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# The Politics of Persuasion versus the Construction of Alternative Communities: Zines in the Writing Classroom

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Reflections Journal

## The Politics of Persuasion versus the Construction of Alternative Communities: Zines in the Writing Classroom

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We discuss how studying and creating zines in our composition classes allows our students to negotiate and explore the complexities of writing without the compulsions of many of the politically problematic commonplaces of composition pedagogy. We use zines to examine the unique ways in which their rhetorical devices address conflicts around questions of audience and diversity, as well as the particular questions that the zines raise about the politics of persuasion, our own writing practices, writing strategies that the zines suggest to us, and the construction of alternative communities.

*Zines are noncommercial, nonprofessional, small-circulation magazines which their creators produce, publish, and distribute by themselves... Zines are an individualist medium, but as a medium their primary function is communication. As such, zines are as much about the communities that arise out of their circulation as they are artifacts of personal expression.*

--Stephen Duncombe (6, 45)

*Zines... are driven by the passions of their creators.*

--Gareth Branwyn (51)

*Zines are a perfect example of an information source that was not created by a corporate conglomerate (unlike almost all news from mainstream television and newspapers)... Their mere existence disrupts the monotone drone of mainstream media; they say something different and their agendas are self-imposed, rather than dictated by advertisers or corporate owners.*

--Amy Wan (17)

### • I •

The recent history of university writing instruction in North America and the ongoing trend toward standardized curricula and set syllabi suggest that many writing programs are moving toward regulating student writing by requiring student writers and teachers to follow a narrow set of rhetorical principles. In her essay, “Writing Permitted in Designated Areas Only,” Linda Brodkey makes the point that “prescriptions that seem to regulate only the ‘correct’ use of language threaten to extinguish altogether the desire to write – in middle-class and working class students alike” (149). Part of the civilizing mission of the academy and of many compositionists today, especially in response to current institutional and corporate pressures to produce docile workers, is to think of writing only in terms of problem solving and not in terms of critical thinking, and as a result to restrict imagination and creativity, stifle language, and police the desire to write. Brodkey suggests that “unless regulating that desire is the point...we begin again and try to teach writing – for a change” (149).

Studying and creating zines is one way to start teaching writing for a change, allowing students to negotiate issues of writing that do not reduce its complexities only to simplistic formulas and rules. We have taught college writing classes across all levels (including first-year college composition courses) that focus on zines. In our writing

classes, students read about zines, study zines, write about zines, and collaboratively produce their own zines. We use zines to examine the unique ways in which their rhetorical devices address conflicts around questions of audience and diversity, as well as the particular questions that the zines raise about the politics of persuasion, our own writing practices, writing strategies that the zines suggest to us, and the construction of alternative communities. Given zines' counterculture form and status, producing a zine becomes the means of forging community, usually a dissident community or network of like-minded people who feel alienated by mainstream culture. Zines thus enable the development of underground subcultures and nonconformist communities/networks.

Studying and creating zines also engages new calls in composition studies for community engagement from scholars like Thomas Deans who proposes taking the "step of asking students to write within nonacademic discourse communities" (9), and Paula Mathieu who advocates resisting standardization and moving beyond the walls of classroom and university spaces "to encompass discursive projects in many areas of community life" (1). Mathieu points out that "this *public turn* in composition studies more generally asks teachers to connect the writing that students and they themselves do with 'real world' texts, events, or exigencies" (1). Certainly studying and creating zines reflects this public turn in composition studies by transcending traditional academic boundaries and reshaping traditional academic discursive communities, but zines also call into question conventional conceptualizations of community at the same time as they build community. Stephen Duncombe suggests that

| if community is traditionally thought of as a homogenous group of individuals  
| bound together by their commonality, a zine network produces something  
| different: a community of people linked via bonds of difference, each sharing  
| their originality....This model is the very essence of a libertarian community:  
| individuals free to be who they want and to cultivate their own interests, while  
| simultaneously sharing in each other's differences. It allows people the intimacy  
| and primary connections they don't find in a mass society, but with none of the  
| stifling of difference that usually comes with tight-knit communities. (51-52)

In addition, zines' relationships to very specific publics usually conceptualize the creation and consumption of zines as both political acts and as ends in and of themselves, unlike those community-based and service learning courses that presuppose that the really useful learning takes place through service learning projects and/or participation in community organizations outside of classroom spaces. Undoubtedly material community engagements matter, but the production and consumption of zines too may constitute community engagement, may constitute political and public engagement.

