TEACHING PEOPLE, NOT WRITING: CIVIC EDUCATION & CRITICAL PEDAGOGIES IN THE MULTIMODAL WRITING CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

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“Teaching People, Not Writing” proposes a perspective shift for the college writing classroom from a focus on teaching writing to teaching people to write. This shift facilitates improved post-college utility of writing, increased student personal investment, and an increase in the relevance of writing classroom curricula. As a theory into practice dissertation, teaching people, not writing draws upon three scholarly discussions for support: civic education, critical pedagogies, and multimodal composition/technology. Considering these discussions as well as the planning and delivery of two courses conducted at Bowling Green State University, this dissertation argues that by implementing a person focus over a writing focus, writing teachers can make college writing classrooms more active, participatory, and liberatory spaces that attend to the multi-disciplinary and multimodal writing needs of students.
DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my parents, David & Linda Salitrynski. My mother has always held education in high regard, and she taught me to value it in my life. My father taught me that wisdom begins by knowing that nothing is True and that what matters are not answers but questions. Together they taught me that my life’s journey should be a compassionate discovery of possibility, a journey that touches hearts and minds, and a path that leads me in service to others.
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As I propose in this dissertation, teaching and learning are most successful when we focus on forging the relationships that serve as a conduit for learning over a focus on content. Many friends, colleagues, teachers, and students have been instrumental in my growth as an educator and essential for the success of this project. These extended acknowledgments serve as a testament to their care, consideration, and kindness.

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CHAPTER I. THE MODERN LIBERATORY WRITING CLASSROOM

Introduction

As I watch students file into my college writing classroom on the first day, I often feel a sense of renewed hope. I hope that when they leave on the last day, change and growth has occurred. I hope, as many teachers do, to make a difference in the lives of the students I have the good fortune to work for and with. The specifics of that “difference” are always situated and variable, but the conditions of that “difference,” the role I play as instructor and educator, and the learning the college writing classroom makes possible remain consistently the same.

This dissertation is about precisely what that possibility is, why it matters, and how we can use the writing classroom as platform for broader and deeper educational goals. Teaching people, not writing argues for a perspective shift that necessitates change at an incremental, individual level for students and teachers alike. By contributing to ongoing discussions about improving classroom engagement and increasing the relevance of college writing curricula beyond the classroom, this dissertation synthesizes civic minded and critical pedagogical theories to propose classroom practices that reflect the outcome of that research. With a student-centered focus that privileges reflection, self-assessment, and student independence, I argue that writing education can be more engaging, more impactful, and more relevant for students in today’s world. To do so I propose a shift from thinking first of our classes as writing spaces and instead think of them as spaces where learning is facilitated through the reflective, social practice of writing. In that learning space, we must put the needs of students as people first and foster a classroom environment where students are engaged in a democratic process, are empowered by
impactful self-critical assessment, and are provided the opportunity to produce writing that considers all available modes of persuasion.

With that perspective as my starting point in this dissertation, I propose three moves to shift the classroom from writing as central to people as central without destroying extant systems and at the same time while teaching writing as a tool to serve the needs of students as writers. Those three moves are as follows: to increase post-collegiate utility, to increase personal investment, and to increase modern relevance of our writing curricula at all levels of college writing. In classroom practice these moves manifest in a variety of specific changes to the classroom environment: increased student choice and input in classroom activities, structure, and assignments; inverted classroom structure that moves lecture out of the classroom, making the classroom primarily a workshop environment; meta-discursive assignments such as literacy narratives and self-reflective essays; student- generated criteria and self-assessment for extant and potential genres; and multimodal tasks that challenge students to construct texts that more realistically simulate future work. To support each of these moves and the consequential suggestions, I draw upon three primary scholarly discussions for support: civic education, critical pedagogies, and technology. What follows is a rationale for my research, a discussion of the major contributing theories, a brief overview of the pedagogical implications and experimentation, and then a chapter overview and conclusion.

Rationale

At the most basic level in the college writing classroom, we hope that students leave as better writers, and we search for evidence of that change through their improved writing over the course of a semester. That assessment is a necessary institutional step, one that demonstrates our effectiveness as educators and provides markers for student growth. However necessary, though,
it’s a step that generates impassioned arguments both for and against common systems such as standardized rubrics and normed classroom settings.

While most teachers are invested in creating effective writing classrooms, some argue that teaching writing is in fact impossible, making assessment of any kind highly problematic. One such advocate, Richard Epstein, presents this argument in his article “Heavy Sentences” in which he critiques Stanley Fish’s book How to Write a Sentence and How to Read One. Epstein contends that “writing cannot be taught, though it can be learned” (4), and he contrasts this against Fish’s love of the structure of the well-written sentence. Epstein believes that each discrete element of writing exists only within context. He writes that, “A sentence, every sentence, is a tile in a briefer or lengthier mosaic known as a paragraph. No sentence, like no man, as the poet said, is an island” (7). These two positions are often presented in opposition to one another; discrete knowledge of writing techniques placed against the “art” of writing. Despite this precedent, however, I see no reason for it to persist because both make valid points. Writing is an art that cannot be taught, and it can be learned. At the same time, the discrete elements of a sentence, a paragraph, an essay, and so forth can be taught. Moreover, many students come to writing classes seeking discrete knowledge, specifically but not exclusively basic writers and ESL students, and many stakeholders in the writing classroom are looking for students to acquire and demonstrate their writing ability in concrete and generalizable ways.

Instead of the contrast Epstein presents, I prefer to see this relationship as collaborative, crafting an environment that fosters rhetorical awareness and provides discrete knowledge when necessary. Kathleen Welch argues “it is unethical to teach overtly or covertly that writing is a mere tool that resembles, say, a hammer” (206), because writing as a whole is expression. At the
same time there are benefits to being able to pound in some nails, creating stronger platforms for expression, training wheels even, to help students succeed.

Teaching the art of persuasive writing, or rather creating an environment that fosters its learning, is a much more challenging task, however, than teaching the discrete elements of writing. Similarly, assessing the written results of rhetorical learning is a complex, situated affair. Assessing effective traditional writing criteria (examples include counterargument, exposition, synthesis, and spelling) produces more easily defined and defended results that can be offered to students, external stakeholders, and to other writing teachers as evidence of the effectiveness of our work and our students’ work. Assessing that a writer has become more “artful” or more persuasive requires a subjectiveness that many discrete tasks do not require. It’s rather simple, for instance, to assess a student’s effectiveness at utilizing complete sentences or providing an effective thesis or including a concluding paragraph. This simplicity, immediate verifiability, and strong statistical reliability make discrete forms of assessment very attractive. When writing is taught from a rhetorical framework, however, those tools exist solely to serve the needs of the writer, helping that writer improve in her art. Similarly, as I contend in this dissertation writing is not a goal itself but a tool that serves the larger educational needs of students. Unfortunately, and in direct contrast to scholarship in the field (from process theory onward), it is often realized in the writing classroom the other way around: writing and its discrete elements come first, certainly not the writer, because writing can be assessed and analyzed with relative ease. In an educational system where external evaluation to certify ability is the primary purpose and function of assessment, it makes sense that discrete assessments would be favored, and while they are, for that reason, a necessary element of our work as writing teachers, they need not be our primary focus in the classroom nor in our interactions with
students. They are part of a product we writing teachers must produce, but as this dissertation contends they are not themselves the goal of our college writing classrooms. That goal, to use Stephen North’s often quoted Writing Center philosophy, is “to produce better writers, not better writing,” (438) because in the best of situations over time (and sometimes a very long time) one does follow the other. Moreover, as students grow as people, their writing can improve and that writing can serve as a vehicle for continued growth, creating a cyclical pattern of writing and learning.

To facilitate the cyclical engagement of writing and learning, we must also consider how the world outside academia has changed over the past several decades. Today technology plays an ever-increasing role in defining work and communication, and we must prepare students to write in various rhetorical modes because of the dynamic, service-oriented focus of modern work. Moreover, for students to engage in the world in an active way as agents of change, they need access to modern tools of discourse. Thus by providing technological training and opportunities for digital composition, we not only offer access but also create opportunities to contribute to equity.

In Electric Rhetoric, Classical Rhetoric, Oralism, and a New Literacy, Kathleen Welch explains that in the modern era, “rhetoric is now electric; writing is now electric,” (6) implying that to separate the digital, the visual, and the auditory from the textual is no longer possible. Welch further defines electric rhetoric as a “consciousness or mentality that constitutes who we are as citizens in a representative democracy” (207). Writing more than a decade ago, she explains that students live in an electric world, a world of visual and auditory bombardment constantly vying for our attention. Welch argues that we must do more than prepare students
with the rhetorical awareness necessary to comprehend these forces; we must also help them engage in utilizing them.

Opening the “electric” or digital space Welch discusses requires a change in how texts are imagined in the writing classroom. Cynthia Selfe explains that “if our profession continues to focus solely on teaching alphabetic composition—either online or print—we run the risk of making composition studies increasingly irrelevant to students engaging in contemporary practices of communication” (72). If however, we teach composition as multimodal, she continues, “we may also extend the usefulness of composition studies in a changing world” (72). Carl Whithaus argues similarly that “if textual and linguistic writing is changing into opportunities for multimedia composing then the … methods of teaching writing must be confronted” (xvii). He argues that “the answer … lies not with the development of one-size-fits-all testing regimes and teaching methods, but with a careful and detailed examination of student composition as situated communication activities” (xvii). Because writing is always a situated activity, the writing classroom is an ideal place for students to develop the skills necessary to meet this variable future, a future that they will not only participate in but may also shape.

This kind of preparation requires, as Paolo Freire would describe it, a critical consciousness and a reflective perspective. Moreover, it also requires a move from imagining writing as a singular and separate activity to thinking of it as an integrated activity, as “composing” instead of “writing,” which conjures images of words alone on a white page. Limiting students to only or primarily alphabetic texts reinforces boundaries that rarely exist in practice outside academia and does not prepare students to engage with genres that have yet to be invented. Instead of holding students in the past in technology and in practice, we must prepare them to take on the world they will encounter on their own, guiding them to reflect, self-assess,
and critique with confidence and clarity. To do so, students must possess discrete knowledge of their own process and products and must be able to articulate critiques of their own work, preparing themselves to operate effectively not only as participants in the modern work world but also as creators of content and genres and the systems that require both.

Realizing these ideals in the classroom creates several significant challenges. For example, an environment that permits and understands the necessity of failure is essential in developing critical consciousness but functions often in opposition to summative and standards-based assessments. Student ownership of writing, self-assessment, and critique can be more intimately integrated into coursework through a variety of choice options provided to students but can add significantly to the complexity of a course, requiring fairly constant individual attention. While self-assessment is an essential skill, the individual guidance necessary can be difficult to offer to classes of 20+ students. And fully integrating technology, while responsible, does present some skill hurdles that can be difficult to navigate for both teacher and student.

Thus it is not only a matter of discovering methods consistent with the theoretical premises to be explored here; it is also a question of how to realize them and how to do so within the physical and temporal limitations of the modern writing classroom. To address these concerns and others inherent in teaching people, not writing in the following three sections, I review the literature and theory relevant to this project by considering the engagement goals of John Dewey’s civic education, the liberatory goals of critical pedagogies, and the goals of equity, accessibility, and rhetorically relevant writing presented by proponents of multimodal composition.
Civic Education

The term “civic education” refers to teaching that helps students develop the tools and ability and interest in engaging in civic discourse. In the most practical sense this often boils down to civic activities such as partaking in political debate or voting. In this dissertation, however, I will use the term to mean what John Dewey describes as an active, intelligent, and productive engagement in society of which overt political participation may be just one of many activities and skills. For civic activities to be productive, they must produce something of value. To be intelligent, they must be informed. And for them to be active, they must function as an agent of change at some level. Civic education seeks to help students engage in society in fruitful ways for them and for others without sacrificing personal liberty utilizing an open framework that can be impacted and changed as necessary. It’s a broad definition, but its breadth includes not only the modern creator of the concept, John Dewey, but also classic rhetoricians, for the idea itself, that education must serve the civic good, is as old as education as a field. Looking at some of the earliest arguments about civic engagement, I turn to Isocrates.

In *Against the Sophists*, Isocrates writes, “if all who are engaged in the profession of education were willing to state the facts instead of making greater promises than they can possibly fulfill, they would not be in such bad repute with the lay public” (73). Thus begins Isocrates’ claims against the sophists as inadequate educators, explaining them to be money-grubbing fools and criticizing their mistrust of students. He argues that rhetoric (oral) is an art and likens the teaching of it by the sophists as little more than a business of throwing around rules. While not all elements of this piece ring true today (arguably Isocrates’ division between speech and writing, one as art and one as static, neither fits with my work nor with modern theory about writing), what Isocrates does do is present a perspective that values honesty about
one’s knowledge and ability as an educator. The opinions of the “lay public” notwithstanding, Isocrates claims that ability lies within the student, and while we educators might help develop that ability, we cannot put it there in the first place. For Isocrates there are those who have skill and those who don’t. I would argue in contrast that barring some mental infirmity that “skill” is always present. When students fail to meet our standards, it is most often not because they are lacking in innate ability but rather other external factors that inhibit success.

In Henry-Irénée Marrou’s classic analysis from *A History of Education from Antiquity*, he describes education and specifically ancient Greek education as “a collective technique which a society employs to instruct its youth in the values and accomplishments of the civilization within which it exists” (xiii) making it subordinate to civilized life. While this subordination is again contrary to Dewey’s philosophy of aligning education with life, Isocrates maintained similar goals of student empowerment. Marrou explains the following.

“Isocrates’ aim was to get his pupils to do the work themselves, to share in the work of creation. In this way he gradually enabled them to discover the ideal that lay behind his art—an ideal carried out by old teachers of rhetoric, century after century, right down to our own day, and which was the kind of writing that is easy to read and, on the surface easy to understand, but in which the attentive reader will discover endless felicities, interlaced as it is with innumerable allusions to history, philosophy, and full of illustrations and embellishments.” (85)

To be able to construct such philosophically and historically grounded work, discrete information that must be taught, but as Isocrates argued, our primary role is help students discover what is already within. The modern advancement of Isocrates approach is that we seek to not only assimilate students into current culture; we hope to provide them the tools to operate
as agents of change in that society. The process of internal discovery was critical to Isocrates as an educator and critical to the success of his students as civic agents.

Writing in the early part of the 20th century when the threat of industrialized education was just beginning to take form, John Dewey advocated for a return to what was being lost in the changing shape of education. He saw the mentorship of the apprentice, journeyman, master system that had served most professions for centuries replaced by mass programs designed to serve many more students than any extant system had before. It was a change that needed to happen, but Dewey was concerned that in our effort to reach as many as possible we were in the end connecting with few. In Dewey’s time the debate came down to one of resources, time and money, versus serving the individual needs of students. Despite his efforts, though, and the considerable fame of his work to suggest that mass systems could meet the needs of students as individuals, his suggestions in their entirety have largely gone unheeded in modern mainstream education.

The lack of application, however, has not stopped the proliferation of Dewey’s work, which is at its heart about promoting the common good. Dewey saw education as a necessary part of a civil society, and he believed the most effective education system would be one that crafted an appropriate environment for learning rather than designing a program to shape students. For Dewey it’s the difference between designing a factory machine that shapes cogs and tending a garden where knowledge can grow. In the “garden” environment the student is the central focus of education. As a core component of teaching people, not writing, this same analogy can be transferred to the writing classroom; teaching the student writing, not teaching writing to the student. In *Experience and Education*, Dewey argues that it is actually impossible to do otherwise. He explains that “perhaps the greatest of all pedagogical fallacies is the notion
that a person learns only the particular thing he is studying at the time” (49). Thus a neutral approach cannot exist. And since that is impossible, Dewey contends that we must make the best use of that teaching that we can, teaching not only content but teaching most significantly and importantly with the way we teach.

Despite clear overarching themes, Dewey’s writing demonstrates a struggle between dichotomous arguments that seem to place him in one category or the other: pro-curriculum or pro-student, pro-standards or pro-independence, pro-moral education or pro-secular education. In each case Dewey seems to come down somewhere in between, making his arguments sometimes challenging to sift through and interpret. Both sides of these stratified positions have argued over what Dewey meant. Rhetoric scholars Stephen M. Fishman, and Lucille Parkinson McCarthy argue that as a whole, Dewey’s argument are cohesive with a determined focus on developing students as reflective, active citizens. In “Teaching for Student Change: A Deweyan Alternative to Radical Pedagogy,” they study an attempt to realize Dewey’s philosophy in one of Fishman’s own classes. They establish a debate between Dewey, supporter of cooperation in the classroom, and Radical Pedagogues, who tend to favor confrontation. While Fishman and McCarthy admit that this may be a simplification of these perspectives, it did, in this case, yield productive results. They argue both approaches need to co-exist and that debate with openness (confrontation with cooperation) is the preferred method. Not only do I find insight in Fishman & McCarthy’s arguments, I fundamentally agree with their analysis. A classroom that provides no challenge (which is sometimes confrontational) can be as damaging as a classroom that’s overly demanding. It’s a balancing act, always trying to keep each student challenged in a way they feel pushed and yet also feel they can succeed. In any given class it is nearly impossible to balance all students in that moment throughout a semester, but the hope is to get as many in that sweet spot
as possible. Exploring this balance, the ways in which Dewey describes it, and how it might manifest in the modern writing classroom is the focus of chapter two.

Critical Pedagogies

Paulo Freire is the father of critical pedagogies, a liberatory theory of education that fosters individual freedom and critical consciousness. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and *The Politics of Education: Culture Power and Liberation*, Freire contends that systems of education that do not promote freedom of the individual are inherently oppressive. He explains that this oppression occurs through what he calls the “banking” approach to knowledge, wherein information is dumped into the mental bank of a student with the hope of retrieving it later. To counter this approach to education, Freire argues that teacher and student need to work to create knowledge together not only to inform but also to liberate people from the chains of mental and cultural oppression.

Freire’s arguments on the whole are relevant to the writing classroom in the same ways that Dewey’s are, invested in co-created knowledge, but Freire also discusses the barriers to his goals. He explains that trying to free people from themselves is problematic, making the liberator into a new oppressor, and he struggles to articulate ways to emancipate without imposing his own value system. As a moral imperative, doing so is problematic because ultimately actualizing the philosophy requires intellectual imposition itself. Though a liberatory classroom may at first seem paradoxical—and if taken as a literal extreme would be impossible—what Freire argues is not that teaching can be completely free and open but that educators should strive to reach those goals even knowing that they cannot, by definition, be attained.
In an effort to place Freire’s early work in a modern context and to situate his work in the field, Ann George provides a general overview of Freire and critical pedagogical thought in “Critical Pedagogy: Dreaming of Democracy,” a chapter included in *A Guide to Composition Pedagogies*. While supportive of critical pedagogies in general, George expresses a significant challenge for critical pedagogues. She explains that without authority learning cannot take place, because that structure needs to be there in the first place to establish an effective space for learning. Human beings learn on their own in society, but formalized education does require structure. However, George also argues that while this power balance may appear contradictory, it is not a contradiction that needs to be solved. Suggesting a balance between authority and freedom, George offers an answer for Freire that implies that the challenge becomes one of negotiating extremes. George suggests that to effectively put critical pedagogies into practice, we must create freedom with authority, because there is no other way for that value to naturally emerge.

As Fishman and McCarthy argued about Dewey, this balance between authority and freedom is a struggle for the civic educator as well as the critical pedagogue. What may be different here is the discrete awareness and focus on authority as an integral part of our process as educators. It is never up to the student solely; teaching is a collaboration, and it is all too easy to expect the student to balance out the difference between authority and freedom. It is not the student’s burden alone, however; learning is a shared responsibility.

Like Freire, Henry Giroux wishes to both maintain and create rigor in education while striving, not unlike Dewey, to develop a critical approach that is at the same time emancipatory. In *Theory and Resistance in Education* and in *Schooling for Democracy*, Giroux argues that this task is necessary because he feels that others who have made the same attempt
have failed, becoming educators who seek to create “happy” but ultimately unenriching environments. Giroux contends that we must reject the historical trappings of our own liberatory ideologies to begin forming a citizen-focused pedagogy. To do this, Giroux suggests the role teachers play in schools must shift to not only include students’ views but the views of teacher as well, allowing for a more open, honest discussion of the power relations within and without of the classroom site. He argues that literacy is the logical first step in this new emancipatory ideology, allowing subordinate groups to not only recognize their subordination but also have access to the tools of their own liberation. Giroux identifies a distinction between two systems of order, schooling that serves the interest of the state and schooling that serves the interests of the people. He encourages fellow radical pedagogues to resist the structuralism of their own theories, the demands of the larger institution, and the appeal of control without consciousness, recognizing that it is a hard road to travel, but knowing that only through our own resistance can we teach our students.

Promoting possibilities for resistance is important not only for the writing classroom but also for students’ lives beyond that space. If it is a pattern we can model in the safe space of the writing classroom, it may be one that students can carry with them as they leave college and move into the work world, helping to both resist authoritarian structure both in and outside of school. Promoting resistance in education is essential, because as Ivan Illich argues in Deschooling Society, school is the originator of conformist dogma. He contends that “schooling” pervades society as a whole and we are taught to view “doctoring oneself as irresponsible, learning on one’s own unreliable, and community organization, when not paid for by those in authority, as a form of aggression or subversion” (3). He explains that as our world expands it becomes increasingly commoditized, creating a situation where a child in a city is familiar only
with that which has been crafted, shaped, and planned. In Illich’s description of school and society there is no space for creativity. It is not even desired because we learn to analyze everything in the same way our world around us is produced: in what can be measured, bought, sold, and proved. As an answer to this social problem, Illich proposes, much like Giroux, a liberation of education from the state, calling for the creation of learning networks that recognize the accomplishment of skill-teachers not through what they can be certified to teach but through the feedback of learners about their teaching. In this system ability would override certifying authority and would serve civic needs. Such a network would connect people with like-minded interests in a web of learning that would not detract from living one’s life but rather add to it. Illich does not argue learning cannot be a planned activity, but argues that it needs to be an activity owned by the learner.

Illich places authority back in the hands of learners and challenges the technocratic authority of society, valuing the experience of productivity, not certificates of effectiveness. And ultimately, Illich argues that we must liberate learning from the requirement of education, because it is that requirement itself that perpetuates learners’ oppression. By utilizing a servant leadership model and developing a student-focused classroom, Illich’s ideals can be realized to some degree, but only if students are trained in self-assessment. Illich doesn’t explain how laypeople develop the ability to self-critique and to determine whether or not their learning has been effective. So, while I agree that a free and open learning network would be ideal, it functions only with participants who can intelligently evaluate it. The formal structure provided by a college writing classroom can be an environment that fosters that sense of self-evaluation if summative assessments are not overvalued and student self-critique is given weight. Writing teachers cannot duplicate the learning networks Illich proposes, but we can make it a space
where learning how to operate in a potential network or even creating one is part of the course goals and ideology.

Mirroring Illich’s concerns, Jonathon Kozol claims in *Illiterate America* that the problem with education is social, not merely a school problem. He points to rampant illiteracy, part of which includes the lack of self-evaluative skills that are essential for Illich’s learning networks to function. Kozol argues there are significant barriers to developing student and that our teachers “have been victimized by a credentializing system” (214) that reduces their work to something more akin to vocational training than a humanistic liberal experience of learning. Unlike Illich, Kozol believes we need not discard our current system of education. We have the resources, he claims, what we lack is a social structure both inside and outside school that recognizes the values of our teachers and supports them. Kozol believes education should be more than just practical; it should be enriching and thereby beat back student apathy, allowing and encouraging students to pursue learning for themselves. As writing teachers, we need to work ourselves out of a job, in a sense, instead of building student dependencies on us for wisdom, knowledge, and approval. More practical than Illich, Kozol’s suggestions can function in the classroom and present a message at the core that’s about students looking to themselves for evaluation because in the end it is to themselves that they must turn. And we can carry this vision of decreasing student dependence on our evaluation into the writing classroom, leading to suggestions that will be made more explicit in chapters three and five about the essentialness of student self-reflection and self-evaluation.

In the same vein as Illich and Kozol, Ron Miller argues in *What Are Schools For: Holistic Education in American Culture* that our current educational system denies creativity, self-actualization, and spirituality as prime foci for learning and human development and is thus
ready for a change to a post-industrial world that embraces holistic learning both inside and outside of school. Though driven by an interest to de-secularize education and incorporate spiritual but not necessarily religious content into the classroom, Miller makes a compelling point about the importance of holistic education, of bringing one’s life into the classroom, and his positive outlook paints a picture of possibility. If we truly value individuality, as the American myth purports we do, we need to realize that value in our education system. In the writing classroom this can manifest as an openness to discussion, challenge, and student input.

Drawing this “living world” into the classroom, which Illich, Kozol, and Miller make explicit and implicit references to, though, is a complex task, and we must be careful to maintain a professional distance if we are to protect ourselves and our students. In *When Students Have Power: Negotiating Authority in a Critical Pedagogy* and *Critical Teaching and Everyday Life*, Ira Shor provides his take on this struggle through his experiences teaching in a commuter college setting. His arguments cover the many facets of oppression that limit the thinking ability and capacity of the working class, engaging them in what he argues to be a frenetic bombardment of sound, imagery, and constant movement that becomes all-enveloping. Shor believes that despite this persistent denial of critical thinking that when engaged in a liberatory process, working class students (or any student for that matter) may present as surprisingly literate and discover and/or reveal the strengths he must appeal to. Thus it might be that it is not that students lack the ability to self-critique but that in certain environments doing so becomes exceedingly difficult. Alternately, it might be that self-critique has been trained out of students from such a young age that in adulthood those skills don’t present themselves in academic settings even when present in other areas of a student’s life. Either way, it still makes the writing classroom a place where it makes sense to engage, reengage, or draw out the self-knowledge of
our students. Shor recognizes this challenge, presents it honestly, but is reasonably hesitant to make encompassing statements about how to move forward. Instead he shares practices that have become essential to him as a teacher such as withering (a process of reducing one’s authority and even necessity in the classroom over the course of the term). Far from paying lip service to notions of student agency, he believes, like many of his contemporaries, that he must learn what each student needs. When Shor studies his students, he’s not looking only for generalities that might inform his teaching; he’s interested in each individual students’ perspective, history, and experience. Shor explains that each situation, each classroom is unique, offering endless challenge. For Shor there is no end to learning, no pinnacle of teaching perfection, no True path. As he teaches so he learns. Like students, knowledge can be imagined the same way, situated and complex. Some generalities are indeed possibly, but if we focus only on those kinds of knowledge, we ignore the fact that we’re dealing with a living world. And for Shor it is that living world that we must recognize and draw upon in our classrooms if we are to be effective educators. Shor contends each classroom’s uniqueness (and each student’s) requires an individual approach. While accomplishing that degree of individualization can sometimes be daunting for a variety of reasons, it nonetheless represents a goal most teachers would agree we are all striving for in the writing classroom, and I believe several of Shor’s suggestions, “withering” more than any other, provide pathways to integrating the living world into our work.

Peter Elbow has argued that he has found ways to effectively bring the living world of the personal into the classroom. In *Writing with Power* and *Writing without Teachers* he touts the transformative properties of freewriting, the art of letting words simply flow out onto the page without any effort to guide, direct, or structure. It is this core concept that Elbow believes to be the first and most essential element to successful writing. And while Elbow’s approach can seem
“magical” (a term he uses himself), his suggestions for practical work on one’s writing in both texts suggest a middle ground. Yet even as he advocates for pragmatic order, and direction, he explains that the belief in the magical power of words is the most essential element for success (that and a willingness to write, and write, and write, and then even when you’re tired, write some more). Mirroring the suggestion that Illich offers about crafting learning networks as an ideal, in Writing Without Teachers, Elbow offers practical strategies for working on one’s writing outside of academia which he suggests can be freeing and potentially more fruitful than the tasks assigned by many writing classes.

Offering more practical suggestions for incorporating the living world into the classroom in Telling Writing, Ken Macrorie provides a guide to help new young writers understand the world of mature writing. With a decidedly Expressivist perspective, Macrorie, develops concrete, simplified arguments with multiple examples to explain, explore, and uncover truths about writing habits, practices, products, and processes. He begins with an explanation of what he calls Engfish, writing written for teachers that has no place outside the classroom. He argues that to be better writing, it needs to be honest, natural, and meaningful to both author and reader. Having used Macrorie’s work to great effect in writing classrooms, I recommend using his text and arguments in the classroom, as students seem to connect well to the concept of Engfish. Many students claim they have written many Engfish essays and would argue in one fashion or another that they had not enjoyed the experience.

