

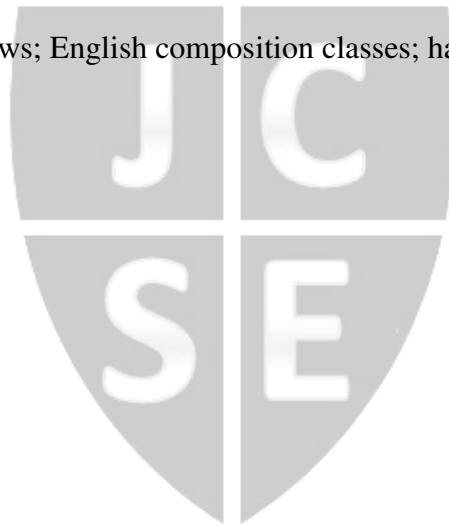
Anti-Semitism in first year composition

Matthew Levy
Pacific Lutheran University

Gerald M. Myers
Pacific Lutheran University

Robert Cohen, Assistant Professor English at Fairbanks University, has just completed a contentious meeting of his First Year Composition class, which had discussed a paper written by one of the students. Joe Anderson's paper contained statements that have been historically used as anti-Semitic slogans. Cohen attempted to avoid embarrassing Anderson in front of others but felt he must address the issue directly. Despite his efforts to avoid embarrassing Anderson, Cohen was not sure he had been successful. Instead of expressing remorse at his error or a desire to revise his paper to remove the potentially offensive content, Anderson seems more concerned that Cohen will punish him with a bad grade. What could Cohen have done differently to produce a better outcome? What should he do differently next time he teaches the course?

Key words: Anti-Semitism; Jews; English composition classes; handling controversial issues in class



INTRODUCTION¹

“You know, I don’t want to write about this anymore. Mainly, I’m just worried about my grade.” The words, spoken by Joe Anderson, rang in Robert Cohen’s ears. Cohen, Assistant Professor of English at Fairbanks University, was about to conclude the May 5th session of his First-Year Composition class. That day, four students had “workshopped” their papers. This meant that significant class time had been devoted to their drafts. They had submitted their papers to the class electronically a day earlier so that their classmates could read their work and prepare feedback and the class had discussed their papers one at a time. Having all of the students examine one of their papers with this kind of sustained focus was a new teaching strategy for Cohen. After workshoping about twelve papers that semester, he was convinced that this exercise was making his class time more productive; yet, the events of the last hour raised serious questions in his mind about his method of facilitating those workshops.

One of the papers discussed on May 5th was Joe Anderson’s, whose paper addressed stereotypes of Jews. This was an appropriate topic for the assignment; however, his treatment of the subject was troubling because, in some sentences, Anderson seemed to accept stereotypes as accurate depictions. Cohen knew that the issues of anti-Semitism would arise one way or the other—he would have had to raise the issue if none of the students had done so. Early in the semester, Cohen had established an informal contract that the classroom would be a safe environment in which to raise difficult and sensitive issues, and that he would assume that their intentions were good, no matter what they said. Cohen did not believe Anderson intended to attack Jews, but he felt a responsibility to explain why certain passages in the paper would be seen by certain audiences as anti-Semitic. In his mind, this did not technically violate the informal contract, but he knew that the students might feel differently, especially Anderson. Was there something he could have said to address the content of the paper without seeming to “call Anderson out” unfairly? How might he revise the contract for future classes to maintain the safe learning environment without making it more difficult to address potentially offensive content?

FAIRBANKS UNIVERSITY

Fairbanks University owed its late 19th century founding to Connecticut insurance mogul Everett M. Fairbanks. Fairbanks envisioned a regional comprehensive university devoted to liberal arts and professional education. The university grew in size and stature, and by the time Robert Cohen joined the faculty, Fairbanks University included professional schools as well as a well-recognized liberal arts program. Undergraduate enrollment at Fairbanks was about 4,000 students; small graduate programs in business, nursing, and education brought total enrollment to about 4,300.

ROBERT COHEN

Cohen came to Fairbanks University in 2007, having completed a Ph.D. in English at a large state university in the southwestern United States in 2005. Prior to his arrival at Fairbanks, Cohen had taught undergraduate writing courses for over 10 years at other institutions. Fairbanks’s first-year writing courses required a theme, whereas Cohen’s prior first year writing

¹ This case is based on an actual classroom experience. All names and institutional affiliations are disguised to preserve confidentiality, but the incident took place as described herein.

courses had focused on argumentation. Based on a previous course in which he used a graphic narrative as part of a common reading experience, Cohen chose to focus his First Year Composition [FYC] course on comics related to serious historical, social, and political issues.

