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# Political Correctness—Correct?

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**I**T was almost all over for H. Ross Perot shortly after he addressed the NAACP Convention in July of '92. Two clean, innocent sounding words, "you" and "people," helped to derail, at least temporarily, his well-fueled political train. For the NAACP, they were politically incorrect and highly offensive. How, we wonder, could a personal pronoun, "you" and a highly revered noun, "people," used with telling effect by Lincoln at Gettysburg, so thoroughly unnerve a political maverick's presidential aspirations? In short, what was PC to Perot was clearly not PC to the NAACP.

Of course, "you people," who are rhetoricians as well as administrators, particularly "you people" who are experts in *elocutio*, recognize the potential power of language style to elevate or demean, to inspire or squelch, to heal or hurt, to liberate or oppress as well as to mold and influence thought. You also know that taboo words and phrases with their soothing euphemistic counterparts have marred or enhanced language usage from the beginning. In my boyhood days, a failure to use the appropriate euphemisms for nasty or naughty words brought on a quick soap in the mouth treatment.

During the past two or three years, administrators and faculty have witnessed a rising tide of politically incorrect language—student verbal abuse—racial, ethnic, and sexist—that not even soap could cure. To compound and confuse this problem, the PC movement to promote polite speech on campus brought on vicious, often stormy battles over curriculum planning, affirmative action, reverse discrimination, academic freedom, and First Amendment rights to mention just a few. Let's examine this fascinating PC phenomenon, looking for its roots and objectives, its successes and failures in coping with the inevitable conflicts and clashes an ever increasingly multicultural campus can and does provoke.

About two years ago, a spluttering, heated PC brouhaha hit academia and spread widely and wildly across the print media. Many of the issues fueling this debate, however, have been around for several decades (Berman, 1992, p. 5). The controversy, however, still rages, and has managed to turn the normal conservative/liberal positions upside down. It's rather refreshing to hear the right wing beat the tubs for the First Amendment—distressing to watch

its traditional defenders impose restrictions on free speech. Even George Bush entered the fracas with a speech at the University of Michigan, deploring the PC censors (Cockburn, 1991). It's hard now to determine who wears the big bad "L" word.

Political correctness, as an expression, began years ago as something of a joke to describe communists who slavishly toed the party line. Roots for the current PC rage, however, stretch back to the student revolution of the late 60s and early 70s, to what Paul Berman calls, "the '68 Philosophy" (Berman, 1992, p. 5-11). Even if time permitted, I am not capable of unravelling all the mysteries and verbal abstractions of the various philosophical schools, e.g., postmodernism/poststructuralism that inspired American scholars, mainly in the humanities, to re-examine their thinking about literary criticism, the literature they taught, critiqued, required students to read, the fundamental nature of language, written and spoken, and the immense power of the word in shaping student thought and action.

The humanities and some English Departments, it seems, are finally catching up with us. All of our founding fathers, Woolbert, Winans, Weaver et al. focused their teaching and research on a study of the spoken word, proclaiming it more powerful than even the written as a potent social and political force. Scholars in the humanities, taking a hard look at language, concluded that one source of racial and sexist prejudice was the requirement and penchant of teachers to teach and students to study principally the works of dead, white European males. Consequently, students acquired a biased view of society, reflecting a narrow white, sexist image, resulting in a negatively focused racial, class, and gender alignment. Moreover, the so-called liberal literature of the enlightenment had failed, among many failures to save us from a senseless, immoral Viet Nam war. Forcing students to concentrate almost exclusively on the "canon," allegedly the best works of civilization from the beginning of time, raised serious questions for the PC enthusiasts. Were these sacred texts designed to heat up the melting pot, thus producing a homogeneous community, rather than assisting in the development of a more healthy environment, a tossed salad society, grounded in diversity? Concentrating on dead, white, European males to the near exclusion of women and minorities certainly did little to cool the fires of prejudice and rendered the curriculum impotent to ameliorate legitimate grievances. Modern and even ancient writers representing blacks, women, Native Americans, Hispanics and other minority groups cried out for recognition. Even art and architecture demanded an infusion of fresh blood (Kimball, 1990, pp. 116-141).

