Students want professional-managerial careers because their aspirations have been shaped within the existing order, which as we know is deeply unjust. It’s our job as teachers to reveal this injustice to them so they can make truly informed choices, free of the false consciousness with which they arrive in our classrooms.” My colleague calls this view “Freirian.” Whether or not that label fits, the argument does, I suppose, at least have the virtue of acknowledging the evidence—the actual professed wishes of students. Of course, it is also self-validating or, as they say in the sciences, unfalsifiable. It’s one of those claims that turns the apparent lack of something into proof of that very thing: The fact that students don’t want something means they really do.

Indeed, any of these three ways of dealing with students’ obstinate refusal to embrace many writing teachers’ goals could claim support from students’ sheer lack of resistance. When Colleague A uses composition classes to train her students in fighting the System, they don’t correct her; no one says, “Excuse me, professor, that’s not what I came here for.” Some no doubt applaud. How much does this tell us? My students claim to be just as enthusiastic about the more traditionally academic things I teach, and the charismatic Professor Q’s are full of praise for his effort to spiritualize writing classes into a search for the “writer within.” College students are remarkably pliable, especially around authority figures—and even the most radical of us are the authority figures in our classrooms. We may disclaim that authority, but students know quite well who in the room has the power, ultimately, to set rules and requirements if she so chooses, and who doesn’t.

Moreover, students quickly get used to the idea that many of their courses, especially required courses like composition, have no clear relationship to their majors or eventual careers. They learn to mark time in these temporary cul-de-sacs, sometimes even to have fun there, safe in the knowledge that the main road will still lead on to graduate business school or a license in engineering. Plus, when it comes to required English, students are no doubt relieved to find themselves asked to talk about, say, social issues; it beats doing sentence diagrams or whatever other drudgework they came in expecting.

Put all this together and it’s not surprising if students don’t tell the teacher that what he’s doing isn’t particularly germane to their real goals. Hence their silence on this, up to the point we last see them, doesn’t trump other evidence of their class and career aspirations. Indeed those aspirations are confirmed pretty much as soon as students are out of our sight. Five or ten years down the road, where are most of them, in fact? At odds with the hegemonic system, fighting it from within or without? Or accepting its diplomas, competing to enter the better graduate schools,
prepping for board and bar exams, looking to get on the tenure or partnership track? I suspect most of us don’t inquire into this because we know perfectly well what the answer would be. And if we don’t, there are studies that will tell us. (See, for instance, Adelman for results of a longitudinal study of college graduates’ later careers.)

III

Thus far I have argued that gates are being kept, whether we like it or not; that these gates open up (or bar the way to) membership in what might loosely be called “the overclass”; that most of those who opt for higher education share a desire to enter that class; and that they see college both as one of the gates and as a key for unlocking others. Now I would like to address what I think must concern us as teachers—the implications of all this for what actually goes on in the classroom.

Of course, many things go on. From expressivism to social constructivism to feminist, multicultural, and postcolonial methods and paradigms, composition has for years been a scene of efforts to find something new, something that breaks free—or better, will break students free—from the dead hand of received tradition. I cannot here give each of these paradigms the detailed attention it deserves, but I also don’t want to lump them all together. They do not all agree. They and their practitioners constitute a lively debate—or many debates, since the terms themselves each name a complex, continuing, far-from-settled discussion.

But the newness itself is one point of linkage. Without the urge to do something different, there’s no need for new paradigms. This impulse is the common current that lights up the Christmas tree of contemporary theories, here turning it red, there white, there green. It’s what we are feeling when (for instance) a feminist theorist like Gail Griffin declares,

[A] “different voice” must be heard, speaking from the pedagogy of centuries of motherhood. It must speak against tendencies toward ever greater specialization, compartmentalization of students and subject matter, and competition enthroned as a deity. It must speak for an immersion in process against an obsession with product, for education as superior to training. And . . . it must speak in the most unsentimental and serious way for an ethic of encouragement whose aim is to teach not subjects but people and whose larger goal is to create an environment where human beings can grow in and toward the fullness of themselves. (Griffin 41; emphasis in original)