## • II •

**A** typical writing course we teach using zines is divided into three units. In the first unit of the course, we might use Duncombe's book-length study *Notes from Underground: Zines and the Politics of Underground Culture* and *The Factsheet Five Zine Reader* as class texts, and ask students to write a paper that responds to a prompt like the following:

Discuss any issue about zines raised in Stephen Duncombe's *Notes from Underground: Zines and the Politics of Underground Culture*. In your discussion, make reference to *Notes* and at least two outside sources. Spend a minimum amount of time summarizing your sources and a maximum amount of time discussing them. Ensure that your paper has a thesis and develops a sustained argument. In your engagement with your sources, be sure to follow the guidelines we discuss in class on using sources. Cite sources following MLA format, and conclude your paper with a list of "Works Cited" following MLA format.

This first assignment, a standard argument essay using research sources, enables students to learn—through independent research—about zines, the political stakes in their production and distribution, and the questions around them articulated by critics as well as zine creators and readers. Given the unconventional subject of our course, requiring students to cite sources following MLA format may seem incongruous. We do not believe that there is no value in teaching students current academic conventions. But we do believe it is a disservice to students to teach them only current academic conventions and not other discursive forms as well. Hence, while we would argue that it is useful for our students to learn current academic conventions, we would also argue that it is equally useful at the same time for them to learn to challenge academic conventions. By requiring students to develop a sustained academic argument, our first writing assignment emphasizes a standard feature of much contemporary academic writing; by engaging with what others have written about zines, students acquire the knowledge and contexts to accomplish the second writing assignment, which underscores the importance of close reading and textual analysis, also customary of much contemporary academic writing.

However, instead of embarking upon textual analyses via the customary close readings of high-culture or other academically legitimated texts, significantly (ironically) students in our classes do textual analyses and close readings of zines on "taboo" subjects such as *I Fisted Jesse Helms: A True Story*, *Sex With Chickens*, and *The NecroErotic – For All Those Who Find Sexual Lust In Cadavers*. Students learn to read the zines carefully in order to be able to articulate their political, aesthetic, emotional, and other effects. Perhaps because of the subject matter of zines, they usually find the process to be immensely enjoyable and are often startled to discover the unanticipated pleasures that close readings of texts bring. Hence, we might in the second unit of the course, look at and analyze sample zines in class—both zines we select for the class to examine and zines that students select and bring to class.

We require each student to select and bring two zines to class, thus ensuring a wide variety of zines for our consideration, and also engaging students with "alternative" communities where zines are distributed or in contact with the creators of the zines they want to bring to class. The distribution of zines circumvents the usual channels of mainstream publications—agents and publishing houses—and capitalist modes of circulation. Instead zines are usually distributed at "alternative" community spaces and venues like independent cafes and bookstores, underground concerts, youth centers, "small" art galleries, zine gatherings, etc., or can be ordered directly from the creators, usually by sending cash in the mail. *Broken Pencil*, an independent publication that reviews zines urges readers to break postal regulations and "Please Send Cash" to zine

creators (2). Some creators encourage readers to send them other zines instead of money in exchange for their zines. In fact, zine production and distribution often “enacts a countercapitalist logic” (Barnard 73). Moreover, it is not unusual for a reader to receive a personal letter from a zine creator after writing to purchase a zine, or even be invited to visit the creator in person should the reader happen to live in or visit the creator’s home town. Zine creators also encourage readers to start their own zines and frequently tell them how to go about producing a zine of their own. The circuits of exchange reveal not only a more interactive and personal relationship between writer/artist and reader than is commonplace with today’s mainstream publishing trend of mass production and alienated readers, but also the blurring of lines between production and consumption, artist and consumer, as well as conceptualizing zine creators/readers as community. Zines do more than engage with existing political, material, and discursive subcultures and communities. Zines also create community to the extent that their specific foci imagine local interested audiences; communities develop around zines as zine creators and readers find and interact with one another, exchange information and cultural artifacts, co-contribute to future issues of specific zines, and develop other zines.

