ABSTRACT

PRAXIS AND UNFINISHEDNESS IN THE PUBLIC TURN: CRITICAL DEMOCRATIC PEDAGOGY AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN FIRST-YEAR COMPOSITION

by Benjamin D. Kuebrich

This thesis analyzes two semesters of first-year composition that I taught in the 2007-2008 school year. In curriculum design, writing tasks, and daily interactions, I attempted to create democratic and critical spaces for student interaction with other students and the public outside the classroom. I situate my descriptions of these classroom practices in disciplinary debates about composition’s public turn and in wider cultural debates about democracy, decision-making, and civic engagement.
PRAXIS AND UNFINISHEDNESS IN THE PUBLIC TURN: CRITICAL
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WALKING INTO THE PUBLIC

I have a holistic view of the educative process. The universe is one: nature and mind and spirit and the heavens and time and the future all are part of the big ball of life. Instead of thinking that you put the pieces together that will add up to a whole, I think you have to try to start with the premise that they’re already together and you try to keep from destroying life by segmenting it, overorganizing it and dehumanizing it
-Myles Horton *The Long Haul* (130)

Even if I just clap my hands, the effect is everywhere, even in far away galaxies.
-Thich Nhat Hanh *Being Peace* (56)

In the last two years, at my most fragmented, I felt like three different people, working three different jobs. I was a teacher, taking on five sections of freshman composition as part of my master’s assistantship and adding two basic writing classes on top of those, one at the university’s satellite campus and one with the university’s staff. I was a student, interested in linguistics, political philosophy, and postmodernism. And I was an organizer, working 20+ hours a week with different student groups who promoted positive social change. At the best moments in the last two years, I did not feel like I was working at all, and that is when the three identities shared the same sense of purpose.

My first encounter organizing was with a local student group working on a living wage campaign with the university’s staff. A friend of mine had been on the campaign for two years and I began by asking him questions, researching living wage movements, and hearing about the staff’s situation and the university’s labor history. My first action with the group was in front of our English building with a few staff members that I knew personally. My friend spoke on a megaphone, staff members and students held a banner, and I helped by gathering signatures for a petition. Staff members drove by honking and cheering, passing students looked confused and disrupted, and in an hour we compiled one hundred signatures to send to the university president. The rest of that year, I existed on the edges of the movement, engaging in actions I felt comfortable with like “drifting,” which was the process of meeting workers we did not know to dialogue about collective organization.¹ Late in the year I played a role in planning a rally, participated in a union drive, and edited a video for the group. I prepared for the next year by organizing the Living Wage Committee, a collection of staff, students, and faculty with the

¹ The term “drifting” comes from Guy Debord’s “theory of the derive,” which influenced the engaged wandering of our trips around campus, meeting staff members we would never encounter across more practical paths.
charge of generating numbers and statistics to use in discussions and negotiations with legislative bodies and administrators at the university.

Much of the leadership of the movement left that year, and those who remained discussed plans and tactics over the summer. We created a book list and a blog to read about labor, poverty, and theories of organizing, distributed letters for staff to sign in protest of extraordinary hikes in health care costs (a successful action), and I started attending union meetings regularly. Eight months later, I was arguing wage comparisons with the head of human resources and lobbying the largest legislative body on campus, which ended in a resolution of support for a living wage.

I describe my organizing history here in demonstration of what I learned during my year and a half as a living-wage organizer that I could not have learned in the classroom alone. I did not enter an MA in English thinking that I would leave with experience in local economics and university power dynamics, but, reflecting on it now, it is remarkable how much sense it all makes after my first day of action.

I cannot help but think that my work as an organizer fueled my teaching practice and education as well. The experience of putting ideas into action is recursive and addictive, and the more weight there is on a potential action, the more committed I am to researching and refining the ideas which inform that action. Working on rhetoric in most of my classes, I experienced a direct correlation between theory and practice. I wanted to share these connections with my students.

The same summer I spent attending union meetings and reading about organizing, I studied the public turn pedagogy of Paula Mathieu and Jessica Singer in order add a civic engagement project to my English 111 course (first-year composition) the next fall. I was also finding the connections between teaching and organizing, most clearly articulated in The Long Haul, Myles Horton’s autobiography, which is in turns a history of Horton as an organizer, a theoretical text on democratic education, and a history of labor and civil rights movements. In addition, I explored Paulo Freire and John Dewey’s educational philosophies and began reading up on as many social and political issues as I could, hoping to be a responsible resource for my students in the coming semester.