Cohen realized that discussion of the Jewish experience and the Holocaust could be disconcerting for many of his students, the majority of whom were white students from Christian families who might be experiencing uneasiness of their own talking about “minorities” in front of a “minority.” Cohen, who was Jewish himself, knew he would have to be honest with the class about his own feelings and reactions to the material on the Holocaust. By the same token, he thought it important to help the students to feel safe to discuss their feelings openly as well.

FIRST-YEAR COMPOSITION

First Year Composition focused on writing and the thought processes involved in developing well-reasoned written work. Sections were offered by faculty in various disciplines on a variety of topics. Each faculty member developed his/her own syllabus and was responsible for creating and grading their own assignments. A First-Year Composition section might address Shakespearean drama, the role of images in popular culture, or environmental sustainability. Students were free to choose from among the various offerings according to their own interests..

Cohen’s section carried the title “Serious Literary Comic Books” in the course catalog. The following description appeared in the syllabus: “Comic books aren’t just for kids. Many titles that used to be intended for children are still being made; however, many comic books are being produced for adult audiences. Some of the youth titles have also been revisited and re-imagined in order to make them address serious real world events and issues. Comics use many strategies from other art forms while also deploying their own recognizable approach to engaging readers. Our course will examine these techniques as used in serious, full-length comic books. We will write papers in several different forms of academic writing and also try our hands at writing short comics on serious issues.”

Cohen described the purpose of the course as follows: “This course helps students adjust to the expectations of the university in terms of reading, writing and critical thinking: how to get the most out of reading, how to participate in class discussions, and how to conceptualize your response to writing assignments. We will approach writing as a recursive process in which the writer assesses context, invents a purpose that meets the demands of the moment, considers audience, develops ideas, and fashions an appropriate structure, format, and style. By “recursive,” we mean that these steps do not always occur in the same order and some must be repeated before the piece is revised adequately and worthy of being called ‘finished.’”

Cohen had designated several days as “writing workshop” days. On these days, two to four students were assigned to discuss their work with the rest of the class. Each student received only one class workshop during the course. All students were given each other’s papers to read in advance, so the students were able to provide constructive critiques of each other’s work. Cohen typically started out these discussions by asking the students to focus on the strongest and weakest elements in the work under discussion. From there, the discussion might evolve in a variety of directions, depending on the specifics of the assignment and the overall quality of the student’s work. Cohen did not review the papers before he distributed them to the class.

THE MAUS ASSIGNMENT

A major assignment on the Holocaust focused on Art Spiegelman's two-part Maus series. Spiegelman used a comic book format to describe the ordeal of his parents, Vladek and Anja Spiegelman in Nazi Germany during World War II. In the books, Jews are portrayed as mice, the Nazis as cats, the French as frogs, and the Poles as pigs. Spiegelman describes his struggles in coming to terms with his parents' suffering and his experiences researching and writing the books.

Cohen had not taught much material that was related to Jewish experience and was therefore surprised by the strong feelings evoked in students' minds by this unusual piece of writing. How would students feel about addressing this material with a Jewish instructor? At the beginning of the unit on Maus, he addressed the students on this subject: "Some of you may not have had Jewish friends or a Jewish teacher before and also may not have discussed this kind of material in a formal setting. I don't want you hold back from discussions because you are worried about what you might say wrong. No matter how what you say or write appears to me, I am going to assume your intentions are good."

Having read both of Spiegelman's books, the students were then asked to write an essay that made a claim about a theme from the books, supporting that theme with specific textual support from Maus and at least three other sources.

JOE ANDERSON'S PAPER

In his essay, Joe Anderson's paper discussed a number of stereotypes of Jews. While this was an appropriate topic given the nature of the Maus assignment, Anderson's paper seemed to accept the stereotypes uncritically in several parts. The paper was not, in total, a passionate attack on Jews, but there were enough statements that seemed classically anti-Semitic to Cohen that he knew he could not ignore them. For example, Anderson asserted that it was easy to see the historical reasons why Jews today are more obsessed with money than other people. In Anderson's paper, Jews were characterized as miserly, acquisitive and wealthy. At the same time, some sentences in the paper expressed horror at the treatment of the Jews in the Holocaust. The meaning and intent of Anderson's paper seemed open to interpretation.