Our second writing assignment prompt might look something like this:

Select and analyze a zine. You may want to address one or more the following questions in your analysis: How does this zine construct and position its audience? How does the zine address people’s experiential and affiliation differences (e.g. in terms of race, gender, sexual orientation, class, age, nationality, etc.)? What values does this zine embody? How are these values articulated? How are these values similar to and/or different from those embodied by more “mainstream publications”? What political agendas do the zine’s rhetorical strategies suggest? How does the zine’s form support or undermine the ideologies it purports to espouse? Support your analysis with specific reference to the zine you’re discussing. Do not respond mechanically to these questions: ensure that your paper has a thesis and is not a collection of unrelated points. Spend a minimum amount of time describing the zine and a maximum amount of time analyzing it. Cite sources following MLA format, and conclude your paper with a list of “Works Cited” following MLA format.

Our culminating unit, though a progression from the earlier units that provide students with an understanding of zines and zine culture, departs in significant ways from the usual business of “freshman composition” with its attendant emphasis on academic conventions. Indicative of our commitment to giving students the opportunity to practice a range of rhetorical conventions in a variety of writing situations, we ask students to put into practice their understanding of zines demonstrated in the first two conventional academic papers by responding to a writing prompt along the following lines that disturbs the conventions of standard academic writings:

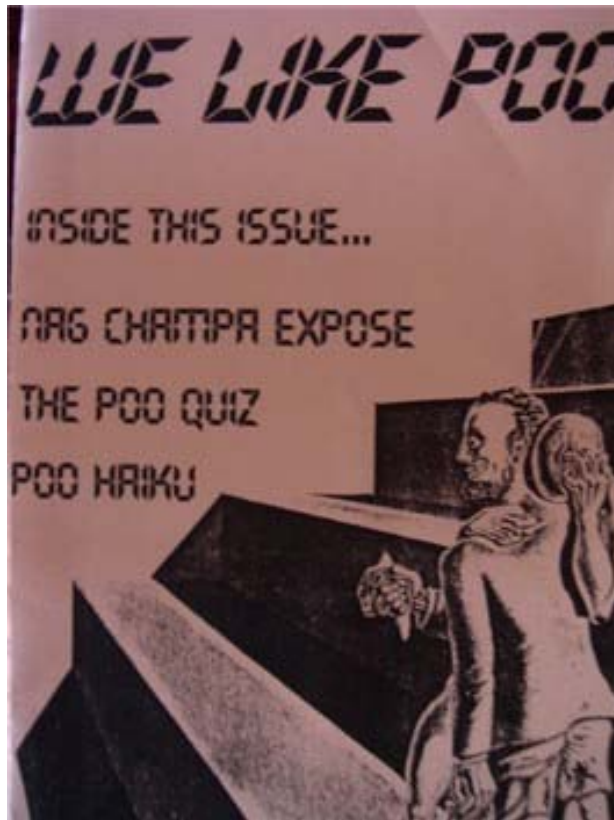
In a group, produce and distribute a zine. Your zine should demonstrate your understanding of the purposes and workings of a zine, your engagement with the zine-related issues we have addressed in this class, and include a substantial amount of writing. With your group members decide what the focus of your zine will be, how this focus will be embodied, what your particular role in the project will be, and how and to whom your zine will be distributed.

Requiring students to produce a collaborative zine gives students the chance to go against the fetishization of the singular author still common in composition and literary studies, gain experience in writing in “alternative” styles that lie outside the strictures of conventional college composition, and challenge many widely held assumptions about teaching writing, as Jonathan Alexander has also observed in his work on e-zines in writing classes. The zines produced by our students and by others critique and rewrite at least three such assumptions—about tone and rationality, audience, and professionalism—as we illustrate in the following discussion.

