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On Teacher Neutrality: Politics, Praxis, and Performativity

Jennifer Smith Daniel

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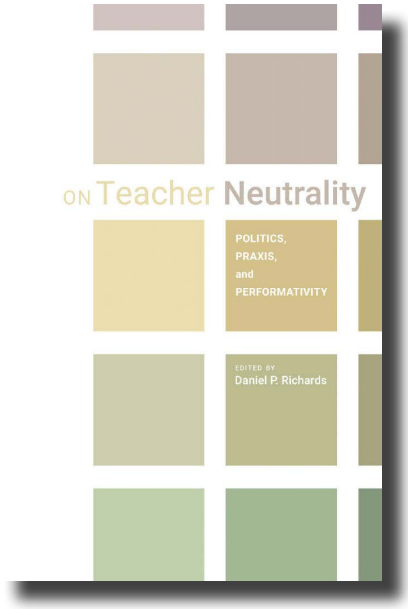

Reviewed by Jennifer Smith Daniel
Queens University of Charlotte

While teacher neutrality is a contested concept within the field of rhetoric and composition, the public often expects a teacher's neutral position. Daniel P. Richard's collection of essays grapples with this disconnect in *On Teacher Neutrality: Politics, Praxis, and Performativity*. The collection's purpose is three-fold: to complicate in order to clarify the term *neutrality*; to bring "depth to how neutrality operates differently in various institutional settings"; and to "nuance" ways neutrality may or may not be applied in those settings (14). Richards opens the collection by framing our current political discourses about education pointing to external pressures from advocacy groups such as Turning Point USA and internal pressures from neoliberal institutions. This edited collection challenges "teachers of writing to explore further and more fully and honestly the ramifications of a ubiquitous position of non-neutrality […] against a larger social scene that still believes in and expects neutrality in education" (13). His caution is not wrong—particularly in pointing out that while our field may understand that teaching is a political endeavor, the discourses through which our students are reading us tell another story. Readers will appreciate the ways the collection works towards theorizing the phenomenon of teacher neutrality and how the public's static perception may be complicated. To more deeply engage the theories, readers may wish to read Karen Kopelson's "Rhetoric on the Edge of Cunning; or, The Performance of Neutrality" as the essay is a prominent support or counter for most of the collection's essays. Using a variety of methodologies, Richards and the other contributors test the ways neutrality and non-neutrality either serve our goals as teachers of writing or hinder them.

Meaghan Brewer's essay "The Limits of Neutrality" opens up part one of the book with this anchoring idea: "The idea of the teacher as politically neutral appears to be a cultural commonplace" (27). Brewer's research suggests that the graduate teachers from her study had a couple of approaches for neutrality as they negotiated the politically informed curriculum they were assigned; a performance which

centered on keeping the student focus at the level of the text. She notes that many graduate instructors seemed unaware of their neutral stance, which "were […] influenced by interactions with past professors and other literacy sponsors, as well as cultural prototypes for the 'ideal professor'" (Brewer 32). These differing accounts of how to perform neutrality illustrate Brewer's assertion that "different institutional settings demand different degrees of neutrality"—a point taken up more thoroughly and explicitly with the lenses of praxis and performativity later in the book. Brewer makes visible an essential need to train new graduate instructors to "operate as teacher-rhetors, recognizing the classroom as a rhetorical space for accomplishing the work of education" (39).

Chapter two by Jason C. Evans, "Living in Contradiction: Translingual Writing Pedagogies and the Two-Year College" asks a germane question for instructors of writing: "What are we doing, really?" Evans bids readers to consider how instructors (particularly at two-year-colleges) sit at "nexus of contradictions" and how "composition's dominant attitudes about language position [it] in relation to […] students" (41). He reminds readers that students come to our courses with their own agendas and goals that may lay in more practical pathways than our democratic ones. Evans interrogates the theories of linguistic capital, capitalism, and social-class in the chapter not to deflate the field's idealistic aims but to remind us that those aims are always contingent. Evans notes in his conclusion that "students' instrumental understanding of college" may cause tension between the goals of translingual writing pedagogies and students' instrumental goals, but concentrating that tension mostly at the level of the student seems to miss the opportunity to acknowledge how systems of power co-opt language and invite students into a conversation that addresses language as a tool for both access and exclusion (53).