This philosophy of what she calls “the motherheart” must be, says Griffin, “at the center of all true teaching.” And later she adds, “What feminists have said about the necessity of role transformations in parenting applies equally to those who act, still, for better or worse, in loco parentis. The academic family, too, must be shaken and transformed” (41).
Advocates of other paradigms might not describe what they’re about in images of family or mothering. I believe, though, that most would agree they are acting on the same urge as Griffin and her fellow feminists—and that this urge, moreover, is not just in the direction of anything new and different, but is likewise aimed at some of Griffin’s own bêtes noir; if not always under the same names. Thus, Griffin’s concern for the “different voices” of the historically excluded and marginalized tracks well with the emphases of multiculturalists and postcolonialists. Her chauvinism toward specialization and received subject-matter divisions recalls the refusal of social constructivists to take existing disciplines, and their received views of “knowledge,” on their own terms. And her call for the dethroning of competition and “product” in favor of growth and “human fullness” echoes the concerns of some expressivists and developmental theorists and of those intent on student “empowerment.”

The common values these projects express—inclusivity, nurturance, student-centeredness, and impatience with compartmentalization and with the constraints of old-style classroom writing tasks—are so widely shared, one could almost say they have come to constitute our field’s pedagogical “Standard Model.” Of course, that’s not a term the members of any of these schools would likely use. Most prefer to see themselves as radical critics of the prevailing standard. But the standard they’re thinking of is a different one: that of the (probably male) professor lecturing from yellowed notes and harrumphing about split infinitives. There may still be writing teachers of that kind around, but not many. They certainly aren’t much in evidence among those who verbalize their aims and interrogate each other’s practices in such forums as 3Cs, College English and the like. As Linda Brodkey says, pedagogical theory has for forty years now been almost the sole preserve of forward-looking structuralists and poststructuralists (227). More vividly, Steven Lynn notes that the few surviving product- (as against process-) oriented compositionists “will soon be outnumbered by members of the Flat Earth Society” (902). A still better comparison might be to soldiers huddling in the jungle because they haven’t yet heard the war’s over. The old Standard Model, if it ever held sway, simply no longer has defenders: There are no theoreticians of the yellowed notes. Even “current-traditional,” a term formally given to some aspects of the old standard, has become a synonym for “old-fashioned.” The phrase seems to exist precisely in order to name that which current theorists oppose.

Yet to talk about gatekeeping in connection with the teaching of writing is to appeal to values that seem a part of that older pedagogy. That may be why current theorists—advocates of today’s inclusive, non-judgmental, student-centered Standard Model—seem about as interested in keeping gates as they are in re-segregating their cities’ drinking fountains. But the converse of this is also true. If gatekeeping is unavoidable and, in fact, is all around us, then perhaps the new standard, at some level, is not viable. Perhaps our pedagogy cannot be the things many
of us wish or imagine. The avant-garde among us sometimes seem to sense that this may be the case. Griffin, for instance, notes that the nineteenth-century female professor who coined the term “motherheart” might not be an adequate role model for her today. She wonders if calling “the maternal spirit” the center of all true teaching is too sweeping. In the end she decides it isn’t—but the doubts she has raised linger.

Rightly so, I believe. Gatekeeping is the crucial issue it is because of the troubling questions it raises about so much of what compositionists today claim to do. Let me illustrate what I mean here by taking up the issue raised by Griffin’s own brief demurrer. Can “the motherheart”—or any principle equally subversive of the old yellowed-notes approach—always be central? More generally, what do teachers owe their students—what, as Griffin correctly calls it, is teaching’s “ethic”? Is it possible to say what “must” lie at the center of all true teaching?

I doubt that it is. For starters, “all true teaching” cannot simply be defined as “the kind of teaching I happen to prefer.” That would be arbitrary and circular. If the phrase is to be used to choose among teaching methods, it must be defined independently of them. A good way to do that is as follows. True teaching is that which brings about true learning. A student who has truly learned has in all likelihood been truly taught. Perhaps he’s been taught cruelly or unfairly, but he’s been taught—truly.

Second: There are obviously many things that can be and are truly learned, even with no help from any “maternal spirit” to speak of. Consider organic chemistry—all those formulas and covalents and atomic weights and whatnot. Organic chemistry courses are notorious “killer” courses, which I take to mean that the pedagogy in them has little in common with the motherheart. Evidently, few organic chemistry instructors worry over their “process” or see their role as teaching “not subjects but people.” (I’m told there’s a movement to change this, but according to students in my pre-med writing classes it isn’t yet being felt much “on the ground.”)