These efforts to bring the living world into the classroom, creating a more welcoming, liberatory, and engaging environment, is, however, not a new concept by any means and runs throughout the history of rhetoric and writing scholarly research. Sterling Andrus Leonard, a contemporary of John Dewey, provides an example in his book English Composition as a Social
Problem, written in 1917. Leonard wrote to fellow teachers of the problems he felt were universally experienced, explaining that our attempts to fabricate lessons and learning that simulate a natural experience tend to fail. We writing teachers feel it: the resistance, the boredom, sometimes even the fear of writing born out of repeated failure and criticism turned inward. As educators, he argues, we attend to the form, shape, and correctness of language but often not to the, “vivacity, force, and charm” (vii) of our students’ writing. Instead of “forcing” a curriculum, he suggests that we must engage students in writing about what they care about. Stories, games, handiwork, or observations of life can be great sources of material for early narratives that can later develop into more mature writing where more complex motives such as the desire to tell stories, the desire to meet teacher expectations, and the desire to meet the expectations or needs or a community can be motivating influences. Leonard explains that if students aren’t engaged with the material in the first place, they will not connect to it emotionally, and that loss of interest will continue as work continues, making the drudgery ever increasingly unpleasant. Leonard’s proposed first step assumes that students’ personal interests matter. He argues that they are important primarily because writing with interest is in almost all cases superior to writing without interest. This core philosophy was as true a century ago as it is today, and it is a core pillar of my teaching philosophy. I often tell students to do their best to choose topics that they care about because their investment often reflects the effectiveness of the products they will produce.

While I support the calls for change I’ve presented here, I realize I would be remiss if I included only one side of the issue. Idealism like any extreme can be itself a problem in the classroom. Saul Alinsky explains in Rules For Radicals: A Pragmatic Primer for Realistic Radicals that idealistic radicals, such as critical pedagogues, often present extreme positions akin
to tearing down the entire system without concern for the consequences such an action would really have. This strikes as a harsh accusation considering the number of critical pedagogues who offer suggestions for creating change in the extant system, some of whom I’ve mentioned here.

Even so, there is an undeniable thread of idealism running through critical pedagogical arguments, one that seeks an educational utopia, and it is undeniable that the pursuit of such idealism can leave us in the clouds, wondering what we’re standing on. Yet the father of critical pedagogies, Paulo Freire, would have, I think, agreed with this concern. He held to the desire and drive to create a utopic world and a utopic learning environment, but at the same time he was realistic about the impossibility of ever realizing it. Thankfully Alinsky offers an alternative. Eschewing extremism himself, he neither disagrees with the need for change nor that seeking high goals is invalid; rather, he argues that we must speak to the middle even as we strive towards ideals, making our message, our approach, and our calls for change accessible and reasonable for those who have power even if the end goal is to undermine that power.

Less confident of a positive compromise in Toward a Civil Discourse: Rhetoric and Fundamentalism, Sharon Crowley advises caution in the face of idealism and explains the dangers of absolutism and fundamentalist thought of all kinds. Alinsky argues that sometimes when extreme idealistic minority voices move the masses, it can be harmful and/or lead to harm. To combat these forces, which include what she calls apocalyptism, Crowley recommends using two rhetorical strategies, the recognition of superior values (the harder of the two to accomplish), and the disarticulation of beliefs from a belief system (i.e. rooting out cross-belief contradiction). It is important to note that Crowley is not against activism or passion in one’s beliefs. She is cautious of easy answers to skepticism and the fear of not knowing.
Similarly in “Students, Goals, Gatekeeping, and Some Questions of Ethics” Jeff Smith presents a counter-dialogue, arguing against prevailing conversation in composition that contends that we should be teaching people not students. He claims that efforts from within the classroom to resist engaging in the societal practice of gatekeeping are doomed to fail because the world at large, even the institution that provides us with income, embraces gatekeeping as a common practice. His conclusion is not that such approaches be abandoned but that the conversation should be less about the dynamics we cannot control and more about focusing on the direct needs of our students, which includes certification from our courses so they may advance. Smith claims that by focusing only on a liberatory agenda, we are missing the reasons students come to us in the first place. Despite his overt rejection of Freirean values, Smith professes a firm commitment to his students. Like Alinsky, Smith calls for a middle ground approach, claiming that an elimination of gatekeeping is impossible and we must work within the system as it is. Thus even as we pursue idealistic goals in our writing classrooms, it is important to consider when and why we might place the needs of the few over the many and vice versa. We cannot eliminate the gatekeeping processes, but that process shouldn’t dominate the goals for our courses.

All three, Alinsky, Crowley, and Smith, argue against extremism and present fair counters to the positions Freire and other critical pedagogues claim. But a further examination of Freire’s practice reveals not extremism but a struggle to find balance. Often the extreme positions presented by critical pedagogues, civic educators, and Expressivists alike are goals to be achieved not expectations of reality. There is no need to reject the high-minded dreams of the theorists presented here as long we understand that they present utopic goals.
Technology

As Cynthia Selfe has argued, it is our responsibility as writing teachers to attend to the changes in technology for the benefit of the field and for our students. It is essential that we provide access to technology so as to resist imprinting imbalances of power. Despite the challenges that doing so may create the rapidity of technological change requires that students have ample opportunities to practice. While the alphabetic essay may remain relevant to those in pursuit of a PhD, it has little other use beyond the classroom. Composing across various genres and utilizing multiple modalities considering both digital and as Kathleen Welch describes it, “electric rhetoric,” will prove more useful and more relevant. And since access is an issue of equity, we cannot and should not deny it to our students. Cynthia Selfe cautions, though, that technology is not itself a panacea. It can be just as detrimental to a classroom if poorly handled as it can be helpful. Additionally, Diane Penrod explains in Composition in Convergence: The Impact of New Media on Writing Assessment that working with technology in the classroom does not necessitate discarding existing practices. Rather she suggests a “syncretic” approach, “the blending together of different traditions or schools of thought” (169). Thus, when working with technology we must continue to observe good practices and remain pragmatic in our approach.

To begin developing that good practice, I turn to Stuart Selber’s Multiliteracies for a Digital Age. Selber defines three kinds of literacy: functional literacy, critical literacy, and rhetorical literacy. Functional literacy is the ability to use the tools at hand. Critical literacy is defined as students’ ability to be informed questioners, to be able to analyze a multimodal text. And thirdly rhetorical literacy asks students to be able to evaluate their work and the work of others in a situated online environment. Selber writes, “students should not just be effective users of computers, nor should they just be informed questioners … in order to function most
effectively as agents of change, students must also become reflective producers of technology” (182). In this case Selber means technology in a general sense, but the same applies to multimodal composing.

These three rhetorical literacies presented by Selber are high goals, each with its own challenges. Functional literacy seems on its face obvious and easy to assess, but often students are not transparent about deficits (or are embarrassed), and there may be great divides between the knowledge levels of students in various classrooms. The critical eye is difficult to develop when working only with alphabetic work because of the habitual nature of its genres and the extensive codification that has occurred over the last century. Incorporating visuals adds a new level of depth and opportunity requiring more guidance in the classroom and more varied practice. And lastly helping students effect change in a realistic way is at once easier (because of online access) and made more complex because of flux over privacy/technology issues in the classroom and the struggle to monitor so many varied inputs. These challenges can be intimidating and time consuming, but we must endeavor to attend to all three where possible to provide students with the tools to write in various modes.

No longer a matter of reading the same paper over and over, multimodal composition demands a greater attention to rhetorical moves and a more intense critical eye as an instructor. Given its dynamic nature, multimodal composing also provides an opportunity to involve students in the process of developing the very genres they are producing. Instead of constantly crafting the same iteration of extant genres, through multimodal composition students have the opportunity to break boundaries and remake old genres anew. Additionally multimodal composition encourages, and perhaps demands, that we engage students more intimately with the criteria for the genres they will produce or create. Carl Whithaus explains in *Teaching and*
Evaluating Writing in the Age of Computers and High-Stakes Testing that “by involving students in the creation of assessment criteria, the process becomes open and students understand how a work is being evaluated” (66). And when students understand how their work is constructed they can more adeptly, more intelligently, and more purposefully craft their work, realizing part of the goals Dewey set down for civic education.

Making a similar argument to Selber’s in “Embracing the Squishiness of Digital Literacy,” Zac Chase and Diana Laufenberg explain that developing digital literacy involves more than just knowing how to use digital tools. It requires “an inquiry-driven curriculum served by technology” (537). Chase and Laufenberg continue explaining that ideally a multimodal curriculum “yields students that are skilled in consumption, evaluation, and creation of content, … [preparing] for a future in which our understanding of what their needs will become is squishy at best” (537). That “squishy” understanding may have been possible centuries or perhaps mere decades ago, but today, it is unattainable. We continue to search for it, though, with the vain hope that we might know what our students will face and properly prepare them for it. That preparation, however, often assumes that we can somehow know the new technologies, new composing modalities, new genres, and evolving societal changes that students will face. But assuredly we cannot; we have no crystal ball. Thus, it is not enough to prepare students for extant genres or even imagined future genres. We must prepare them to engage with new genres on their own, and if we are fortunate inspire them to create them themselves.

This ability to create and/or synthesize genres is essential because as Mary Hocks explains, “meaning is not just verbal or visual but rather it is multimodal …[and] visual rhetoric – when understood as the dialogical processes of critique and design… goes much further in helping us teach students the rhetorical and compositional studies that they can use for years to
come” (215). Thus when we limit students to only classic alphabetic texts, we deny access to a larger breadth and depth of meaning; we deny them a tool that is more relevant and more useful. There are times when the classic essay is appropriate, but it’s only a template. Our job is to help students move beyond the five paragraph essay and instead design their own patterns, rubrics, and criteria for their writing. In this way we make student writing not only not only more impactful for students but also more relevant to their work in and outside the university.

John Dewey imagined the separation between school and the world at large as an illusion that ultimately serves no purpose. Instead of embracing that illusion, he urged teachers and administrators to accept the seamlessness of student experience. For many of our students modern computerized technology is an essential part of their experience, and for students who don’t have that access, they need it, because it is in those virtual and digital spaces that discourse now resides. Moreover, since we cannot possibly know how those spaces will shift and change and ideally we want our students to be agents of change, we must help them understand how to craft not only texts but the genres that support them. It is not through replicating our expectations that students will succeed, rather they will succeed by designing and meeting their own.

Pedagogy

With the writer as a prime focus and that writer’s development as the goal of any college level writing course wherein discrete task completion serves that goal but is not an end in itself, a change in perspective is required from content to people, from teaching writing to people to teaching people about writing. At first glance this might seem like just another student-focused teaching perspective, but this theory should not be confused with focusing on the needs of our students in our writing classes for our writing classes, which is how that term is most often used.
This dissertation focuses on our students’ needs as people first, not as students but as human beings living in the world. That shift changes student-focus into a people-focus, requiring that the “external” world be included instead of excluded from the writing classroom. And I argue that ultimately it’s impossible for that exclusion to occur; rather its existence can only be denied.

At the same time as I envision humanizing our students, we teachers must also be humanized and professionalized. A couple thousand years ago, and it’s as true today, Isocrates argued in Against the Sophists that education is a public service not a for-hire trade. For him and for many modern theorists and pedagogues, education is a mission, and our primary accountability is to our students and the public good. As public servants our role is not to prepare students for specific service jobs alone but rather, as John Dewey explains, to prepare students to engage actively, intelligently, and productively in society.

Since modeling is one of the most effective methods of teaching, demonstrating our own engagement as agents of change can be a powerful and effective way to provide opportunities for students to participate in the same practices. By making our work transparent, the struggles and choices we make and why, we can create greater understanding and foster a more collaborative environment in the classroom without eroding or discarding the authority that space requires of us. To succeed in our mission is to engage in it ourselves, because we cannot hope to teach in theory what we do not employ in practice.

By taking the mission of education on ourselves, we make it primary and resistant to impositions of accountability from without. This resistance, though, does not imply that assessment of student work—and therefore a teacher’s effectiveness—is impossible. Rather, I argue that the fruits of our labor cannot always be picked immediately; they ripen over time. Our most valuable lessons are precisely the things that cannot be assessed. And instead of citing
failure as terminal, we must imagine experimentation, for us and our students, as an integral part of our process. Losing sight of that, we might focus on content, skill development, and meeting learning outcomes instead of on our primary role, to further the life goals of our students. The modern attitude of detachment that pervades our educational system is neither humane nor necessary even if it appears to be more solid, scientific, and measurable. It is antithetical to the mission of education in the first place. As teachers we are servant leaders, and our primary mission is to help students become more than cogs in a cultural and industrial machine. Thus the goal of teaching people, not writing as a framework for the writing classroom is to provide students with the tools and confidence and wisdom to engage in and shape society as they see fit.

Chapter Overview

Drawing from the history of rhetoric and the inception of civic education and critical pedagogies, chapter two focuses on the contributions of Classical Rhetoric and the seminal works of John Dewey in an effort to establish a core value system derived from both ancient and early perspectives on modern education. This chapter explores the function, purpose, and necessity of what I call a civic education in terms of students engaging as agents of change beyond the classroom.

Chapter three moves forward in time, focusing on Freire as the creator of critical pedagogies. It then delves into further discussions of civic education and critical pedagogies within Rhetoric and Composition, making explicit connections to the writing classroom, giving shape to the people-focused perspective being espoused in this dissertation.

In the fourth chapter, I discuss technology, its role in the classroom, and its importance as an essential piece of students’ educational future; moreover, it is here that I make explicit connections between access to technology and its civic and liberatory potential. I advocate for
responsible use of multimodal composition as a core element of the writing classroom, contending that without if we deny students access to realistic, useful writing tools, we perpetuate power imbalance, deny students essential skills, and for many exclude them from discourse they might otherwise not have access to. I also discuss the limits of our own access and the way as educators we are deprofessionalized, limiting our ability to effectively deploy multimodal composition at various levels of the college writing classroom.

In my final chapter I offer a more detailed explanation of the implications of the theories presented and provide practical suggestions for realizing those theories in the writing classroom, relating to the successes of two courses taught at Bowling Green State University, ENG 2070: Intermediate Writing and ENG 4840: Foundations of Teaching Writing.

Conclusion

As a writing teacher I endeavor to make student choice an integral part of the classroom. I make student generated criteria and student input a necessary part of our work together. And I design tasks for students that prepare them not for the world as it was, but for the world as it could be. I provide them opportunities to craft multimodal compositions that reflect a greater rhetorical awareness and represent a more useful, more realistic tool for their future. And at the same time I understand that these suggestions may not work in all environments or in all situations. What kind of mentoring relationships can a teacher create when she serves 150+ writing students total in a semester? How can she guide them to their own criteria for success when many struggle with fragments? Where does multimodal composition fit into a department curriculum that neither requires nor encourages the development of visual rhetorical awareness? Each university and each classroom is a situated rhetorical space, and what I propose is not a new standard but a careful consideration of our writing classroom that attempts to better balance
the demands of the various stakeholders in that space and that keeps our focus firmly on the larger needs of students.

At 19, I read an article by John Dewey for the first time. I rushed to my advisor's office excited about what I'd read. This was the answer, I thought, the answer to why I had been bored as a student, to why I both loved and hated school. There was a better way. I didn’t know anything about Dewey at the time, and I exclaimed I wanted to meet him. My advisor laughed and then told me that he was long dead. I was taken aback. How could his writing be so old, I wondered, could it be taught in nearly every education department in the country and have been so universally ignored? I remember her looking at me with sadness and then smiling and saying that was something I could try to change. Back then I imagined changing education as a whole, but today my take-away is that I know we can do better. Our teaching can be more relevant and therefore more effective, and to do so we must resist the temptations of ease, efficiency, and assessability and instead embrace our students as people first with needs that exceed the boundaries of the college writing classroom and the boundaries of our knowledge and wisdom.
CHAPTER II. RHETORIC & JOHN DEWEY’S CIVIC EDUCATION

Introduction

In *On Democracy* John Dewey describes democracy as, “the necessity for the participation of every mature human being in formation of the values that regulate the living of men together: which is necessary from the standpoint of both the general social welfare and the full development of human beings as individuals” (Dewey). It’s a definition I have pondered for years and have considered for the development of my classroom practice, contemplating how I might make the writing classroom a more democratic space. To explore that question and some potential answers, this chapter considers the perspectives on democracy from Ancient Greece where the political concept originated, the teachings of John Dewey, and specifically a discussion of Dewey’s definition of democracy (above). It then considers how, in the writing classroom, we can take directed action towards developing students as individuals and as virtuous participants in society.

Democracy In and Outside of the Classroom

Dewey’s definition of democracy begins with the understanding that participation is necessary. More than a right, it is a responsibility. And while it is not our role as educators to determine how students will be active or in what discourses they will be active, we do need to hold them accountable to their responsibility to be active in some way that is beneficial and productive. As I say in my classes when providing students a variety of choices, “nothing is not an option.” Students can and often will be uncertain when provided with a variety of options and choice in general, but disengagement is a violation of the student-teacher contract. There isn’t one “right” direction that a student need choose when writing, but in an environment that tries to develop a more democratic space, all must participate. Without participation and investment,
learning and the growth of that community cannot take place. And with some semblance of
direction and engagement, students can choose interests that become topics for papers and
projects, fields and foci, and eventually their work and career. As a democratic space, the writing
classroom can be an ideal place to generate and foster long-term goals because of the personal
and reflective nature of both writing products and processes.

The development of students as participants begins with the necessity of action. As
teachers we usually first encounter students after they have overcome the hurdles necessary to
arrive in our classrooms. Presence, though, only creates a possibility of learning. It is the choice
to take action that allows students to express and explore their interests and as writing teachers
we provide unique venues for that exploration. As writers ourselves we understand the power,
significance, and usefulness of writing as a reflective teaching tool, and we know that writing
will inevitably be a part of whatever discourse students decide to engage in during and after
college life. Thus those pursuits, student interest, and their chosen discourse, as well as our goal
to help them write more effectively, go hand in hand. It can be accomplished in the classroom
starting at the most basic level, topic choice. Carolyn Ariella Sophia, argues in her article
“Bringing Lessons from Homeschool to the Writing Classroom” that “tenured professors always
work on topics that are self-selected, meaningful, and authentic. Why would we deny this
opportunity to young students?” (103). Similarly, Nancie Atwell explores student-created topics
in her article, “Everyone Sits at a Big Desk: Discovering Topics for Writing,” arguing that while
it can sometimes be a scary prospect, students have an incredible ability to find and explore
topics that are meaningful to them. She writes “when students initiate writing by taking
responsibility for finding out what they have to say, they all sit at the big desk” (36). Atwell uses
the metaphor of the “big desk” because she’s not talking about a college composition course; she
teaches eighth grade English. A task appropriate for 8th graders must be similarly possible for college students. As part of a democratic process and consistent with the values of teaching people, not writing providing students freedom in topic selection is essential, and it is our duty as writing teachers to help students find and develop engaging relevant topics that they can write about with passion and vigor. It is important to note that this may involve excluding certain topics and kinds of argument (i.e. clichéd or polarizing topics), but when we do so we should be transparent about why and open to challenging that choice if necessary.

One immediate hurdle college writing teachers face when helping students find effective writing topics is that most students do not favor academic discourse. Mistakenly, many instructors begin by trying to bash through that disinterest by pushing students to engage in writing like an academic as quickly as possible. But it does not make sense to begin where we want students to be but rather we must, as best we can, lay out a path using their extant interests as guiding points. Doing so involves a lot of guess work and is dependent upon student input, but it has the best chance of long-term effectiveness. Our task is to recommend, to caution, to guide, to encourage, but if we truly believe student’s lives are their own, barring emergencies, we can only make demands when our job or the institution requires it of us and even then we should be careful.

As participants in a democratic educational space the student’s role is not only to produce work to be assessed but also to engage in the process of that assessment. That can be particularly challenging for students who have been taught repeatedly that their input is irrelevant. When approaching students new to this kind of discourse, still I imagine myself as an advisor, because I believe (contrary to the expectation of the university) that ultimately I am not the one who needs to determine effectiveness. The student does. She needs to be able to identify the needs of her
audience, her ability to reach that audience, and her ability to adapt to those needs. My counsel is but the training wheels that help keep her upright as she rides along to keep her balance until she discards them and is able to ride on her own. But the bike, her riding, and her writing remain her own. And she should be the one to assess them.

Giving students power and recognizing their own essentialness to their learning process also makes space for them to take action. Not all will; no matter the case. All we can do is provide the opportunity. As Jeff Jackson explains in his article “Reconstructing Dewey: Dialectics and Democratic Education,” “Dewey's democratic education requires that students be developed as ‘beings for themselves’—individuals who see themselves in the challenges presented by growth” (75). We can provide the tools for students to craft such a lens on their own, and writing lends itself very well to this task. And without that investment and reflection students will remain mere subjects and not active learners.

With active, participatory learners in a democratic space, we automatically create a classroom environment that is communal. Jayson Seaman and Peter J. Nelsen explain in their article, “An Overburdened Term: Dewey’s Concept of ‘Experience’ as Curriculum Theory” that Dewey’s arguments “challenge[s] the liberal conception still dominating educational thought—that individualism is marked by independence from others. Instead, [they] maintain that individualism emerges through acting with others” (19). Thus participation is not for the learner alone, but is a necessity for the growth of the classroom community. One builds upon the other, working in symbiosis. The development of personal needs enhances the communal growth and vice versa.

Additionally Stephen M. Fishman and Lucille McCarthy explain in their article “Dewey’s Challenge to Teachers,” how active learning can lead to not only better results in school but also
a better life for students in general. Fishman and McCarthy are, however, realistic about the challenges faced by such a radical approach, recognizing Dewey’s democratic classroom as utopic, to be sought after but never fully realized.

“The challenge with which Dewey confronts educators is a daunting one. Dewey wants teachers to cultivate students’ capacities for ethical love, that is, for devoting themselves to esteemed objects that they choose wisely and passionately. He argues that, as paradoxical as it sounds, this is not only the best way to bring about social reform but also the best way to increase students’ chances of gaining the fullest happiness. Unfortunately, in a culture that rewards competitiveness over cooperation and is increasingly colored by a global economy that is (to borrow Dewey’s terms) “brutal,” “oppressive,” and “egoistic,” nurturing the desire among students to promote the common welfare is far from easy. It not only is out of step with widely held cultural values, it is also out of step with a school culture that stresses high-stakes testing, work-place preparation, and a climate of “learn to earn.” (15)

Thus while creating an environment that encourages students to take action, to participate for their own benefit, is a core goal that aligns with Dewey’s teachings, and it’s a challenge to implement because of how it counters prevailing cultural notions of participation in and the value of learning in school. In chapter 5 I discuss experiences of resistance in the classroom to the establishment of this kind of environment and explain how I was surprised to discover that some students prefer the “learn to earn” mentality even when presented with alternatives. Thus, setting up a democratic environment in the college writing classroom requires extensive relationship building and activity scaffolding to be successful.
While a rare few students will be personally resistant to a democratic approach, there are also external but invasive hurdles to consider when crafting a democratic classroom. However, my focus in this work is not to change the cultural perspective of our nation nor of educational institutions but rather to consider how we might work with our students within the confines of our extant classroom spaces and enact change potentially through their work and understanding. Additionally, I see neither shame, nor capitulation in serving the needs of students for access nor in meeting the requirements of my job (providing grades, for instance, which is in the long-term antithetical to a democratic learning process). Specific writing conventions and structures are expected of students in college, and we cannot neglect our responsibility to our students and their choice to be participants of that institution by denying the access to the necessary literacies of that discourse. It’s a challenging balance to maintain, and I contend that teaching people, not writing offers the weight that tips the scale, our student focus. Some students and classrooms will accommodate a more democratic structure. Others will not. What’s important to understand is that it’s not up to us. Students decide, and we have to trust that choice even when the choice is to just get the grade and move on. While we might not be able to reach these few students who resist change to the “schooling” formula as suggested by Dewey, we should not miss the opportunity to forge stronger relationships with those who embrace that change.

Further exploring this concern, in his chapter “Coming Down from the Ivory Tower,” Dominic DelliCarpini explains that “When we [writing teachers] concern ourselves only with ‘academic’ matters, we are seen as disconnected from other publics—as ‘anachronistic,’ ‘esoteric,’ ‘useless,’ and ‘elitist.’ But when we … instead contextualize writing pedagogy within larger civic and social goals, we are often attacked as politicizing the classroom and being neglectful of our ‘real’ jobs” (193). What is often touted as our “real” job is to serve the writing
need students will utilize within the institution or as participants in university communities, “academic writing.” Despite the resistance we may encounter, we must remember that except for those students who will work as academics, the college world is but a stepping stone to other discourses, and in most of those cases the classic academic essay, for instance, neither carries the weight nor the import outside the university that it does within the academy. My purpose here, though, is not to put down the “essay,” nor suggest a superior alternative. Rather, I contend that what matters for both our students and our teaching is the rhetorical effectiveness of their work, their initiative to engage in that work, and most importantly their ability to self-assess, because beyond the classroom no teacher will grade them. As writing teachers then we must consider what contexts student will choose to write in. What skills will they need to write in those contexts? And we must also consider how we can craft environments that simulate those contexts to some degree and therefore provide the necessary skills to engage in those discourses.

Considering these questions and the importance of access, frontloading college discourse as an essential part of first year writing courses can be workable. But if we are to serve the needs of all students in a grander sense and be more than just writing coaches, we must see academic discourse by itself as a stepping stone for most, not an end point. Our job is not only to reproduce ourselves in our students; it is to guide them to their own pursuits. That can be a daunting and emotionally challenging goal to reach towards because as academics we know our own world best. However, by trying to know our students’ worlds and the discourses they may encounter, we can learn with them and ultimately discover together, crafting environments where collaborative learning is possible. It’s not the idyllic utopian education Dewey calls for, but it is another small step in the right direction.
John Dewey’s definition of democracy argues that participation and engagement is important for more than the local benefits to the classroom. Not only is it beneficial to have as many voices as possible engaged in civic discourse that engagement is necessary for the functioning of an equitable civil society. And a core part of a successful college learning experience is for students to come to understand that society neither persists nor even exists without their participation. Any activity that students engage in that serves the greater good, be it art or entertainment or business and so forth can contribute to the functioning of society. There is no need to rank or order different discourses when concerning our students (though modern university structure does so by design and more so as state funding decreases across the nation). From a cultural standpoint those values can’t be ignored, but from a rhetorical perspective, only students’ ability to communicate effectively matters. What we must do is help students determine not only what discourses they choose to participate in but also ask them to consider how what they do contributes to the world. What does their work mean? Why does it matter? And how can they effect change in their chosen discourses effectively? The writing classroom is an ideal place for helping students answer these kinds of questions because it is both a rhetorical and a philosophical space.

The rhetorical and philosophical reflection made available in the writing classroom is essential because it allows us to counter traditional notions of virtuous participation in democracy, which have often manifested as nationalistic propaganda. That’s not my intent here, nor was it John Dewey’s. Instead of a nationalistic perspective that places the needs of the state over the needs of the individual, Dewey proposes that the individual and society at large work in consort and that meeting the needs of one meets the needs of the other. He describes the relationship as symbiotic instead of parasitic. When we treat students as subjects whose duty it is
to serve society by carrying on the legacy of our history and culture and knowledge, we reduce them, we deny them, and we treat them in a parasitic manner. A writing classroom that values students as people and engages in democratic negation can establish a symbiotic harmony between the needs of individuals and the needs of society, valuing both simultaneously.

In the college writing classroom at public institutions, however, this democratic ideal of dual value (individual and society) cannot be fully achieved. Teachers are hired as authorities and are often expected to act as such and in a superior, judgmental fashion. To make our classroom space more democratic, more symbiotic, and less parasitic involves a change in practice and/or aligning practice with theory in the field. Lecturing vs. workshop style classrooms provide a clear example.

In the lecturing style classroom, the student is the subject, expected to sit, to listen, to take notes, and to be attentive to the authority in the classroom, the teacher. It’s a unidirectional power structure. I talk, you listen, and you will be accountable for understanding what I say. In my own workshop style classrooms, students work independently or in groups. I check in with students, ask questions, respond to their questions (often by encouraging them to find their own answers), and so forth. Instead of functioning solely as a source of knowledge, I act as a guide helping students complete a writing task. In the workshop classroom, I often offer guideposts, templates, and tips & tricks that all could be presented in a lecture format, but instead I include them as downloadable documents or video resources in the course shell. This allows students to access the information at their own pace and then ask about what is unclear or challenging. In the workshop classroom, the power is shifted into the hands of students, where it rightly belongs. This is not to say lecturing is useless. There are moments where expedience is necessary (when
explaining a syllabus schedule, for example), but for lasting knowledge, putting authority in the hands of students is more effective, and doing so teaches responsibility for one’s learning.

What we teach in the writing classroom is not only writing but a way to live and act and engage in discourse. From a rhetorical standpoint we want our students to be effective communicators. From a democratic standpoint we want them to be not only active participants but also intelligent and productive. But what does that matter if it does not serve the needs of society in some way? It’s up to our students to determine how that might be possible. And often it manifests as a search for a career. One student enjoys boxing and decides to pursue a career as a sportscaster; another loves dancing and becomes a business major so she can open her own dance studio; another is fascinated by nature and earns a degree in botany. Their careers and pursuits become manifestations of their investments and choices to engage. Often, though, the path is not a straight one; interests come and go; possible careers are considered, and the risk of particular pursuits must be evaluated. Most students will pursue a variety of careers before making choices that will turn into life decisions post-college. The writing classroom, as a reflective space, is an ideal location to ask students to consider the virtue of their actions and through that reflection take greater responsibility for their choices, their work, and their writing, by engaging with their work more discretely and more intelligently. Again, that is not to say that the writing classroom should serve only as a job discovery space or as a civic education course, but it is a space where discovery and guided discovery are core teaching tool.