Jessica Clements' tidy chapter "Walking the Narrow Ridge: When Performing Neutrality Isn't an Option in the Vocation of the Christian Professor" shares her practical approach of utilizing *mêtis* within the context of an institution openly aligned with a Christian ethos. Clements posits that when the non-neutral position of the institution extends to the classroom, the institutions "should be willing to reward their instructors for subversive performance of neutrality as purposeful pedagogical *mêtis*" (Clements 55, emphasis original). During an invention exercise with the students, Clements adds words that may counter, or at least muddle, those initial student responses so that eventually her "covert stratagem" produced "critical dividends in the students' reflections" she shares as part of her research (62). What Clements seems to do is give the students the rhetorical space to think deeply about their projects through her use of *mêtis* to counter their preconceived expectations about assignment goals and their instructor's suspected alignment with the institution's Christian character.

The nexus of teacher neutrality and the precariousness of contingent faculty is the subject matter for Robert Samuels' essay "Contingent Faculty, Student Evaluation, and Pedagogical Neutrality." Samuels claims "that we can use the principles of the scientific method to posit that instruction should also be based on the ideals of neutrality, objectivity, empiricism, and universality" (72). His point is that even if teachers

cannot be neutral, they should still aim for it. Framing his argument on the ideas of Descartes and Freud, Samuels echoes other contributors in the collection regarding the value of developing students' rhetorical agility to recognize how form and content operate together and that contexts drive what is rhetorically appropriate. Samuels draws a new understanding of neutrality as "a dialectical relationship between the modern quest for universality and the postmodern emphasis on cultural and historical differences" in which that universality is not reduced to an essential singularity but rather "expanded by the inclusion of new protected categories [. . .] fueled by postmodern minority-based social movements" (79).

The inter-chapter between Richards and John Timbur provides a fulcrum for the entire collection—particularly in light of Timbur's influence in our field, which is shaped by Freirean notions of education as a means of liberation. Timbur posits that students come with their expectations of teacher neutrality because of science: ". . . the ideas of neutrality and objectivity are interrelated historically in the formation of modern science" (85). Bias alters facts, and science addresses bias through "methodology"—the scientific method. Timbur suggests that despite their understanding that "scientific knowledge" is subject to the same pressures that rhetoric enacts on any phenomenon, scientists "also see politics, emotion, personality, as contaminating. And, science has sold that methodology, and established that authority in the production of knowledge" (86). Timbur suggests that we can reframe the idea of teacher neutrality in programming that is designed through interdisciplinarity such as WAC programs because these require faculty to work across disciplines to consider how knowledge is produced and legitimized (86). Timbur reminds readers—by paraphrasing Ken Bruffee—that "'how we teach is what we teach,'" which becomes significant to the ways teachers may perform neutrality in the classroom (89). For Timbur, the conversation around teacher neutrality "is a matter of working out what the authority of the teacher is. And I think bouncing off of the complexity that emerges when you start to talk about neutrality, and to see both what it screens and hides and what it authorizes" (94). What follows in Parts II and III of the collection addresses directly how neutrality can either obscure or legitimize. If politics end up being about people, then responding to the politics of teacher neutrality means factoring in the human contingencies in all their messiness. Part II of the book shifts from exploring the strategy of neutrality towards tactics for that strategy.

Kelly Blewett's chapter, "Strangers on Their Own Campus: Listening across Difference in Qualitative Research," invites a student's voice into the discussion. She suggests that despite the feeling of alienation that teachers—and likely students—feel when we engage a person with opposing values, we should consider simply pursuing a space of "mutual common ground, [decreased] fear, and [an increased . . .] sense of connectedness between students and teachers" (99). Over the course of interviews focusing on first-year writers, Blewett and her student shared what Lad Tobin calls "'purposeful self-disclosures'" (Tobin, as quoted in Blewett 102). These disclosures when read as neutrality can be experienced as "an openness to listening, to making a space for the student to explore their own" thoughts, which can be a "natural precursor to trust" (102). Blewett claims that her stance of neutrality was "not only a

performance for students but also an orientation to students" (109). Blewett reminds readers that the discomfort about disclosing non-neutral positions is not just felt by instructors, but by students as well.