Despite these harsh truths, the United States continues to produce capable organic chemists. That means organic chemistry is, somehow, “truly” learned. And that, in turn, means (by my definition) that it’s being truly taught, motherheart or no.

The only way to conclude otherwise would be to remove organic chemistry from consideration—to suggest that it’s somehow not what we mean when we talk about “teaching.” Griffin, perhaps, hints at such an exclusion when she contrasts education with (mere?) “training.” Perhaps, she would say, those non-nurturing, patriarchal chemistry departments are only training people, and training can be done even with no ethic of care or human fullness in evidence. Such belittling of another discipline would be terribly presumptuous, and that’s why, I think, it’s seldom done out loud: better just to pass the hard sciences over in silence. They just don’t seem to fit what we in the humanities want to believe about teaching; they stick up like spikes through the tissue of our efforts to claim we’re describing teaching as such, not just certain methods that those in our field happen to like.
Now: If organic chemistry courses contain so little of the motherheart, does that mean they play no role in the care, growth, or fulfillment of human beings? Of course not. Organic chemistry is a key discipline that underlies medicine. Sure, some doctors are not very caring people. But some are, and even those who aren’t frequently do play a role in preserving people’s lives and health. And even if we wished that young doctors learned to care better, would we favor their learning this in place of organic chemistry, or any of the other technical subjects we expect our doctors to know? I doubt it. Organic chemistry may not be a sufficient condition for good doctoring, but it is probably a necessary one. All of us want the doctors we and our loved ones depend on to be well versed in it. By the same token, every time a doctor decides correctly about, say, a patient’s medication, especially in a tough case, part of the credit must go to that doctor’s one-time organic chemistry profs. For some doctors, indeed, it was no doubt those profs’ very un-maternal cracking of the whip that ensured that the chemistry of people’s bodies was taken seriously—and truly learned.

We could go discipline by discipline and find all kinds of similar examples. Is it fun to learn civil engineering? Does it make one feel mothered? Much of the time, no. But is it good for people if roads and bridges don’t collapse on them? Does building sound roads and bridges, therefore, enact an ethic of care? Absolutely. In case after case the human world benefits from things people learn even, or especially, when the motherheart is nowhere in sight.

The point of all this is not that patriarchy and “product” are therefore the better way. It is simply that we cannot decide the ethics of teaching—cannot define right behavior or assess our obligations toward students—apart from some account of the teaching’s goal. The ethics will differ depending on the goal; or more precisely, what we as teachers are ethically bound by is the goal and not, in the first instance, particular methods, approaches, or classroom climates.

IV

Since that last statement puts me at odds with our field’s Standard Model, I’m obliged to explain it carefully. What we are dealing with here is the classic ethical problem of means versus ends.

It is, of course, unethical in the extreme simply to collapse means into ends. If I’m Torquemada, and I think I’m saving the world, that still doesn’t justify my running an Inquisition. Closer to home: If I’m a teacher, and I’m trying to get students to do something good, that doesn’t justify rapping their knuckles with rulers. I cannot evaluate what I do ethically only by its ultimate aim, however worthy. If I could, nearly every institutionalized evil in history could be excused. Our means are open to, indeed demand, ethical scrutiny independently of the ends, from which they cannot be too different. The means, we might say, cannot lie at too many removes
from the ends, lest the ends be tainted and their worthiness diminished or destroyed. I must not inflict cures that are worse than the disease.

None of us doubts this. But many compositionists seem tempted by the other means-ends fallacy: the belief that the means must always and immediately enact the ends—that no gap, however temporary, is ethically permissible at all. Thus: If I’m a teacher and my aim (in the end) is to nurture students as persons, then every single thing I do at every moment must be overtly “nurturing.” The classroom must, every single day, look, sound, and feel like a place of nurturance. I must not criticize, I must not censure, I must not exercise power. No hierarchy is valid, since one of the goals of my teaching is a world without hierarchies. No compartmentalization is valid; it is a betrayal of whole-personhood. And for that same reason, the writing that students do should be personal too. It should delve deeply into experience and identity, for there lies authenticity—not in the kinds of boring documents actually produced in the professions and disciplines.