• III •

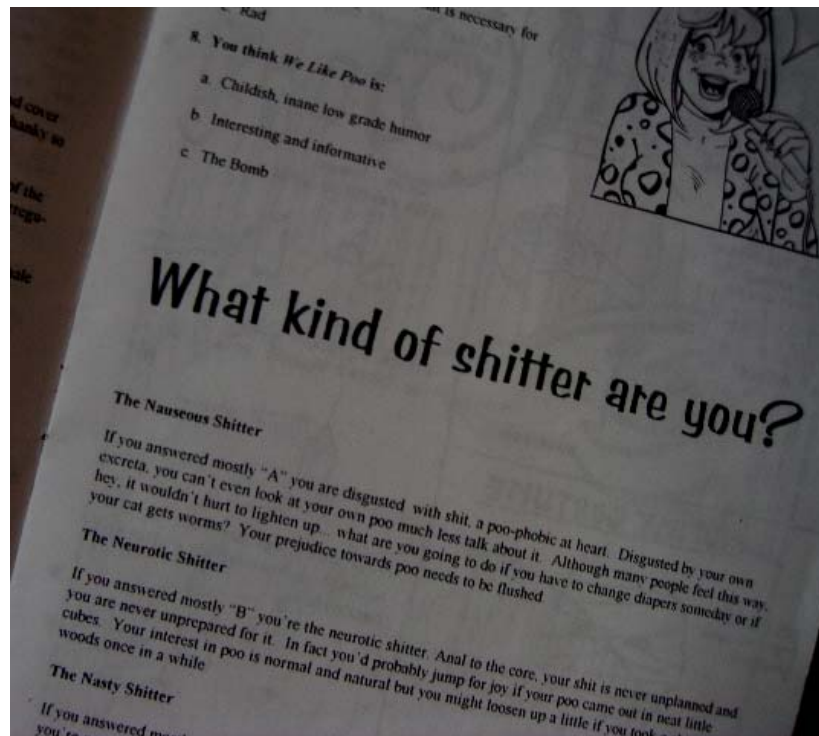
**T**he taboo content of many zines is the least of the ways in which zines disrupt prevailing assumptions about teaching writing. The tones of campiness, flippancy, sarcasm, outrage, outrageousness, anger, and fuck-youness that characterize many zines fly in the face of the rationality, decorum, measured language, and respect for the reader that have become standard imperatives of college composition. Of course, these dispassionate tones of expected expository writing assume that one’s reader is potentially hostile but a potential convert to one’s argument. They disallow the possibility—and the productive results—of writing for an already sympathetic reader, despite the reality that many professional writers do so. Repudiating decorum is a way of moving beyond the basics of a topic that are always the necessary foundational explanations for ignorant or hostile audiences, and of grappling with more complex and difficult issues. The repudiation of decorum also provides an opportunity to explore the role that emotion can play in writing, of the power that rage can produce, of the pleasure of writing loudly and with excess, and of the liberation that comes with writing for a blatant disregard for—or even a scathing mockery of—those who disagree with you. These pleasures and powers are too often denied to composition students.

“A student handbook for writing and learning” informs students that “the only kind of thinking that will hold up under careful examination by your audience is logical thinking – thinking that is reasonable, reliable, and above all, believable” (Sebranek 558). But zine writers often reject the normalizing notions, derived from Aristotelian modes of logic, that reason equals logic and emotion equals illogic, and reject the assumption that illogic doesn’t have value in the first place. In studying and creating zines, our students begin to question this binary; they also begin to ask why certain discursive modes are constructed as more rational than others and what such constructions indicate about cultural forces and expectations. Obviously, then, zines writers have a very different conception of their audience compared to the college writer imagined in most composition handbooks.



*We Like Poo is an example of a zine that is independently produced and driven by the passions and idiosyncrasies of its creator. The subject of the zine is feces, and it includes interviews, "toilet paper art," and a quiz on "what kind of shitter are you?"*

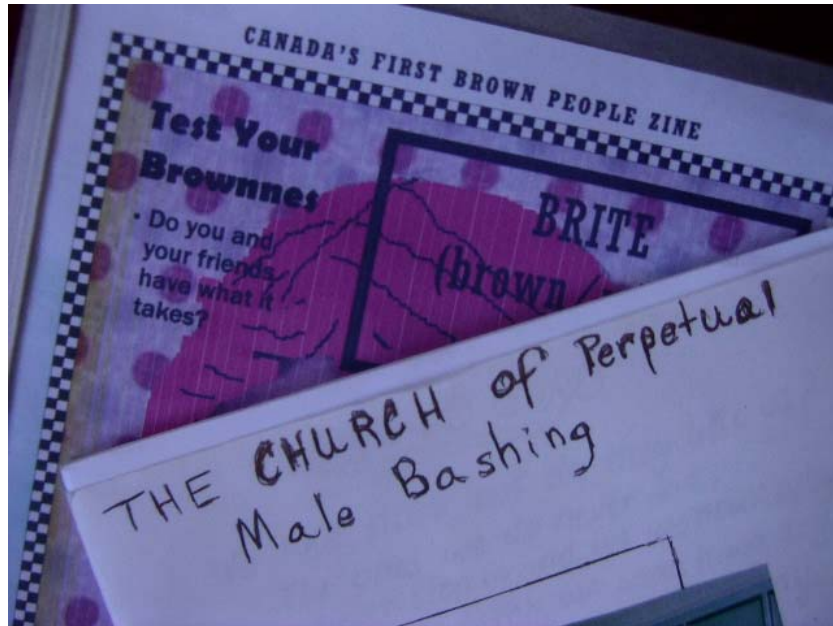
*The zine delights in its subject, and does not attempt to explain or apologize for its unconventional theme that would probably be considered "distasteful" by many readers.*