Christopher Michael Brown's chapter, "Believing Critically: Teaching Critical Thinking through the Conversion Narrative" also enacts an orientation towards neutrality in pragmatic ways for the classroom. Brown echoes the previous sentiments about the fraught nature of neutrality and invites readers to consider how "pedagogical approaches that seek to convert students along particular ideological lines may be less effective as a method of engaging students" in critical thinking processes (114). Instead he invites teachers to foster critical thinking through Burke's idea of *syllogistic progression form* (Brown 114, emphasis original). This tactic asks students to consider the how and why they came to have specific beliefs or values and to articulate that journey, which invites students into a naming process and makes visible to them the origins of their beliefs. Brown explains that routines of drafting and revision (by the student) and feedback (from the instructor) provides "students the analytical tools needed to recognize that the discourses that mediate their experience do not reflect timeless truths but emerge from—and are allied with—historically situated interests" (115). For Brown these tactics towards a neutrality, as a strategy, might work when the neutrality is about "enabling students to develop lines of inquiry on the basis of their own ideological commitments" in order to help students come to the understanding that "beliefs have a logical foundation" (118–119). Brown introduces the issue of student development and then posits that students are receptive to assignments they perceive "as akin to their own interests and commitments" (123).

The following chapter, "Ideology Through Process and Slow-Start Pedagogy: Co-Constructing the Path of Least Resistance in the Social Justice Writing Classroom" by Lauren F. Lichty and Karen Rosenberg also attend to the issue of how student development is a factor in resistance. They propose a slow-start pedagogy to minimize student resistance by "unmasking student assumptions about what a legitimate university classroom 'should' look like, de-centering professorial authority, legitimizing student experience as one form of valid evidence, providing productive outlets for student resistance, and enlisting students as active co-creators of the classroom learning community" (128–129). They argue for an "attention to process" so that "student resistance can be minimized by attending to developmental and contextual factors" in the "design [of] courses" (129). They emphasize further that "based on a read of our own institutional context […] we argue that analyses of classroom practice are incomplete without the understanding of how classrooms are nested within particular institutional locations" (128). Indeed, the ecologies of higher education will come to factor into the tactics used by writers in later chapters. For Lichty and Rosenberg, sometimes student resistance is less about ideology and more about pedagogy.

Heather Fester extends these themes in chapter 9, entitled "Transparency as a Defense-less Act: Shining Light on Emerging Ideologies in an Activist Writing and Research Course." She contends that the tactic for occupying a non-neutral stance as an instructor must be the work of preparation around the classroom culture. Instructors should acknowledge the complexity of the non-neutral stance by "recognizing

teacher positionality and the potential [for] student difference at the same time, in a way that doesn't dismiss possible tension in the space between" (147). Indeed, Hester asserts that "complexity recognizes that the instructor's beliefs are always already a visible part of [the] shared curricular ground" and as such "the space of the classroom needs to be *prepared*" (146, emphasis original). Fester suggests the tactics of co-creating a brave space with defined rules of engagement; student feedback loops that she creates through surveys and course design; and being transparent with students about choices for their shared learning. Fester prompts readers to consider that "our interpretation of cultural practices [are] powerful, influential, and mostly invisible" to students and that even "simple neutrality" performed in the classroom means that "the ideologies informing the curriculum as assignments can become invisible too" (157).

Mara Holt broadens the conversation by considering the impact of time and location as factors in the performance of teacher neutrality in her chapter "It Depends on the Context: Cultural Competencies in First-Year English." Holt takes readers to "three historical moments" in the early 90s, the early aughts, and just after the Presidential Election of 2016. She also relocates the conversation not just in terms of physical location, but also in terms of the curriculum as a site where the performance of teacher neutrality may or may not be a viable option. Holt reminds readers that "neutrality is a construction that assumes White is the only unbiased perspective" (163). Eventually, Holt realizes that the responsibility of curricular choices should not be driven by a fear of student resistance or teacher discomfort but by the kairotic moment being presented. At each moment in her timeline, Holt wants readers to understand that there was no one-size-fits-all answer to the situation she faced so she "responded to the context surrounding" her; "reflected on the possible [. . .] motives and the possible consequences"; "took a risk" because *any* choice she made—whether for a neutral or non-neutral stance—came with risks (174).