This view is at the core of what I’ve called the Standard Model. We might call it “means-ends equivalence” or “the ethic of direct enactment.” It’s a view very influential among teachers these days, especially in non-science fields. One can see its intuitive appeal, particularly to those of us impatient to see our teaching have its intended effect. (And who doesn’t want this?) If making the world at large, or even the academy at large, more caring or maternal or anti-hierarchical is bound to take a long time, at least—I may reason—I can make some of that happen right here, today, in this classroom. If I believe the best society is the one which keeps the fewest gates, then I can refuse my own turn at the gates (or at least convince myself that’s what I’m doing). Isn’t that better than nothing? And isn’t it more likely to produce the kind of graduates I want, the kind of world I want? It certainly feels better to me, not only as a holder of those progressive values but also as one who feels the human tug of sympathy for the actual people sitting in front of me. After all, these students didn’t choose to be so unprepared for high-stakes professional work; why should I penalize them for it?

But is this view correct—are we obliged to enact our values in this way, to realize them in each moment, as opposed to pursuing them through means which may, at least temporarily, seem at odds with them? It should be obvious that, at times, good things are learned even by less than ideal means. In his Autobiography, Malcolm X describes a key part of his education as sitting in a jail cell memorizing a dictionary. Here was a pedagogy none of us would dream of inflicting on our students, conducted amid surroundings one could hardly call nurturing. Yet even these means, says Malcolm, helped forge his radical, counter-hegemonic political identity. Even these he found, in the current parlance, “empowering.”

Outside of teaching the point is even clearer. Not only can we not always match means to ends, but sometimes we positively mustn’t. If the one cannot be at too many removes from the other, sometimes it must be at one or two removes.
There are circumstances in which any of us would insist on this. With respect to certain tasks, the most inclusive and anti-authoritarian among us depend on the existence of at least some hierarchies—some clear lines of authority, even command. When I’m driving over that bridge, I don’t care whether the teams that designed and built the bridge were run democratically or not. I don’t care whether all ideas were listened to, let alone followed. My only concern is that the right ideas—the ones that make for sturdy, reliable bridges—won out. Any bad feelings that may have entailed are preferable to the bad feelings brought on by bridge accidents. Likewise, the distress of a nurse or anesthesiologist who’s just had a surgeon bark orders at him are better than the grief that can follow from surgery that’s botched. Did the surgeon fail to “nurture” her colleagues or staff? Did she use language not to empower others or help them “find their own voices” but to do the opposite, to exercise control? Is the hegemonic discourse she invoked complicit in a long, oppressive history of patriarchal authority and spiritless Cartesian positivism? If it’s a loved one of mine lying on the table, I don’t care. Let the surgeon bark her orders; nurturing and higher philosophizing can wait until later.

Instances like these can be found discipline by discipline, and not only in matters of life and death. If I’m directing a play, I enter into relationships with the actors doing the play. The ultimate goal of these relationships is something fun—an evening of entertainment—and sometimes the work toward that goal is fun too. But often it isn’t. Rehearsals can be grueling, and the whole process is highly competitive: For every actor in the cast there are several others I’ve turned down. Certainly actors (perhaps more than most) need care and nurture and reassurance, and sometimes that’s what I give. But I am not there to give those things. My ethical obligation is something else. When our shared aim is better served by, say, being demanding or confrontational, by setting standards and pointing out when they’re not met, then I’m obliged to do those things instead. That would be true even if I felt my only obligation were to the actors. For in part, the actors’ well-being depends on the well-being of the project as a whole. If I tried to direct based on a Standard Model-style ethic of immediate enactment, if I collapsed ends and means; if I insisted on making “entertainment” happen each moment we’re at work instead of investing it in the final result, here’s what would happen: The play would be a mess, people wouldn’t come to see it, and eventually the theater itself would shut down. And that would help neither actors nor audience.

This raises a key issue. Who is that “audience”? It turns out that I, as director, am not dealing only with actors, and that my obligations, whether ethical or (in this case) artistic, are not exhausted by what I owe them, any more than the surgeon’s are by what she owes her nurses or staff. There are further obligations that arise, not within the doctor-nurse or director-actor relationship but from other relationships that exist beyond it—or more correctly, that underlie it. As a director I am also dealing with people I haven’t yet met: the people who will one day see this play.
Though not present to me at this moment, these people, too, have a claim on me: a right to expect that I'll try to make the play a good one. That's what both I and the actors are really there for. Without that future audience, we wouldn't have got together in the first place. Our relationship is subordinate to the relationship we jointly have to another clientele altogether.