To explore how this might be achieved and why it is so essential in this chapter, I use Dewey’s definition outlined in the introduction as a guide and then begin with a discussion of writing, rhetoric and virtue as seen by the Ancient Greeks. I move into deeper discussions of Dewey’s extended discussions on the topic of democracy and finally propose a framework based
on collaboration as a core tenant of the writing classroom to actualize the ideals put forth in this
dissertation.

The Citizen Rhetor, Virtue, & Writing in Ancient Greece

In Ancient Greece writing was generally seen as an inferior form of communication to
speaking. Though writing moved historically from being a skill used primarily for numerical
records to becoming a part of social discourse, as an art it was still an art of structure not one of
fluidity like oratory. Richard Enos explains in “Ancient Greek Writing Instruction and Its Oral
Antecedents” that “writing was not initially seen as an intellectual source of power but rather as a
functional skill that served, at best, as a facilitator of the oral tradition of education” (19).
Supporting this argument, Isocrates writes in Against the Sophists that the “art of using letters
remains fixed and unchanged, so that we continually and invariably use the same letters for the
same purposes” (73), implying that while spoken words might be amended, retracted, or
inflected, the written word is static and cannot change, be taken back, or be used in more than
one way. Isocrates argues that rhetoric [oratory] is an art, and he is appalled at the Sophists who
to his mind apply “the analogy of an art with hard and fast rules to a creative process” (73). Plato
agrees and describes his mentor Socrates’ disdain for writing in a dialogue with Phaedrus:

Writing, Phaedrus, has this strange quality, and is very like painting; for the
creatures of painting stand like living beings, but if one asks them a question, they
preserve a solemn silence. And so it is with written words; you might think they
spoke as if they had intelligence, but if you question them, wishing to know about
their sayings, they always say only one and the same thing. … It [writing] has not
power to protect or help itself. (Plato 166)
Through the stories of his teacher, Plato imagines writing as defenseless. In Ancient Greece, the transition from writing for calculation and record keeping to rhetorical communication had only begun. Like many emergent technologies it was regarded with skepticism and was compared to the dominant discourse of the day, oratory. Writing was not considered a persuasive discourse so much as it was an informative one. In *On Rhetoric*, Aristotle claims exactly that. He writes “written style is most exact; the agonistic style [oral debate] is very much a matter of delivery. …Thus things that are intended for delivery, when delivery is absent, seem simple-minded” (227). Aristotle assumes that oratory is the superior form of discourse and that while writing may contain debate, without a proper oral delivery, it cannot be as successful. Divested from rhetoric writing lacks political force and exists only as a tool one uses with the efficiency, accuracy, and binary reality of a hammer. One either hits the nail on the head, or one doesn’t.

In the modern writing classroom this can create confusion for those outside the discipline as our formal writing assessment methods often appear to reduce writing to binary elements of effectiveness, as if it is a discrete reducible science that can be explained away by a complex rubric. This confusion arises because sometimes the expectation of other disciplines outside of writing is that writing *can* be reduced to such formal evaluation, that our job as writing teachers is primarily to help students eliminate error and learn to write in static genres. I’ve had teachers from other fields plead for this very thing, because for some writing is a vehicle for assessment, and it pains them to get the same “poorly” written papers repeatedly. Can’t we just fix it?

The persistence of this perception demonstrates a clear lack of understanding of the nature of writing as a situated activity, and when we do resort to using formulaic measures we do so more often to appease external stakeholders in the classroom and to establish a sense of defensible rigor rather than to help students improve their skills as writers in a holistic sense.
Bob Broad featured this concern in his seminal work *What We Really Value: Beyond Rubrics in Teaching and Assessing Writing*, but the issue persists, arguably because of the perception of validity and reliability formalized assessments provide. A prime example is the systematic reliance on complex writing rubrics to establish credibility in the classroom. Maja Wilson explains in her article, “Why I Won’t Be Using Rubrics to Respond to Students’ Writing,” that she believes “rubrics and their ‘menu’ of generic comments, are clumsy in practice and in theory; they tear at the foundations of the rhetorical heart of writing, reducing student essays and our responses to an exercise in purposelessness” (63). She suggests an alternative, writing to students from a subjective standpoint, a stance in which meaning and interpretation are jointly shared and achieved. She argues that when, “unmediated by the rubric, our response gives students the power to think through what effect they want their words to have rather than how their words measure up to the categories on a rubric” (65). In short, Wilson claims “assessment must be a conversation” (66). Writing cannot be reduced to its constituent parts any more than a painting or an aria. Most first year writing courses, however, rarely deal with writing as art; they deal with it as a tool for college success. The assessment may speak of rhetoric but then seeks to define writing in a static fashion, to dissect it, take stock of it, and label its constituent parts. Individual, focused (summative) feedback with its questions and suggestions, observations and connections to one’s knowledge of that students writing, is far more useful for writing development if less precise and determinate. It’s what students themselves ask for because our formal assessments are often meaningful only in terms of a grade as opposed to focusing on one’s growth and development as a writer.

Still, when considering teaching writing in a system that demands precise assessment, writing can be seen as a concrete “art” because of the many rules and objectively assessable
elements (spelling, format, grammatical consistency, etc…) without which it could not function. It is not a completely free form, and as the Ancient Greeks pointed out in comparison to oratory, it certainly cannot defend itself from attack. Once written and moved from author to reader, it must stand on its own, even against rubrics and formal assessment methods. Writing as a mode of discourse has limitations. Within the modern university it serves the needs of most disciplines as a tool, which we must attend to as educators, sometimes employing methods that devalue the subjective, situated, and rhetorical nature of writing and instead assist students in navigating the writing challenges of the university.

It’s also important to note that the way writing is often perceived in the university at large, both within disciplines that see writing primarily as art and those that see it as a means to an end, is not static. Its value and usage is a product of cultural choices and the ways in which we perceive the advancement of human knowledge. Writing is a product of both our perceptions, expectations, and the texts themselves. In the modern writing classroom, this means that the structures imposed from without for the purpose of the university and/or post-collegiate expectations are fabricated perceptions.

One of the core elements that determines the nature of our perception of writing past and present is the technology available to produce and reproduce writing. In Ancient Greece writing could not be performed with the same ease as it can be today. It was a laborious task and preserving texts was quite challenging considering the implements used, making writing relatively scarce. The communities of people who used it were relatively small, and as a discourse it had yet to develop as a political and judicial discipline. Thus while their critiques of writing remain relevant, they did not yet see how writing could be a powerful rhetorical device.
What had developed in Ancient Greece was oratory rhetoric, and the forums were home to the earliest democratic debates. Plato argued that the purpose of rhetoric was the pursuit of truth and virtue in civic discourse whatever form it might take. He believed that the goal of a rhetorical education was to develop students as citizen rhetors who could serve the greater needs of the state. As a student in a Grecian Academy, understanding what discourses one was engaged in and what context one was speaking in was essential to success. Aristotle believed this awareness was the most essential aspect in determining not only the effectiveness but also the moral virtue of an orator. In *On Rhetoric* he writes “the greatest and most important of all things in an ability to persuade and give advice is to grasp and understanding of all forms of constitution” (73). In short, know your audience. For Aristotle, knowing one’s audience was about understanding the political perspective of those one was trying to persuade. He called these “forms of constitution” *politeia*, which translates as the form of government and the rights of its citizenry.

Modern rhetoricians assume that writing like oratory is rhetorical in nature and that while delivery can certainly enhance writing, it is no more or less effective at delivering a particular message because interpretation is always possible. What makes communication effective is an attendance to the rhetorical features of that communication, a feat possible when writing and speaking. In his article “Defining Advanced Composition: Contributions from the History of Rhetoric,” William Covino explains that though this difference creates a philosophical split classic rhetoric has much to offer modern pedagogy. He points to Aristotle, Cicero, Vico and De Quincey claiming that they all encouraged a “play” with words based on a kairotic understanding of the world, a communal knowledge of vocabulary, and a resistance to formalization of written and spoken language for the purpose of efficiency. As an example of similar resistance, when he
believed the Sophists to be making education mechanical, Isocrates rallied against them.

Similarly Aristotle wrote of the problems a lack of rhetorical education could produce because like Isocrates he believed that for society to succeed every virtuous citizen needed to succeed.

But when it comes to virtue, Isocrates differs from the teachings of Aristotle’s mentor, Plato, because while he believed it was an essential part of rhetoric and success in civic life, he did not believe it could be taught as knowledge. A citizen either possessed the potential for virtue and oratory skill or did not; these qualities became the basis for ethical values in Isocrates’ view. Henry-Irénée Marrou explains in *A History of Education from Antiquity* that “in the hands of Isocrates rhetoric is gradually transformed into ethics” (89) because of the way Isocrates establishes ethos (in terms of a person’s whole character) as essential to effective rhetorical discourse. In *Antidosis*, Isocrates writes, “that the power to speak well and think right will reward the man who approaches the art of discourse with love of wisdom and love of honor” (77). Both must be present, oral skill and virtuous employment of that skill. Isocrates would contend that rhetoric should not be used for the sake of expediency or personal gain (in the sense of selfishness). Isocrates argues that “those who have gained this power [rhetorical skill] by the study of philosophy and by the exercise of reason never speak without weighing their words, and so are less often in error as to a course of action” (79). In *The Genuine Teachers of this Art: Rhetorical Education in Antiquity*, Jeffrey Walker posits that Aristotle would agree. Expanding on Aristotle’s classic definition of rhetoric as “observing the available means of persuasion in any given case,” Walker explains that for Aristotle rhetoric is also essentially “a faculty of critical judgment whose job is to evaluate” (13). To be virtuous then includes a consideration of the impact of one’s influence and that with rhetorical skill comes significant responsibility to oneself, the maintenance of one’s honor and ethos, and a commitment to civic good.
Again in “Defining Advanced Composition: Contributions from the History of Rhetoric,” William Covino explains that Thomas De Quincey saw a similar concern about the virtuous use of rhetoric in the early 1800s in Great Britain. Of De Quincey he writes that the “reign of bureaucracy and technology today makes virtues of conviction and efficiency” (119). For De Quincy this is where rhetoric ends. Covino argues this perspective on rhetoric “insists upon substance while discouraging a particular stance … it encourages license without vagueness” (121). Avoiding relativism, he suggests instead a balance in between. Conviction for its own sake like efficiency should not be considered inherent virtues. How a student uses the means of persuasion available is as important as their attention to rhetorical detail.

While in the modern day we do consider how student writing will impact potential audiences in terms of effectiveness, we take less time to discuss and/or debate the nature and purpose of that persuasion. In part this is likely because it is not an assessed element of our student’s coursework. And it shouldn’t be. Ours is not to determine morality but to engage students in its consideration. Some writing topics lend themselves better to questions of virtue and civic morality, and while I do not believe we need to pick the most challenging topics (they all too easily become polarized anyway as is popular in contemporary media), we should not eschew a topic or potential writing focus because of its contentious nature. The writing classroom is an ideal place for that debate as the process of writing can hone student understanding.

New and emerging modalities of writing offer enhanced ways to develop virtuous reflection in the classroom, and we are just beginning to understand the possibilities modern web-based and online technologies have to offer. Like the Ancient Greeks, we are at a critical historic moment for the evolution of modes of communication. Writing that was once static is
changing into a form that is more fluid and sometimes synchronous, allowing in some cases for words to be defended because the author is virtually available. Writing, in the sense of words on a blank white page, is shifting, but the importance of rhetoric when applied through writing or oratory remains. Thus, it is necessary to consider how we might prepare students to act virtuously in our society and to do so requires we provide them with access to writing that can evolve beyond a static, defined, single-mode state and writing that can allow students to act in the best interest of themselves and their communities by engaging in rhetoric/political discourse.

From an idealistic standpoint such goals seem hard to contend with, freedom, equity, access, virtue, and so forth. What is in great debate is how these ideals can be realized. The key to answering that question is to define the parameters of the classroom environment not the students who reside within that environment. To do so, students must have input and must be able and/or taught to self-judge. If we expect students to be effective producers of knowledge, we must treat them as if they can and do produce knowledge and are able to initiate, format, and carry out change both within themselves and without. Discovering how to do that begins with defining what virtues to espouse, how to put them forth, and most importantly what it means to be virtuous in a modern, liberatory sense of the term.

Being virtuous is often equated with bravery or particularly selfless conduct. The Ancient Greeks attempted to define virtue in concrete terms, to quantify it and clarify it. Plato believed it was a certain knowable and determinable quality of character while Aristotle describes virtue (arete) as a kind of balance between excess and neglect. In most universal terms virtue is the enactment of the golden rule: to do unto others as you would have done unto you. And while it certainly is a secular concept, vice versus virtue has been a core debate for religions throughout
history. It is laced with social demands and at the same time cannot exist without integrity of the individual, for virtue is goodness in one’s actions from a holistic perspective.

Virtue as Practice

For the purposes of this dissertation, however, I want to consider virtue as a practice that is neither defined solely by society nor constructed selfishly only within the individual. While it can be the former to the extreme but not the latter and retain its definition, I think Aristotle’s argument about balance (and only that part) along with Isocrates contention about the ethos of the speaker is the best way to perceive virtue as a goal. As mentioned previously, we model behavior and attitudes that teach values whether we are explicit about them or not. For example, the inherent gatekeeping process of modern education is undeniably a value loaded exercise both in concept and in actualization. Our complicity in that system teaches values. Favoring academic discourse, eschewing or embracing multiple modalities of writing, lecturing or workshopping as class models, all teach particular values. In Amy J. Wan’s article, “In the Name of Citizenship: The Writing Classroom and the Promise of Citizenship” she explains as follows:

Teachers, whether implicitly or explicitly, play a role in shaping the citizenship produced in educative spaces, not only by issuing calls to adopt active citizenship, but because the skills we want to teach—public writing, public engagement, citizen critique, critical literacy, or technology—are inextricably, although often silently, linked to what we imagine as the ideal “good citizen.” (32)

In my efforts to use the methods espoused in this dissertation in the writing classroom, I have for instance, run into challenges with the teaching of values. As I neared the end of one course in particular where students helped build the syllabus after the first month, created their own
writing projects, designed their own assessment criteria, and assessed themselves and each other, I discovered that the liberatory values that underpinned my work in that classroom site ran into the expectation the university had of me assigning grades. I had done so much work to get students to take ownership of their work and constantly redirected back to them to reflect, consider, and decide, that some found it uncomfortable when I stepped in as an authority. That was only necessary in a few cases where students did not perform as expected, but it nonetheless brought the issue to the forefront. We cannot avoid that at times we must impose on our students. Our jobs sometimes require it. While students who do not meet expectations placed upon them must be held accountable, we can reduce those moments if students are engaged in the creation of those expectations. Embracing a more liberatory, democratic approach, we can teach both virtue and virtuously.

Virtue and rhetorical ethics in a writing classroom must be a concept that has the opportunity to grow through discussion, debate, and reflection. And while defining it is problematic beyond generalizations, there are a few that can be made that are helpful. Following Dewey’s definition of democracy, we know that a virtuous stance can be one that meets the needs of society as a whole as well as those of individuals. And we also know that the core value our own politeia works under is, ideally, one of freedom. We must then prepare our students with a focus that values equity and freedom for all. And we can do that by reshaping our writing classrooms to make it a space for our students as more than receptors of knowledge but as whole persons engaged in the process of learning with us by teaching people, not writing as the title of this dissertation suggests. We can model the values we want to teach in our classroom itself and by doing so more powerfully impact student learning through the way we teach and the environment we create than we ever could through any curricular design or unit plan.
As noble as these ideals are, though, it’s important to note these are goals to be sought after, not radical changes to be embraced. The very idea of teaching for freedom sounds clichéd, like a line of political propaganda. By civic service, I mean not blind engagement, but I refer to an intellectual process, a weighing of rhetorical impact as Isocrates would suggest, that develops and promotes that needs of the individual as well as the needs of society.

While the writing classroom can be a democratic space that facilitates virtuous uses of rhetoric and helps educate a productive, engaged citizenry, Dewey argues that we can go further. He contends that there should be no barrier between the classroom and life. Ideally, learning should be part of one’s life, not something one must go somewhere to do. That kind of utopic education is not currently possible, but we can get closer. One way is to engage students with communities outside one’s institution. Dewey would stress, though, that such an arrangement must exist for the benefit of all parties involved. As Peter Felten and Patti H. Clayton explain in their article “Service Learning,” “community organizations are not mere learning laboratories but rather realms of significant problem solving and human interaction, which means that much more than student learning is at stake” (77). Considering the needs of communities partners as essential Dewey that a work environment where learning occurred at the same time, a working school where co-learning is a core part of the work would be ideal. Felten and Clayton continue arguing that “the defining learning outcomes of service-learning transcend students to encompass learning and development for everyone involved” (82). Thus while philosophically sound, finding a matching environment and service-learning community partner can be a significant challenge, but there are many options. Students might seek partner(s) on their own, explore options through direction from a class, engage in community practice as part of a class project, take on an internship, or even study abroad. Considered from this wider perspective, the question
becomes not how we bring our writing students to communities but rather how we bring our writing education to communities our students are or could be engaged in. For most institutions at the moment, I believe that question is best answered from within the classroom, asking students to bring those communities in, to engage with them as part of our classes, and to incorporate class service-learning components when practical. By imagining ourselves as servant leaders bringing learning experiences to our students instead of subjecting them to education, we promote their independence and help them view their work as important, valuable, and the center of our concern for their well-being. This in turn can develop a similar sense of our student’s roles in society in general, so they may enter the work world looking for co-workers rather than a boss.

If serving the individual serves society in general then if we are not teaching students to serve their own needs and interests they will not be able to contribute as effectively to society at large. On a less grandiose scale this can be seen in the writing classroom by comparing the writing of students who care about their topic and those who don’t. There are certainly students who defy expectation, but in general interest leads to better quality. In my own classroom I am often heard saying, “If you care, your writing will be better.” Like any creative process and any learning process, the results are based on investment. As often as possible I give students the option to choose their own topics, usually within a particular spectrum as providing no boundaries can be to some as equally daunting as strict boundaries. And guiding student interests into viable careers is a core part of the college experience. If students are denied the opportunity to explore their interests within other contexts then those they are familiar with, how can they be expected to embrace those potentially new forums? I’ve been surprised, for instance, by the numbers of students in upper division courses who think I’m joking when I say they can pick any
topic. “Any topic,” they reply, often then citing something they think as an outrageous choice (and it usually isn’t). In my last upper division course students completed writing projects that included a nail polish blog, plans for a dance studio, a bicycle repair video, a micro-brew website, a High School English unit plan, and so forth. Some of these projects were tied to students’ majors, others were not, but all were tied to student interests. The projects were chosen precisely because students were producing writing they expected they would use in their work lives after college. Students explained to me that they were prouder, worked harder, and produced better work because they felt the work was relevant and because they cared about it.

Seeking freedom and emboldening students to see themselves as producers instead of only as receivers of knowledge, however, does not mean an abandonment of the value of effective communication. A misspelled word or a fragment is still technically a less effective form than a correctly spelled word or a complete sentence. At the same time there may be rhetorical reasons for choosing a different spelling or choosing to include a fragment as effective rhetorical devices. Thus holding students to standards of correctness can be part of a liberatory process as it demands that deviations have a purpose. That certainly privileges the status quo to some degree. But how can we do otherwise? In the least what we can do is be honest with students about this limitation and encourage them to pursue variant rhetorical forms that are purposeful when appropriate. For the purposes of our courses, the time when it is most appropriate for students to pursue variant forms is after they’ve mastered the basics. It is often a mark of success when students do so. For instance, I am always pleased when a student uses a fragment in a rhetorically effective manner. It’s the kind of sentence I might use an example in class to help students understand that rules can be broken, if there’s a reason.
Additionally, it’s important to consider that a liberatory, participatory, and democratic writing classroom will exclude some students inevitably. As a teacher I’ve found this surprising, but it remains true that some students prefer correctness, precision, and clearly defined boundaries that lead directly to a grade. Some prefer to not ask questions or engage and feel imposed upon if asked to do so. As with the question of correctness in such situations I think we must consider the greater good or what is most virtuous. I have, for example, received feedback from students having taken courses from me that attempt to realize the ideals put forth in this dissertation like the following, “He made us feel like we were stupid if we didn’t ask questions and couldn’t explain what we meant.” While I wouldn’t use the term “stupid,” I do agree with the sentiment. Similarly, I have received feedback that claims I use words students don’t know. Again this is written as if it’s a negative. What both comments demonstrate is a (for some) long-held student belief that they are not responsible for their learning. A responsible attitude would see the larger vocabulary as an opportunity for learning and questions as an automatic habit. This attitude of being “put upon” to act and participate is not mere immaturity. It is resistance, resistance to accepting responsibility, and it has been taught by a system that by and large does not hold students personally accountable. While I sympathize with the plight of students who are resistant, it is not a problem of the classroom, but a struggle of the student to determine whether he or she wants to be in that classroom or not in the first place. In short and quite practically, we can only work with students who are willing to engage with us. It’s important to be aware that choice, freedom, emotional investment, and self-reflection/expression, can be, for some, frightening prospects, and while we can sympathize, on this one, we cannot bend. Dwelling on students who choose to disengage is an easy way to eat up precious time in the classroom. We
should always leave the door open, but we benefit more from reflecting on our experiences and thinking of where and how we can move forward with those who are invested.

Having considered the contributions of the Ancient Greeks to concepts of writing and rhetoric and having established engagement as a classroom requirement, we can also peer into the future of writing and see how writing is changing. While in ancient Greece writing was sparse, today it fills nearly every moment of our lives. We can sometimes respond to writing and even as an author write back. Texting, blogging, commenting on websites and discussion boards all provide opportunities for an engagement with written discourse that more closely resembles oral debate. Moreover, as that communication develops it evolves with twitter-speak, acronyms, abbreviations, and exaggerated signs that indicate intonation or feeling. Those symbols help blur the lines between text and image when a colon and an end parenthesis indicate a smile that turns in one’s chat window into a little yellow smiley face. Perhaps in this way we are coming full-circle as the anonymity of digital spaces creates concerns about personal and professional ethos and virtuous utilization of rhetoric as it opens new modes of discourse. Additionally, the oratory that once dominated discourse has been replaced by writing that now is becoming more oral in nature in the sense of a more synchronous rather than asynchronous conversation. Arguably this division is itself an artificial one, useful only in defining the difference in language use and how one imagines it, not a difference in how it functions for the purposes of communication. Walter Ong would argue that they have always operated concurrently. In *Orality and Literacy*, he argues that “orality needs to produce and is destined to produce writing” (15). As our verbal language is now amended as a clear result of online textual practices (and again Ong would argue this has always been the case), that door swings both ways.
If we are to educate students to engage actively and intelligently and productively in society, then we need to consider the various modes of communication now available and teach them to operate effectively, responsibly, and virtuously within those digital spaces. While emerging virtual communication is not as clearly codified nor as assessable as other established genres, it is growing exponentially not only in its importance but also in how it is related to our reception and processing of information. As with the Ancient Greeks we might be tempted to be wary of this change, to see this shift as they saw the shift from oratory to writing as we perceive alphabetic text to multimodal composition. Rather we can take a more enlightened perspective and consider the lessons of history to understand that writing is not on the whole an inferior form of communication versus oratory any more than synchronous tweeting is inferior to writing an academic essay. Each provides different venues for discourse that have varying value based on context (not our determination of them). In Chapter 4 I highlight these changes in technology and why they are essential for our students to have access to them.

To meet our commitment to preparing students to engage in democratic process in their own lives, in their communities, and with the world at large, we must consider how the rhetoric of each pursuit is relevant and finds ways to capture student interest and engagement paradoxically (but quite possibly) for themselves. That change begins with a focus on students as participatory individuals not subjects. It requires an integration of choice into the classroom, time and a focus on reflection about moral issues in our writing when appropriate, an environment that fosters questioning and turns responsibility on the student, and a space that incorporates access and education in crafting multimodal compositions and a consistent consideration of our and our students’ ethical and virtuous conduct within those spaces.
Education for Democracy

In Ancient Greece democracy meant a society ruled by the people instead of by a single dictator. It was a radical notion at the time, and it didn’t and couldn’t go as far as it can today. The “people” then certainly didn’t mean women or slaves or children or people of other ethnicities or from other cultures. Being a citizen meant being male, affluent, from a family that resided in the city, and so on. The power of a dictator or a few controlling an oligarchy had been given to many in a democracy, but even in Ancient Greece, it was still an overall small percentage of the populous. In the modern era we have an opportunity to spread that influence to a much larger percentage of the population, and we can do so through our college writing classrooms.

As writing teachers, we play an essential role in democracy’s possibility. While the decisions of the majority don’t always reflect the best interests of all parties as well as is possible, I know of no better way for that to occur than to engage in political discourse and political action regarding the concerns of everyone because there is and can never be an overriding human authority that can or should decide it for us. There should be no philosophical elite as Plato espoused in the Republic, no King, no council to rule us, no force that knows better than the people for themselves. It’s a dangerous idea, one certainly not yet realized fully in the United States, even as it may be spouted from the mouths of nationalists, because the ideal presumes that we treat people in general with more intelligence, agency, and credit than most formal institutions currently do. That’s in part the challenge of any mass society, but that does not make the denial of that ideal permissible. College education can and should be a part of that process, opening students’ minds to our history, helping them discover themselves, and considering where they want to take us from here.
In *On Democracy* John Dewey, writes that “the foundation of democracy is faith in the capacities of human nature; faith in human intelligence and in the power of pooled and cooperative experience,” and that “every autocratic and authoritarian scheme of social action rests on a belief that the needed intelligence is confined to a superior few, who because of inherent natural gifts are endowed with the ability and the right to control the conduct of others” (Dewey). Instead of preparing students for an autocratic world, I propose, as John Dewey did, that we prepare them for a purely democratic one. For even if the march of democracy slows, it is better that we prepare students to meet it and contribute to its growth. And if we don’t, then we risk becoming part of the current cultural machinations that keep us in the past, the resistant to change, defensive of outmoded values and social policies that benefit the few instead of the many, instead of embracing the ways democracy and freedom and even virtue might grow in our students and our society. Dewey explains this challenge thusly:

“The democratic faith has emerged very, very recently in the history of mankind. Even where democracies now exist, men's minds and feelings are still permeated with ideas about leadership imposed from above, ideas that developed in the long early history of mankind. After democratic political institutions were nominally established, beliefs and ways of looking at life and of acting that originated when men and women were externally controlled and subjected to arbitrary power persisted in the family, the church, business and the school, and experience shows that as long as they persist there, political democracy is not secure.” (Dewey)

As long as we see power as unilateral we remain part of a system that binds us in that hierarchy. Changing that power structure in our classrooms begins with the central idea of this dissertation, teaching people, not writing, a shift that aspires to human nature and our common experience as
students and as people. We do not benefit from objectification. It may serve the needs of efficiency as De Quincey argues, but it does not meet the needs of society as a whole. It is not long-term beneficial, and while appropriate in some emergency situations, as a regular practice, it is degrading our students and educators alike. We must foster a healthier classroom to help make, what can be for many, arduous labor less taxing without removing challenge. Learning requires struggle, and it requires pain and even at times boredom, but what it does not require is that we ignore our students’ needs as people, placing the curriculum before the student.

Dewey explains in *The Child and the Curriculum* how the experiences of many students resist liberation and instead become drudgery. He argues that “subject matter is but spiritual food, possible nutritive material. It cannot digest itself… The source of whatever is dead, mechanical, and formal in schools is found precisely in the subordination of the life and experience of the child to the curriculum” (187). Carried to the writing classroom, this can be seen as the formal, mechanical structure of many writing tasks, the unsituated nature of those tasks, and their denial of individual student input or personal relevance. While this radical conclusion can be drawn directly from Dewey’s own words, in other places he tempers them with divisions that provide a more balanced perspective.

In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey defines two different kinds of education, formal and informal education. Formal education for Dewey is at its heart the development of various literacies in the broadest sense or the “conveying of learning through verbal signs” (9). It is an intentional, directed process that requires structure, rigorous assessment, and consistently presented expectations. Dewey argues that formal education is essential. Without it we could not pass on the necessary elements of learning. Because a purely democratic society needs a populous that has access to political and cultural venues of discourse, various literacies must be
learned in the writing classroom. Thankfully, this is a value that seems to be universally accepted in democratic nations. However, my contention and Dewey’s as well is that because this kind of education is easier to setup, easier to deliver, and easier to assess, it becomes all too often a central focus of education and Dewey’s informal education gets ignored. I suspect that’s why much of Dewey’s work talks about formal education with such disdain, despite his recognition of its obvious importance.