In her book *Seductive Reasoning*, Ellen Rooney argues that in the arena of literary theory, any attempt at persuasion constitutes an appeal to liberal pluralism: according to Rooney, pluralism is based “on the theoretical possibility of universal or general persuasion” (2), and “the pluralist’s invitation to critics and theorists of all kinds to join him in ‘dialogue’ is a seductive gesture that constitutes every interpreter—*no matter what her conscious critical affiliation*—as an effect of the desire to persuade” (1). This argument can be applied to composition studies and pedagogy, to the ways in which the imperative to appeal to a mythical “man in the street” denies the particular interests and stakes that specific individuals and communities might have in certain critical positions and practices, and thus enforces hegemonic political ideologies. Since zines are often so specialized, zine writers often have a very specific audience in mind.

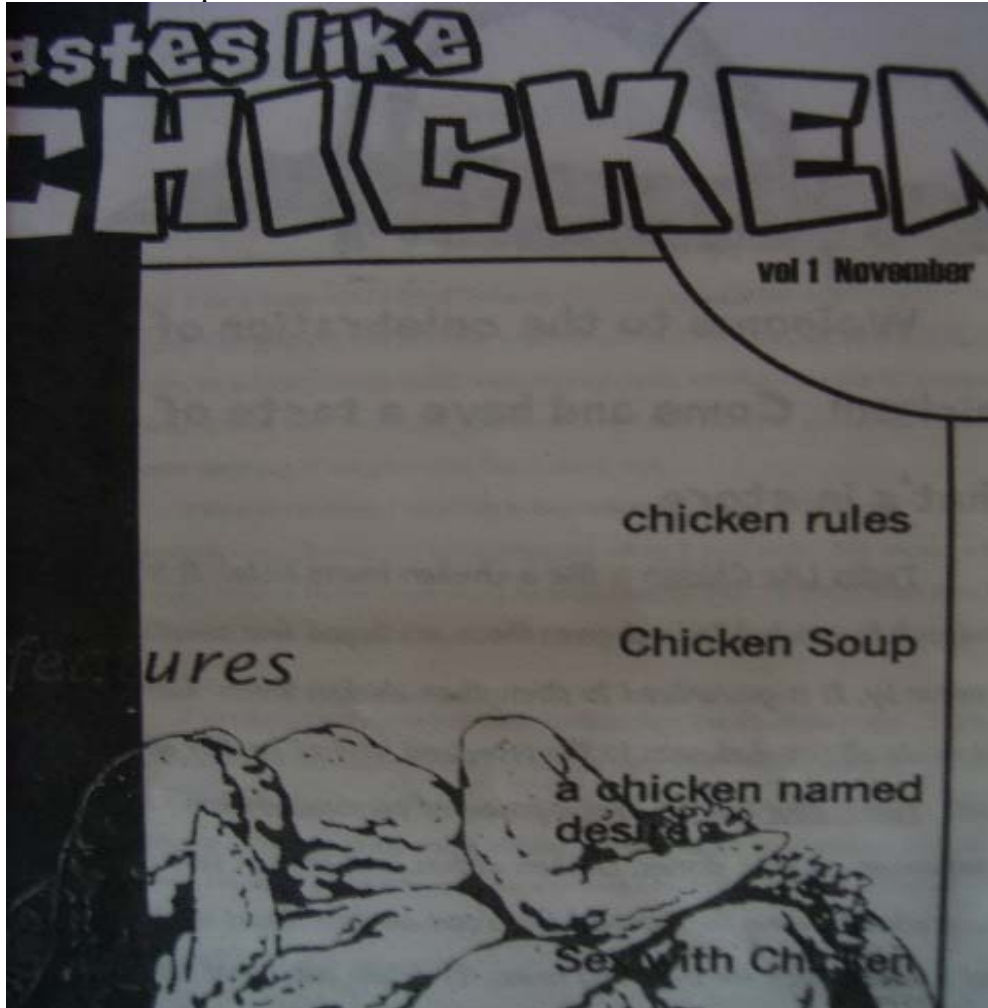
Because of the impolitic tone of many zines, the liberal pluralist mandate to write to a general audience—an always potentially persuadable audience—is replaced by writing tailored to a material community; we always have our students distribute their zines to their intended audiences, and report back on these audiences’ reactions to the zines. Ironically, although it has become commonplace in composition studies to insist that effective writers have a concrete sense of their audience, this imperative is seldom translated into pedagogical praxis: fictitious constructs of how a generic audience might react to a student text often translate the concept of audience into the far-from-generic person of the teacher. Work with zines not only enables students to escape the ideological dictates of liberal pluralism, but also serves an immediate pedagogical function in giving them a much sharper and more immediate sense of their readers. Zines our students have created include the feminist zine *The Church of Perpetual Male Bashing: God Help You!* that assumes that all women share their conviction that heterosexual men need to be “taken down;” *Rage Against the University!*, a zine that extols the virtues of directing one’s rage against university administrators and takes for granted that every reader is already an activist and comrade; the zine *Objectophilia* that takes on “the desire to engage in sexual activities with household objects” seriously and unashamedly; and *Brite* that touts itself as “Canada’s first brown people zine.” These zines illustrate the possibilities that come with writing for specific constituencies. Because of their work with zines in our classes, some students decide to continue publishing zines even after our classes are over, indicating, to our delight, that they imagine writing for audiences other than us—their instructors—a possibility that is often advocated by composition theorists and teachers, but seldom actualized. These instances, when writing breaks through the walls of our classrooms, when students envision themselves as “real” writers writing for “live” audiences and communities, remind us of the powerful potential of zines, specifically in terms of how producing a zine transforms students into writers.