In the eyes of the right-wing anti-PC forces, this modern crusade toward multiculturalism sprang from the machinations of the 1968 campus radicals, now professorial *Tenured Radicals*, the book-title of Roger Kimball's bitter rebuke (Kimball, 1990). Aided and abetted by lily-livered, timid administrators, according to the right wingers, these zealous professors, mainly in the humanities, conspired to gut the curriculum with a vast assortment of anti-western, pro-black, pro-feminist, pro-gay notions, peppered with Marxist and Freudian doctrines that condemned the United States, the West, and Europe as hopelessly decadent, reactionary, and oppressive. To my knowledge, the hard sciences have escaped, not entering this part of the PC scuffle. Right-wing conservatives, by and large, accused timid administrators and radical professors of driving out the great classic works of antiquity, replacing them with ancient and modern, but also obscure and inferior works of women, blacks, and other minority groups. Further, these "Visigoths in Tweed" (Berubé, 1992, p. 125) as conservative firebrand, Dinesh D'Souza branded them, have further barbarized the curriculum by establishing widely diverse studies programs for women, African Americans, Chicano/Chicanas, and gays and lesbians, to name a few.

As we know, SCA, years ago, joined the multicultural, minority promotional drive of the PC movement. You can easily find in our current convention program a multitude of meetings sponsored by the black, Asian/Pacific Islanders, LaRaza, women's, and gay and lesbian caucuses. Some new ones may well loom on the horizon, perhaps indigenous

persons—PC for Native Americans.

Roger Kimball, author of *Tenured Radicals*, attended the 1990 convention of MLA, held here in Chicago. According to this witty PC critic, Shakespeare and Milton fared badly while the apostles of the “Multiculturalist imperatives of political correctness,” dominated the convention. Denouncing Professor Catharine Stimpson’s presidential address, admittedly a stirring defense of PC, Kimball complained that “the traditional idea of literature and the concept of literary quality, insofar as they came up at all, were dismissed as ‘naive,’ ‘elitist,’ ‘hegemonic,’ ... The chief substitutes for literature on display,” he wrote caustically, “were Marxism, feminism, what we might call homosexuality, ‘cultural studies,’ ethnic studies, and any number of indeterminate mixtures of the above leavened with dollops of deconstructivist or poststructuralist theory—in other words, multiculturalism *de luxe*” (Kimball, 1992, p. 66). Bitterly he denounced and poked barbed humor at some of the more sensational and sexually oriented programs and papers. I fear that some of our SCA programs might also fare poorly at Kimball’s hand. What we need in Academe, according to Kimball, D’Sousa, George Will, the late Allen Bloom, William Bennett, and other conservatives, is a return to the “rigors” of classical learning and most of all the abandonment of politics in the classroom. In conservative eyes “Marxist intellectuals have ‘politicized the academy,’” imposing “ideological constraints on free speech,” (Henson and Philpott, 1992, p. 10) and installing “totalitarian reeducation camps” (Stimpson, 1992, p. 59).

The radicals and liberals, on the other hand, denied the charge of abandoning the “canon”, i.e., Shakespeare, Milton, etc., but were simply expanding the offerings to introduce students to the literature of a wider variety of cultural groups: African Americans, Hispanics, Native Americans, women, and others who were left out of the “canon” and should now be included. This change, in the words of Catharine Stimpson, was designed “to bring dignity to the dispossessed and self-empowerment to the disempowered, to recuperate the texts and traditions of ignored groups, to broaden cultural history” (Stimpson, 1992, p. 45).

Another frightening aspect of PC according to conservatives, was the ’68 radicals penchant for turning the curriculum into a vehicle to promote their leftist, radical politics. Any change in the curriculum, promoting the right wing agenda would probably have escaped censure. But as Gerry O’Sullivan, Senior Editor of the *Humanist* pointed out, the canon itself has always carried political overtones for at least 100 years and “was steeped in politics from the very start” (O’Sullivan, 1992, p. 17).

But now, let’s examine a most serious charge against PC. Like most medicinal drugs, the PC prescription to cure our curricular myopia has produced some evil, injurious, even a few silly side effects. The one central to our concern in speech communication, is the recent impulse under the aegis of PC to use force—speech codes to eliminate language and ideas offensive to various minority groups and women. The political incorrectness of hate speech, racial slurs, harassment of women and minorities is indeed frightening and despicable, surely calling for stern remedies

A few observers attempted to draw causal relationships between the rise of hate language with the introduction of affirmative action, the establishment of various cultural study programs, and what some considered to be reverse discrimination. Causal relationships are seldom easy to establish. Certainly the jump in enrollment of various minority groups and women aroused concern in some white males who saw their one-time superior position threatened. It’s easy to be tolerant as long as the underdog or outsider doesn’t invade or endanger our territory.

Few would quarrel with the objectives of the PC advocates to generate a prejudice-free campus where learning thrives in a peaceful, quiet environment, free from strident name-calling, insulting speech, and verbal harassment. Some of our linguistic efforts to purify the language contained some good humor (Hitchens, 1991). Women spelled with a y rather than an e for example. A few years ago our local newspaper attempted to greet new students as

fresh persons and were nearly laughed out of town. But, please don't call me baldy—I'm merely "hair disadvantaged" or "follicularly challenged" (Innerst, 1992). Even the sacred Word was not immune. But the New (1990) Revised Standard Edition hasn't totally eliminated God as a masculine figure (Goldman, 1990).