Later in *Democracy and Education* Dewey argues that informal education is just as important as formal education, perhaps more so in a sense, because while formal education is the delivery of a tool system, informal education is the utilization of those tools to further a students’ learning beyond the formal. Thus Dewey defines informal education as learning that occurs as a part of one’s life. It is in a sense automatic, and he argues that the prime purpose of acquiring literacies is to further the potential of this kind of learning. It is here that innovation, invention, and creation thrive. Success of informal education cannot be measured with ease. It is individualized and tied directly to activity, and it may or may not have ties to formal educational structures. What is most paradoxical about it is that given space and time, it will arise on its own. We need not try to make it happen; rather we need to avoid making it *not* happen. As I will explain in the next chapter, many argue that students’ natural desire to learn is stifled by a system that denies them the opportunity to do so. This occurs most frequently because it is often assumed that the only literacies that matter are those that match the goals of each educational system. Dewey’s point is that in-school literacies and traditionally out-of-school literacies are not split for the student. The binary is artificial, and as educators we deny ourselves valuable resources by maintaining that split.
In his conclusion to the topic about these two forms of education in *Democracy and Education*, Dewey argues that both formal and informal education can be integrated in an “educational scheme where learning is the accompaniment of continuous activities or occupations which have a social aim and utilize the materials of typical social situations” (196). Dewey is unclear what those “typical” social situations are, but what he does point out repeatedly is that learning as informal education is a natural process. Such a claim is a bit ironic as much of the informal education he speaks so highly of requires formal education for it to occur. I suspect Dewey makes this division because of the challenge of speaking about both together. It seems contradictory to do so, yet that is precisely how education needs to function, the formal alongside the informal working in consort. In this way we might not only see them as working together but as symbiotic in the same way Dewey describes the valuing of self and society for democracy. This core of cooperation is what Dewey is ultimately advocating for, and it’s an attitude that’s a core construct for this dissertation.

**Collaborative Pedagogy/Classroom**

In *A Guide to Composition Pedagogies*, Rebecca Moore Howard provides an overview of “Collaborative Pedagogy” in her chapter by the same name. She explains that the term can mean several different things: students teaching students, students working in small groups, and students writing collaboratively. In her conclusion, Howard joins scholars such as Glynda Hull, Mike Rose, and Mary Minock in her argument that all writing is collaborative (67). Howard describes the battle against plagiarism and the hero worship of the solitary author, how it pervades our field, the university, and society in general thanks to the capitalistic implications of textual ownership. For many upper-division college writing classrooms, there’s room for this debate about authorship and authorial ownership. Space can be made even in lower-level classes
for collaborative writing as long as one is careful to be clear about academic honesty. The other elements Howard mentions, though, are for many writing classroom staples. For example, the writing classes I teach at all levels look more like writing workshops than anything else; working in small groups is the norm. Lecture in a writing class beyond the most basic instruction is often wasteful, and having students sit and work in silence when they could benefit from working together in groups and sometimes as a class is much more fruitful.

John Trimbur explains in his article “Consensus and Difference in Collaborative Learning” that “it would be fatuous, of course, to presume that collaborative learning can constitute more than momentarily an alternative to the present asymmetrical relations of power and distribution of knowledge and its means of production” (477). Despite these concerns Trimbur does add later that “collaborative learning can provide students with exemplary motives to imagine alternative worlds and transformations of social life and labor” (477). Thus, collaborative approaches are not a panacea for an inherently hierarchical system that presumes students are consumers of knowledge not producers of it. Moreover, we often lack an effective way to assess group work. Students must be assessed as individuals and many balk when told they will be assessed with other students. Establishing rules for how a group will function and what consequences and awards will be granted for who did what work is complicated, and it is made more difficult because of the hierarchy Trimbur mentions. At the end of the day our role of gatekeeper must be upheld regardless of whether that is consistent with our pedagogical philosophy. Yet, I still think we can do more.

Collaborative pedagogy can be understood by definition to be broader than we normally think of it in terms of student collaboration. It can also be imagined as a state of the classroom itself, a state of collaboration for all students. Like collaborative writing tasks, this attitude can
be most strongly realized in an upper division course or in a graduate course but has relevance for all college writing classes. To meet the ideal of teaching virtue, to promote democracy, and to help students achieve the success Dewey discusses, we must model in our classrooms the behaviors and habits we want students to utilize in their work life. The “typical social situations” Dewey mentions cannot be duplicated entirely. That is certain, and Trimbur confirms it, but students can have a stronger collaborative role in how the classroom functions. Taking ownership of their own work becomes easier when they have more control over their environment. In the modern day this also means engaging with modern systems of communication, often establishing collaboration in ways that are impossible outside of digital spaces.

Embracing teaching people, not writing means letting go of our authority as superior and imagining ourselves as if we are on a learning journey together with our students. With the goal of cooperation as a core principle, the dream of promoting freedom, and the drive to teach virtue as a focus for our classroom to help students become stronger persons, we can adapt our practice to meet student needs. Those practices include but are certainly not limited to student created rubrics, student-run lessons, student generated assignments, collaborative class writing, collaborative syllabus creation, peer teaching, and so forth. These activities express cooperation by their nature, promote freedom by encouraging student voices to have impact on the governance of the classroom, and teach virtue by holding the respect of others and oneself as a higher value than autocracy. Even those these efforts are undermined by the authoritarian structures we work within, the boundaries of these activities can be pushed. And they need to be pushed because some students will respond to them; some will seek out the individual mentorships within and without of the classroom that might not be possible without such
openness and consideration for students as valuable contributing members to their own development and the creation of knowledge. And ultimately this is essential to our work because teaching is not about the successful transmission of information and skills alone. It is about relationships. It is about forming a mentoring bond with students who wish to learn and grow. To be successful, our teaching must be a student driven or we become what we are criticized to be, mere instructors of basic skills, not humanities educators—or more grandly humanity’s educators.

The way we treat students establishes expectations of behavior, models they will follow. If we want students to act as intelligent producers in the formation and development of democracy and equity, we need to treat them as if they already are.

Conclusion

Dewey’s symbiotic definition of democracy proposes an ideal for society as well as for the classroom. While the ideal in its pure form may never be completely attainable, moving ever closer to it makes our politeia one focused on freedom and equity. It’s a value that’s easy to support but challenging to realize. Though as teachers we are part of an autocratic system, it does not mean our classroom environments and our student interactions are all controlled by that system. In her article, “‘What the College Has Done for Me’: Anzia Yezierska and the Problem of Progressive Education,” Amy Dayton-Wood explains that while progressive movements such as the democratic education proposed by Dewey have “tremendous potential to tap into students’ lived experiences and transform these students into more fully realized, engaged citizens,” (229) they are constrained by institutional resistance. We do so by making our classroom a more democratic space that values civic and personal virtue in discourse and action. Amy J. Wan argues that as writing teachers “we should create a space where our own citizen-making through the teaching of literacy is a more deliberate activity” (46). This deliberate approach to the
classroom is necessary not only for our students in their present and future work but also for writing teachers. To teach virtue, we must participate in the process of democratizing ourselves.

The essentialness of rhetoric for public discourse established by the Ancient Greeks and the notion of virtue as an essential element of education as well as the calls for change recommended by John Dewey can function as guideposts to creating an environment better suited to engaging students as individuals and better preparing them to face the world in their post-collegiate lives. And it is our civic duty to prepare students for that world. If we limit what that means to only teaching what is required of us, we cannot at the same time deny the reality of how our classroom structure teaches values regardless of our desire to do so and that we reinscribe authoritarian values in our complicity. That complicity to some degree is unavoidable, but what we can do is be honest with ourselves and our students about our limitations and encourage them to consider what changes they wish to see in the world. We cannot expect to remove autocracy from our classrooms from within alone, but we can become a greater part of that liberating process.
CHAPTER III. CRITICAL PEDAGOGIES AND THE WRITING TEACHER

Introduction

Teaching people, not writing is a perspective shift towards people and therefore a perspective shift towards the personal in the classroom. As a service enterprise when we think of the “people” involved in the practice of teaching, we naturally gravitate to the concerns of students. I would argue, however, that while focusing on students as individuals is of paramount importance, we should not neglect the needs and personal experiences of teachers, nor the opportunity and necessity of examining our own values.

Developing a critical consciousness in the classroom extends to students and faculty alike. And just like students, teachers exist in situational environments. As we rally against false generalizations about students, their behavior, development, and needs, we must do the same for our teachers. Democratic education provides structure but not a systematic value system that can attend to the multiplicity of human needs in the writing classroom. To articulate a series of personal values that can help manage these many challenges while maintaining an ethic of care for our students and ourselves, I turn to critical pedagogies.

In A Pedagogy for Liberation: Dialogues on Transforming Education, Ira Shor explains that “the liberating process is not a professional growth only. It is a self- and social transformation, a moment when learning and changing society are joined” (50). That self-transformation requires an intense reflective stance that consistently examines and reexamines not only our professional attitudes and theories but also our perspectives as individuals towards our students. It engages more than curricula, and it is intimately entwined with each teacher’s hopes, prejudices, and history, making generalization about the needs of both students and teachers difficult. As writing teachers, it is not enough to challenge students to meet the
expectations of the “norm” and write in pre-established genres. For our education to be liberatory, we must challenge students to consider the impact and power those genres have. We must consider how writing shapes thought and culture both as cultural imposition and as liberatory outlet. While this is not as frequently a part of first-year writing courses, it is already a major component in many advanced level writing classes and serves as a testament to the modernization and humanization of writing curricula over the past thirty years. Moreover, this investment in critical reflection about the writing classroom presents opportunities for meta-reflection on our teaching practices and curricula, challenging not only how we teach but how we think about how we teach.

As we ask students to define and redefine genres, we must reexamine our own assumptions about those genres and how we structure the questions we pose about genres themselves. This is especially important because of the changing nature of digital writing spaces as we move from thinking of composing as an act of putting pen to paper to an act of putting fingers to keyboard. To facilitate the critical engagement required to develop genres in digital spaces, we need a value system that promotes creativity and experimentation and does so in a low stakes environment where failure is not punished but utilized as a teaching tool.

As a pedagogical theory that values and promotes plurality, critical pedagogy, or more appropriately critical pedagogies, provides that system of values. The plural nature of the theory, though, makes it impossible to generalize practices. To deconstruct critical pedagogies then, I need to return to their inception, consider how they have developed, and discuss how they remain relevant to the modern classroom.
While chapter 5 will explore the practical application of critical pedagogies in consort with democratic classroom structure and a responsible inclusion of technology in local classrooms, this chapter will build theoretical support by analyzing some of the myths, challenges, and fears that confuse and problematize critical pedagogies into the classroom. To further develop teaching people, not writing as a value-focused theory, I will also explore the values Paulo Freire, the father of critical pedagogies, espoused as necessary, how they remain relevant, and how we can interpret them without being dogmatic, helping construct of a sense of critical pedagogies as a plurality.

Myths, Challenges, and Fears

Like feminism one cannot talk about critical pedagogy in the singular; there are feminisms and there are critical pedagogies. Kay Siebler explains in *Composing Feminisms: How Feminists Have Shaped Composition Theories and Practices* that essentializing feminism as a singular perspective is a dangerous practice even if in each particular situation it is a necessary one. She argues that while she needs to affirm her specific practices as a feminist, feminism as a theory in general and as a practice in the writing classroom must embrace multiplicity. Siebler writes, “feminist pedagogy, like feminist rhetoric, is practiced differently depending on context, audience, and purpose” (209). And as she makes clear throughout her text, it is inherently tied to a historic moment of practice.

Following in Siebler’s lead, the development of teaching people, not writing takes up the same charge, attempting to both explain individual practice but at the same time recognize multiplicity. Critical pedagogies like feminist pedagogies depend on the context, audience, and purpose of the writing classroom. They also both have contentious historical roots. Siebler
suggests that there is a disconnect between modern feminist theory and practice, and I would argue the same of critical pedagogies. So to begin developing this pluralist perspective like Siebler does, I believe it’s necessary to return to the historical beginning. In the case of critical pedagogies it starts with Paulo Freire.

While critical pedagogies owe their existence to Freire’s work, arguably some critical pedagogues have diverted from Freire’s original intention, which, like my own take on the philosophy, is assuredly a pluralistic one. Even the criticism leveled against critical pedagogies has at times argued against ideologies and dogmatic representations that Freire did not support. Thus when considering critical pedagogies I must return to their source to reconstruct them from where they began.

Paulo Freire did not advocate attempting to realize his vision of critical pedagogy in its complete ideal. He understood that each teacher has to decide how far to push the application of critical theory. In *A Pedagogy for Liberation: Dialogues on Transforming Education*, Freire writes, “this is for me the first thing, not to idealize the educational task. But at the same time, it is necessary to recognize that by doing something inside the space of school we can make some good contributions” (180). Freire advocated not for idealistic zealotry that eschews the demands of the university but for compromise that allows teachers to work within extant systems. Specifically of the writing classroom Freire argues that, “it is necessary to teach correct usage while also criticizing its political implications … The liberatory teacher teaches standard usage in order for them [students] to survive while discussing with them all the ideological ingredients of this unhappy task” (71-72). As a long-standing member of academia, working from within the system and by his own statements, Freire affirms his commitment to tempering his idealism with pragmatism, an attitude he advised others to share in. Additionally, though Freire advocates
compromise, he implies that those actions do not require us to change our attitudes towards tasks we would rather not perform or would prefer to perform differently. This can be particularly troubling when faced with demands that are not in the best interest of our students but rather designed to meet the demands of external stakeholders. Freire points out that sometimes student survival is a more important goal than liberation. This does not by any means imply that we should abandon the ideal of liberation. Instead we must consider what we can realistically accomplish in the environments we work within. Like writing, the practice of critical pedagogies is always situated.

Thus criticisms of critical pedagogies as being too radically idealistic do not take into account the full picture, or as is often the case, those criticisms are often referring to iterations of critical pedagogy that foist it as direct practice, which it is not. It is a system of values that can be realized as practice, and I wonder if the use of the term “pedagogy” has itself contributed to this confusion because the term denotes practice. It is perhaps more appropriate to talk about our classrooms as spaces that allow the development of critical consciousness than to describe one’s practice as a critical pedagogy.

Supporting this argument about confusion of terms in her recent article “Working Boundaries: From Student Resistance to Student Agency,” Gwen Gorzelsky expresses her continued concern over what has been described as a singular perspective of critical pedagogy. She writes that in the writing classroom “to sharply prioritize either [those] pragmatic goals or our values of critical consciousness is to privilege a single variable at the expense of creating classrooms that promote real learning” (82). While the term “real learning” requires clarification, Gorzelsky’s message of balance is consistent with Freire’s vision. Her argument is being leveled against modern practitioners who turn dialogical theory (the core of Freire’s critical pedagogy
argument which turns the monological and unidirectional state of the classroom into a two-way interaction or a dialogue) into mandated practice. Donaldo Macedo’s introduction to Pedagogy of the Oppressed, written in 2000 and published in the most recent version of the book, directly addresses this problem. Macedo writes:

“Unfortunately in the United States many educators who claim to be Freirean in their pedagogical orientation mistakenly transform Freire’s notion of dialogue into method, thus losing sight of the fact that the fundamental goal of dialogical teaching is to create a process of learning and knowing that invariably involves theorizing about the experiences shared in the dialogue process.” (17)

This distinction between theory and method makes critical practice specific to each practitioner. Thus as a critical pedagogue while I do suggest specifics practices for the writing classroom outlined in chapter 5 through two classes taught at Bowling Green State University, the methods described in this dissertation represent themselves only as extensions and expressions of critical pedagogical theory. They are not intended to be taken into the classroom as requirements but as situationally applicable advice that promotes engagement in dialogical teaching. Thus while I can make arguments about the theories that support critical pedagogies, and I can present options for practice, I would be making the same mistake Macedo warns readers about if I advocated for a dogmatic stance.

Even eschewing such a stance, though, the dialogic nature of all critical pedagogies can often conflict with the expectations of scientistic assessments. Critical pedagogies present paradoxes and unanswerable challenges that are an inherent part of the theory and its development and represent themselves in the classroom as flexible variables to be explored not
data that can be locked down. In essence, instead of creating reliability and certainty, critical pedagogies problematize and at their best uproot cemented ideologies. They differentiate themselves from other pedagogies by being problem-posing philosophies not a problem-solving ones. Attempts to analyze it from the perspective as a problem-solving pedagogy and attempts to employ as such in the classroom will fail and yield confused results.

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* Paulo Freire explains that “those truly committed to liberation must … abandon the educational goal of deposit making and replace it with the posing of the problems of human beings in relation to their world.” (79). This problem-posing education takes the focus away from content and even skill sets and instead engages students with challenges that they must figure out how to solve. When I think of critical pedagogies in the simplest sense, I think of them as questions not answers. Freire argues that in an ideal situation there are no teachers, no students. Realized to their fullest, critical pedagogies can promote a space where “people teach each other, mediated by the world, by the cognizable objects” (80), aligning and intertwining our pedagogical goals together, goals we are limited in reaching but can always strive towards.

This stance of posing problems, not answers, allows critical pedagogues to combat what Freire describes as the banking model of education. The writing classroom is uniquely situated to combat such ineffective, authoritarian pedagogical methods. We know that banking pedagogy does not save time. Rather it creates the illusion of learning by demonstrating short-term retention. What students discover on their own, they retain with a much higher level of reliability. What critical pedagogies appear to lack is the controlled precision of knowledge delivery that banking pedagogy pretends to provide. In short the true difference between the two is that critical pedagogies provide less control.
We do not benefit from exerting a high level of control over content in the writing classroom, especially when students can produce that content and can benefit from doing so. We can hand that control over to students, and we often do at many levels even in the first-year writing classroom where learning outcomes are more regimented and external stakeholders have more fierce expectations of our role to prepare students to succeed at college writing tasks. Problem-solving pedagogy returns that control to students. Freire explains that when students “apprehend the challenge as interrelated to the other problems within a total context, not as a theoretical question, the resulting comprehension tends to be increasingly critical and thus constantly less alienated” (81). And when less alienated, knowledge can be cemented at a deeper level, precisely because students are guided to their own answers.

That position, of posing problems, means exactly what it sounds like, a constant creation (or perhaps more appropriately a revealing) of issues inside and outside of the classroom site. It demands the creation of a space without certainty, an experimental space. As a critical pedagogue trying to develop coherent practices, I sometimes feel like I am constantly struggling with a theoretical, answerless koan. I have to trust in the long-term impact of the dialogic process even though it may not yield measureable short-term results, and I have to believe that learning does not take place in discrete chunks but rather as a life-long process. Instead of thinking of teaching as adding a block to the building of a student’s knowledge, I envision it as if we are helping to form the bank of a river together; the stream of their learning providing both the silt that builds upon that guiding shore and the water that erodes it. As a guide, my task is to point them in a favorable direction; it’s for them to see where it goes. Yet as an educator I am required to present evidence that I have given “proper” instruction and that students can produce matching work. So, dogmatic or not, the compromises Freire suggests are necessary for not only our
students’ survival and our own, yet there are ways to do both as I will explain in my final chapter.

Paula Wolfe addresses this challenge of compromise and paradox in her article "Student Microtransformations in English Classrooms." She writes, “if we, as educators, accept the tenets of critical pedagogy, then we must also accept a somewhat paternalistic assumption that we are guiding students toward a more ‘critical stance.’ This is, perhaps, a necessary evil” (332). As Freire argued we must use authority (paternalism) to help students liberate themselves. Thus the compromises we make with external stakeholders can provide a measure of balance to the threat of extreme idealism. The challenge of critical pedagogies is not to find the right way in general but to make our best attempt in each situation using the tools at our disposal, always leading toward liberation when possible. And we must be vigilant to not let our theoretical goals distract us from the situational requirements of our journey towards it.

As a theory with paradoxes and constant situational challenges, practitioners of critical pedagogies must constantly engage in self-examination and evaluation. Russell Durst supports this argument in his article “Can We Be Critical of Critical Pedagogy.” Durst argues that as critical pedagogues we must turn our own philosophy on ourselves. He writes that we must “dislodge from our ideological comfort zones sometimes, have our outlooks complicated by discordant ideas, just as we try to move students toward more varied and complex ways of seeing in classes guided by critical pedagogy” (113). Durst suggests this as a response to scholarship that pose singular definitions of what it means to practice critical pedagogy, definitions that exclude practitioners that don’t go far enough in their practice or whose focus is not as specific to global liberation. Durst’s argument implies that not only are our classrooms themselves situated but so are the ideologies of critical pedagogies that drive the practice in that space. It
also means that generalized attacks are both inaccurate and inappropriate because such criticism is monological in nature.

Dialogical criticism is a challenge for academic scholarship because while each piece of scholarship is engaged in an academic discussion, the voices presented are often meant to promote a single individual and/or ideal. As much as we might like to imagine all scholarship as a “sharing” of perspectives, it also inevitably entails an intense competitiveness, especially for budding scholars who lack an established network and respect for their work. Texts like *A Pedagogy for Liberation: Dialogues on Transforming Education* are essential reads for budding critical pedagogues because this text is co-authored and literally structured as a conversation between Ira Shor and Paulo Freire both as theoreticians and as practitioners. It is not an effort to rebut or denounce one position but rather a sharing of suggestions, theories, and ideas about what’s possible. Thus Durst’s criticism of critical pedagogues functions consistently with critical pedagogical theory while those he is critical of do not.

That criticism and dialogue is necessary for all critical pedagogues both with our students and our peers because critical pedagogies demand experimentation, which inevitably includes some measure of failure. Contrary to the demands of modern schooling, failure is necessary, healthy, and promotes learning, as long as it doesn’t dominate the classroom environment. Recognizing this challenge, William Thelin offers a framework to help deal with these classroom struggles. In his article “Understanding Problems in Critical Classrooms,” Thelin writes that “analyzing our mistakes and trying to strengthen our pedagogy will make us more able to respond to the next situation, but this reflection will not relieve us of the heartache, embarrassment, anger, frustration, and hard work that come with the critical project. Blunders will and should occur” (39). By “blunders” Thelin refers to a concept established in *Blundering*
for a Change: Errors and Expectations in Critical Pedagogy, a book he co-authored with John Tassoni. These “blunders,” argues Thelin and Tassoni, are a natural part of any classroom and certainly part of the critical classroom. They can happen with individual students, a lesson, or even an entire unit. They can occur for any number of reasons; sometimes the same techniques that worked with one set of students doesn’t work for another; personal issues can always create conflicts; communication struggles are often a key breakdown point, and so on. Instead of viewing them as impediments to success, though, Thelin suggests we see them as opportunities for growth not failure, and he urges emotional acceptance of their reality, frequency, and inevitability. In short it’s part of teaching to make blunders, and the best teachers are those who use those moments to their advantage. They are teachable moments for often for both ourselves and our students as we continue learning to negotiate power in the classroom together.

Attempting to put critical pedagogies into practice will increase one’s blunders, especially as one makes room for dissent. That can be emotionally taxing for teachers and students especially because of how critical classrooms permit conflict and negotiation to become normal parts of the classroom experience. To many students unfamiliar with critical practices it may seem like an unnecessary “rocking of the boat.” I’ve had students in my own classes frustrated with me because I wouldn’t give them a straight answer. I’ve been asked, “What’s the correct way to write this?” Before I answer, I often envision the irritation my answer of “it depends on your choice of x and your goal for y…” may bring on.

On a larger scale, I ran into trouble when teaching Intermediate Writing at Bowling Green when working with a pair of students on their final project for the course. To complete the proposal for their project, students needed to find a piece of writing they were to emulate and use as a mark for success. They were assigned to craft rubrics based on this piece of writing and then
to use that rubric for self-assessment. The pair of students in question explained to me that they didn’t need either of those pieces to support their project. Up against a deadline, I let the issue go and accepted their argument. Though I cautioned them, I allowed them to proceed without the support of that rubric or that text because, as they had said, it was impossible to acquire. That decision resulted in a “blunder.” Their final project did not meet the rigor of the course and my feedback not only didn’t seem to help but because they didn’t have the proper grounding in their work, they resisted my criticism. It wasn’t wrong to trust my students, to trust that they could move forward without all the tools. Sometimes students don’t need them even when we think they do. It is certainly possible to scaffold too much, but in this case I didn’t ensure enough scaffolding was provided. It would be easier to blame the students, call them lazy, and say that they tricked me into believing them, but that’s not what happened. I chose, and in that case I chose poorly. A critical classroom is more open to these kinds of struggles because of the amount of negotiation involved, and even though in this particular case there was a blunder, there were more cases of success in that course as I will outline in chapter 5. Moreover, that blunder highlighted the challenge to authority and rigor that can, if not well managed, undermine a critical classroom.

Of all the blunders critical pedagogues may encounter, few can be more taxing than those that arise out of conflicts in negotiating power differentials in the classroom simply because critical pedagogies allow for that negotiation to occur. In Ira Shor’s seminal work, *When Students have Power: Negotiating Authority in a Critical Pedagogy*, Shor describes a utopia class he taught and the experiences he went through in one particularly epiphanous session of this course. Throughout the text he described his feelings, anxiety, and struggle as he negotiated power with students. He writes, “not all teachers will be able to share the authority needed to
open the process [true democratic class dialogue]” contending that some may “find it difficult to adjust to the change from unilateral to mutual decision making” (200). In this book Shor is talking about specific negotiating practices but the experiences of difficulty are generalizable. Student resistance born of conditioned experience can create significant barriers. Ira Shor describes his perception of student resistance in A Pedagogy for Liberation: Dialogues on Transforming Education. Imagining an informed student perspective, Shor writes the following:

“What the hell do you want? Why don’t you just fill the hour with teacher-talk and let me copy down the answers silently, staring at you with glassy eyes, making believe I am listening to your words flying through the air while in fact I am dreaming about beer or dope or sex or Florida or the big football game or the party this weekend.” (25)

When I first began trying to integrate critical pedagogies into my practice I was shocked that students had such reactions. Why would they want class to stay the same? Why would they desire to continue to engage in negative power relations that limit their education and their potential for success? Having made attempts to realize critical pedagogies in the classroom, I understand that the response Shor describes is not all that uncommon. It is a normal, utilitarian response to a challenging situation. Students seek the path of least resistance, especially when they are not personally engaged. The activities Shor mentioned as student interests, however crass, are engaging elements of student life. They are also generalizations that both Shor and I recognize as stereotypes, not markers of behavior. Often baser interests are completely appropriate and merely demonstrate that students as learners in process have yet to experience examples of the benefits of owning their own education. Part of that issue is assuredly a matter of professional experience but a larger piece is the history our students have with enduring a school
system that functions on a top-down, fill-the-empty-cup, get-the-right-answer philosophy. That system isn’t a total failure, however, because there are so many qualified, invested teachers who engage in mentor relationships with their students, fostering the ideals necessary to develop deeper professional engagement. This is where critical pedagogies shine, because through negotiation of classroom authority we not only permit dissent, but we humanize our interactions.

But if given too much control can student resistance turn into outright rebellion? Addressing this concern in a questionnaire section of *A Writer Teaches Writing*, Donald Murray poses this question to himself as if asked by a reader, “What do I do if students rise up and charge?” He replies, “They won’t—even when they should. The most serious problem is student passivity, not student action” (223). Murray goes on to explain how he once stepped into the wrong classroom and began lecturing only to be stopped by the teacher who was late to her advanced Spanish Course. The students said nothing to indicate he was in the wrong classroom. Murray implies that even in shocking cases students tend to remain silent. While I agree with Murray, I also know that critical practice involves designing a space where students can and should resist, not as self-serving rebellion, but as mature dissent. At times this may appear to be open revolt, but it is not. If we open the doors for power negotiations, we must be prepared to engage in those negotiations even though doing so can be a frightening experiment. We will only lose control of our classes if we allow the chaos to undermine our core values and the structure we’ve established in the course. That’s a hard balance, but one worth learning to negotiate because doing so can return power to students. And when students have power they feel emboldened. Their interests can be piqued and their investment in their work can feel more personal.
In teaching ENG 4840: Foundations of Teaching Writing at Bowling Green, I’ve encountered a tendency amongst my students (who mostly plan to teach in public schools in the near future) to separate school work into two categories: work for themselves and work for the teacher (much like Macrorie’s Engfish versions of writing). We talked about this often because students wanted to design classroom spaces that foster the first kind of work not the second. When we discussed how to identify what makes them feel differently about their work, the answer was always choice. Choice is at the core of critical pedagogies, and it’s an essential part of my teaching people, not writing philosophy. Choice is not necessary to deliver content. It’s not necessary to pass an SAT or to produce effective generalizable assessments about writing. But it is necessary to empower people to engage in their writing. Freedom of choice can be overwhelming if safeguards are not used (scaffolding, instructive resources, one-on-one instruction, clear expectations, and so forth), and it is also a mistake to assume that student resistance is inborn in students Though it might not always feel like it, students are our allies in our endeavors to engage them, and we should treat them as such even when they don’t act that way.