THE DISCUSSION ON MAY 5TH

After the class assembled on May 5th, Anderson volunteered to have his paper discussed first. Cohen steeled himself and began, as always, by asking "What are the strengths of this paper?" One student remarked that he was impressed that Anderson was willing to take on such a controversial subject. A couple of other students remarked on specific surface issues in the paper, a good bit of word choice here and an effective transition there. This part of the discussion fizzled quickly, though, and the room went quiet.

Cohen followed up, as usual, by asking, "What are the weaknesses in this paper?" There was an unusual silence. Cohen took a deep breath and started the little speech he had rehearsed in his mind before class:

"I guess some of you remember that, when we began this unit, I promised that no matter what you say during class conversation or in your writing, I would assume your intentions are good. I meant that, and I still feel this way. I am concerned about making you all feel uncomfortable and singling out Joe [Anderson], but I also feel it is my responsibility to point out

that there are statements in the paper that trouble me a great deal. While I do not believe you meant it, Joe, I think most educated people would regard some of these statements as anti-Semitic. For instance, on page three, you say that it is easy to see the historical reasons why Jews today are more obsessed with money than other people. While you are right that events in history did push some Jews into financial professions, to say that Jews today are “obsessed” with money as compared to others is very unfortunate phrasing. I don’t know whether you are right that World War I was, on average, less difficult financially for Jews than for others in Germany. To say, however, that after WWI all Germans were poor and all Jews were rich seems to be a gross exaggeration. Furthermore, even using these categories as you do is problematic, since Germans and Jews are not mutually exclusive categories; there are German Jews. It was the Nazis who tried to say you could only be one or the other.” Having said everything he had planned to say, Cohen paused, giving Anderson a chance to speak up.

Anderson explained that he had procrastinated too long and that he certainly didn’t mean to write something anti-Semitic. Some of Anderson’s classmates quickly spoke up in favor of this interpretation of events, perhaps in an attempt to lower the tension. A couple of students began to argue that what the paper really needed was more support. If Anderson could find statistics showing the relative wealth of Jews to others in Germany, then he would be on more solid ground.

Cohen agreed that it was always good advice to start writing earlier and have support for one’s ideas; however, he made clear to the students that this was not the sum of the problem. For instance, he said, it was possible to find statistics and other so-called evidence in support of bad ideas. The Nazis themselves produced all kinds of pseudo-science in support of their policies. Cohen concluded his comments as follows: “Just finding a piece of support for an idea isn’t enough. We have to ask ourselves where we are getting our ideas in the first place. What is our motivation for wanting to make a certain claim? When we know we are on controversial ground, we have to examine evidence on all sides of an issue.”

While Cohen knew he was muddying the water a little by saying that it isn’t enough to just “get facts” for support, he was pleased with how the conversation was going. He was pleased, that is, until Anderson noted his preoccupation with his grade. Cohen was taken aback by Anderson’s statement. Was Anderson’s concern about grades evidence that Cohen had handled the situation inappropriately? Why wasn’t he more concerned about writing a paper that could easily be perceived as anti-Semitic? Did Anderson believe Cohen was going to use the grade to punish him? Is there something he could have done up front to make the contract more effective? Could he have handled the workshop differently so that he didn’t undermine the contract?

Anti-Semitism in First Year Composition Teaching Note

CASE SYNOPSIS

Robert Cohen, Assistant Professor English at Fairbanks University, has just completed a contentious meeting of his First Year Composition class, which had discussed a paper written by one of the students. Joe Anderson's paper contained statements that have been historically used as anti-Semitic slogans. Cohen attempted to avoid embarrassing Anderson in front of others but felt he must address the issue directly. Despite his efforts to avoid embarrassing Anderson, Cohen was not sure he had been successful. Instead of expressing remorse at his error or a desire to revise his paper to remove the potentially offensive content, Anderson seems more concerned that Cohen will punish him with a bad grade. What could Cohen have done differently to produce a better outcome? What should he do differently next time he teaches the course?

COURSES FOR WHICH THE CASE IS INTENDED

This case is usable in workshops on faculty development or in education courses which focus on handling awkward student-faculty interactions.