“Professionalism” is another common composition imperative that zines challenge. In order to appear professional, formal papers must always be written in appropriate and acceptable language. Of course, appropriate and acceptable language is always synonymous with Standard English. Students are implicitly or explicitly expected to uphold the conventions of Standard English, which, also not coincidentally, is professional white middle-class English. Writing that does not conform to the practices of professional white middle-class English is constructed as technically and grammatically flawed and in need of remediation. Even teachers who might question how and why these standards control our judgment of correct or incorrect language skills, usually do not give students a choice in rejecting them or departing from them in the context of writing formal papers in composition classes.

Zines often use so-called unprofessional discursive styles that more accurately reflect language uses among people. Zines frequently acknowledge that professionalism reflects certain race and class biases. In addition, zine writers often make typos and grammatical “errors” a distinguishing characteristic of their work. Zines give our students the opportunity to make “inappropriate” and/or risky linguistic choices without being penalized. The material form is also significant: zines are sometimes handwritten, often illegible in parts, and usually photocopied and stapled. These features of zine aesthetics become markers of pride that distinguish many zines from glossy mainstream magazines. Because zines embody an individuality that is not mass marketable, shoddiness becomes a political and aesthetic virtue. When our students produce their own zines, they are challenged to question the stakes in demands of neatness and presentability that have been drilled into them in their previous writing classes. Frequently it’s the “shoddy” zines with messy thinking/writing that get the higher grades in our classes, not only because they show a better understanding of the genre, not only because the shoddy form might better complement the ideas being presented, but also because shoddiness shows that students understand the significance of breaking out of the dominant constraints that have been placed on writing/thinking.

One of the better zines our students have created, *Tastes Like Chicken*, exemplifies several of these zine qualities.



This 4 ¼ by 5 ½ black and white typed and neatly photocopied zine, written in uneven standard English, is a witty, articulate, ironic, and transgressive celebration of all things chicken. It includes apparently innocuous reminiscences of chicken soup, reviews of fast food chicken restaurants, and long lists of chicken preparations. It also matter-of-factly includes articles titled “Sex With Chickens” (a memoir and a how-to) and “A Chicken Named Desire” (a seduction and a confession) that are interspersed with the others and share their enthusiastic tone and style. It is precisely this rhetorical juxtaposition of the banal with the unnameable that gives the zine its particular humor and edge. The audience imagined and created for this zine is less likely centered around the zine’s subject matter as it is around the zine’s style and flair for pushing the boundaries of good taste. While a less arresting zine (or a conventional magazine) might create an audience around a particular topic area (chicken lovers), here the imagined community is more abstractly defined by its rhetorical and moral sensibilities: those who share the zine creators’ pleasure in clever writing, outrageous thinking, the dutiful articulation of this

thinking, interrogations of aesthetic and social platitudes, and assaults on bourgeois morality, and who find such assaults amusing, entertaining, and affirming. And while a more conventional political reading of this zine would no doubt find it trivial and childish, we would argue that such a limited definition of the political is exactly what zines—and the teaching of zines—contest.