The greatest threats to critical pedagogies often come not from within the classroom, though; they come from without, when critical practices conflict with institutional demands. Freire addresses this concern about our dual role as employee and revolutionary in his book the *Politics of Education: Culture, Power, and Liberation*. At the end of the book, Freire includes a candid interview where he answers questions about critical pedagogy and how it manifests in his life, research, and teaching. In one question he is asked about how he can operate as a thinker who clearly imagines education outside the university and yet at the same time works within the university as a teacher. Freire replies that “in terms of tactics, we all have one foot inside the
system, and strategically we have the other foot outside the system” (178), creating a challenging balancing act. Freire argues that this is risky and is one reason why most scholars stay in the system and don’t challenge it. Stepping outside the bounds of accepted practice can be frightening because educators have been denied tenure, lost their jobs, and have been persecuted and reprimanded in their attempts to resist. As an example, the introduction to *Politics of Education: Culture, Power, and Liberation* was written by Henry Giroux, who was denied tenure at Boston University in the early eighties, according to Freire because of the radical nature of his theories and his attempts to realize them in practice. Maurice R. Berube explains in *Radical Reformers: The Influence of the Left in American Education* that the reason for his denial was political. Berube writes, “John Silber [former president of Boston University] practiced a right-wing polemic anti-intellectualism” (65). Giroux had at the time published two books and had over 50 publications in scholarly journals. Giroux himself described the denial of tenure as a punishment for being a “working class intellectual on the left” (65). Giroux’s is an extreme example, but it highlights political concerns about critical pedagogical practices. Both Freire and Giroux would agree that those who practice dissent tend to suffer. At the same time Freire makes it clear that we must each choose how far we are willing to go, offering no judgment on those who, like him, work to keep one foot in each camp, working within the system to maintain that crucial connection to students. The decisions to fight one battle or another are both professional and personal and must take into account the individual situation each teacher is faced with, so I am hesitant to criticize those whose contexts I’m not familiar with and even then, I don’t think it serves our field in any productive way to argue that some faculty aren’t radical enough.

When approaching critical pedagogies then, I do so carefully and with an understanding that my fervor for liberation is matched by the power of others who either may not understand
that value of our work and/or follow a different value system themselves which is not focused on
the needs of students. So, I am allowed dissent to a certain degree, and if I tread over specific
bounds I can be held accountable especially as a young scholar without tenure or seniority. Thus
while I envision an ideal, I position it as a compromise with the system as it is, not as I wish it to
be. Like Freire I believe that change can only occur from within, as we teachers, who are both
oppressed and oppressor, resist in what ways we can. One of the primary ways we present that
resistance is through honesty with our students, sharing our theoretical work with them, engaging
them as participants in our drive to develop more effective strategies for teaching. When we
imagine our students as people first, this becomes easier because our primary goal becomes not
delivering content but helping each individual grow. Additionally our defense from both external
bullies (be they institutional or individual) and resistance in our own classroom will also
ultimately come from within, from students who have invested in their work because of the
freedom of choice critical practices facilitate. That takes time, time in the classroom and time as
a pedagogue establishing a rapport and a history with students. The challenge critical pedagogies
open up are not new, they are always in the classroom. The difference is that critical practices
attempt to demystify them, to tear down the walls between teacher and student and provide an
environment where we can talk person to person, because at its core teaching is not about
content; it’s about relationships.

The Practice of Critical Pedagogies

In Pedagogy of the Oppressed Paulo Freire lays out five essential values required for a
successful liberatory education: humility, faith, hope, critical thinking, and love. In the following
section I will analyze each of these, focusing primarily on humility and the rhetorical questions
Freire poses about it as a construct; attempt to answer concerns brought up about each; connect
them back to the core value of this dissertation, teaching students not writing; and frame them in terms of classroom practice.

Freire argues in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* that true “dialogue cannot exist without humility” (90). He follows this bold claim with a series of questions that he intends as rhetorical but that I will attempt to answer individually in the first part of this section referring to them by their number. Freire asks “[1] How can I dialogue if I project ignorance on others and never perceive my own, … [or] [2] consider myself a member of the in-group of pure ‘men,’ the owners of truth and knowledge … [or] [3] I start from the premise that naming the world is the task of the elite, …[or] [4] if I am afraid of being displaced” (90). While I stand firm as a practitioner of critical pedagogies, considering these questions I find it hard to argue that I as a writing teacher am capable of dialogue as Freire defines it. Students I teach are sorted into classes at some level by virtue of their knowledge, and it is part of my job to profess my ability to teach them. I am implicitly, and in some cases explicitly, discouraged from expressing my weaknesses, my struggles, and the areas I have to improve in to either my colleagues, administrators of the university, and certainly not to my students. To do so would demonstrate ineptitude. Of course, I do find ways to talk about areas of improvement but always in the context of how that improvement is proceeding (always positively). Thus I do not project ignorance but instead engage in a constant performance that attempts to verify my reliability as an educator. In answer to Freire’s second question about humility and ownership of knowledge, that performance requires that I identify myself with the intellectual elite, the “owners of truth and knowledge.” I am one of them, and I’ve fought hard over many years to establish that identity and to secure it.
Considering Freire’s third question about humility and identity, I can’t but believe the naming of the world—which Freire means to include more than mere naming but also the codification of knowledge—to be the purview of the intellectual elite. We create many barriers and check systems to make sure those in power stay there, creating a high challenge for entry and social/intellectual mobility. The rigor required to come to the place I am now as an avowed member of the academic community was hard won. I’ve earned the right to contribute, and I had to earn it. One’s value does not simply come from one’s potential contribution to knowledge; one must prove one’s ability to make contributions, making it seem to many students like an impossible barrier to breach. It’s a system I find philosophically and morally abhorrent. Who is speaking should never trump what is being said, but that’s never been the case. Earning the right for one’s voice to be heard is the core of intellectual ethos. It’s antithetical to the values espoused by Freire and stands in firm opposition to my commitment to teaching people first, creating a disconcerting contradiction between a desire to function as a liberatory force and the reality of my complicity in a system that values certification as a vital check system. So while I as an educator can place value in the personhood of my students, my practice does nothing to counter a system that has no interest in voices without political, intellectual, or social power.

Responding to Freire’s fourth and final question about humility, I cannot but fear being displaced. My job as a writing teacher requires that at some level I maintain my authority as a certifying agent of my classroom. At the end of every course, I am responsible for student evaluations, and it is imperative that I am able to defend those judgments regardless of whether such assessments serve students effectively. In fact, we know that they often don’t. Supporting this argument in What We Really Value: Beyond Rubrics in Teaching and Assessing Writing, Bob Broad contends that rubric-based summative assessment tools, which are still used
prominently in the field of composition, provide only a surface assessment of style and formatting, privileging “generalizability, context-independence, statistical analysis, secrecy, and control” (13-14). The results of such assessment function more as an audit of a student’s writing rather than a functional analysis of the situated rhetorical effectiveness of their work. Using rubrics can help students pass courses, but this common practice can do little to help students write for dynamic, demanding audiences. Broad suggests an alternative which he calls dynamic criteria mapping, “a streamlined form of qualitative inquiry that yields a detailed, complex, and useful portrait of any writing program’s evaluative dynamic” (13). By “useful” Broad means useful to students and useful to teachers in helping students, less so for helping external stakeholders establish statistical analysis of student writing ability. Brian Huot agrees, arguing in (Re) Articulating Writing Assessment for Teaching and Learning, that “much of what is wrong with assessment … can be traced back to the lack of attention to assessment as a viable and legitimate part of the teaching of writing” (9-10). Huot contends that as a field we’ve focused too much on summative assessment (the final grade) instead of the more useful formal assessment (feedback meant to be put to use for help with revision), and he admits that we’ve done so as a response to outside pressure to produce scientistic results that codify the work of our students. In Assigning, Responding, Evaluating: A Writing Teacher’s Guide, Edward White identifies what he argues is the “heart of the problem” with assessment. White writes, “if students could learn to assess their own work, they would be much more likely to adopt the work habits of professional writers” (84), and this skill of self-assessment, contends White, could serve students for the rest of their lives.

Our theorists have made it clear; we need to move away from standard rubrics and towards dynamic, local assessments that are more formative than summative, and we need to
teach students to assess themselves. But that theory clashes violently with the summative assessment demands of the university. Students cannot determine their own grades, cannot certify themselves, and when I suggest that they should be able to, I feel twinges or worry. Even with theoretical support from the field and with the knowledge that situated feedback is much more useful than an “objective” summative measure. Moreover, my evaluation as an educator depends on it as well. As a critical pedagogue who wishes to challenge such entrenched authority because of how it ignores the needs of students, I cannot help but worry about the security of my own job even when maintaining that security conflicts with the needs of students.

Thus considering all four of Freire’s questions about humility, it seems I’ve failed them all and am unable to answer them in the rhetorical fashion he intended. As with other elements of Freire’s work, I believe what matters, though, is not achieving the ideal state but rather demonstrating that one has and is continuing to move forward towards the impossible-to-reach critical goal of liberation. Freire describes an ideal classroom space, one in which all his posed questions can be answered with ease, as “the point of encounter.” It is a place where, “there are neither utter ignoramuses nor perfect sages; there are only people who are attempting, together, to learn more than they now know” (90). At the most basic level humility means being open to the experience of learning from one’s students and setting up environments where co-learning can occur. Being unable to reject a knowledge check system or promote self-assessment as strongly as I’d like doesn’t mean that critical pedagogies and teaching people, not writing aren’t steps in the right direction. In fact, that’s all they are and all they can be.

In framing the five values he presents in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire describes his humanist, liberatory philosophy as having two stages; the first involves revealing the nature of oppression and the second, the act of transformation. What we must do is not only provide means
for understanding uneven power relations, we must provide outlets for change. Putting people first requires that we open those negotiations before any course even begins because it’s a framework that privileges the needs of the individual above the demands of content (and the demands of external stakeholders that may be invested in that content over the needs of individuals). That humble perspective automatically rearranges power dynamics in the classroom, but it’s only the beginning of a long process.

Through humility, Freire offers critical pedagogues a perspective that forms a guiding framework for everything that occurs in the classroom. Expanding on this framework, Freire suggests there are more pieces than just humility itself. In the series of rhetorical questions I referenced earlier in this section, he poses a challenge to the projection and denial of ignorance or in more simple terms, that we assume students don’t “know” and assume we do. This categorization is arguably a necessary part of student identification and categorization in the modern system. The alternative would be an open learning community where learners self-identify need and know nothing of the abilities the teachers they might seek out could possess. As a social concept this sounds attractive from an ideal standpoint. As a practical endeavor, it is challenging to conceive of a functional system. This is particularly true when considering skills or knowledge that require extensive years of training. Many highly skilled professions fall into this category. While not content intensive, learning writing requires a high level of knowledge, rhetorical savvy, and a strong theoretical background. It is important to note, though, that at the highest levels learning communities can operate effectively. A common example in our field would be when a grad student co-authors a piece with a professor. As a totalizing system, however, too much would be lost, or it would simply take too much time to operate in this fashion. Additionally such a system would provide no basis for credentializing the generalizable
skills a student possesses. All learning would be individualized. Certainly as a practitioner of critical pedagogies, I’d prefer it that way because it would serve students better, but there are far too many stakeholders invested in credentialization for that revolution in education to occur in the current era. Thus while I hear and value Freire’s objection and recognize the connection to humility and can indeed take up that attitude at a local level, I don’t think the fight over the power differential between student and teacher can be currently won on a large scale. The entire system of education from top to bottom assumes student ignorance and teacher knowledge, so denying students access to the skills that would mark them as worthy of particular credentials could cripple their ability to succeed. To do so would undermine our mission as educators. As part of that mission we must identify need, and we must identify those who are qualified to provide that education. A mass system can’t work without it, and it doesn’t prevent us from recognizing student knowledge in the classroom and taking a humble stance towards that knowledge, particularly self-knowledge.

Accepting participation in the system of education then requires an assumed elitism of educators. Freire mentions this in the second question referenced at the beginning of this section, asking if we can consider ourselves “pure ‘men,’ the owners of truth and knowledge” (90). His contention here is with the notion that membership in the intellectual elite includes basic human superiority. As a conscious belief this is often easy to dispel, and while some educators might claim outright that being an academic means being superior, I think such attitudes are generally frowned upon. However, this belief of superiority, as a sub-conscious elitism, is an integral part of membership as inexorable and as persistent as racism or classism. It is a cultural phenomenon and deeply ingrained. Like racism or classism while we can identify it, we cannot ever completely eradicate it. As long as we are not active practitioners of elitist behavior, all we can
do is recognize our tacit perception and commit ourselves to reflection and gradual but never complete change. As a practitioner of critical pedagogies, this means constantly engaging in a self-reflective process that considers how and when I choose to honor the value of humility in the classroom.

Freire’s third challenge implies that we should not defend the intellectual elite’s power of naming. In this instance, “naming” also refers to the creation of knowledge and Freire’s concern about the silencing of voices. As an educator this is a troubling challenge because I see all too often how easily misinformation can and or has convinced students to engage in perspectives, attitudes, and practices that are against their best interest and sometimes health. We must have a check and balance system to affirm that some knowledge is reliable and that some is not. As writing teachers one of the most visible ways we accomplish this is through helping students develop the ability to evaluate research, making distinctions between an academic article and Wikipedia entry. Yes, this perpetuates the elitism Freire challenges, but in response I offer my own rhetorical question. Is it not our job as educators to assist students in sorting through what can be supported as true (or as least conditionally true if taking an extreme skeptics position) and what is illusory and/or false? To do so requires that we, the intellectual elite, are engaged in the creation and codification of knowledge and does inevitably include the silencing of voices. Ideally the voices that are silenced are those that seek to misguide and misinform students and our understanding of the world. In Freire’s ideal vision of education, terms such as teacher and student wouldn’t exist, but in a world where they do, he asks that we consider how we might “create with” as opposed to “create for,” how we might lead students to discover or even journey with them instead of inform. Even as we invest in the elite system of education, it is not
inconsistent to try to find ways to engage students in knowledge making and “naming the world” together, especially if we include student experience as a kind of knowledge.

Self-reflection, evaluation of one’s work, and defining personal connections to complex ideologies, histories, and cultures are all ways in which knowledge is formed. Henry Giroux argues in his book *Schooling and the Struggle for Public Life: Democracy and Education’s Challenges* that:

“student experience must be given preeminence in an emancipatory curriculum. But learning how to understand, affirm, and analyze such experience means not only understanding the cultural and social forms through which students learn to define themselves, but also learning to engage student experience in a way that neither unqualifiedly endorses nor delegitimizes it.” (197)

That balance is the challenge, and it has been my experience that it’s a tenuous one. When legitimizing some aspects of a student’s perspective some students will contend that their experience should be superior to any established knowledge (without qualification). Students sometimes can find it difficult to empathize with the language and/or content of complex academic thought. They may also have conflicting values that inhibit their ability to see the impact, rigor, or effectiveness of academic discourse. Often it is simply a lack of experience. As educators it is our duty to help students bridge that gap. Turning to student experience is a necessity when trying to forge those connections. What I find particularly troubling about connecting student experience to knowledge development is that sometimes there just isn’t enough time in the semester to do so, or sometimes I’m just not the right instructor to make the connection despite the efforts of both myself and my students. In such situations, I imagine that
what we accomplished was a foundation that might be built upon later. Sometimes it’s, as Thelin would describe, a “blunder” that serves instead as a learning experience for the future. It is not failure; it is simply a tall mountain to climb. Thankfully those situations are in the minority.

Students can be involved in the creation of knowledge and the “naming” of the world without following direct lines of authority and power and becoming mere tools of the system, but first they must understand that they can “name” their own world and experience. For many this is a novel and sometimes frightening idea. It is natural to experience resistance and push-back along the way, and there’s no need to see that as a loss of control.

Resistance to authority displacement, however, as Freire describes it, in a total sense is impossible to avoid. Without that authority I don’t have a job or any reason to garner reward based on my work (i.e. a paycheck). I’d be an equal member of a learning community, which as a teacher, I certainly am not. Learning communities can be simulated, at least for a time, but in the end the deception is revealed, and power asserts itself. In the writing classroom that assertion of power can be a tool to help protect and guide students in their understanding of complex rhetorical situations. Outside the classroom, it can be the basis for more open relationships that establish the semblance of a learning community. When I was a student, for instance, classroom power relationships were most authentically undermined outside the classroom not within. And I formed the best relationships with teachers when I wasn’t a student of those teachers anymore. Those relationships could then become more “horizontal” to use Freire’s term. I write “more” horizontal because even as a professional now, I still have a pseudo-parental regard for the mentors I had as an undergraduate student even though those mentors have no formal role in my life anymore. That regard is not an aspect of those relationships I begrudge because that authority also represents itself as earned respect. In a more horizontal relationship it is something I choose
and that I grant, partially because of social etiquette but also because it represents a genuine feeling of appreciation for the many gifts those mentors have provided to me. But whether earned respect or imposed authority, which to different people might appear the same at times, my job as an educator would not exist without that element of imposed authority. The valuable lessons I gained from teachers outside of class time, outside office hours, and off campus, would not have been possible had I not first encountered those mentors in the university setting. Thus while the university creates explicit barriers to horizontal relationships because it is a credentializing institution, it also, paradoxically, establishes and maintains spaces where those connections can form.

Modeling the work of my mentors as an instructor, I now mentor my own students and have met with several over the years on a regular basis. One in particular, whom I will refer to as John to preserve his anonymity, met me in the first composition course I taught. We still meet weekly for lunch and talk about life and philosophy. I asked him recently about our relationship and he explained that one of the most important parts of our contact has been his ability to have me as a resource in his life for questions he could have pondered for years and that I could answer in a moment. He also told me that for him as a learner, familiarity with his teacher or tutor is of paramount importance. John explained that he has a chemistry teacher, for instance, whom he knows is super smart but from whom he can’t seem to learn a thing. Yet when working with a fellow classmate who explains the content differently, he picks it up right away. He told me that he and I have a similar connection that allows information to pass easily between us. Our relationship has become a conduit that allows the transmission and sharing of knowledge and also allows for moments of co-learning. I share my dissertation work with John as I do with my colleagues, and I consider his feedback seriously.
My mentoring relationship with John and other students establishes some of the best opportunities for learning and growth possible. Those relationships remove the artificial bounds of the classroom and instead put teacher and student on a more even playing field. Teaching people, not writing then becomes easier to realize as a guiding philosophy of mentorship than directive education because the maintenance of those relationships is based on respect, mutual interest, and trust not the transmission of knowledge. It’s important to note, however, that it’s a limited opportunity. If all my students sought such relationships, I would not have the time to meet with them all. It is also problematic because it privileges students who have the necessary confidence, trust, and time to invest in those relationships. I have never, for instance, developed such a relationship with students who perform poorly in my classes, not for lack of trying, though. A lack of confidence is a common challenge for students who struggle, and I assume that is likely part of the reason they don’t seek me out for assistance or further conversation. Treating students as people first might not result in mentoring relationships in such cases, but it does provide a better chance of connecting to students who find their class work challenging.

By relinquishing my own power and letting students in, I encourage them at their own particular stages to take that power for themselves. Developing a mentoring relationship is an easy way to see the effectiveness of that approach, but more often than not the results of that approach are neither immediately visible nor assessable. Thus while we cannot eliminate the power dichotomy inherent in classroom structure, we can do our best to craft a simulation that might open the way for more horizontal relationships both in and outside of the classroom.

This withering of authority, as described in chapter 1 by Ira Shor, should coincide with an honest representation on one’s intentions, plans, and limitations as an educator to students. While this might be seen by some as presenting weakness, that honesty is an essential part of helping
students take control of their own education. Paulo Freire writes, “the oppressed must see examples of the vulnerability of the oppressor so that a contrary conviction can begin to grow within them” (64). Bell hooks confirms this need in *Teaching to Transgress*. Hooks argues that “when professors bring narratives of their experiences to classroom discussion it eliminates the possibility that we function as all-knowing, silent interrogators” (21). If we expect our students to grow, to take risks, to be personally vulnerable and open to change, then we must be willing to engage in that process ourselves. Sharing one’s limitations, challenges, and real experience with students is a brave act that can humanize a teacher for students, reducing the space they see between themselves and the teacher. We must do so in a balanced environment, and this won’t help if the teacher is using the classroom as a place to vent, complain, or bemoan his or her struggles. It requires acceptance of limitations and expression of those experiences to students in an honest and positive manner that does not undermine one’s ability or fitness to teach.

Moreover, continuing in our commitment to humility and honesty we have an obligation to be honest about the system we work within, how that system impacts our students, why we’ve made the choices we have as educators, and how that relates to our students and to the university at large. This is especially important for writing classes that are designed to help students navigate the writing needs of the university so students can learn to contextualize their writing. Helping students to effectively navigate university writing expectations will help them succeed. Instead of creating an antagonistic relationship with students where we are error-correctors or red-pen markers, we can position ourselves as allies helping students negotiate their future work. As students move closer to leaving the university we can help them develop criteria for their future writing work and can continue to ally with them in understanding how to negotiate the rhetorical needs of their careers.
Jonathan Kozol contends, though, that we don’t go far enough to merely point out the structure of education and its apparent expectations. In *On Being a Teacher*, he argues that as long as we avoid dogmatic arguments or the development of conspiracy theories, we can communicate to students that the system of education they reside in is both historically ephemeral and laden with obviously false advertising. Kozol writes “school advertises one thing [truth and beauty] and sells another [class stratification and political indoctrination]. In any other realm of life, this would be castigated and forbidden” (7). While I think Kozol’s point is valid, we must also be careful to avoid crafting tales of woe or powerlessness. And we must consider the political climate we’re working in as well as our own situation as teachers, balancing our desire to liberate students and the choice many of them make to follow the system as it is. Kozol is right that there are students who benefit from that knowledge. However, there are many students who are not interested in liberation but survival instead, and if we are truly giving power to our students we must accept the desires of those students as well. Donald Finkel explains in *Teaching With Your Mouth Shut*, that “a teacher can hand over the power to determine what goes on in the classroom without handing over his power over what happens in the course as a whole” (123). Thus we can be a driving force, opening the door for liberation as often as possible, but at the same time respect the needs of other stakeholders and the choice of many students to do their best to meet the expectations of the university. In chapter 5 I will explore how this balance can break down when facing summative final assessments and will suggest attitudes and practices that allow us to maintain our humility and honesty and at the same time exert the authority our jobs require of us.

Countering Kozol and those with an overt political agenda, Caleb Corkery challenges both the motives and effectiveness of the liberatory goals of critical pedagogies in his article.
"Rhetoric of Race: Critical Pedagogy without Resistance." While Corkery generalizes critical pedagogies in his article, he is referring specifically to critical pedagogies that are designed to increase white racial awareness, but his contention critiques any critical approach. He writes “must critical pedagogues rely on charisma or charm to retrieve their students from evasive, defensive, or even bitter mind-sets?” (251). Corkery poses this seemingly rhetorical question after citing examples where teachers encountered significant student resistance to critical pedagogical practices. He concludes that “clearly, we are not all up to it.” (251), arguing that not all teachers possess the attributes necessary to engage with conflict and challenge regularly in the classroom. I agree with Corkery’s point about ability. Some teachers are ill-prepared to handle conflict; others may choose to engage less in liberatory practice because of the struggles inherent in the practice. But I disagree strongly with Corkery’s conclusion that the struggle to employ critical pedagogies presents some kind of valid criticism against them as a practice. Corkery is right that employing critical pedagogies requires charisma and charm. However, his attempts to mark this as a criticism are unfounded. One of the core elements of any critical pedagogy is the forming of relationships that foster critical thinking and development. Posing my own rhetorical question, I would respond to Corkery by asking, “How can we expect to form those relationships without some measure of emotional engagement?” And even as I pose the question, I wonder what the alternatives would be. How would we engage students in the process of change without either force or encouragement, the latter of which certainly requires a measure of charm? The lack of ability Corkery mentions, however, is indeed a grave concern. Personal elements of persuasion are often neglected in teacher training, and I believe this is a glaring mistake. Practicing critical pedagogies or any humane teaching ideology requires some level of relationship building with students. And I like to think that only the worst, most disillusioned
teachers don’t invest in student relationships. So, my response to Corkery’s question about whether we must rely on charisma and charm is a resounding, yes. Yes, we must rely on personal abilities to connect because intellectual motivation alone is an insufficient motivation to guide students through their learning. The assumption that it is enough assumes that the core of learning is content delivery not the edification of students as whole persons. Moreover, modeling enthusiasm for writing and the study of writing can be an intoxicating force in the classroom. Students are more likely to be excited and invested if they see that their instructor is sincerely excited about writing (and even better if that sincere enthusiasm can be directed at their work).

We need those powerful motivators because learning is hard. It can include joyful epiphanies but often it is in the least uncomfortable and at its worst painful. Instead of operating under a utilitarian model that seeks to avoid all struggle of any kind, we need to embrace challenge and failure as the normal parts of learning that they are.

Ira Shor argues in his article “Critical Pedagogy is Too Big to Fail” that “unrelenting conflict is the signature of our lifeworld to which critical pedagogy responds” (21). Furthering my argument about the need for conflict, Shor contends that critical pedagogies do not create conflict where it doesn’t already exist. Critical Pedagogies attempt to reveal the conflicts and power struggles that are already there and remain hidden or overlooked. Combined with the natural human tendency to avoid pain and struggle, we need every motivator at our disposal to help engage students and to help them understand that the struggle is worth the effort. Many will be resistant, and though we should treat students as independent agents, we should not at the same time disregard the years of conditioning that contributes to their resistance, apathy, or confusion. Many of them are disenchanted, disillusioned, and generally unmotivated as defense
mechanisms against a system they often feel certain to fail in. And no matter our humility or self-
imagination, we are intrinsically part of that system.

Humility by itself, though, is insufficient to foster a truly liberatory education. Paulo
Freire contends that a particular kind of critical thinking is necessary. He contrasts this critical
approach with what he describes as naïve thinking. The difference between the two is that naïve
thinking seeks to affirm current reality or the “norm” and critical thinking seeks the “continuing
transformation of reality, in behalf of the continuing humanization of men” (92). Freire also
argues that liberatory education requires faith and hope, faith in the ability of students to
overcome their own oppression and to embrace critical thinking over naïve thinking.
Overcoming oppression requires bravery, audacity, a profound ability to resist, and a belief in
one’s ability to grow and learn. While we can craft environments that foster these attributes we
cannot create them within students. They only come from within.

Perhaps the most daunting challenge Freire presents, though, is not a challenge to invest
in humility, engage students in critical thinking, or even to have hope in our students; the highest
challenge is to love our students in all that we do. In Pedagogy of the Oppressed Freire writes
“no matter where the oppressed are found, the act of love is commitment to their cause” (89). It
means love of the world, love of students, love of life, and love of oneself. Sometimes I find
myself angry at my students; sometimes even rightly so. Sometimes they frustrate me. Some of
them I don’t even like and vice versa. But I must always remind myself to act out of love as best
I can. I must not thrust my emotions on them, and yet I must share my feelings with them when
fitting. Love, Freire writes, must be “an act of freedom; it must not serve as a pretext for
manipulation” (90). It must be unafraid and daring, and if I hope to have the students I serve rise
up and take their learning and lives into their own hands, I as an educator must be brave too. For
that we teachers are often given too little credit. It is an act of bravery and love to step into the classroom at all, to have labored for so many years as a student to become a teacher, to suffer the indignities of the various forces of deprofessionalization that currently plague our profession (i.e. the extensive, national use of contingent labor, the framing of writing as a “basic” skill by administrators and even some compositionists, the almost universal lack of financial balance for departments like English that do not generally take in external funding, and so forth), but most of all, it is brave to imagine that we can make a difference in the lives of the students we serve. That difference is made possible through our humility, our faith, our hope, and our critical consideration of our classroom.

Conclusion

When I first began this project I assumed the greatest barriers to my success and growth would come from without: the authoritative university structure, demands of the limiting classroom, the modern obsession with scientistic evaluation, the deprofessionalization of educators, and so forth. But while these obstacles and others still remain I have come to realize that to some extent I have on occasion neglected one of the most invasive and challenging obstructions to liberation, myself.

Membership in academia for me includes a significant investment in academic performance. It’s a show I put on every day, constantly professing and proving my legitimacy to the world that I am indeed what I claim to be. While I can pretend to sit with my students as if I am a member of their cohort, in doing so I inevitably bring my location in the classroom and my identity with me. In many ways this is fruitful because that identity includes a strong ethos which can engender trust, but it also includes distancing and an inherent element of superiority. In her classic article *Pedagogy of the Depressed* Jane Tompkins describes a similar revelation about her
own teaching. She writes, “[I] had been putting on a performance whose true goal was not to help students learn but to perform before them in such a way that they would have a good opinion” (654). Tompkins’ comments made me realize the many ways I assert my intellectually elite identity in the classroom, trying to get students to form “good opinions.” Creating positive relations in the classroom is certainly an essential part of developing a successful critical environment, but I must be careful not to let it impede my efforts. To ensure that doesn’t occur, I need to constantly reflect on my work, taking the classroom with me wherever I go, always seeking to direct my practice back to the student, not all students but each student, both the engaged student I feel I can identify with and perhaps lead on a path of liberation and the bored, disenchanted student who wants nothing more than to just slide through doing the bare minimum to both pass and to avoid notice.