The importance of this fact cannot be overstated. Its consequence for our ethical discussion is this: Our obligations to each other as professionals cannot be assessed only in light of our relationships to each other; but must be judged in light of that other, underlying, future or virtual relationship and of the needs (and people) which it aims to serve. It's not just that things work out better if I treat my actors to some degree instrumentally, as means to ends—or if the surgeon treats the nurse or anesthesiologist instrumentally. Rather, this is the only way things can work, period. The actors, the anesthesiologist, the engineers building the bridge cannot be viewed only as ends in themselves. If they were, the work would be done poorly, the enterprise would fail, and the people in question would cease to be actors, anesthesiologists, engineers, and the like. To occupy any such role is to become, in part, a means to others' ends. Our professional interactions cannot help being, in large measure, instrumental. Otherwise they're nothing; they literally cease to exist.

As people, students are, of course, ethical ends in themselves, not means to others' ends. But in their role as students, that Kantian rule just doesn't hold. I am a teacher, which means students are my clients. But the enterprise of which we are jointly a part also has clients. Indeed, the students as individuals—future professionals—have (eventual) clients, just as my actors have an eventual audience. The play's audience isn't present for rehearsal, and my students' future clients aren't sitting with us in the classroom. But they are "there" ethically. If not for those clients, most of the people who are there in class wouldn't be—they wouldn't be students. They would just be people out in the community, few if any of whom I would ever have met. The only reason I have a relationship to them at all, a relationship in which ethical issues can arise, is that we've been brought together by the larger enterprise known as college.

Hence, as a teacher, I cannot ignore the claims of that larger enterprise. If one of its functions is to train doctors, and if I have accepted employment within it, then I have agreed to be part of the system that trains doctors. I am one of that system's agents. This obligates me. It means I cannot ignore the fact that Felicia, sitting there in row three, wants to be a doctor. I cannot treat Felicia simply as a person, existentially encountered, here to be subjected to any pedagogical goal I happen to favor. I need not teach medicine—I am not qualified even to try—but I would serve Felicia poorly if my teaching had no reference at all to her long-term goal of practicing medicine, her medium-term goal of succeeding in med school, or her near-term goal of majoring in organic chemistry. For apart from those goals, Felicia wouldn't even be there in row three.
There are others I would serve poorly as well. My role in the doctor-training system subjects me, if more remotely, to ethical claims not only from Felicia but from her future patients. I must at least in part be concerned that when the time comes, Felicia will make good medical decisions. Not to care about that would be not to care about the human misery that could otherwise ensue. True, my role in preparing Felicia for medical decision-making is relatively minor; the greater burden will fall on her professors in med school and the doctors under whom she apprentices. But if I seriously believe that what happens in my classroom has something to do with what kind of person Felicia will be, then I must also believe it has something to do with what kind of doctor she will be. To say that I have no role in preparing Felicia for her career would be to abstain from her education understood as a larger whole. It would be radically to distance myself from much of the rest of what Felicia does, or will do, in school. Thus it would run afoul of my own professed interest in dealing with her as a whole person.

To put it another way: I serve Felicia poorly if I fail to acknowledge not just that she wants to be a doctor, but that she wants to be good at doctoring, a doctor who doesn’t serve her own clients poorly in turn. Hence, to do right by Felicia I must also, finally, aim to do right by people she may one day deal with professionally—people whom I myself will never meet.

This probably doesn’t limit me much in terms of pedagogy; I can always argue, if sometimes only weakly, that writing tasks X, Y, and Z, tasks whose aim is to “empower” Felicia or help her “find her voice” or resist the operations of the dominant ideology, will indirectly make her better at doctoring or whatever else she winds up doing. (In effect, I would be making the same “It builds character” argument that led teachers of an earlier generation to force would-be professionals to parse Greek and Latin sentences.) But if we recognize Felicia as a student and (as such) as a would-be professional, such arguments become more problematic. Perhaps the best way to define our obligation to our Felicias is in terms of burden of proof. There is a burden of proof on me as a teacher, a burden to show—by a preponderance of the evidence, at least, if not beyond a reasonable doubt—that what I’m offering will somehow help Felicia, not just as a human being but as a college student with certain more or less clearly stated aims. The assistance I offer can lie at one or two removes from the aims; I don’t have to have her dissecting cadavers for me or writing essays on the molecular bonding properties of carbon. But the more removes, the harder it will be to meet that burden. In my view, much of what is taught and advocated by today’s compositionists is too far removed, its relationship to students’ reasons for being in college too abstract.