Tristan Abbott brings in the topic of assessment to the collection. He argues in "The *Mêtis* of Reliability: Using the *Framework for Success* to Aid the Performance of Neutrality Within Writing Assessment" that leveraging "objective-seeming and/or test-based assessment practices" might offer "a sort of distancing mechanism" to create a stance of neutrality for audiences beyond the academy (176). The assessment tool becomes the mediator between the material reality of non-neutrality for teachers and the need to "signal a disembodied objectivity" by the institution (177). Of particular use in the chapter is his discussion about the distance between validity and reliability and its impact on how institutions began to think about and measure writing abilities. He claims that the "embrace of validity over reliability has allowed for the development and implementation of assessment practices that, while imperfect, address many of the severe ethical and pedagogical concerns associated with a uniform or standardized approach to writing instruction" (181). Abbott draws our attention back to the idea of *mêtis* as posited by Kopelson and claims that there is a path to "appear less obviously subjective without substantially altering pedagogy" by using tools such as the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing* (186). Abbott maintains that all assessment is imperfect, but intentional design can safeguard our pedagogical practices from the more draconian aspects of standardization.

The issues of design are salient for Adam Pacton's chapter that follows Abbott: "Massive Open Ideology: Ideological Neutrality in Arizona State's Composition MOOCs." Pacton sketches the design and implementation of two composition courses that complicate the ideas of teacher neutrality heretofore as a particularly American issue. He contends "that the multivalenced heterogeneity of [MOOCs] calls for a more nuanced stance on ideological commitment" (192). Pacton describes the process for designing these MOOC courses "began with the axiom that there is no view from nowhere" (194). The team used a process of "*theorizing*" ideological neutrality, which is "understood as a recursive, always-incomplete dialog between context, data, confirmation, prediction, and the epistemological scaffolding that undergirds them" (195, emphasis original). He states that they aimed for a "*direction* rather than a destination" to help refine their process (195, emphasis original). Pacton reaffirms the potential for the "broad outcomes" enumerated in position statements such as the *WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition* and *The Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing* to become the tools for moving in the direction of ideological neutrality in both the course design and negotiating the "ideological commitments" found in LMSs (198). Pacton acknowledges that these types of tools are not fixed solutions for managing neutrality but merely one possibility for pursing "a kind of ideological equilibrium" (202).

If Part I is about the various theories possible in performing teacher neutrality and Part II is the pragmatic application of that performance, Part III is the reflection on the implications of that application. Romeo Garcia and Yndalecio Isaac Hinojosa offer a chapter meant to complicate the ideas present in Kopelson's original response of performative neutrality in reply to student resistance. Their initial move of contextualizing their own subject positions lends texture to their arguments for "unravel[ing] the term *resistance*" (207, emphasis original). In "Encounters with Friction: Engaging Resistance through Strategic Neutrality," their identities as a Mexican-American and Chicano from the southwest U.S. matters materially the moment they step into the classroom because they are "raced, gendered, and classed in various ways" (207). Garcia and Hinojosa draw on their lived experiences of learning "to listen [and] understand" in order "to respond to situations" (208). Here they are pointing to the difference between responding and reacting in a way that promotes the idea of "*friction as a nuance of resistance*" (208) in hopes of "shift[ing] away from resistance and from student-as-problem rationales" (208). For Garcia and Hinojosa, while the use of "strategic neutrality" can "mitigate resistance," student resistance was not something to be avoided so much as co-opted for the purpose of learning.