#### • IV •

**S**ince our students choose the subject matter of the zines they create, and since the content of zines is as varied as their form, we periodically mull and argue over the question of how formative style and form are in the politics of the zines our students produce. While we have suggested that zines are always in some way dissident and transgressive in the context of a composition classroom situated in the patriarchal metropolitan corporation, we also wonder in what ways a white supremacist zine, for instance, is and is not dissident and transgressive. First, one would have to concede that a white supremacist zine is possible, that all zines do not share a particular position on the political spectrum. The multitude of what are generally acknowledged as zines by zinesters and trade publications certainly admits of this possibility. However, our students have not yet entertained creating such a zine, and some zine critics who see zines as always politically “left-of-center” (Wan 16) would no doubt deny the white supremacist text the status of zine. We would ask if and how the zine’s subversive form (its by-nature critique of publishing corporate capitalism) might counteract or redirect its reactionary content – and even to separate form from content in this way may belie the materiality of zines’ meaning and effect. Additionally we would ask to what extent style is politics, how stylistic innovations contribute to progressive politics, and what politically progressive functions are being served by stylistic experimentation.

As teachers, we also wonder whether our use of zines in academic institutions necessarily undermines the zines’ subversive potentials. If zines are designed to resist institutional power, isn’t requiring them in the classroom a co-optation that decontextualizes and defangs them?

No matter how zinesters may view the incorporation of their work into writing classes, requiring students to produce zines does challenge and subvert the desires and expectations of university administrators (and many of our colleagues and students) who increasingly presume that the function of composition classes should be to funnel students into corporate businesses, serve the interests of the dominant classes, and preserve the political and educational status quo. We are committed to a different vision of education, one that expects students to develop their critical faculties, to interrogate how knowledge serves specific economic, political, and social interests, to cultivate a questioning relationship to their own knowledge and to dominant modes of knowledge-dissemination, and to create their own counter-practices in writing. To paraphrase Bernice Johnson Reagon, socially conscious writers are not born, but are culturally oriented and trained (1). It is necessary and instructive to make students aware of the virtues and efficacy of resisting the status quo, and to teach them strategies for materializing that resistance. Using zines in our classes enables us and our students to

explore “power relationships between dominant and sub-cultural groups” (Williamson 4), and to learn about the pleasures, powers, and frustrations of subversion and resistance.

And how do students respond to this forced refusal of their presumptive desire that expository writing classes function as service courses—the road to better papers in other classes, better grades, competency at a job, a life of effortless and articulate communication? Other than the few who believe they actually want a teacher who lectures and prescribes (and who believe that they aren’t getting their money’s worth otherwise), our students have found their work with zines enjoyable, enabling, and liberating for them as writers (and our own evaluations of the students’ work bears out their claims). One student who requested to remain anonymous commented in the preface to her portfolio at the end of one of our writing courses on zines, “I felt like I was in control of my writing for once.” Another student remarked in anonymous student evaluations that “the zine forced me to break out of the dominant mold I had been pushed into and it liberated me as a writer.” Even students who seem to have little interest in writing or in academic work in general, appear to come to new engagements in their work on zines. One such student displayed a surprisingly sophisticated writerly understanding of audience construction and the dynamics of collaboration in an anonymous reflection on the modest-in-scope but effective zine titled *Fuct Up* that the student’s group had produced:

Our zine, *Fuct Up*, was an assignment I gained a lot from. I was elated at the very fact that I could even write about getting fuct up in the first place. [...] I took off from the freedom given to me. I feel that our zine reflects the creative colorfulness of each unique individual within our group. Each one of us has experienced different substances that made our zine attract a vaster crowd. Considering every person in the group was at a different stage in their substance consumption career, everyone had their own distinct role that was fulfilled.

This student’s reflection reveals a complex understanding of how collaborations function. Unlike the myth many of our colleagues endorse, that for collaborations to be successful it is important for all students to contribute equally, working on and producing a zine enables our students not only to come to richer understandings of collaboration and the asymmetries of writing situations/contexts, but also to find pleasure in writing that challenges the status quo, to imagine alternatives to a culture that privileges consumerism as the only path to pleasure, and to form alternative networks/communities.

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