TEACHING OBJECTIVES

- Identify ways to respond to students who exhibit a lack of awareness of the impact of their words on others.
- Discuss ways to deal with awkward situations which arise in the classroom and to which a faculty response is required.
- Discuss ways to generate "trust" in discussion groups so that sensitive issues can be discussed without fear of reprisal or discrimination.

SUGGESTED ASSIGNMENT QUESTIONS:

1. Evaluate Cohen's handling of the situation leading up to the discussion. As you consider Cohen's situation, consider the following potential courses of action:
 - a. Should Cohen review all the student papers before distributing them to students?
 - b. Should he have postponed the class discussion?
 - c. Should he have modified the prepared statements he delivered during the workshop? If so, how? If not, why not?
 - d. Were other alternative courses of action available to Cohen?
2. Cohen is Jewish himself, and in his "informal contract" with the class, he has told the class that he would assume no negative intentions behind whatever they say or write. Was this the appropriate contract? What other contract[s] might he have made?
3. If students are to benefit from discussions of their work, a strong sense of trust and openness is necessary. How do you establish and maintain an atmosphere conducive to open discussion?
4. The fact that the discussion fizzled quickly may suggest that the students were uncomfortable confronting the possibility that Joe's paper betrayed anti-Semitic views. Evaluate Cohen's handling of the class discussion. What might he have done differently? Without making

assumptions about Joe's own views, should the class discussion have been guided in such a way that would prepare students to confront racism and anti-Semitism when they find it in the future?

5. How should Cohen respond to Anderson's statement of concern about his grade?
6. Suppose a worst-case scenario. What if Anderson had made anti-Semitic arguments during class? How should Cohen have dealt with that situation?

CLASSROOM DISCUSSION

1. Evaluate Robert Cohen's handling of the situation leading up to the discussion. Should Cohen review all the student papers before distributing them to students? Should he have postponed the class discussion? Should he have modified the prepared statements he delivered during the workshop? If so, how? If not, why not? Were other alternative courses of action available to Cohen?

Cohen's options do appear to be somewhat limited. Presumably, he *could* have approached Anderson prior to the class and tactfully suggested that he might want to postpone his workshop assignment. However, that would have necessitated a public announcement ["...we will not be discussing Mr. Anderson's paper today..."], which might have raised more concern than dealing head on with the anti-Semitism issue, since the others in the class already know the content of Anderson's paper.

With appropriate planning, Cohen could have reviewed *all* the papers in advance before *any* were scheduled for an in-class workshop. This would enable Cohen to avoid "awkward" or "unpleasant" situations and enable students to avoid embarrassing themselves. However, this approach would also deprive the class of an opportunity for thoughtful, critical inquiry. Sooner or later, they will have to deal with ethnic slurs, racist comments and stereotypical ideas. They might as well get started here, in the context of a small class where trust is established and the person responsible for the statements is not hostile (and probably has no ill intentions).

In addition to preparing comments about the statements in the paper that concerned him, perhaps Cohen might have prepared more specific questions to elicit those concerns from other students in order to convey to Anderson that the problems were generally evident and not specific to Cohen's sensitivity.

2. Cohen is Jewish himself, and in his informal contract with the class, he has told the class that he would assume no negative intentions behind whatever they say or write. Was this the appropriate contract? What other contract[s] might he have made?

Cohen wants the students to feel safe making mistakes so that they can learn. If they are just supplying what they think their Jewish teacher wants to hear or, even worse, are too nervous about saying something "not politically correct" to speak up at all, the students will miss out on full participation. As such, he promises to assume "good intentions" behind whatever they say.

Should Cohen have made no contract with the class? That would leave the students wondering how their work would be evaluated, particularly in light of the emotional content of the book. At least some students will be likely to associate Cohen's name with Jewish ancestry; in the interest of full disclosure it seems important for Cohen to be up front about his own heritage.

At the same time, the contract might be received as a kind of challenge to a student who wanted to act out. Cohen needs to be prepared to respond if a student writes or says something that Cohen simply could not take any other way than as overt hostility to him or to Jews in general or some other group. Under these conditions, he might not be able to keep the contract. There may be Jewish students in the class of whom he is unaware. He may not be worried about his own feelings getting hurt, but he does need to promote respectful discourse and avoid inviting statements that might make certain students feel unwelcome. In its desire to invite open and safe conversation, the contract may unintentionally invite uncivil behavior. Instructors may want prompt the class to consider alternative contracts that would invite engagement without risking civility.

3. If students are to benefit from discussions of their work, a strong sense of trust and openness is necessary. How do you establish and maintain an atmosphere conducive the open discussion?