Shaping my classroom around the needs of each student, though, is just the beginning of the perspective shift that teaching people not writing demands. I also recognize that I cannot force liberation or zealously craft an environment that serves only a singular political purpose no matter how much we might believe it would impact students for the better. If students are to experience liberation, they must choose it themselves. That doesn’t mean we can’t challenge students or problematize authority in the classroom; we certainly should, but at the same time we must consider why we are where we are doing so and how we are best serving all our students’ needs as they see them not only as we or other stakeholders do.

And perhaps equally important, we need to take care of ourselves as teachers, not as an act of service but as an act of self-care. Students will know if they’ve become a burden or if I’m wearing thin. They can sometimes take it personally, no matter what I might say to the contrary, so it’s important to maintain our responsibilities, to avoid blaming students, and at the same time
never let on that though we may love my work, it requires an incredible amount of energy. Again I turn to the wisdom of Jane Tompkins who writes that “a kinder, more sensitive attitude toward one's own needs as a human being, in place of a desperate striving to meet professional and institutional standards of arguable merit, can bring greater sensitivity to the needs of students and a more sympathetic understanding of their positions” (660). By treating ourselves better we create a model for behavior that can positively impact the classroom and our relationships with students.

No matter how we refine our practice, it’s the attitude we begin with that defines the work we do. By teaching people not writing, I begin with the student always, asking what each might need as the starting point for every syllabus, unit plan, assignment, or even comment in the classroom. In *What the Best College Teachers Do*, Ken Bain explains the following:

> “the best teaching can be found not in particular practices or rules but in the *attitudes* of the teachers, in their *faith* in their student’s abilities to achieve, in their *willingness* to take their students seriously and to let them assume control of their own education, and in their *commitment* to let all policies and practices flow from central learning objectives and from a mutual respect and agreement between students and teachers” (78-79).

Bain highlights several key values in this passage that mirror the values presented by Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*: attitude, faith, willingness, and commitment. While Bain does include a mention of learning objectives, content is not mentioned. The only references to assessment seem to be about agreement. Instead of enforcement, the most essential value is attitude. Those core values of Freire’s critical pedagogy form the foundation of teaching people,
not writing’s philosophy, and they are the measure by which I consider all my actions in my effort to employ a critical meta-reflective consciousness.

With the structure of the democratic classroom supported by the values of critical pedagogies, it would seem I am prepared to attempt to offer an ideal classroom environment, but there are still significant challenges in implementation. As mentioned in this chapter we are as a field enduring numerous forces of deprofessionalization that often hinder our ability to employ utopic pedagogies as extensively as many of us would prefer to, contributing significantly to the theory practice divide that many of us have encountered in our careers and/or have been reluctantly complicit in. In the following chapter, I will outline in greater detail what I believe those forces are and offer some suggestions for response from our field. While I don’t have an inclusive answer to all these concerns, I will suggest how responsible integration of technology can provide an impetus for change that permits and promotes democratic and critical values systems in the classroom and will then demonstrate in the following and final chapter my attempts to make them a reality in the college writing classroom.
CHAPTER IV. TECHNOLOGY & THE RHETORIC OF DEPROFESSIONALIZATION

Introduction

Writing spaces are changing. As Jay David Bolter explains in *Writing Space: The Computer, Hypertext, and the History of Writing* “the computer is not leading to a new kind of orality, but rather to an increased emphasis on visual communication” (xiii). We see it daily in the variety and ubiquity of media that bombards us and our students. We work within it as we compose digitally and research online. And we feel its impact in the classroom as we continue to mediate the practice of writing alphabetic texts in an increasingly digital world. As explained by Elizabeth Clark:

“the future of writing—based on a global, collaborative text, where all writing has the potential to become public— informs our classrooms and forms a new, ‘digital’ imperative, one that asks how we can reshape our pedagogy with new uses of the technologies that are changing our personal and professional lives.” (28)

Diane Penrod urges us to face these changes not by abandoning our knowledge of the past but by employing a syncretic approach that integrates existing knowledge into digital production (169). And as advised by Bolter, print is not dead; rather it is changing, and as college writing teachers we have both the opportunity and responsibility to engage students in remediating and repurposing it into writing that contains not one mode of expression but many.

From the most basic inclusion of images or creative font sets in an alphabetic text to a fully synchronous web space, any visual, digital, aural, or textual enhancement falls under the category of multimodal composition. To help students adapt to these new and developing modes,
we need to provide access when possible and relevant to “all available means of persuasion, all available dimensions, all available approaches, not simply those limited to the two dimensional space” (Selfe 645). And as authors such as Selfe and Selber have argued throughout their scholarship, we must do so considerately and responsibly.

In one sense, we writing teachers have always been engaged in this multimodal endeavor. Arguably every text is multimodal, even those that fall into traditional alphabetic frameworks. In an interview in *Issues in Writing* Cheryl Ball explains that “a written essay is multimodal in the way it’s framed on the page, in the fonts we use, etc…” (114). The five-paragraph essay is a classic example. As a framework, however, it has become so commonplace, so precise, so overwrought that it no longer lends itself to (or is institutionally restricted from) structural development and rhetorical exploration.

In contrast to familiar writing genres, multimodal composing asks more of both writing teachers and their students in terms of emotional and intellection investment as well as engagement with more advanced modes of production. It demands that genre boundaries be recast and redesigned to fit rhetorical needs. Ever-changing and growing, multimodal composition is a dynamic part of how we communicate in modern public spheres and as such is becoming an increasingly critical part of students work. If we are true to our commitment to the present and future needs of students, as teaching people, not writing suggests, then we must attend to students’ needs to engage effectively with digital technology moving beyond the complexities of pen and paper and even the word processor into hybrid and online spaces that allow composition in multiple modes.
As multimodal composition and changes in technology increasingly move students and teachers alike into digital spaces, how we intake and express our ideas transforms, adding new layers of connectedness. Bolter explains that “Unlike the space of the printed book, the electronic writing space can represent any relationships that can be defined as the interplay of pointers and elements” (32). While texts are certainly interconnected by the “virtual” history of cultural and academic discourse, hypertexts in digital spaces can be virtually connected in more transparent and accessible ways. Thus one of the major advantages of multimodal composing apart from the sheer level of abstraction and opportunity to engage in various modes of writing is its power to increase access and engagement with both extant and developing knowledge.

Like any technology, though, multimodal composing is a tool. It has the potential to elevate our teaching, but it can also be used to perpetuate the attitudes of the status quo, indoctrinating existing roles of power and limitation if we codify and limit the technology and genres students have access to. While ease and convenience might dictate that we generalize multimodal genres, over time doing so would serve us only in replicating the five-paragraph essay in digital form and would deny students access to the meaning making through genre development that multimodal composition offers. In his book New Digital Media and Learning as an Emerging Area and “Worked Examples” as One Way to Move Forward, James Gee argues that one of the essential reasons for avoiding this commodification and codification of digital media is that digital composing tools exist for making meaning themselves, much like writing in general. While in my argument I conflate these two concepts, arguing that composing with digital media is writing, Gee’s argument stands. He writes “digital media and learning cannot and should not … drop the strong tie to learning and become digital media studies” (8). By digital media studies Gee is referring to the study of extant genres as opposed to the exploration
and creation of new ones. Gee has this concern because as David M. Sheridan, Jim Ridolfo, and Anthony J. Michel point out in *The Available Means of Persuasion: Mapping a Theory and Pedagogy of Multimodal Public Rhetoric* from a kairotic standpoint (the exploration, reflection, and ethical consideration of a rhetorical moment) new media assignments are often “broken” in the same way that classic writing assignments have been because those texts are produced in an environment where “the teacher dictates mode, medium, and genre to be produced” (109).

Rhetorical effectiveness gives way to performance for the teacher. A multimodal “assignment that begins ‘make a video’ or ‘make a website’ is just as limiting as an assignment that begins ‘write a paper’ because it does not allow the rhetor to …engage in the complex process of invention that [is] informed by … infrastructural resources, audience, exigency, etc…” (109).

Thus it is essential that multimodal composing remain situated, and if applied responsibly and in conjunction with a critical consciousness and an emphasis on rhetorical awareness, it can provide students with unique opportunities to express themselves in fluid rhetorical spaces that challenge their ability to navigate and mediate their thoughts and ideas through digital media. Consistent with the mission of teaching people, not writing, multimodal composing is an essential part of a liberatory classroom, giving students power over their expression, helping them negotiate technologies of new media, and challenging them to make active, purposeful decisions about where and how and why their modes of expression will be most effective. When they are given the freedom and encouragement to contextualize their work, multimodal composing can help students feel a sense of immediacy, purpose, and powerfulness through their writing.

We stand today at a great crux between the alphabetic text and the digital one, between cultures of what Marc Prensky calls digital natives (those born in the digital age) and digital immigrants (those born before the digital era). As we move across this divide, it is essential that
we stand united against the forces that would box-in, centralize, generalize, and otherwise repurpose multimodal composition into precise, limited forms. My hope is that the rapid and arguably exponential changes we are witnessing in modern technology will help facilitate that continued disruption and change. Henry Jenkins argues that because this technological change is not actually a move from one viewpoint to another but more accurately a convergence, as the title of his book *Convergence: Where Old and New Media Collide* states, and this merging will require a continuous change and adaptation, resisting formulaic design. Jenkins describes it as a shift “in the ways we think about our relations to media …[and] that the skills we acquire through play may have implications for how we learn, work, participate in the political process, and connect with people around the world” (23). Undeniably, this includes how we write, compose, and otherwise engage in new media consumption and production. That very convergence helps us resist slipping back into old familiar habits and old familiar writing assignments.

So while the very nature of convergent digital spaces may help us resist formalist genre appropriation, the situatedness of advanced multimodal writing projects can be a challenge in itself. The more the complex genres and technologies we include in our students’ work, the more complex our jobs become negotiating those spaces, demanding more of our attention both in and outside the classroom and requiring a higher level of technological access for students, teachers, and universities. It’s an effort that is well worth it, but in the current economic climate, carving out that time and space can be a challenge for many writing teachers. And while we often think of our current generation of students as technologically engaged and knowledgeable, there can be surprising divides in access. Students don’t all have smart phones and laptops or even a computer
at home. For some disadvantaged few, even using a word processor may be a challenging area of technological literacy, and access is key.

Our challenges, however, come not only from within the classroom. This historical moment is one of great technological convergence but also one of the greatest assaults against college education in recent history. Writing teachers and our classrooms are undermined; our ability to deliver not only a multimodal but any effective curriculum is stymied. We sometimes fall back to generalizable methods versus individualized ones as a means to survive. We codify dynamic spaces in the hopes of making them more accessible to larger audiences, forfeiting the opportunity we have with students to develop within emerging genres of multimodal composing. This concern is certainly about resources, but it is also about theoretical debates at the university level, debates between scientistic delivery of information and a participatory and student-centered education, which in the modern age must include multimodal composing.

To tackle these challenges in this chapter I consider first the deprofessionalization that threatens our ability to teach effectively and argue that our responsible investment as writing teachers in digital and online spaces can serve as a vehicle for political support within the university, increasing our ethos and presence. Following that discussion I will further situate multimodal composing across the cultural digital divide and within hybrid classes (those that incorporate digital resources into local classrooms) and online writing classrooms (those that operate within a digital space). Lastly, I will discuss how the theory of teaching people, not writing, can engage with multimodal composing to be a transformative liberatory force in the writing classroom, focusing not on the delivery of content but on the growth of people making rhetorical choices about their modes of expression.
The Rhetoric of Deprofessionalization

As members of the academy in our current economic times, we writing teachers are being deprofessionalized. David Sadker and Karen Zittleman explain that “the diminishing opportunity for full-employment is but one of the grim problems part-time faculty face … signal[ing] a deprofessionalizing of university teaching itself” (p. 197). Our classes are overloaded, and our professionals are denied secure positions. Universities routinely replace full-time faculty with part-time adjuncts as a cost saving measure. The practice has become so frequent that now the overwhelming majority of compositions teachers are not part-time faculty or adjuncts, not full-time, tenure track faculty.

Despite the rhetorical demands and complexity of writing at any level, multimodal or otherwise, hiring part-time writing teachers instead of full-time and/or tenure track faculty has become the norm. This lack of resources and our sometimes desperate efforts to deal with them create and perpetuate this climate of deprofessionalization. In her article, “The Continuing Politics of Mistrust: Performance Management and the Erosion of Professional Work,” Tanya Fitzgerald defines this deprofessionalization as a condition wherein teachers are treated “as technicians rather than as professionals … presuppose [ing] that teachers cannot be trusted to establish and adhere to their own codes of professional conduct” (p. 120). Those “codes” Fitzgerald mentions are not merely each teacher’s professional ethic or style; they also represent our ability to employ and develop effective theory and to integrate technology as well as participatory, student focused pedagogy into our classrooms.

As federal and state funding continues to decrease across the nation, making the term “public” university no longer applicable, the shift towards standardization and scientific
evaluation is bleeding ever more into our writing classrooms. Speaking out against this situation decades ago in *A Writer Teaches Writing*, Donald Murray explains that “today the majority of composition courses in the country are taught by teachers who do not write, do not know how effective writing is made, and do not know how to teach writing” (1). In the recent film *Con-Job: Stories of Adjunct and Contingent Labor* by Megan Fulwiler and Jennifer Marlow, William Thelin makes the same argument about our situation today. Thelin argues that we have more and more underprepared teachers entering the writing classroom, people who have little to no support and limited oversight. He adds that no administrator would challenge an adjunct who teaches grammar outside of written contexts as formulaic instead of as meaning-making, yet we know that practice is ineffective (Fulwiler). As the interviews in the film *Con-Job* contend, scholarship and active teaching have become in many cases actively different activities taking place in separate spheres defined not by the work that’s being done by but who is doing it and in what capacity. This claim is made not because teachers don’t care or are lazy. Actually, it’s the reverse problem; they are in many cases so dedicated to their work that they want to do it despite the difficulties. When adjunct faculty who have been teaching full loads are denied access because universities are trying to avoid paying for healthcare for employees who work full-time hours contingent writing faculty are more and more working at multiple institutions, creating greater challenges for this disenfranchised work force. As the interviewees explain in this film, many writing teachers have neither the time nor the energy to give the attention needed to all their students, nor do they have the opportunity to engage in effective scholarship to support their work. It is a bleak picture, and while I do not have an answer to this crisis on the whole, my hope is that by increasing our ethos and professional standing in the university we may make ourselves less dispensable and thereby resist this brutal trend.
Certainly we are not alone in this devaluing of educators, but arguably composition has been hit harder than many other disciplines in recent years as is most clearly demonstrated by our average decrease in pay and increase in part-time workers. Providing a piece of the answer to this concern in his article “The Deprofessionalization of the Writing Instructor,” David Healy argues that we writing teachers have created this problem ourselves precisely because we advocate for liberatory and student-focused teaching methods. Challenging the assumption that the deprofessionalization we’re experiencing in our field is generated primarily from without, Healy contends we are in a sense cutting our own throats the more we invest in critical consciousness and dynamic teaching methods instead of establishing our field as a bastion of exclusive knowledge. We routinely undermine our power and authority in the university, and this he argues is the greatest contributor to our mistreatment. Healy writes, “writing teachers who believe that their role as authority and expert inhibits their students’ empowerment as writers, and who deliberately shun that role, are in the process of significantly affecting the way they are perceived professionally” (46). Healy continues, arguing that our “participatory, collaborative, liberatory, or student-centered pedagogies are evidence of deprofessionalization because they weaken a teacher’s claim to an exclusive body of knowledge, lessen their authority over clients, diffuse professional power, and narrow the margin of indetermination teachers enjoy” (46). In short, we make ourselves look weak. Healy concedes that these theoretical frameworks may indeed produce more effective more humanizing teaching, but he cautions this does not change the reality that in the academy and in relation to other “hard” disciplines these attitudes makes us appear inconsequential. As a result when we battle for resources, we lose. The more we teach to remove ourselves from the equation, to hand education and power over to our students, the more we are not only teaching ourselves out of our jobs with students—a necessary step to student
independence—we are literally teaching ourselves out of our university roles because we are eroding our position of authority in the university by not laying claim to an exclusive subset of knowledge.

What’s most painful about Healy’s argument is that he’s right. Criticisms like Healy’s remain largely unspoken, but when departments are threatened with cuts these arguments surface. Writing programs are criticized as basic. “Anyone can teach writing,” our opponents, sometimes once friends and colleagues, decry. It’s argued that writing can be taught by contingent labor unlike psychology or mathematics or biology, all of which are within departments that claims a hold on specific knowledge. I’ve heard it from the mouths of professionals in “softer” disciplines that I respect, and I have been surprised by their attacks. But when faculty are faced with the prospect of losing their jobs or even their departments, which I encountered first hand at Mansfield University while earning my Master’s degree, how can we not expect in-fighting? Only a week ago I received an e-mail from a colleague who has just started his career in the field. He too has been encountering these arguments against our credibility as authorities within the university. When we openly profess our investment in student-focused practices that put power in the hands of students, we take that power out of own hands, lessening our bargaining power within the resource starved and now internally competitive university.

Having agreed with Healy’s assessment, though, I want to be clear that I have no intention of stopping my advocacy for what Healy describes as “participatory, collaborative, liberatory, or student-centered pedagogies” (46). Teaching people not writing falls into all those categories, and arguably responsible integration of multimodal composition does as well because of the critical consciousness required and because of the participatory and collaborative nature of
digital spaces. Moreover, I refuse to establish myself as an authority in the classroom to score political points. I care about my students and my own sense of professional ethics too much to do so. I will not disregard best practices because of political maneuvering of what is hopefully a passing era of crisis. In the long term, I believe education will recover and support from the state will return. The current deprofessionalization might limit what we are able to do, but we should not let it undercut the values we espouse and attempt to realize in the classroom. For the long-term sake of our body of knowledge, the historical value of our scholarship, and the current needs of our students, we should not play the competitive, authority-based game Healy claims we are losing, even at the cost of our diminishing resources. There must be another way.

That position, though, does not mean that I don’t hear Healy’s concern, nor do I think it should be ignored. We can’t in good conscience change our philosophy for economic reasons; it would be ethically and professionally irresponsible to do so, but we can find creative ways to maintain our position of student advocacy and at the same time appear strong within the university. I believe one way we can accomplish that goal is through the integration of multimodal writing.

Multimodal composing adds new levels of complexity to our already difficult teaching situations. However, an investment in modern composing methods can not only help students in their future work, it can also help solidify our position as professionals in the university. As an area that requires extensive rhetorical training as well as technical skill, teaching writing with and while integrating technology promotes our value as educators.

Writing as a skill is already regarded widely as an essential skill, but it is not often considered a high level skill. While this is patently false, it is nonetheless a pervasive
understanding (even sometimes within English departments). Multimodal composing can help elevate our standing by demonstrating that we teach not only “basic writing” but also multimodal writing, requiring specialty skills. Additionally while writing and rhetoric can certainly be considered exclusive fields of knowledge, making that argument outside English is challenging. Rhetoric as a field of study, for instance, is often difficult to explain and is poorly understood outside the field. As a result of its complexity, situatedness, and purposeful resistance to generalization and codification, it makes claims of exclusive knowledge challenging or impossible. As writing teachers, it is argued that we appear to be borrowing from other fields instead of crafting within our own, supporting the claims that we have no “real” discipline of knowledge. Multimodal composing, however, makes genre analyses and creation a part of meaning making, expanding alphabetic texts in ways that differentiate those texts from being “simple” or basic. Abandoning cookie cutter writing assignments and replacing them with dynamic relevant writing tasks can help us resist these unfounded criticisms. Thus, because all writing is multimodal, our ability as writing teachers to disrupt static genres is an important step in establishing a stronger relevance for our curriculum to students and the university.

While this shift to multimodal composing might be theoretically sound, it still presents many challenges. While all writing teachers have encountered writing, not all will be proficient composing in various modes. Still, the wide variety of modes available provides writing teachers with opportunities to use digital technologies to develop specialties that make our work less basic and less dispensable, especially if it is relevant to future student work. Elizabeth Clark argues in her article “The Digital Imperative: Making the Case for a 21st-Century Pedagogy” that “the composition classroom should immerse students in analyzing digital media, in exploring the world beyond the classroom, in crafting digital personae, and in creating new and emerging
definitions of civic literacy” (29). As part of a writing curriculum, that civic involvement—characterized by Clark as an engagement in digital publications of various kinds both social and professional—can, for example, increase our intra-university ethos as students create and publish beyond the classroom.

Teaching multimodal composition also requires teachers have a knowledge of visual rhetoric and the technical knowledge about the technology used in their students’ projects. While making more demands on our time, as a result of that knowledge, in the eyes of the university we can become not just writing teachers but teachers of visual design, video production, digital presentations, and integrated web design. As we increase the expertise and skill variation required, we can distance ourselves from the notion of our work as basic and affirm ourselves as authorities over a select set of multimodal knowledge.

To have the time and energy to develop multimodal writing classrooms that first serve the growing technological composing needs of our students and second might elevate our distinction in the university, we need the very resources our many contingent faculty are denied. It is indeed a paradox, but that challenge doesn’t diminish the importance or value of our efforts, it merely slows them down. My hope is that seeing multimodal composing as a “way out” and as a way to garner respect and value in the university can be a motivating factor for writing teachers to engage in the variety of specialty skills that are available. Not only is multimodal composing a potential bargaining chip for us in the university, it is also essential for student learning and necessary for them to develop skills to engage with the ever-changing technology they will encounter in their post-college work lives.
Digital Natives Teaching Digital Immigrants

Using multimodal writing as way to elevate our place in the university is a worthwhile reason to invest in new technologies and modes of composing, but it isn’t a strong enough reason on its own. Teaching people, not writing focuses on people first and as such when considering the value of multimodal composing, it’s necessary to make student needs central. To understand those needs in the modern age, we need to see their world through their eyes because, excluding a select few non-traditional students, our students have grown up in a digital age. They require a modernized classification and understanding of the way they interact with technology because in most cases they were born into a different culture that is strange to anyone who didn’t share that experience.

Marc Prensky’s seminal article “Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants” provides a lens that can help us understand this generational gap. As his title implies, he puts students and teachers into two categories, digital natives for those who grew up with digital technology as a regular part of their lives and digital immigrants for those who didn’t. Having been born in 1978, I am right on the line between them. When I was born the personal computer was a new idea. As a teenager the internet was new as well and yet today the technology is ubiquitous. While I would identify as a digital native that title might be a misnomer, especially since I have studied only under digital immigrants, but it couldn’t have been otherwise. So my sense of technology and how it impacts me is still different than the current generation and even further advanced than as Prensky described more than a decade ago.
This split, though, is not just about familiarity or an interest in technology, it’s cultural and pervasive. Prensky contends that students have changed the way they think and interact with the world. The way they consume media, conceive identities, engage in conversations, process information, and even the structure of their brains has shifted. Prensky writes:

“They are used to the instantaneity of hypertext, downloaded music, phones in their pockets, a library on their laptops, beamed messages and instant messaging. They’ve been networked most or all of their lives. They have little patience for lectures, step-by-step logic, and “tell-test” instruction.” (3)

Today we might add Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, and other technologies that are continuing to emerge and grow daily. Arguably, as a shift in thinking and processing writing, this move is as dramatic as the shift from orality to literature. Carl Whithaus explains that students are “already thinking in graphically intense ways” (130), and as a result, “the written word can no longer be the only, or even primary, vehicle through which students learn to compose” (130). In Prensky’s more recent book, *Teaching Digital Natives: Partnering for Real Learning*, he expands on this description of student perspective, contending that students don’t have shorter attentions spans as we’ve commonly imagined. Rather, he argues, they have and make increasingly important demands. Prensky writes, “students see a new world coming –their world –a world in which what they think should be important actually is … and they already know more about some aspects of it than we do” (3). These digital natives speak another language, and to be effective writing teachers, we need to teach them to write using that new language.

James Gee further defines this split described by Prensky as a division based not on the demographics of people working with technology alone but on the kinds of tasks and products
they complete and produce. Gee explains that those who have adapted, both in and outside academia possess a “premium digital literacy.” He writes that “premium digital literacy is the ability to use specialist/technical language connected to digital tools. Premium traditional literacy is being able to use academic language connected to institutional and public-sphere knowledge-building and argumentation” (419). Ideally, this is the level scholars operate at, especially those invested in multimodal composing. However, Gee continues arguing that:

“At the premium level, the digital brain and digital natives are not a ‘new thing,’ but an even higher octane version of an old thing, the literate brain. But now that brain has, for some young people, though not all, left the gardens of academe and the professions and is flourishing … producing all sorts of media, citizen science, and knowledge in competition with experts via collaborative problem-solving communities on the internet” (419).

Thus while the terms “digital native” and “digital immigrant” are useful, they don’t adequately account for the modern convergence of thinking, processing, and media production as argued by scholars such as James Gee, Henry Jenkins, Diane Penrod, and Cynthia Selfe. The challenge becomes not to identify and integrate digital natives or immigrants into one culture or another. The challenge is to help students develop the convergent and “premium” digital literacies necessary to utilize the skills of what Gee calls the literate brain to produce effective multimodal products.

Immigrants and natives alike, we both need to learn to speak in a new hybrid language that translates over the critical consciousness necessary for texts to be successful into the digitally situated environments our students work and operate in. What we value about logic, voice, comprehension, processing, process, and so forth (all part of Gee’s “literate brain”),
remains valid and valuable. Students can teach us about how they process and perceive the world while we can help them develop rhetorically effective multimodal products relevant to their work. In chapter 5, I explore some specific practices that can aid in this process and explain my experiences having students, as digital natives, help teach me to understand their language and vice versa.

One of the advantages for compositionists in attempting to engage in this learning process is that integrating multimodal texts, while now more complicated, is not something brand new to the field. In Jason Palmeri’s book, *Remixing Composition: A History of Multimodal Writing Pedagogy*, he explains that “compositionists have a substantial history developing and enacting multisensory approaches for enhancing students’ development of alphabetic writing skills” (11). Palmeri explains that visual rhetoric has not only been incorporated into our work but scholars have explained how the understanding of visual media, for instance, can help not only writing products but also the writing process. The major change now is not that we’re integrating visual, auditory, and/or digital elements into the classroom. The change is a shift in the products that are produced, how they are produce and how this can impact student and teacher experience as a result.

Cynthia Selfe, an advocate for multimodal composing, argues that while the emphasis on multimodal practices and integration Palmeri cites is an important part of our scholarly history, the products students created remained text based. In her article, “The Movement of Air, the Breath of Meaning: Aurality and Multimodal Composing,” she uses aurality as an example. Selfe writes, “although writing assignments in the twentieth century sometimes focused on topics that touched on aurality and oral performance –popular music, for example–students were expected to write their analyses of songs, to focus on written lyrics, or to use music as a prompt for written
composition” (627). While Selfe supports efforts to incorporate aurality into writing curricula, in this case she is using it as one example of the many multimodal possibilities that can be integrated into the writing classroom. Utilizing variable modes as part of the writing process is a good start and certainly part of the tradition of composition scholarship as Palmeri argues, but Selfe contends that the products that are assessed and given value need to be multimodal as well. Selfe writes that students “need opportunities to realize that different composition modalities carry with them different possibilities for representing multiple shifting patterns of identity, additional potential expression and resistance, [and] expanded ways of engaging with a changing world” (645) of which, she argues, aurality and alphabetic writing, for instance, are just one tool of many.

When I think of a fitting analogy to explain this shift from alphabetic composing to multimodal in technical terms, I often conceive of it as the difference between using PowerPoint and Prezi and how I have come to use them. I use PowerPoint often for creating a controlled outline. It is step-by-step and fixed (though there are advanced tools available) and is in general boxed in by borders, limited in scope, and in that sense focused. But for me, Prezi is a canvas. I can drop ideas down on the page and then organize them together. I can put ideas inside of other ideas. I can use larger images and focus on particular parts. And perhaps most significantly for this analogy, Prezi moves. It does not transition or flip to the next slide. It glides over a plane of information taking viewers from one set of information to another, diving into some ideas and sliding by others. The first Prezi I made had much more information included in it than I focused on, making the background one of continuing conversation. It is a mode that is meant to be explored, though not necessarily followed, even though that functionality is available. Prezi seems designed with digital natives in mind. It is fully online, can be shared with ease, can be co-
created, and its simple controls mask the complex functionality it provides. Thus while PowerPoint can be dynamic as well, it’s harder to make it because we’ve grown accustomed to a controlled use of that technology, and while Prezi represents as fluid, it too can be templated.