That, obviously, is matter for further debate. I mean here to open that debate, not settle it. What I am proposing are not particular teaching practices but criteria whereby such practices ought to be judged but too often aren’t. Meanwhile, this discussion turns out to have one worrisome upshot. If not just Felicia but her future
patients have ethical claims on me, what happens when those claims conflict? What happens if, at some point, it becomes clear that Felicia simply cannot be counted on to make good medical decisions—that either her temperament, her difficulty grasping tough subjects, or her own (lack of) ethics makes putting her in charge of patients too dangerous? It would seem someone is ethically obliged at that point to steer her elsewhere, even if that’s not what she wants. Someone would have to bar Felicia’s way through the gates of medicine: turn her down, fail her, warn her of failure so she can self-select out (perhaps to come back and try again later). That someone isn’t likely to be me; seldom are writing teachers given that much power. But it isn’t entirely not me either. I am part of the system that keeps that gate—that is that gate. If somewhat peripheral to it, I am still complicit in its actions. And I choose to be, every time I cash that system’s paychecks.

V

Gatekeeping today gets the bad rap it does in part, no doubt, because of lingering memories of generations of bad gatekeeping: quotas and arbitrary exclusions that limited the life chances of women, Jews, African-Americans, and others. In part, too, there’s been a general retreat from the certitudes that underpin even less-bad gatekeeping—a much-discussed loss of faith in objective standards, merit, even knowledge itself. But the observation that writing teachers are paid personnel of a larger system also suggests a third and less praiseworthy reason.

Most colleges these days compete for students. That means there is less gatekeeping to be done—or that it is done differently, by self-selection and by channeling the less privileged through school systems that don’t prepare them and don’t raise their sights toward college in the first place. Once students do make it to campus, though, there’s a premium on keeping (as the British say) “bums on seats.”

A Marxist might remind us here that people’s views are largely a superstructure built on the foundation of economics. Professors’ beliefs serve in part to rationalize their position within a certain set of economic arrangements. Thus, when they survey their classrooms and say, “I feel it’s my duty to try to keep these students here,” they no doubt think they’re responding to a higher calling. They see their motive as wanting to educate, to help those who otherwise would be denied life’s opportunities. But in fact, by this analysis, what they’re really doing is acting as agents of a system that desperately needs to keep those students there so as not to go bankrupt. The professors are, albeit unconsciously, signing onto an agenda set by the university’s vice-president for finance. The (ultimately) economic pressure not to be too selective is internalized as a noble wish to help those who need it.

I see just such mechanisms at work when, for instance, a colleague on another campus writes to tell me that if she doesn’t put students’ “home” cultures at the center of her teaching, students will “adopt the tactic of rejection” and refuse to learn.
This professor has decided that it's her job to defeat that "tactic," to see that students keep rolling down the educational assembly line. My question is: So what if they adopt that tactic? Isn't that their right? They don't have to be there; higher education is voluntary. While not trying to alienate them, of course—while recognizing that good teaching takes due account of where students are "coming from," in every sense—shouldn't we teach what we think the subject requires, and let students decide whether to reject it or not? Isn't it patronizing to suggest that students can't be trusted to know whether or not they want to stick around? As Paul Goodman once asked, why force students into lockstep? For "it is often obvious that balking in doing the work...means exactly what it says: not this subject, or not at this time, or not in this school, or not in school altogether." Yes, students can be "bullied into passing," Goodman said, but "There comes a time when we must treat people as adult, laziness and all," even if that means you "fire a do-nothing out of your class" (158–59).

So, part of why many in our field say they'll have no part of gatekeeping is, I think, that subliminally we recognize the economic pressure we're under to keep bums on seats, even if that means a certain amount of covert bullying. (The pressure isn't always subliminal: In the program in which I teach, a remarkably crude system of personnel reviews has made us all very conscious of what the powers—that-be expect.) By the same logic, rising enrollments that once again create a scarcity of places may, subtly, tend to drive up gatekeeping's intellectual stock. Perhaps this reverse trend is already happening at some institutions. In either case, coercion as such can't be countenanced, so instructors who practice it have to call it something else. When there's a need to keep bums on seats, they have to present themselves as defeating students' "tactics of rejection" for the students' own sakes, even if the interests being served (says our Marxist critic) are really the institution's. It is always thus, so long as we operate within received social structures. That is the great irony. To turn one's nose up at gatekeeping is an expression of one's position within those structures just as much as is gatekeeping itself.