In "Turning Resistances into Engagement," Erika Johnson and Tawny LeBouef Tullia continue the promotion of resistance as a tactic ripe for creating meaningful learning. Johnson and Tullia explicitly address possible outcomes for teachers who are "authentically inhabiting [their] identities" in the classroom and how that has "proven to open more conversation than it closes" (222). They flatly state their unwillingness to perform neutrality as they feel it "robs [. . .] students of crucial and difficult conversations" (223). For Johnson and Tullia, as both "visibly and invisibly marked in how [they] identify," the idea of "cunning neutrality may prevent resistances from en-

tering or impeding the writing classroom for some students, it may alienate or, even worse, fail to offer students who finally see themselves in us an opportunity to engage with their own identities" (223). Johnson and Tullia complicate the issue of power by asserting that within classrooms teachers are "both the powerful and the powerless" (226). Johnson and Tullia contend that resistance does not always stifle learning, but "that a pedagogy seated in the praxis of intersectionality and relationality" means that instructors also "engage" the process, which is "not fully possible from a positionality of neutrality" (231).

"Who is Afraid of Neutrality?: Performativity, Resignification, and the Jena Six in the Composition Classroom" by David Stubblefield and Chad Chisholm returns the conversation to arguing from the position "that neutrality is an indispensable concept for academic institutions [and] can produce unpredictable and desirable effects" (236). They contextualize their argument by providing a brief overview of the failed rise of the democratic classroom and the ramifications of the cultural reckoning of the 1960s, particularly as the composition classroom was affected by the theories of critical-pedagogy and expressivist scholars writing at the time. Stubblefield and Chisholm argue that a turn towards a "kind of oppositional pedagogy" became the tactic for bringing about the democratic classroom (240). Here they echo Kopelson's arguments for performing neutrality as a way to handle "today's hostile student audiences" (245). Providing an example from students at a "small historically Black college" regarding a student protest around the Jena Six, Chisholm suggests that he used a performance of neutrality to help students "measure their own assumptions" using "the very values and history they claimed to cherish" referring to the school's ethos and its "Methodist-affiliation" (249). He claims that such a stance "did not stifle politics, difference, or diversity, but [facilitated] the emergence of these things by encouraging the exchange of ideas" (250).

Jennifer Thomas and Allison L. Rowland's penultimate chapter, "Moving from Transparent to Translucent Pedagogy" resonates with earlier chapters in framing the resistance less as a political challenge than a pedagogical one. They posit the idea of "*teacher transparency* as a corollary concept to *teacher neutrality*" with a pivot towards a "*translucent pedagogy*" (252, emphasis original). They offer an argument to "highlight the conflation of competing transparency rhetorics in higher education [… and provide] a set of criteria in which to tell them apart, and suggest ways of adopting learning-centered transparency to the contemporary neoliberal moment" (253). Learning-centered transparent teaching is more about "the *how* and *why* of their learning" (257). Their approach accounts for how student learning habits and ways of being develop and sometimes need spaces that invite conflict to promote growth (259). They encourage teachers to ask students to join them in hard conversations about privilege and difference, but in a more intentional way and at a slower pace, which they name a "translucent pedagogy," that "gesture[s] to the possibilities inherent in strategically withholding learning purposes, goals, or other information […] in the initial phases" of an activity or lesson and with a "'debriefing' discussion activity" afterwards (261). Teaching practices such as these are an option for potentially making use of potential student resistance.

Daniel Richards closes out the collection with a reflective essay that attempts to bring all the various threads into harmony through a narrative from one of his own teaching experiences that was a fraught site of non-neutrality. In responding to a student critique about a class where students had various responses to the outcome of the 2016 US Presidential election, he finds himself disclosing to a student his disappointment with the results. This reaction (versus what he would have preferred as a considered response) seems to trouble him as not something he would normally do, but felt in this moment that he was trying "to genuinely forge a personal connection with a student" (275). What he thinks is a better option is to have conversations "*with* students and guide and co-explore more educationally the language of teaching performance and politics" (277).

This collection does what it is meant to do in that it complicates our understanding of teacher neutrality and how it operates ecologically within educational contexts. Readers will find much to agree with and contest throughout the essays as they consider the merits and drawbacks of performing teacher neutrality. It is important to note that Karen Kopelson published a follow up to her essay from 2003 just as this collection was coalescing. Her frank reframing of her former assertions highlights a few of the important themes from other contributors here; for example, the need to consider teacher and student development as factors related to neutrality and that teaching as an action should always be rhetorically and reflectively informed. Ultimately, for Richards, this action requires a willingness to be "fair, considerate, self-aware, and critical of all standpoints" (277). I hope that most teachers strive for that positionality.