A more serious side effect of this name-changing game, e.g., from negroes, to blacks, to Afro-Americans to African Americans is the temptation to brand anyone who continues to use the older forms, either from habit or preference, as sexist, racist, or homophobic. Linguistic habits die slowly. A Sunday or two ago in church I was standing next to one of our zealous feminists and had to remind her that even when singing from our new gender neutral hymnal she fervently sang the age-old "mankind" instead of the newly printed "humankind." In spite of some silly changes, the shift toward generically neutral words and away from the heavily weighted male language that has from the beginning marked our language is surely a healthy move. The increased use of PC euphemisms, inoffensive words for ones that conjure up prejudice or hatred seems legitimate and helpful as long as we aren't laboring under an illusion that changing the name will automatically change the attitude. But, eventually, as the Sapir-Worf thesis reminds us, it will help.

This rage to change the language raises significant problems for faculty and administrators in communication. During the past two or three years, over 350 colleges and universities passed regulations to stop derogatory language, racial, ethnic, and sexist slurs, and even jokes, e.g., "inappropriately directed laughter" aimed at minority groups (Talbot, 1991). Enforced by severe punishments, including expulsion from the university, these speech codes with a gag placed on words and thought raise serious questions: Are speech codes and the use of force as a means of achieving political correctness—correct? Can we teach speech communication and still selectively outlaw some forms of speech? Can speech codes live harmoniously with academic freedom?

To cope with these questions, we need at the outset to examine our insides. Within each of us, conservatives, radicals, liberals, and reactionaries, there dwells a little censor who is always poised, ready to jump out and squash any word or idea repulsive to our feelings or our thoughts. When we confront the unspeakable, we speak out vigorously—there ought to be a law! Even John Milton in his celebrated denunciation of censorship in the *Areopagitica* was quite willing to deny free speech to Catholics (Fish, 1992, p. 231). A celebrated English clergyman confessed his strong desire to blue pencil the smut he found in the Old Testament. Most of us liberals become highly, even righteously indignant when the ever-smiling Jerry Falwell, the ever-scowling Jesse Helms and the ever-passionate Donald Wildman raise their voices and marshal their confederates to banish naughty speech, lewd art, and offensive books, movies, and magazines. But now on campuses across the nation the PC "legion of decency" is hard at work to do precisely the same thing. The filthy words and ideas of PC are not the same as the filthy words and ideas of the Falwells, Helms or Wildmans. But the manner, methods and censorship techniques are frighteningly similar (Hentoff, 1990, p.147).

I readily grant Falwell, Helms, and Wildman the right to preach and to agitate for their causes. Academe must also oppose with every rhetorical device the use of hate words, racist, ethnic, and sexist, if we are to further the education of both faculty and students. The question is: Is the imposition of codes that call for student or faculty suspension or expulsion satisfactorily doing the job with fairness and justice?

One survey estimated that over 60% of the colleges and universities had "written policies on bigotry and verbal intimidation," condemning everything from "discriminatory comments, name calling, racial slurs, or jokes" (Dority, 1992, p. 31) to the vilest of sexist smears. Michigan, Stanford, and Wisconsin, became the PC models. Although the courts subsequently tossed out many of these codes on the grounds of vagueness and broadness, (Ingwerson, 1992) Wisconsin tried unsuccessfully to revise its code to meet constitutional standards. Following a heated debate and a 10-6 vote, the Board of Regents finally threw in

the towel on September 11, 1992, just three years and ten days from the establishment of the code (Jordan, 1992). This may cool the current PC code craze, but it's highly doubtful that recent court decisions will completely dampen the zealots' fire for correctness (Shea, 1992). Even the courts have offered hope to the PC radicals in their "fighting words" doctrine.

While I understand the Supreme Court's argument for banning so-called "fighting words," and "worthless speech" as unworthy of First Amendment protection, I don't find this philosophy appropriate for academe and must unreservedly join those who oppose restrictive speech codes. Surely the liberals and radicals who support speech codes backed by force have admirable objectives. The ends, however laudable, in no way justify the means. When we are concerned with forcing correct speech through laws or codes that punish students or faculty with suspension or expulsion for politically incorrect speech or thoughts, the fundamental mission of education has misfired. Suppression of speech inevitably leads to suppression of thought. When we resort to force or censorship, in of all places, the halls of academe, we have failed in our primary mission to civilize and educate the foulmouthed and stupid through the legitimate tools of our trade, namely talk, discussion, thought and persuasion (Healy, 1983). Here are my reasons. In the first place, no professor, administrator, or lawyer for that matter is smart enough to write a code or gag law that cannot or will not be mutilated, stretched, and enforced unjustly by some supremely pious, overly eager administrator. He or she ends up bending the code out of line with reason and punishes the student out of all proportion to the offense. The administration at the University of Michigan, for example, sought the expulsion of a black student who asserted in class that homosexuality was treatable through therapy. Another black student also faced expulsion "for using the term white trash in class" (Dority, 1992, P. 31).