VI

Obviously few of us like seeing our work in such terms. To recognize that we, too, have interests, and that those interests are bound up with those of a suspect institution—a big bureaucracy, in most cases—seems to diminish what we're trying to do. In general, teachers don't like seeing their work as instrumental—as aspects or stages of a larger enterprise whose aims they can't dictate. They don't like to see themselves as means to others' ends.

Yet that shouldn't really be so painful. Even the noblest human efforts are usually means to others' ends. Doctors combat disease in order that people will be healthy. Fire-fighters put out fires in order that people will be safe. Great political
leaders—Gandhi, King, Nelson Mandela—organized and battled authorities and went to prison in order that people would be free. To live in society is to live within a division of labor. And a division of labor is precisely a mechanism for translating ends into means: into various, often narrow roles which specific people take on and for which they must be specifically trained.

Students attend college as a means to an end. We can labor mightily to make it an end in itself; we can try to make each task intrinsically valuable, and sometimes we will. But no matter what sort of personal discovery or empowerment or ideological reorientation a given assignment offers, it is self-deluding to think that students will do it (and have it in by Thursday!) for those reasons. The thing would not even be an “assignment,” indeed they would never be there to encounter it, but for something else—something that has got them to apply and pay all that money and stand in line at the Reg Office and give up four or more years of doing other things. Students put up with their studently burdens (including most composition assignments) because they’ve decided, perfectly sensibly, to trade off means for ends, the short term for the medium-to-long. They may or may not want to write the essay by Thursday, but they want something else toward which the essay is one small step: to be a doctor, lawyer, engineer, journalist; to save lives, fight for justice, build things people need, help citizens be informed.

It may seem paradoxical that this both limits and obligates us, but in fact it obligates us because it limits us. We cannot, in the writing classroom, teach life-saving or bridge-building or most other things students aspire to. We cannot deliver to students their longer-term goals. We operate almost wholly within the short term—literally, the ten- or fifteen-week term. At some, particularly smaller schools, we may play a more visible role in the student’s work and development over the whole four-plus years. As a student I had teachers who followed and helped me all the way through, even though I took only one or two of their classes. That is, we may encounter students not simply in our role as teachers of our subjects, but as mentors, junior colleagues, members of the same community. But that’s not always the case, and when it is, it just points up all the more that whatever’s going to be accomplished is going to be accomplished over a period of time. We cannot secede from the rest of the curriculum. We cannot pack into that ten or fifteen weeks the whole of the liberal education (or the empowerment, spiritual liberation, cultivation of identity, or whatever) that we fear students aren’t getting from college as a whole. If we’re right that students are being denied needed things, then the solution is to take up the harder struggle of changing the whole curriculum, perhaps even the whole structure of professional preparation and selection. The astounding paucity of discussions in our field of whole curricula—of what to do throughout college, not just in the writing classroom itself—strikes me as evidence that most compositionists have simply given up on this, that they have turned inward in the seeming hope that what they can make happen for four hours a week from Sep-
tember to Christmas will somehow offset years and years of pre-professional socialization of a whole different kind.

But it's not clear it even should—not unless we think people should never become doctors, lawyers, engineers, or journalists. If we value what those professions are at least sometimes able to do, if we care about their clients (which include our own communities and families and the students'), then at some point we have to value the things that make it possible for them to be done well. That means not just education but training, not just teaching people but teaching subjects, and certainly not equating nurturance with "true teaching."

Above all, it means seeing the oxymoron in the phrase used by Gail Griffin (and many others): "the academic family." The academy is not a family. It is an intentional community, comprised of people who are nearly all voting-age adult citizens. Taking such people seriously—as presumably we all mean to do—means honoring the choices they make and, indeed, deferring to those choices if at all possible. To do otherwise is undemocratic at best, if not infantilizing and frankly oppressive. It is to treat others instrumentally as means to our ends, rather than as ends in themselves. We are not obliged, to recall Frank D. Walters's caricature, to "bring our students' writing into line with a service model imposed from a culturally monolithic outside." That's because we are not bound by the wishes of the corporate elite, the knowledge brokers, or the moneyed ruling class to which he ascribes that aim. But we are ethically bound by students' own aims, even if those aims seem uncomfortably close to elite values. Our distrust of such values does not permit us to tell students what they "really" want, or should want. We are very limited, I think, in how far we can set ourselves up as ends-experts. The only thing we are certainly justified in imposing on students is our judgment of means: Here, in my expert opinion, is the best way to learn this thing that you and I have agreed should be taught.

