

# RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

## Teaching Notes

**Not a Self-Help Class: On Teaching Michael Pollan's *In Defense of Food:***

**An Eater's Manifesto**

by Andrew Tonkovich

For two years I have taught a required lower-division research-writing Composition course at the University of California at Irvine officially titled How America Eats. Because the name suggests a sadly passive-sounding "Three Blind Mice" ("See how they run . . ."), I renamed it Food Politics in an effort to provoke engagement with the most important of three "literacies" I teach in this basic, if predictably remedial, writing course: standard written academic American English, research methods, and civic literacy. The core text is activist-foodie Michael Pollan's *In Defense of Food: An Eater's Manifesto*, its subtitle good for discussion of the ostensible purpose of this bestselling nonfiction take-apart of the so-called Western diet and, yes, a clear, loud call to resist the industrialized food production system: "To reclaim . . . control over one's food, to take it back from industry and science."

Despite my clumsy efforts to further politicize what seems obviously political, many students misunderstand the "manifesto" part of Pollan's title. So, on the first day of class we consider why food might need "defending" at all. Of course I ask what other famous books suggest a manifesto, a word we define. By way of coaxing, I ask about other books which changed public policy and, yes, *The Jungle* comes up.

*In Defense* is accessible, fun, and a great model for research essays on related issues: genetically modified food labeling, obesity, consumer awareness, and government subsidies. The challenge is not persuading first-year writers to accept Pollan's anti-corporate thesis or introducing consumer advocacy groups such as The Center for Science in the Public Interest. Students seem to appreciate noncorporate media like National Public Radio's "Science Friday" and even Pacifica's more radical "Democracy Now!" And, thankfully, I have never had to argue with even one apologist for big business or corporate

capitalism despite self-described "conservative" future MBAs and entrepreneurs who have enrolled. No, my only struggle is getting students to accept that Pollan seeks to change society and not just persuade them personally to eat right or be more health-conscious consumers; to understand that inherent in a manifesto involving "one's food" is the assumption that "one" means everybody; and to see that the author means to encourage *collective* citizen action.

They do not know what to do with the analyses that they have come to through powerful research and even advocacy of legislative or policy positions. An otherwise successful thesis arguing for passage of, say, a bill increasing funding for food safety inspection—an "A" paper, surely—arrives frustratingly shy of a larger critique, with an embarrassing conclusion about how important it is for "all Americans" to "do our part," or else personally pledging—I kid you not—to stop eating junk food.

All this despite my insistence that *In Defense* is absolutely not a diet or self-help book, and my repeated haranguing that Pollan's defense is not only of food, but of democracy. Weeks of researching positions, legislative histories, proposed bills, lobbying by interest groups and advocacy organizations and grassroots activists; of learning about the appropriations process and the work of the odious Chamber of Commerce; and still most students cannot, it seems—how to say this?—get over themselves as only individual consumers, and find a way to enter the larger community of public policy makers, thinkers, activists.

Naturally, I try personal writing, with an assignment requiring that third variety of literacy: the language and practice of civic engagement. Students write a pretend letter on their position to a local PTA, to the university

newspaper, or as a commentary for NPR's "All Things Considered." Of course, this requires studying these rhetorical models: reading an actual PTA newsletter or the school paper, listening to public radio. Yet their efforts are often still shy of making that connection I insist on between the "academic" rhetorical situation and the real world.

So I try one final assignment. Share your draft, I tell them, including its tentative "big conclusion," with at least three people unconnected to the university. Write a short cover letter explaining why you chose them, what you'd like them to understand about the essay's purpose, and, most important, how you'd like them to respond—thinking, acting, valuing your argument.

Of course, this final cover letter assignment often turns out to be the best writing students do, and frequently produces a broader argument (about motives, power, our flawed representative democracy) not only on behalf of an essay in a Composition class, but about the purpose of research, advocacy, and civic engagement.

### **Call for Teaching Notes for *Radical Teacher***

Is there a book, film, essay, poem, or story that you've found particularly useful in the classroom and want to share with other ***Radical Teacher*** readers? We are especially interested in Teaching Notes on new materials not widely known, but we would also like to hear about newly rediscovered older works, as well as new ways of teaching familiar ones. Or has something challenging, encouraging, or frustrating happened in class? If you think our readers can learn from your experience -- whether you handled things well, handled them badly, or are still trying to decide -- we'd like to hear about it.

Contributions should run about 500 words. If you'd like to see some sample Teaching Notes, check out "Recent Issues" on our web site.

Please send a hard copy of your Note to Bob Rosen, Department of English, William Paterson University, 300 Pompton Road, Wayne, New Jersey 07470 -- and also an e-mail, with the header "Teaching Note," to: [bobrosen@radicalteacher.org](mailto:bobrosen@radicalteacher.org)



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