When I think of teaching with technology I often return to this analogy because I want my teaching and our digital workspaces to feel more like Prezi and less like PowerPoint both from a technological and a modal perspective. As Geoffrey Sirc explains in his article “Box-Logic,” “I want students–designers, now, not essayists–free from such associational drifts; entering things naively, without countless rehearsals; trying to capture a mood or vision” (121). I want them to paint with their words more and limit them less. That’s romantic and idealistic, to be sure, but it integrates an element of play that is sorely missing from many classrooms. Doing so requires the same shift made decades ago in composition from product to process. It’s a shift we need to return to again and again. Bump Halbritter argues in *Mics, Cameras, Symbolic Action: Audio-Visual Rhetoric for Writing Teachers* that in the modern era we should “recognize the impetus being generated to think of writing as more than exclusively linguistic–as drawing from the expanded resources of symbolic action” (18). Most simply, Halbritter argues we must continue to think less about what writing *is* and think more about what writers *do* (18). Moreover as Dong-Shin Shin and Tony Cimasko argue, “providing the available modes as design elements allow individuals to create a variety of meaning-making forms in relation to the cultural and individual identities to which these forms are affiliated” (377). Multimodal composing not only expands play and variety of expression, it permits a greater range of agency and self-realization through one’s work.

Thus while multimodal composing in digital spaces can increase our ethos in the university, it also addresses a core need of students; it speaks to them in their own language. And
if we are dedicated to the mission of teaching our students as people, we cannot ignore their need to express themselves in modes that are familiar and engaging. Doing so allows us an opportunity to help students grow by asking them how their chosen mode best delivers their message. It puts the power back in the hands of students and better prepares them to face future rhetorical challenges.

Integrating Technology

Integrating multimodal composition into the writing classroom begins with reshaping the classroom space. Most institutions have been steadily making this transition to online spaces, sadly often for economic rather than educational reasons. But along with that shift comes the digital classroom and/or hybrid classes. Course shells are now the norm. When students ask me in my classes whether I want paper submissions or digital ones, I happily reply, “I don’t do paper.” From syllabi to instructional videos and discussion boards to e-portfolios, we’re moving online not just because it’s the latest fad but because it increases efficiency, provides global access to resources, and engages students in their “plugged-in” lives. But can we really make this move? Are we losing something if we do? If we’re careful and responsible in our practices, we won’t. Moreover, I believe it’s our responsibility to do so. As I mentioned in chapter 1, Cynthia Selfe explains that “if our profession continues to focus solely on teaching alphabetic composition–either online or print–we run the risk of making composition studies increasingly irrelevant to students engaging in contemporary practices of communication ” (72) and certainly less relevant to the university (i.e. more basic). If however, she argues, we teach composition as multimodal, “we may also extend the usefulness of composition studies in a changing world” (72). I would further Selfe’s position and contend that we must extend that usefulness.
An advocate for multimodal composing in digital writing classroom spaces, Kristine Blair contends in her article “Writing as Process and Online Education: Matching Pedagogy with Delivery” that we have a responsibility to move our writing classrooms into hybrid and/or fully online environments. As she makes this move, she recognizes at the same time that there is concern among digital immigrants about the success of shifting to hybrid and/or fully online spaces. Blair writes “there is suspicion among teachers that relying on a completely virtual curriculum would detract from rhetorical, audience-based frameworks that are at the core of most writing curricula” (40). This is a valid concern, but it’s also an age-old one. This kind of apprehension accompanies any “new” technology. As Plato was suspicious of writing and its inability to defend itself, so many digital immigrants are naturally cautious of operating in digital spaces for fear they’d lose the abilities and advantages of the local classroom. While this fear is certainly rooted in this classic suspicion, there is also plenty of evidence to prove it to be justified. Attempts at teaching developmental composition in online-only environments, for instance, have yielded much higher attrition rates than face to face classrooms. And while many institutions are eager to jump on the online band wagon, not as many are willing to take the necessary steps to train teachers or demonstrate an understanding of the increased demands teaching online puts on educators. Moreover, few graduate programs offer dedicated courses in multimodal composing and teaching in online environment. Blair explains that to meet this need, she created a course dedicated to familiarizing graduate students with a variety of technologies available and engaged them to craft their own multimodal projects as well as establish a stronger digital presence.

This course is just one piece of a larger multi-degree curriculum we need to incorporate into our writing pedagogy programs from the bottom up. In my case, I am fortunate that I took
film theory and aesthetic design in college and that my work outside of academia has made me familiar with CMS tools and Adobe publishing software. As a teacher of multimodal composing, that familiarity and a general interest in digital technology as well as my consistent history of access have served me well. Many of my colleagues, however, have not been as fortunate and struggle with technology. Transitioning from education taught by digital immigrants to digital natives will take the next several decades. This will inevitably become easier, but for the time being it requires an increased investment.

On the other hand, I find that I don’t need to be an expert with each piece of software or digital tech I use in the classroom. What I need to know most is what different technologies are used for, how they benefit student work, and most specifically what the value of their extant and potential rhetorical products can be. As an example, one of my students in ENG 2070: Intermediate Writing at Bowling Green chose to develop a web blog about nail polish, using web technology I wasn’t familiar with. I didn’t know anything about nail polish either, but I learned. Together we looked at other nail polish websites, determining how their authors developed an avid reader base. We discussed the potential for her project as a resume item but also as a viable start to a long-term business venture. And we explored a couple technological options for hosting her website. The web blog website builder she chose was new to me, so when stuck, we watched tutorials together to figure out how to proceed. She also used technical services at the university to help guide her. Thankfully, as her writing instructor, I knew the basics. I have a sense of the web aesthetic, how to edit, crop, and frame images, how to grab reader attention immediately, and in general how to balance content and design. While some of these abilities require a modicum of technical skill, the primary challenges of designing complex projects like the one described in my example were rhetorical, and rhetoric is already a core part of our educational
program for writing teachers. So, while there certainly is a basic level of entry required, expertise in Photoshop or Flash is not, for example, required of us. Such skills can be developed minimally and then with greater expertise over time. What we need to teach most is not how to use technology itself, barring the most basic skills, but how to engage in effective persuasion. And technology is only a tool. Consistent with teaching people, not writing, our job is not to teach web design so much as it is to help people use the tools they have available from pencils and paper, to word processors, or even Dreamweaver, to develop texts that assist them in their learning and life goals.

When we craft assignments and classroom environments that help students engage with technology in rhetorically effective ways, that consider kairotic moments and their ethical and cultural implications, student can ask not only “what I can do but also who I am” (Sheridan et al. 119) because developing answers to the second question can dictate the first. Self-discovery and learning, not performance or production, become the focus. That shift changes student experience into a personal journey of discovery and also provides opportunities for co-learning between teacher and student.

Though co-learning is a valuable opportunity for learning new technologies and engaging with them as writing tools in reflective considerate ways, technological exploration and co-creation does not serve teachers well in crafting their classroom environment itself be it hybrid or fully online before the class begins. We need to be more familiar with our course shells and online course design when working in increasingly digital spaces. It is not a healthy co-learning space at the outset because we need to use that space to establish the shape and ethos of our hybrid or online classroom.
Moreover, there is concern that the move to hybrid and fully digital spaces will limit our effectiveness overall. In these trying economic times no matter our push back, for instance, writing class sizes are steadily increasing. This is especially taxing for writing teachers with hybrid or online courses. In my own local hybrid classrooms, for instance, I lecture very little if at all. My work takes place in individual conferences and in feedback to students. It’s subjective and obviously student-focused. I have access to few simplistic binaries for summative assessment and none for helping students develop their writing along the way. And I prefer engaging students to self-assess and to negotiate grades rather than assigning them. Each of these practices compounds the challenge and time commitment as much as they increase my effectiveness and provide an improved learning environment for students. The expectation that I and others like me can handle just a few more students is unreasonable. And it’s worse for those who teach in fully online environments. Adding more students means something has to be cut, and in a student-focused writing classroom that means people. People get cut. Students who need help will be left behind, not because we ignore them but because we simply cannot attend to as many. Unsurprisingly, those “cuts” impact the bottom percentage of students the most. Meaning that while class sizes increase and state instruction funding becomes increasingly based on completion rates, we actually lose more students to attrition, negatively impacting university funding. Thus, increasing student numbers in student-focused and technologically integrated writing courses not only negatively impacts students and teachers alike it does not save money in the long-run.

This vicious cycle is particularly ugly in online only environments, and while these are commonly known concerns, there is a pervasive attitude that little can be done about it. For instance, I’ve discussed issues of deprofessionalization of educators (including technology
support and class sizes) with administration at all levels at the various instructions I’ve studied at, and I have not found one that was unsympathetic (even as they advise cuts). Still, we must continue these conversations and continue to educate university administrators about our classroom challenges because that sympathy doesn’t translate often enough into action. Diane Penrod agrees arguing that “although it appears that administrators and legislators agree that there needs to be more technology and more accountability in teaching writing [in digital spaces], there certainly is little agreement about implementation, costs to maintain, and success in measuring what students have learned” (160). Engaging in those continuing conversations remains essential, but it won’t eliminate the problem because the economic issues of the university stretch far beyond the boundaries of our campuses.

Like our administrators, we teachers are also limited in our reach. Deprofessionalization is not a crime of administrators where they are the victimizers and we are the victimized. That’s too simplistic; it’s a chain of multiple victims in a painfully trying time. And most significantly, it’s not an issue that can be impacted by those invested in the university as most administrators are. In short, our fight is not with them alone. Our experience of deprofessionalization is a symptom of a lack of societal and therefore monetary support that demonstrates a lack of understanding about what goes on and needs to go on inside the university. This ignorance and lack of support ultimately undermines our ability to develop successful digital resources and classroom spaces, but it does not undermine the possibility of those core practices meeting the needs of students. Given the tools and appropriate class sizes, we can teach multimodal composition, and we can teach it online.

Teaching online includes all the same elements we might include in a hybrid course, but also involves several other important considerations. First, we need to plan ahead more
diligently. In a face-to-face environment I alter the syllabus on the fly, change assignments and assignment dates (forward, never backwards without student approval); I develop group consensus on project demands, and I often poll students for reactions, understanding, and approval of changes. In an online environment this is less immediately possible. It can all still be done, but even if you have the luxury of a scheduled online meeting time, making changes is more complex because generating consensus is harder. While communication can be synchronous it is not always rooted in a defined time and certainly not a defined location. When teaching online I can’t see students to take stock of their reactions. Thus I take a more rigid approach to course planning, taking into account that students are even less engaged online. One might conclude that from my previous arguments about advocating for online teaching that because it’s in the language of digital natives that students would be more eager to engage, but that has not been my experience. And as I mentioned previously, in first-year writing classes, for instance, fully online courses tend to result in student losses regardless of presentation. Even as digital natives, students need to be acculturated into the university environment, into their roles as college students, and need to develop the maturity to engage with such an independent class space. Laura Bush believes students often see online courses as a convenience. She writes that “students often hope … that taking a course online might somehow be easier” (304). As a result, when teaching online, I’ve found it necessary to adjust my expectations of student investment and production. While teaching online is a viable option, we need to continue to modify not only our course structure but our expectations to match how students operate in those spaces. That doesn’t mean we lower standards. In an online environment for me it means that I prepare more small assignments and fewer large ones. I simulate in-class discussion through blogs and discussion boards; I track assignments more diligently than in a face-to-face environment, and
when possible I setup Skype appointments to check for the understanding I don’t have access to in the online environment. It also shapes what kind of digital products students will create because sometimes local resources are not available. While online tutorials are helpful, sometimes one-on-one instructions is necessary for help with classic texts and multimodal projects alike, and while synchronous and video sessions can assist, there are times when a physical touch can make a huge difference. But again, technology continues to move forward with the possibility of remote desktop access, for example, and I anticipate more technological answers to these concerns as time goes on.

As a teacher, teaching primarily online forces me to reexamine how I operate as a pedagogue and how I can take across the personal connections I work so hard to establish in the local classroom into the digital world. And while the initial move to a fully online classroom can be jarring, that reexamining of practice can be a worthwhile and productive reflection that yields innovation and creative responses. I prefer to see teaching online as an opportunity rather than a burden and teaching in hybrid environments as sheer advantage. Teaching online is a way to reach students we wouldn’t otherwise have access to and challenges us to mediate our own teaching in digital spaces, expanding our digital native literacy, and increasing our drive to develop relationships which become even more important across the digital distance. And while online teaching continues to complicate our relationships with students we can still deliver quality instruction and even teach multimodal composition, which can in some ways be an integral part of one’s online instruction if composing digitally is part of one’s course requirements. Lastly, if not in online environments, we should at least make the move to hybrid environments creating a digital space in and outside the classroom that can serve as a jumping off point for projects and a staging area for conversation and even publication.
Multimodal Composing as Liberatory & Transformative

With a digital space established either in an online class or a hybrid one, multimodal composing can be integrated into writing classrooms, but like any responsible practice it must be tailored to meet the skill levels and needs of students. Following the tenets of teaching people, not writing, I always consider who my students are first. In a first year composition course, for instance, I don’t task students with the creation of their own fully-functioning independent websites, but I certainly would foreground their future work by helping them develop an e-portfolio that they can have access to throughout their careers, and I find it’s an essential place to locate the first lessons on visual rhetoric and analysis of visual texts. In all my classes I like to begin with content that connects to student experience. While that usually manifests as some form of literacy narrative in a classic alphabetic form, I like to move quickly to work that engages students in their digital native tongue. For example, in early courses I have found that dissecting advertisements, first static images and then video and website critiques, is a great introduction to multimodal composition as literary. Moreover, working with advertisements, video, and websites provides numerous opportunities for cross-disciplinary collaboration with media and communication, technology, and business departments and also helps students identify corporatized media as a site for persuasion that can be interrogated instead of consumed.

Thus multimodal composing becomes a valuable resource not only for the writing classroom but also for the university, and as our writing courses are so prolific, we writing teachers have a unique opportunity to contribute to conversations about how to develop university wide initiatives that develop multimodal composing abilities. WAC (writing across the curriculum) could change to ECAC (Electronic Communication Across the Curriculum) as suggested by Donna Reiss, Dickie Selfe, and Art Young in the book by the same name. They
write that electronic media can “extend our ability to expose students to a variety of purposes and
audiences as well as spread students’ involvement in complex communication projects across the
curriculum and across their tenure at our institutions” (xviii), and we writing teachers can herald
that change.

Moving on to courses where multimodal composing is mostly exploratory and analytical,
as students advance in college, more significant changes in multimodal curricula are possible.
Perhaps as technology and technology training advances at the high school level, first-year
composition courses may take on more multimodal composing projects, but at the moment that’s
not a viable focus at most institutions, especially at those that depend on those courses to prepare
students for writing university essays. In later classes, though, technology can be more fully
integrated, allowing students a breadth of options to explore.

In my own local upper-division multimodal writing courses, I’ve had students design
websites, establish and maintain blogs both for business and entertainment, develop promotional
materials for future business ventures including handbooks, advertisements, and flyers. Students
have created videos both instructional and promotional, and throughout all these project students
made the rhetorical situatedness of their work central to the mode of expression they chose. In
every case they’ve been tasked not only with establishing a sense of the genre they are creating
within but also with establishing criteria by which it will be evaluated. The success of these
practices has involved the access to proper tools needed for our digital space and has also
necessitated working with professionals in the field outside of school (or inside in the case of
some aspiring college teachers) who produce and utilize the modes students have chosen.
Students conducted interviews and then collected artifacts and resources from professionals that
can serve as models for their production, mirroring the analyze–emulate–create schema a
professional writer would use to write in a new genre. These practices empower students to dissect and craft the genres in which they are composing and is essential learning because as we know in writing, form cannot be separated from content. By challenging the genres students compose in, they can integrate form and content in rhetorically meaningful ways. This breaks up the monotony and helps avoid getting stuck in a genre rut. And while using the five paragraph essay as a sort of writing training wheels, for instance, can be useful early on, it does not serve writers well in their future work as they are tasked with developing texts in complex rhetorical contexts. Often in university education, we extend the templates too far, boxing in genres and denying students the opportunity to wrestle with the modes and structure of their expression. We must take off the training wheels and allow students the opportunity to ride. William Thelin argues that in doing so we will encounter classroom blunders, but consistent with critical pedagogies, these bumps along the wrong are normal and can create potentially fruitful learning opportunities.

Still, like any teaching approach, multimodal composing can be taught in a boxed-in way. Stuart Selber argues that “if students are to become agents of positive change, they will need an education that is comprehensive and truly relevant to a digital age in which much of the instructional agenda seems to be little more than indoctrination into the value systems of the dominant computer culture” (234). Cynthia Selfe and Gail Hawisher agree, arguing that “unless we remain aware of our electronic writing classes as sites of paradox and promise, transformed by a new writing technology …we may unwittingly use computers to maintain rigid authority structures that neither contribute to good teaching nor to good learning” (44). Multimodal composing assignments that specify genre and delivery may benefit students for early training just like we would assign for alphabetic writing but at the higher levels students need to have an
opportunity to challenge genres, to reshape them, to help students take their writing into their own hands.

As our students produce multimodal work, so should we scholars. There are more and more opportunities available to publish peer reviewed work. Major journals like *Kairos* or *Computers and Composition Online* are leading the charge to develop spaces for digital scholarship, helping mediate print-based work in digital spaces. As a relatively new way of writing and reading scholarship, we have a unique opportunity to not only explore the possibilities of public digital rhetorics but to engage our students in a shared exploration and at higher levels even shared publication.

That shared work will currently only be possible between digital native and digital immigrant, but it is becoming less so as this split develops into a moment of techno-social convergence. And while academia is still determinedly rooted in the alphabetic text for credentialing and ethos development, our students entering fields outside academia will find digital rhetoric being more readily and more hurriedly introduced and integrated into their work. Change in the university is slow to catch up to the changes in the world. Moreover, just as we have opportunities to reexamine our own scholarship, breaking classic genres and challenging how our work is perceived, evaluated, and valued, we can pass on those liberatory possibilities to our students through their multimodal work. What’s most compelling about it is how ready and eager students are to engage. Technology, to many students, means fun. In digital spaces they can play, create, and connect. That play, however, hides behind it the requirement and development of complex rhetorical awareness, and when put in the hands of students, it can be transformative.
But it can only be transformative if it is “given” to students. They need opportunities to not only write within existing genres, they need to dissect them and reform them with their own vision. As with critical pedagogies, we must connect the mode of expression and student choice to the needs of the audiences they seek to address. We must first give the reins of their work to students and then assist with their technical and composing needs. Instead of submitting a topic only for a major research paper, students need to also offer a plan for the mode they wish to pursue, explaining how they will engage with the chosen technology and how it suits the needs of their work. Additionally I find it helpful to engage students in continuous reflective conversation about the ways in which they mediate their work, helping them challenge and engage with their chosen modes.

Genre breaking and reforming is it itself a liberatory process. It grants students ownership over not only the content of their work but also the form, removing the shackles that many of our digital native students feel are put on them throughout their educational careers. When they enter the multimodal writing classroom, they don’t need to power down their devices. Instead we can ask them to engage with those devices in responsible, effective ways. We can help them use their tools and expand their understanding of how and why they use them. In their article “Gaming/Writing and Evolving Forms of Rhetorical Awareness: Potentials of Interactive Digital Media for Democratic Classrooms” Adrienne Lamberti and Anne Richards argue similarly. They write the following:

“We suggest that teachers of writing seize the increasing presence, rhetorical range, and influence of the digital as a kairotic opening, not to harness and norm the diverse rhetorics of digital communication into hierarchically based formulae
for the digital age, but to nudge our praxis in the direction of classroom decenteredness and student authority” (Lamberti).

Thus by engaging students in this shift to structuring form instead of acquiring it from a handbook, “students gain confidence in their own ability to create meaning in semiotic domains, thus exercising their social agency in increasingly effective ways” (Cooper 186). In short, multimodal composing provides us opportunities to give students power over their writing expression.

And this is the true power of multimodal composing. More than just a creative outlet and demanding requirement for their future work, it allows students to question what has often been accepted as static, when it is not. The increasingly rapid changes in technology and language demonstrate perhaps better than ever in history the ephemeral and fabricated nature of culture, language, art, and writing. By engaging students to consider the rhetorical effectiveness of their modes and the genres and sub-genres they contain, we put them “in a better position to continue asking how tastes develop and how we learn to take certain visual structures and practices for granted, unquestioningly” (Wysocki 200). We ask them to challenge the status quo and through multimodal composing to reshape it.

Conclusion

As an advocate for civic and critical pedagogies and multimodal composition, it pains me to admit we live in a time when our liberatory, participatory, and student-focused classrooms may undermine our ability to present as authoritative within the university. But I take David Healy’s criticism not as an undermining of our field but as a warning of an ally who has faced these challenges in his professional career as a writing program administrator. We should heed
his warning, but we should not bend to its implications because our commitment to students hasn’t changed. Teaching people, not writing specifically advocates for a liberatory, participatory classroom because that’s healthy, productive, and effective for long-term student learning. Creating the physical, environmental parameters of our universities and therefore classroom spaces is not primarily the task of teachers themselves; it is the responsibility of the state and of our citizenry. I am shocked and saddened when I talk to people outside academia about the national crisis of deprofessionalization within the university and I am responded to with complete ignorance. While the fight for our students needs to be taken beyond academia and into the public sphere through advocacy and unionization, within the academy we need to remain true to the values of teaching students first.

Multimodal composing presents resistance to the devaluation of our work by proposing and developing an exclusive and inclusive understanding of composition in digital spaces, attending in some capacity to Healy’s concern, and at the same time it also furthers our liberatory agenda. From a historical standpoint, the challenges we face as writing teachers in terms of authoritative oversight and the national financial crisis of “public” universities and therefore criminal increase in underpaid contingent labor are both urgent and yet ephemeral. They are urgent because, as ever, our students need our help, and we cannot and should not deny our core mission, which is to help people grow and to pass on our cultural legacy so they may set off to build their own. And it is ephemeral because I do not believe that education will stay where it is. Support for education has waned in recent years but it will return again, and I would rather stand on firm theoretical ground that has continued to meet student needs while we weather this multi-decade storm than sacrifice our mission for momentary political gain. Teaching people, not writing seeks to do both by continuing to engage in dialogue about the necessity of developing
more than just content and skills but also rhetorical cultural and self-knowledge. The lives of our
digital native students are so intimately entwined with digital media that to deny them access
would be utterly irresponsible. Students in my multimodal writing classes do not leave saying
“what a waste, I didn’t learn anything” because I can tailor the courses to meet students’ needs in
ways that make that impossible. I make it about the lives they wish to lead, and in the final
chapter of this dissertation I explain how I have attempted to make that possible within two
experimental courses taught at Bowling Green State University.

Education has historically done two things: built relationships and passed on knowledge
in its full breadth. Teaching people, not writing returns us to that core mission, building
connections between student and teacher based on mutual respect and trust and engaging
students to take knowledge as their own. To do so responsibly in the modern era includes
teaching students to engage in dynamic, kairotic multimodal production. It necessarily involves
the development of a critical consciousness and puts learning and genre creation where it rightly
belongs, in the hands of our students.
CHAPTER V. TEACHING PEOPLE

Introduction

In 1972 Donald Murray presented a short paper, “Teaching Writing as a Process Not Product,” to the New England Association of Teachers of English. In it he outlines ten different implications for the writing classroom as a result of the suggested paradigm shift. Paraphrased, Murray suggests that students examine their own writing, choose their writing topics, use their own language, produce as many drafts as necessary, use all available means of persuasion, focus on mechanics last, work within specified timelines, recognize and be recognized for rhetorical choices, and explore writing as they see fit. Lastly, Murray writes “There are no rules, no absolutes, just alternatives. What works one time may not another. All writing is experimental” (6). Reading this piece in my Master’s program for the first time sent me to reading Murray’s book *A Writer Teaches Writing* and ultimately to this dissertation. My research has led to practices in the classroom that guide students on their own journey as writers, and I agree with Murray that, “we have to respect the student, not for his [or her] product, not for the paper we call literature by giving it a grade, but for the search for truth in which he [or she] is engaged” (5). That is the goal of teaching people, not writing, to help each student express his or her idea through any available means of persuasion. Murray’s classic suggestion of best practices has guided that process and development and continues to inform my classroom practice. But as my scholarly research has deepened and developed, I’ve come to understand that this starting point doesn’t fully account for the kairotic nature of writing and writing processes. Process theory does not attend as specifically to the personal writing and learning needs of individual students (even if Murray certainly did so in his practice) as post-process theories propose because it generalizes and codifies the writing process.
Post-process theories of writing pedagogy contend that writing processes themselves cannot now or ever be generalized. Each student, each writing task, and each performance of writing is a situated experience. Thomas Kent writes in *Post-Process Theory: Beyond the Writing-Process Paradigm* that there are three qualities that define post-process pedagogies: “(1) writing is public; (2) writing is interpretive; and (3) writing is situated” (1). While post-process arguments provide essential support, and I agree fundamentally with these three core goals, teaching people, not writing as a theory is not a process nor even a post-process pedagogy. As Murray proposed a move from product to process, teaching people, not writing proposes a move from process to people, arguing that writing should function as a relational medium, not the focus of education.

When deciding which path to take six years ago, I chose writing as a field from several specifically because of the affordances writing permits and encourages and because of the ways we can strip back the subject focus and attend to needs of students as people. Instead of moving forward from process or post-process, teaching people not writing asks us to step aside and to look back remembering that writing, while a powerful, emotive, and essential tool for public life, is only a tool.

Considering writing as a primary tool for teaching people, this dissertation has called on three scholarly discussions–civic education, critical pedagogies, and technology–to argue for the shift from a focus on the tools we use to deliver education to the people engaged in learning. From civic education and the teachings of John Dewey, I am reminded that education is not about content first and that it must always situate students in a social and civic environment. Education is about relationships, relationships that form a conduit along which knowledge and learning can flow. Without that conduit, learning can be a jarring and inhuman experience. What
makes it a human experience is not pseudo-abstract learning structures and fabricated disciplinary divisions but a holistic approach that makes the classroom a place where people can live and work. In his essay “Self-realization as Moral Ideal,” John Dewey writes, “if I were asked to name the most needed of all reforms in the spirit of education, I should say: ‘Cease conceiving of education as mere preparation for later life, and make of it the full meaning of the present life’” (660). A century later I agree with Dewey wholeheartedly that this reform is the one most desperately needed, because as Dewey is often paraphrased as saying, education is not preparation for life; it is life.

Too often what students are taught by school, as a system, is that writing is not a part of their lived experience; rather, it exists to serve a mechanical need, causing students to produce writing that is formulaic and mechanical, writing meant for the teacher not for themselves or for any external audience. And they are taught this most powerfully not by the content of lessons provided but by the way they are taught. For the sake of “efficiency” the banking theory of knowledge described by Paulo Freire lives on, but if we are “truly committed to liberation [we] must … abandon the educational goal of deposit making and replace it with the posing of the problems of human beings in relation to their world.” (79). As Freire writes, there are only two options:

Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world (14).
To open the possibility of that transformation, we teachers need to put our full selves into the classroom. Bell hooks argues that “when professors bring narratives of their experiences to classroom discussion it eliminates the possibility that we function as all-knowing, silent interrogators” (21). Instead of reinstating extant hierarchies we can share our experiences with students and provide them opportunities to consider, challenge, and dissent.

Additionally, crafting a liberatory writing classroom space is impossible without making all means of persuasion available. An overwhelming number of composition scholars in rhetoric and writing have recognized and written about the need for multimodal composing in our writing classrooms (Cheryl Ball, Kristine Blair, Jay David Bolter, Laura Bush, Elizabeth Clark, Marilyn Cooper, Jason Palmeri, Diane Penrod, Stuart Selber, Cynthia Selfe, and Anne Wysocki). Working with ever-changing technology presents a series of technical challenges, but the potential for genre exploration and the need for rhetorical skills in multiple modes of persuasion is becoming increasingly important. Writing with digital technology is not simply a change in our toolset; it is a change in how we make meaning. We have a unique opportunity to help students connect and construct in these emerging digital genres, and we should capitalize on it.

Capitalizing on it means putting it into practice, and while the bulk of this text has been focused on theoretical support, in this final chapter, I present practical attempts to realize the philosophy of teaching people, not writing in the college writing classroom. Consistent with Murray’s best practices, post-process arguments about the situatedness of the writing process and the philosophies espoused by civic pedagogies, critical pedagogies, and advocates for multimodal composing, in what follows I detail two experimental courses I taught at Bowling Green State University, ENG 2070: Intermediate Writing and ENG 4840: Foundations of Teaching Writing. In doing so, I suggest not protocols to be followed, nor precise methodology;
rather, I offer up my experiences for review and consideration as an attempt to teach people, not writing.

ENG 2070: Intermediate Writing

Teaching people, not writing begins with people always, and when planning this course that’s where I turned my attention first. I asked myself “Who am I teaching?” not “What am I teaching?” That simple shift changed my start point and moved me from considering what content to include in a course designed to help students in their future careers to trying to understand where the students entering my courses were coming from, who they were. But it’s a demographic I wasn’t intimately familiar with, so I needed some background first.