Second, I base my views, not on legal or constitutional grounds, but upon the basic principle undergirding academic freedom for both teachers and students. When we turn to codes or the courts to promote academic freedom, we have already lost the battle. The concept of academic freedom antedates the First Amendment by several centuries. These two basic freedoms are not the same. And if we are true to our ancient tradition, we don't need the First Amendment or codes or courts to do the job we ourselves are pledged to do. Academic freedom is not a legal right; it is a professional claim—a claim that is supported not by the courts but through the vigorous defense of those rights within the academic walls. Teachers, students, and administrators must pledge themselves to maintain the right of free inquiry, no matter where it might lead and to the right to express themselves without the sinister fear of dismissal for saying something that might offend someone. In academe there must be no compulsive, legal penalties imposed on faculty or students, even for seemingly stupid or ignorant words or thoughts. One advocate of stricter codes, John Powell of the California ACLU complained that universities have not "seriously" discussed racial issues. Right though he is, speech codes will only provide "a chilling effect on the needed discussion" (Karl, 1990). We do not educate the dumb by excluding them from school because of their dumbness. It's far better to allow the nuts to rave in public than force them to think and plot in private. Moreover, codes often endow the despicable with the unjust rewards of censorship. Their pseudo-martyrdom, like that of 2 Live Crew and Ice T enable them to climb out of the slime to the top of the popularity charts.

Third, speech codes usually lead to a speaker's ban, either official or unauthorized, thus barring students from hearing all sides of controversial issues. In a PC atmosphere anti-feminist Phyllis Schlafly would have difficulty securing a hearing. Zealous PC students in the past have exercised a heckler's veto, the hiss and boo successfully silencing the speeches of Linda Chavez (Will, 1991) Jeane Kirkpatrick, the late William Shockley, Eldridge Cleaver, Tom Hayden, and Sheik Yamani when they attempted without success to speak on campuses (Desruisseaux, 1983). In some cases, faint-hearted administrators simply threw in the towel. Unhappily, they succumbed to the temptation to bring only speakers who would

upset no one's digestion, including their own. Students in class who question the concept of affirmative action or express a pro-Arab position risk being silenced as anti-feminist, racist or anti-Semitic (Leo, 1990). The advocates of equal rights, who have always used speech as their principal weapon, may one day find their own sword sheathed.

So, in summary, I would have to say that I wholeheartedly support and condemn both the conservatives and the liberals in their tussle over PC. I enthusiastically endorse the PC liberals in their efforts to expand our curricular offerings to include more multicultural works in all areas including rhetoric and public address, and cross cultural communication. Indeed, I think we in speech communication have been well ahead of our English Department sisters and brothers in supplementing rhetorical studies and public address sources, moving well beyond dead, white, American or European males. Yet, Aristotle, Cicero and Quintillion still live and thrive. Bring on more not fewer courses that genuinely introduce the student to the market place of ideas even those with political overtones. I suspect the treasured canon will survive. And if we are to escape the "ethnic cleansing" rife in the Balkans and throughout too much of our world, we must break down the barriers between races and cultures in our own country.

On the other hand, I must join the conservatives in their crusade against speech codes, even though I strongly suspect their motives, as they continue to bang away at affirmative action. We of all people know how language works. Or to put it another way, the potency and force of language to persuade and our impulses, largely good, to control and direct that force toward socially uplifting goals. Education at its best is rarely neat and clean. As the late Timothy Healy, President of Georgetown University from 1976 to 1989 observed, "Messiness, not to say a kind of anarchy, is part of our nature" (Healy, 1983). Thus, we are always subject to the deviant's shocking words or ideas, but our best hope of convincing the peculiar one to shape up is not through force but through education and persuasion. And we might ultimately decide that the odd one's shape possesses genuine merit. Like democracy, reasoned discussion is always slower and requires more patience than does forced compliance, but it's much more permanent. Force simply intensifies and pushes hateful speech and thought underground where it festers and ultimately breaks out in more lethal forms. The late Justice Hugo Black expressed it well: "My view," said he, "is without deviation, without exception, without any ifs, buts, whereases, that freedom of speech [and here I would add academic freedom] means that you shall not do something to people either for the views they have or the views they express or the words they speak or write" (Black, 1980).

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