VII

Of course, nothing obliges us to enter into that agreement. If we don't trust the college or curriculum as a whole, if we see it as an effort to socialize people into values we deplore, if we think students really shouldn't aspire to professional/managerial careers—well, the gates aren't keeping us in. If we really think that our efforts are something from which all could benefit, that they're liberating or empowering or identity-cultivating quite apart from any given career goal, nothing requires us to offer them only to the pre-selected and profession-bound. As intentional communities, universities are distinct from the society as a whole, and so will necessarily have gates. In some cases these will be high, spiky, forbidding gates, and in some cases they'll be self-service gates that anyone who wants to can push through. Usually they'll be something in between, levying some requirements on entry (while also collecting a big toll!). But the gates are there, and to pretend
they're not—to mistake our relationships with students for chance encounters—is to deny the very operations that put students within our reach. In most classrooms, each student present sits in place of many other potential students who aren't there. If we are serious that we're not there mainly to help train future doctors, lawyers, and engineers, but in fact are ministering to people as such, why then don't we have the same obligation to those missing others? Aren't they people too? Wouldn't it behoove us to go find them, to offer ourselves to the real community and not merely to some artificial one constructed by the admissions office? Or is it only an institutionally defined group—a mini-elite called “students”—who need care and nurturance and the ministrations of the motherheart?

Nothing's stopping us, after all. If I choose to I can hire a hall, place an ad, and teach whatever I wish. If I'm concerned about cost, I don't have to charge admission. If I'm concerned about inclusiveness, I can open the door to all comers. If I want to serve the historically disadvantaged, I can locate my work in the neighborhoods where I think it's needed. Writing is a cheap and still largely low-tech activity, and nothing forces me to limit my instruction to those who choose (and are chosen for) college. Sure, I might be more comfortable, and it's a whole lot easier, to deal only with the people who materialize in my classes. But if I erect this into a principle—"I shall teach only those who come seeking it"—then I have to take seriously what those individuals are in fact seeking, and that means orienting my teaching to their majors and professional goals. And that puts me right back where I started.

I don't, myself, do much in the way of this kind of pro bono teaching. But I also don't make grand claims for what writing instruction is about. I am not working at the university under duress. I knew when I joined it that one of its functions, certainly one that draws a great many of its students, is to prepare people for certain social and professional roles. I believe there's nothing dishonorable about those roles (well, most of them). I recognize that, like me, my students signed on voluntarily, and that they did so with particular aims in view. I don't think it's my job to tell them their aims are wrong. In fact, with a few exceptions (like the first-year student with his dollar sign), I don't see that they are wrong. I see nothing wrong with wanting a rewarding vocation; I want that for myself. And I want the world that I and those I care about are going to live in to have capable people doing the kinds of jobs students say they're looking to do.

Moreover, I know students' principal means of pursuing their aims is not my one writing course, but the college program as a whole. I see what I do as contained within, and constrained by, the university's overall curriculum. While I disagree with many things about that curriculum, I don't think it's fair to students to whipsaw them between the curriculum's values and my own. I want my efforts to converge, in the end, with the university's. I want what I teach to be good not just for people, not even just for citizens, but for future doctors and lawyers and organic
chemistry majors. I am willing, in that sense, to try to make what I teach useful.

Finally, I recognize that the very quality that makes certain roles and vocations attractive to my students makes them attractive to others, too. That creates competition. No doubt the world could stand to be more accommodating of people's wishes and talents than it currently is. But it cannot grant every wish; we cannot have a world that's wall-to-wall rock stars and major-league athletes, nor even wall-to-wall doctors and engineers. Attractive social roles will have over-supplies of aspirants. That fact, combined with our common interest in future professionals' ability to perform, requires that someone keep at least some gates.

So the question is not, Shall there be gatekeeping? The question is: Will that someone include us—will we, through the teaching practices we adopt and advocate, work to make the gatekeeping rational and fair—or will we cede that task to those powerful interests that are all too happy to keep on doing it, all too happy for the chance to keep remaking the world in their own image?

Works Cited