Intermediate writing is a standard course at Bowling Green for Education, Communications, and Business majors. I had access to syllabi of previous instructors, and I asked a couple who’d taught the course about how they’d interpreted the class. It became immediately clear that a lot of freedom was permitted by the department as the courses varied from a course on job preparatory documents to a service learning course to one on queer studies. I wanted to take full advantage of this opportunity to experiment, but I also wanted to stay true to the expectations of the course. As I thought of the different majors, I considered what kind of work students would do in their future. What jobs would they have and what writing would they be expected to produce? For the education majors, most seemed to have a similar path, but for the others, the business, and communication majors (and I did end up with a couple students from other fields), their future career work was more open-ended. Additionally, I also wanted to consider the demands that would be placed upon them in ten or even twenty years, demands I certainly couldn’t predict. Consistent with Dewey’s arguments for students as participatory
citizens, I wanted our class projects to be focused on real-world work, work that would simulate writing students would actually be doing in their careers. As a practitioner of critical pedagogies I also knew it would be essential that our projects be student directed and student assessed. Lastly, I wanted them to be unrestricted in their modes of available persuasion, and I knew it was essential that those modes be rhetorically relevant. To meet those high expectations, I broke the course down into several focused units that explored writing, each with their own guiding questions and framework: writing as personal, writing as social, writing through genres, and then writing as a reflective practice.

To start off the course, we collaborated as a class to construct a definition of writing that would guide our work. The definition defined writing as multi-modal with multiple potential audiences and varied purposes. Consistent with teaching people, not writing, the definition was co-created, and though I served as the mediator of the process, students told me that they felt ownership over the definition as we utilized and revised it throughout the course. As an initial activity, it also established the expectations of the course and provided a sense of internal community engagement. Many of the students had different majors, but they all could come together when discussing writing.

With this broad definition in mind, I wanted students to dig deeper into their understanding of themselves as writers. Because my expectation was for them to engage in their work at a personal level, as people not just students, their first major writing project was a literacy narrative, a personal story about their connections and experiences as a writer.

Reading those literacy narratives, I was not surprised that many students had strong feelings about writing, but I did not anticipate the overwhelming majority of those feelings to be
so negative. Students cited feelings of ineptitude, fear, confusion, and pain. Yet amidst this struggle there were also a smattering of triumphant success stories.

Despite the general anxiety about writing expressed in their texts, many students enjoyed the literacy narrative assignment, explaining that they appreciated how their experiences mattered. These comments painted a stark contrast to a common experience of writing that students complained about where one’s experience and voice were perceived (by them) to be irrelevant. They did not feel like they owned and controlled their own writing, and I was excited to learn that many of them definitely wanted to do so. At that same time, though, this desire was intimately coupled with fear and even at times shame that it was somehow wrong to do so. As a critical pedagogue, I knew to expect this reaction but was still struck by the paradox, knowing that I needed to accept the choice some students would make to not accept power and control of their work. Moreover, for those who seek liberation, it was precarious to suggest that our writing course would operate differently and that they would be encouraged throughout to deal critically and creatively with the subject matter through a variety of mediums. I knew I could offer up technology as a powerful and meaning-making tool, but I wasn’t as confident that I could create an environment where students felt their learning belonged to them. Still I trusted in the theories of critical pedagogies and the focus of teaching people, not writing by making those lofty claims, creating an emotional contract for the course as well as a promise I hoped to fulfill. I explained that in our class students could and would control and produce writing that was relevant, personal, and valuable to them and others.

Moving from the initial personal essays, we began exploring writing as a social phenomenon. There was much debate in the class about what kinds of writing should be personal versus social (a binary that post-process theorists explain as patently false; all writing is social),
but we agreed that most writing does occur in and serve a social space. With my students having worked with academic writing extensively in their college careers, my hope was that for the next project students could take their (often) new-found writer’s voices and attempt to apply them to an argument in their chosen field. They were given the freedom to choose their topic and were asked to take a stand on an issue relevant to their future field of study and work. However, this proved to be a problematic assignment as I tended to get one of two responses. Students either wrote classic academic papers that showed little of the voice present in their previous work and/or students did not write competent academic texts.

When I asked students to construct a narrative about their own writing, they knew how to do that. I assumed that since they had passed their basic writing courses to arrive at Intermediate Writing they could also write an academic paper. Despite my offering examples and explaining Ken Macrorie’s Engfish (writing written for teachers that has no purpose outside the classroom) from his book *Telling Writing*, however, the projects did not produce the results I was seeking. In conferences I asked students where the issue was, placing the responsibility for change on myself as any critical pedagogue would, because it was clear I was missing something. Students almost universally explained the same concern. They told me that academic writing was not a place they felt comfortable using any kind of personal voice. Academic texts to them were written for the teacher to get a grade, nothing more; they were Engfish incarnate. So, when I asked students to see themselves as engaging with arguments in their field, realizing writing as a social activity and in this case a knowledge building one as well, they resisted. As John Dewey explains in *Democracy and Education* we teach more through how we teach than what we teach, and this was certainly evidence of that concern. Students had the knowledge of how to produce the structure of an academic essay, but trying to write it as “personal” felt alien to them. They had
learned from the way writing had been taught and evaluated that you keep yourself out of it. I wanted to challenge that viewpoint, but I also knew that I couldn’t convince students with intellectual argument because too many experiences countered my suggestion and intellect can rarely compete with emotion. I needed them to experience it.

To hear that same personal voice I found when reading the literacy narratives was going to take a different tack. So, instead of considering writing as social in the broadest context of a field of argument, I attempted to localize it in our classroom hoping that a peer connection would serve as a stronger catalyst for debate. I tasked students with writing replies to their colleagues’ argument papers in pairs of similarly chosen disciplines. They were asked to take the opposite stance of their partner (mimicking the way a scholarly critic might argue) in the hopes that I could simulate scholarly discussion in the classroom between scholars if not within the field as a whole. However, these arguments were weaker still than the first set. Taking a stance and attempting to integrate one’s personal voice was too strange a task, thus asking for a reply was also too much. Making the task more concrete merely revealed the challenges students face in trying to write to a real academic audience (i.e. not the teacher). William Thelin and John Tassoni might have described the results of this activity as a “blunder” as featured in their co-edited text, *Blundering for a Change: Errors & Expectations in Critical Pedagogy*, because while it didn’t produce the results I was hoping for, the challenges of this lesson provided essential learning for students and for myself. It made it clear to me as a pedagogue, if it wasn’t clear before, that I have much to learn from students about their experiences as subjects of academic systems.

In an effort to return to the success of the literacy narrative project, I knew I’d need to avoid abstraction, stay away from classic academic arguments, and engage students in more
personal ways. As Ira Shor explains in *When Students have Power: Negotiating Authority in a Critical Pedagogy*, “we don’t come to class with the discourse suitable for reconstructing power relations [;] we have to invent that discourse as we invent the process and, by doing so, reconstruct our social selves” (20). My attempts to engage students in writing within an academic social context but with the liberated voices they established in their literacy narrative didn’t produce the result I was hoping for because I framed the assignment in a way that was too similar to the assignments from other courses. I thought this familiarity would help, but instead it reinforced old habits and extant perspectives. Change couldn’t happen, as Shor explains, if we didn’t reinvent the process.

Thus the next two projects were built as stepping stones from one to the other, focusing not on classic academic argument but on student-created writing projects. I called them both genre projects, a small one and then a large one. Both were designed to serve the same purpose and functioned much like mini-independent studies. For each I asked students to imagine the work they might do upon graduating. I then asked them to find a person who wrote for that kind of job, to procure examples from that person, and then attempt to produce another version of that writing. Students were allowed to work in groups or as individuals, and they were asked to create a proposal for each and criteria for evaluating their work. Scaffolding, workshopping, and then presenting these projects comprised the latter half of the course.

Some of the work students produced fit well within traditional scholarly expectations. As an example, several education majors chose to write teaching philosophies, lesson plans, and unit plans, providing relevant references for the arguments within their various pieces. Others, however, chose less traditional paths. For example, one student wanted to open her own dance studio. She produced a pamphlet promoting her fictional future school and then a handbook for
the advanced students she would teach. A couple students chose to explore creative writing through poetry and short fiction. One developed a nail polish marketing blog. A pair of students planned and filmed a bicycle repair video. Another set made a promotional video for the university dance team and still another pair developed a mock marketing portfolio for a wedding planning company.

What was most different about these projects over the argument papers was the level of student investment. Asking students to engage in scholarly debate yielded poor results (and negative reactions), but by making the projects about their future work, nearly all students dove right in, ironically often making arguments through their work that were considerate of academic discourse. Many students were elated by their chosen genre projects and explained how pleased they were to “finally” be doing work that was relevant for them individually. They told me that by having a choice to pursue projects of their own design and in the modes they found most appropriate, they could produce more authentic writing, the kind of writing in which one’s voice and self is engaged in the words on the page (again referring to Macrorie’s Engfish). Several students even moved beyond the expectations of the course in their projects and final presentations producing high quality rhetorically grounded work. When I talked with them about the effectiveness of their products, students explained that when the work was for themselves they always worked harder. The bar I had set for them began to matter less and less and since students designed their own assessment systems for each project, they felt ownership over how their work would be judged.

Despite much success, and some spectacular, creative, and authentic work from students, not all enjoyed the projects. Because both genre projects were tied together, it became clear that missing one part could create a crashing domino effect. Students with ineffective proposal
struggled for the remainder of the course. For example, one pair of students submitted a proposal with no artifacts (examples of the writing they planned to produce). This proposal came late, and in the interests of time I advised students to move forward as best they could and to acquire artifacts in short order. But artifacts were never acquired, and the final product was of poor quality as a result. Additionally, students who were absent frequently did not fare well. But I suspect that in both cases these same students wouldn’t have done well under any circumstance.

At the conclusion of the course students wrote reflective essays about their experiences. Most of the essays praised the freedom that the class provided. Students who found something they cared about and pursued it by choosing their own criteria were pleased when their work met (or exceeded) those expectations. But again, some did not have that experience. A few students complained that the class lacked structure, that I had asked them to do “the work of the teacher.” But I was prepared for this response. I knew as Ira Shor explains, “contract grading will not be accepted easily by … students, given the long-term habits we [school as a system] develop for unilateral authority” (211), so while I did require reluctant students to develop their own criteria for assessment and grade themselves, I was lenient in my interpretation of contracts that had very open criteria, making it seem “fair” as some students explained. While I stand by this method of assessment, it’s clear to me that establishing it effectively in a single semester is a significant challenge because of student expectation for unilateral authority.

The success of the genre projects was also contingent on the other ways in which our class challenged that classic unilateral authority. For most of the class we used a democratic structure wherein students could collectively decide time frames for projects. When considering the writing modes students would use for their projects, we incorporated technology responsibly as Cynthia Selfe urges teachers to do in her article “Taking up the Challenges of Digital
Literacy” by attending to the three necessary literacies for successful multimodal projects as defined by Stuart Selber in *Multiliteracies for a Digital Age*: functional literacy, critical literacy, and rhetorical literacy. While functional literacy was often limited by what students skills students brought with them into the class, several chose new modes of expression and learned while working in class and outside with the assistance of technology services on campus.

Because all their projects worked from examples of existing texts, analyzing them to define their genres and criteria for assessment was essential. And as students developed their texts they continued to consider the impact of their work on their various audiences. For example, the student who created materials for her imaginary future dance studio conferred with both her current dance teacher and fellow dance students as her project progressed to see how they would be impacted by her developing project pieces. It was also essential that while attending to these literacies students had a vast array of modes available to craft and present their projects. Our computer lab classroom space provided that, and students produced blogs, websites, pamphlets, videos, outlines, graphs, PowerPoints, Prezis, and so forth.

As often as possible throughout the development of these projects I put the responsibility for learning back on the students. Some, though, didn’t want any of it. For those few students, I broke their expectations of how a course should operate. They argued that the course was merely something they need to “get through.” “Isn’t it your job to judge our work?” I can recall one of these students saying in response to our early criteria creation lessons (to which I wish I could have answered “No!”). These disengaged students were put off by my attention to them as people because in the classroom, they didn’t want to be seen that way. They wanted to be students, subject to authority, so they could fit teacher expectations and then be done with it. By trying to connect to them as people, I disrupted their coping strategies. Their disillusionment and
disengagement saddened me, but I also understood that it wasn’t something I could always combat. If I truly respect student choice and student liberation as advocated by Paulo Freire, then the choice to not engage needs to be an option. What is disappointing about that choice is that there are sometimes unavoidable institutional consequences as a result that I must enforce to maintain the integrity of my job.

Thankfully, the jaded disinterested attitude of some students was by far a minority. The way other students described it, it’s as if in school they are asked to fit into a particular box—architect major, English major, dance student, and so on, but when asked who they “are” they often don’t identify in that way. Instead they called themselves micro-brewer, wedding planner, bicycle mechanic, or nail polish blogger, and they felt liberated in our class because they could practice and embrace those identities in that space.

Students don’t self-identify with majors except in the most superficial way, and yet we dictate much of a student’s path by their major alone. In our modern world with such varied changing genres and shifting job expectations, the university’s outmoded sorting system has outlived its purpose. We are certifying students for jobs that by and large most will not actually have, or if they have them, they won’t for long (barring a few specific majors). What we need to continue to do is to train them not in specific tasks so much as prepare them with a wide range of skills and most importantly the ability to self-motivate, reflect, self-assess, and change accordingly.

As an effort to realize teaching people, not writing in the classroom, I tried to shape ENG 2070 as a part of that change at least within its own environs by giving students control over their work, engaging them to participate in decisions about the class, and empowering them to create
and co-create both the products and guiding systems for the course. As the course progressed
student language changed as they came to understand that my expectations for their work were
real and that they would be permitted and encouraged to use authentic voices in their writing as
well as provided the opportunity to determine their own research and writing development paths.

As uniformity gave way to diversity and conformity gave way to self-direction, student
affect changed dramatically. Again at times in the course some students were quite frustrated,
and some nearly begged me to just tell them what I wanted (even in tears on a few occasions),
but staying steadfast to the philosophy of teaching people, not writing served even those students
well in the end. They might not have embraced self-assessment with the same fervor and sense
of freedom as some of their colleagues did, but they saw its effects in others. I don’t consider this
a failure of the course because it’s such a long, uphill battle. Students have been taught by
education as system that they must follow along, do what their told, produce only what is
relevant to others, keep personal thoughts to oneself, and in total, they have been instructed to be
silent. Writing provides a unique opportunity for their voices to be heard again, and though some
may be afraid to do so, I know that all people possess the ability and the will to be heard.

ENG 4840: Foundations of Teaching Writing

I began teaching 4840 well into the writing of this dissertation. As I write, this course is
just finishing up. The course has so far been extremely successful, and I would attribute that
success to the investment of students in my class and my attempts to put into practice what I
learned through this dissertation project and through teaching ENG 2070. 4840 is a more
organized, cleaner course that gives control over to students even more, empowering authentic
voice and engagement in scholarly discourse. It is has a fairly uniform demographic, all
education majors, meaning instead of discussing writing in a grand sense, we could always situate it in particular classrooms. Although not all students expressed a desire to teach writing as part of their profession in the future, all of them explained an interest and long-term investment in education and writing. Like 2070, this course is required, but unlike 2070, I did not have any students explain they were taking the course only because they had to. A room of invested students is a luxury and a boon indeed.

To start off the course, I created an immediate challenge for myself because I wanted to engage students with course construction from the outset. Having left 2070 on such a high note, I had dreams of somehow starting 4840 where 2070 ended up. Once I realized this unconscious hope, I understood how unrealistic it was. It became apparent quite quickly that I couldn’t build a strong enough rapport fast enough for that to be possible. I laid out the course materials, presented options, and gave students the opportunity to vote on various elements. What they decided on was literally the first plan I showed them. I had offered too much freedom too soon, so we moved forward.

Like 2070, we began with literacy narratives to encourage authentic voice, but this time I also asked students to connect to their experiences both of writing teachers and how they imagined themselves as teachers in the future. That reflection became a fruitful topic for discussion as we started our guiding document for the course. While 2070 used a definition of writing to guide our practice, in 484, we focused on teaching and thus drafted a “best and worst practices” guide. As we worked through our early texts, we added to the guide and revised it with the intent to returning to it at the end of the course.
While conducting this early project, during one class, I invited four teachers to come in and talk about their experiences. It was one of the best received sessions the class had. Students had many questions. Interestingly, none of them seemed to be about writing. What students wanted to know about was how to manage a classroom and how to survive their first year as teachers. They explained that it wasn’t that they didn’t value writing, but as people and future teachers, they were most concerned with survival. In planning for the course, I didn’t anticipate the level of fear and concern, students expressed. Having been alerted, I knew it was important to attend to. Thus, I tasked students with writing thank you letters to the teachers who had come in. Those letters sparked continued conversation as a couple of those teachers replied. One particular teacher made such an impact with her responses that students have since referred back to her several times during the course both in class discussions and in presentations. Moreover, comments relating to our teaching interview panel appear in a couple later projects. It was clearly a fruitful session, and I believe it was so successful not only because of the generous nature of the teachers on our panel but also because the relationships between students and our interviewees was a participatory not a judgmental one, creating in some cases fast mentoring bonds and in several cases helping students feel more confident about their first year of teaching.

With the literacy narrative complete and our best and worst practices drafted, we moved into discussion of the different ways to teach writing. I don’t usually use a textbook, but because I hadn’t taught this course before, we used *Teaching Students to Write* by Beth Neman. The early chapters fostered strong discussion about practices, approaches, and history. It became clear early on that students saw process pedagogy as the primary way to teach. While scholarship in writing pedagogy has certainly advanced since the heyday of process pedagogy, this wasn’t a point I challenged them on as a group as process pedagogy is consistent with the expectations of
the courses they would be teaching in their future work, and it does help in meeting common core standard. As students pursued their various research foci, however, we discussed many relevant pedagogical options and for those interested in pursuing employment outside the public system I shared more about my research, this dissertation, and the possibility of teaching people, not writing as a focus for their work.

Having connected to students personally, crafted a guiding document, and worked through the basics of writing instruction, I wanted students to be able to simulate their teaching experiences as much as possible. I constructed three activities and proposed them to the class, hoping that at this point I could better engage them in discussion about how to develop these activities. While we did again end up deciding to do all three projects almost exactly as they were laid out, students did provide input into several of the specifics. Although there was still some reluctance to engage with this process, I knew it was essential because as Dewey explains in *Experience and Education*, “there is no defect in traditional education greater than its failure to secure the active cooperation of the pupil in construction of the purposes involved in his studying” (67). As in 2070, some students felt I was asking them to decide on things they had no right to decide. They said it was not their role and in fact it was disrespectful to challenge the lessons a teacher presented.

As a pedagogue and even as a student I’ve always challenged how teachers teach. That attitude has gotten me in trouble as a student several times over many years for what was described in every case as impudent and arrogant behavior and “thinking that I knew better than the teacher.” As a teacher, though, I know that my students do know better than I do in many cases, and I also know that I need their input for the course to succeed and for them to develop as individuals. I welcome and encourage students to challenge my methods, approaches, and
philosophy and am honestly confused as to why so many teachers in my personal experience have bristled at my critiques instead of seizing them as an opportunity, not because I don’t understand that people tend to be protective of their own egos but because I don’t understand letting those feelings rules your decisions. I get excited on those rare occasions when students present a reasoned challenge, and I am always eager to make changes as a result if possible. At the same time I recognize that asking students to challenge me steps on established cultural codes, and students don’t wish to be rude. Pondering this concern about appropriate “decorum” (thinking of it more like brainwashing than a self-driven acculturation) I became keenly aware of the crippling effect the many short-term teaching environments of the university have on the possibility of liberatory teaching. To even get to the point where students could contribute meaningfully to the class structure took a third of the course time in both courses. I did use that time productively to go over basics, establish guiding principles, and to establish productive relationships, but knowing that learning space will be disbanded at the end of the semester seems an awful waste. Liberatory, participatory education is not about short-term goals, it’s about teaching people for their lives, teaching them to engage as active citizens. It’s a challenge to employ a people focused philosophy in a classroom space that is so ephemeral. Still that doesn’t prevent individual relationships from being quite fruitful and extending beyond the classroom space, and while as a class, students were reluctant to challenge my authority; in individual conversations students were more candid and open.

Those private conversations were extremely valuable because they helped engage students in the course and in relationships with me so that we could further consult on the three projects that would finish out the course: an interview project, a research project, and a research presentation. Each was designed as stepping stones from one to another helping students frame
themselves not only as teachers but also as teacher researchers. Building on the success of the class interview session, I tasked students with finding a teacher who did the work they expected to do in the future. I asked them to interview them in three parts, first an initial interview to get a sense of this teacher’s philosophy, then a class observation of that philosophy put into practice, followed by a short reflective interview to tie it all together. Being education majors, students were familiar with this kind of activity. As students began their interview projects they were also tasked with conducting their chosen research and planning for their presentations.

While in 2070 students used a wide variety of writing modes to complete their projects, those in 4840 chose a more limited scope, most sticking to lesson plans, traditional research papers, and reflective essays. However, students incorporated a variety of technologies into their work: PowerPoints, Prezis, videos, websites, wikis, and so forth. Topics varied but were all classroom focused. Some examples included: incorporating narrative as a central theme in elementary English courses; writing emotionally tempered “impact” essays; utilizing smartboard technology; creating an effective inclusive environment; military writing and how it relates to classroom experience; multi-disciplinary writing projects, teaching writing as “play,” and so on. In each case we discussed the rhetorical effectiveness of each student’s chosen mode(s).

Most intriguing in the course, however, was student reaction to an early assignment we conducted before moving to major research projects wherein students crafted, completed, and then evaluated a writing unit. In an effort to simulate all stages of a writing assignment, we constructed a lesson plan, assignment sheet, secondary resources, and set a timeline for completing a mock eighth grade assignment. When discussing options students overwhelming chose creative writing as the topic and very much wanted the task to be multi-disciplinary. With several social studies teaching majors in the course, history easily won out. The assignment we
co-created asked students to write a story about time travel which involved historical research of a time period and then a creative narrative to tie it all together. We chose one activity from our plan and conducted it in class (drawing our time machines and then writing about them to help develop descriptive writing) and then outside of class we wrote our stories. We submitted our stories to our course discussion board and then we responded to one another’s papers as we would to 8th grade students. While students had a lot to say about providing written feedback to 20+ student papers over the span of a weekend (something many of them had never tried to do before), and we had fruitful discussions about how and when and where and for what purpose to comment on student writing, a majority of students were most excited to write creatively. Several asked if we could complete another story project but sadly our plan didn’t allow for that change so late in the course. I couldn’t make that change also because it wasn’t a universal response. Some didn’t like writing narratives in general and while I value narratives highly, the plan we had for the course would have been negatively impacted in terms of diversity had we decided to do another creative assignment.

As the course progressed, we came back to this topic again and again, and I started asking pointed questions to understand student concerns. Consistent with the goals of teaching people, not writing, I wanted to understand why this activity impacted students so significantly, why it evoked such strong emotion, and how they felt about its devaluation in education. Students who were compelled by writing narratives explained that creative writing was not a common part of their learning experiences neither as budding teachers nor as students. For many our pseudo-assignment was the first time they had written any fiction in more than a decade. While creative writing was an option for them as education majors, students explained that it’s not a
requirement of their curriculum, and since it’s not essential to meeting common core standards, it’s often devalued.

Learning from students how creative writing has become increasingly devalued in education left me with a quandary. As a writing teacher I know that creativity is essential to student success. That attribute is cited as essential by civic educators, critical pedagogues, and technology advocates alike. But at the same time students going into public education must meet the standards expectations of their jobs, regardless of teaching effectiveness. So, while I didn’t advocate rebellion, I did explain that the way you present material to students can shape how they are impacted by that writing experience, perhaps even more so than the content. I argued that writing is always creative and that the difference between creative writing and non-creative writing is control over one’s voice and presentation. Who determines the means of persuasion and dictates the structure of the argument or narrative defines who “owns” the writing—at least perceptually.

Finishing the class where I made this argument, I realized that my teaching had come full circle. I was teaching students the conventions of teaching writing. They were conducting relevant research for their future work. They were discussing issues in the field such as technology integration, cross-disciplinary collaboration, and attending to common core standards, but more deeply the way I conducted the course, the relationships I formed with students, the consistent control I asked them to take of their writing and their teaching was teaching them also to teach people first.

The most powerful way I could teach was not through my arguments or through project plans or inventive materials, it was doing my best to model the behaviors of an effective
liberatory educator. Students’ positive response to that style and ethic of care will be more impactful than any content I could present. So, while I argued for a complex understanding of creative writing, I understood at the same time that nothing I could say could be more instructive than having put those theories into practice.

Conclusion

Attempting to employ teaching people, not writing as a classroom practice leaves me with a number of questions about when and how to capitalize on various liberatory methods and practices. First, one of the primary challenges is the relative short-term of each course and the amount of time and energy that must be invested in overcoming existing notions of education to begin deploying democratic decision-making effectively in the class. It won’t work on day one because doing so not only breaks expectations and defies social norms, it asks students to express a level of control and authority many don’t know they can and/or should possess in a classroom space. Those that do or have as I did when I was a student were likely punished for such behavior as I was. Teaching people, not writing cannot be realized by beginning on the first day with a liberatory, participatory classroom. It has to be grown over time by engaging in a continuous process of relationship building and classroom shaping.

Second, the paradoxes inherent in any critical pedagogy are both unavoidable and normal. Some students will choose (tacitly or actively) not to engage, and there must be space to allow them to do so, as well as consequences when that choice impinges upon university expectations. Additionally, we must continue to present options for students relevant to their future work without undermining instruction from other faculty. In the case of Education majors in ENG 4840, this became a pressing concern when current pedagogical theory and best
practices did not align (or contradicted) with the expectations of public school education. While supporting those who choose public education as well as those who don’t, I tried to walk a fine line between explaining possibilities and not criticizing the system as a whole. I did this not with the expectation that students don’t know what I think. As advised by hooks, I do my best to put my full self in the classroom. So I can’t hide, nor should I, but I did encourage students to examine school systems themselves to determine how they believe they should best teach writing and how they intend to reconcile their philosophies and the demands of common core standards. Freire explains in *Politics of Education: Culture, Power, and Liberation* that “in terms of tactics, we all have one foot inside the system, and strategically we have the other foot outside the system” (178). Thus, I work to disrupt the system from within, not by indoctrinating students into my point of view but by sharing it as one possible viewpoint, helping them discover their own perspective and creating a space where students can interrogate their beliefs, mine, and those of systems they intend to work within. As advocated by theories of civic education it’s in that reflection that the deepest learning occurs, the learning that has the potential to carry over into action and that allows students to engage as active, intelligent, productive citizens in an effective democracy.

Lastly, while paradoxes inherent in activities of acculturation complicate critical pedagogies and civic education, responsible integration of technology through kairotic multimodal projects does not present the same, perhaps ultimately irreconcilable, difficulties. The challenges of multimodal composing are more structural in terms of access and developing our understanding of the utility of various modes and various pieces of software. While I struggled at times to engage students in activities that were liberatory, most students seemed to have a strong grasp on the rhetorical impact of their multimodal work. Removed from the
pseudo-learning environment of school and in conversation with professionals producing the writing students would be expected to produce in their future work, their concepts of audience awareness became keen. The results of the teaching multimodal writing in these courses makes it clear that our assessment of student rhetorical ability using abstract tasks, disconnected from live, active audiences is bound to fail. Responsible integration of technology in the multimodal writing classroom is not merely considerate of the need for access, the possibilities of technology use, and the ways we use technology to make meaning, it also requires a contextualized approach that takes writing out of the classroom and into the world.

Having completed ENG 2070 and nearing the end of ENG 4840, I am left with a series of questions that will serve as benchmarks for future research and the development of further liberatory, participatory, multimodal courses following the model of teaching people, not writing. How can we engage students in democratically participatory activities earlier in the class, increasing student ownership and investment early on? How do we reconcile our dual roles as both disruptors of static authority structures while at the same time we are complicit in those structures as university teachers? How can we persuade students who are inclined to disengage to embrace their passions in a liberatory, participatory classroom? How can we insert our personal, emotional selves fully into the classroom while respecting the various perspectives within that space, allowing all voices to be heard, our own included? How can we balance power for and control over learning so that it resides squarely in the hands of students as often as possible? And lastly, how can we continue to push multimodal composing projects out of the classroom, attending to live audiences that will both teach and allow students to demonstrate their rhetorical abilities?
I began this dissertation project writing about the hope of seeing change in the writing classroom, of “making a difference,” and while that difference was more amorphous at the beginning, tied to dreams of simply impacting student writing in positive ways, as I come to the conclusion, it has taken clear form. Teaching people, not writing is about putting student writing, student work, and student voices in their hands. As John Dewey advocates, it’s about giving people the confidence to trust that those voices have value and can contribute effectively to social and global conversations. It’s about liberating students from authoritarian oppression, as Paulo Freire proposes, so that students can engage and potentially enact change within the systems they choose, and multimodal writing is one of our most effective vehicles for making that contribution possible.

As scholars and teachers we must model the change we wish to see in the classroom. We must reshape our class structure as a safe space that permits failure and learns from it, a space that promotes expression in all its forms and demonstrates to students the value of their work and themselves as contributors and generators of knowledge, and a space that above all treats students not like subjects of a system but as people living full, rich lives who come to learn and grow and write.
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