Several things seem to be necessary to encourage an atmosphere of open discussion of sensitive topics. Clearly the approach taken by the instructor sets the tone for the class as a whole. Students need to know that they will not be penalized because their opinions are different from those of the instructor. However, they also need to understand that college classrooms should be places where thoughtful inquiry is encouraged, and where firmly-held beliefs may be challenged.

On the first day of class, ground rules should be established and they may need to be reiterated periodically throughout the semester, depending on the makeup of the class and the course content. One standard rule for discussion is to “criticize the idea, not the person,” and that rule certainly is an appropriate one for a class such as this. Once again, the instructor plays a critical role here, leading by example and dealing promptly and appropriately with violations of the established protocol. If “incidents” are allowed to slip by without an appropriate response from the instructor, any sense of trust which has been established will be lost.

4. The fact that the discussion fizzled quickly may suggest that the students were uncomfortable confronting the possibility that Joe’s paper betrayed anti-Semitic views. Evaluate Cohen’s handling of the class discussion. What might he have done differently? Without making assumptions about Joe’s own views, should the class discussion have been guided in such a way that would prepare students to confront racism and anti-Semitism when they find it in the future?

When considering issues such as racism and anti-Semitism, all beliefs are not created equal, nor are they equally valid. While each person is entitled to their own opinion, opinions should be supported, and it is necessary to evaluate the facts and evidence used for support. Ideally, the problems in Joe’s paper could be remedied through more careful research that eliminated falsehoods and supported true statements with reputable sources. This important truth is complicated, of course, by the abundant supply of misinformation and purposely-generated “disinformation.” Neo-Nazis and others with racist opinions are prone to citing stereotypical examples as “evidence” to support their views. In a less extreme example, but one that remains troubling from an epistemological standpoint, think tanks are generated by U.S. political parties to produce evidence favorable to one side of an argument. The internet is rife with official-

looking but utterly bogus information. This problem underscores the importance of teaching students to evaluate sources critically.

These questions also raise a basic concern about the purpose of the First Year Composition course. In the institutional culture of Fairbanks University, faculty members are encouraged to teach students to value differences and to be offended by bigotry. Are there, however, institutional contexts where this would not be seen as an appropriate learning objective? Will some students find this message to be a) propagandistic or b) a distraction from the task of improving their writing skills? If so, how should a teacher handle this?

As suggested above, Cohen might have avoided producing a confrontation between himself and Anderson by eliciting the concerns about Joe's language from his classmates. This could perhaps be accomplished by asking the class specific questions about the use of stereotypes in the paper. Ideally, this discussion would seem less like scolding, thus providing evidence that the class has a shared concern about how language depicts groups fairly and unfairly.

5. How do you respond to Anderson's statement of concern about his grade?

Since grades are a matter for confidential discussion between the instructor and the student, public discussion of specific grades would be inappropriate. Some general discussion should be adequate to reassure Anderson that his work will still be evaluated based upon the same criteria as everyone else, as outlined in the course materials. Penalties for lack of research, failure to make cogent arguments, or the use of inappropriate language would depend on the design of the course and the evaluation rubrics that have been established in advance.

It may be appropriate to remind Anderson that education is about more than grades. While grades may provide some indication of intellectual accomplishment, they do not measure empathy or internal convictions. Students need to understand the role of education in expanding horizons and questioning one's assumptions and biases. Furthermore, while Cohen promised that he would assume that the students have good intentions, that doesn't mean that the students' future employers and coworkers will be as generous. There are both moral and practical reasons to be careful and use language ethically.

6. Suppose a worst-case scenario. What if Anderson had made anti-Semitic arguments during class? How should Cohen have dealt with that situation?

Unfortunately, racism and anti-Semitism are a real part of our world. The day before this Teaching Note was written, an 88-year old man with a long history of anti-Semitic, white supremacist views killed a security guard at the National Holocaust Museum in Washington D.C. While this is not to suggest that such ideas necessarily lead to violence, most people know that stereotypes that may be used frequently in a home situation or a comedy club are not as frequently tolerated in work and school situations. When a student shows a blatant disregard for social norms, there is some reason for concern. Instructors should be aware of the counseling resources on campus that may have more experiences discussing such outbursts with students and helping them resolve any underlying issues.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Spiegelman, A. (1991). *Maus*. New York: Pantheon Books.