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2 Rosa Parks called Horton “the first white man I ever trusted,” and she trained at Highlander Folk School with Horton before the Montgomery bus boycotts.
The Public Turn

At the basis of the public turn in English composition, it seems, is the desire to make writing in the classroom more relevant and exigent to life outside the classroom. From this common goal, the public turn has come to represent a number of pedagogical and scholarly exercises connecting the English discipline with rhetorically timely, often local, debates and social initiatives. The public turn in composition includes students and scholars entering the public sphere and the public sphere entering the classroom and scholarship. Of course, a classroom is always already public, and the students are always engaged with society when they use language, but, recognizing and studying the connections between students, literacy, and the public outside the classroom, the public turn represents a conscious and reflective connection of in-class and out-of-class discourse (Mathieu 10).³ In public turn classrooms, students have engaged in web-based publishing, social and cultural issues, place based writing, service learning, community literacy, and ethnography.⁴ Academics too have engaged in public work as part of their scholarship and reflected on the ethical concerns of the process.⁵ Public turn pedagogies vary depending on an educator’s specific goals and the rhetorical situations of the classroom; my goal in the public turn is to develop critically literate citizens through experiences in democratic education and civic engagement, goals situated in composition and educational theory that I discuss in the following sections.

Civic Engagement⁶

On civic engagement, Nick Longo states the following in Why Community Matters:

I define civic engagement as public work (projects creating things of public value); community involvement (membership in community groups and community service); community organizing (canvassing, protesting, and building power relations); civic knowledge (awareness of government processes and following public affairs);

³From here on when I mention the “public,” I mean the public outside the classroom. Furthermore, by no means do I mean everyone or the widest possible audience when I mention “the public.” For my purposes, “public” signifies anyone outside of the classroom that students and scholars encounter either as collaborators or audiences.
⁴See Paula Mathieu’s Tactics of Hope for descriptions and scholars for each subset. In addition, see Mathieu and Christian Weisser’s Beyond Academic Discourse for more complete histories of the public turn and public writing.
⁵See Peter Mortensen’s “Going Public” and Ellen Cushman’s “The Rhetorician as an Agent for Social Change” and “The Public Intellectual, Service Learning and Activist Research.”
⁶I use “civic engagement” in my classrooms because the phrase is less prescriptive than the alternatives “organizing,” “action,” or “activism.” Civic engagement broadens the connotations of the alternatives, most of which would fall under community organizing or conventional political action.
conventional political action (voting, campaign work, and advocacy for legislation); and public dialogue (deliberative conversations on public issues) (14).

While, as Longo describes in his book, these diverse and interconnecting practices can be used in a classroom, not all necessarily involve students working with groups or individuals outside the classroom. Furthermore, the above definition does not suggest how or why a student engages civically, or who defines notions such as “public value.” As an alternative concept, Longo’s book describes an “ecology of civic learning” that necessarily connects education with the community and the community with education, a method which respects the community as a source of both knowledge and knowledge production, problem posing and problem solving. Longo lists Addams’ Hull House and Horton’s Highlander Folk School as examples (14-16). In describing the ecology of civic learning, with Highlander and Hull House as models, Longo begins to look at the relationship between the community and education with ethical and democratic criteria. 7

Critical Literacy

Raymond Williams marks “criticism” as maintaining an historical association with “authoritative judgment,” and he also describes the term’s use in reference to a “conscious response” (84-6). Both conceptions relate, in part, to critical thinking: the process of analysis including observation, evaluation, and reflection beyond fixed assumptions (terms I come back to in chapter one). As a pedagogical aim relevant to English studies, critical literacy, as Ira Shor defines the concept, depends on the belief that discourse creates reality and that “We are what we say and do” and “we can remake ourselves and society […] through alternative words” (“What is Critical Literacy?” 1). Applying a process of conscious response and judgment to this notion of discourse, Shor states:

Critical literacy thus challenges the status quo in an effort to discover alternative paths for social and self-development. This kind of literacy—words rethinking worlds, self dissenting in society—connects the political and the personal, the public and the private, the global and the local, the economic and the pedagogical, for reinventing our lives and for promoting justice in place of inequity (1).

7 Since the term “community” has been contested in composition (in relation to classroom dialogue and public turn projects), I refrain from using the term for my class or the publics they communicate with while I still use the term for myself as I identify, among other things, as a community organizer.
Not only does critical literacy connect the subject with society, but it analyzes the power relations in discourse with an ethical end in mind—the promotion of justice and equality.

**Democracy**

In Horton’s *The Long Haul*, he describes a discussion he had with Jane Addams in which he asked Addams “Well, what do you think democracy means?” and Addams replied, “It means people have the right to make decisions. If there is a group of people sitting around a country store and there’s a problem they’re talking about, there are two ways to do it. They can go out and get some official to tell them what to do, or they can talk it out and discuss it themselves. Democracy is if they did it themselves” (49).

The Greek roots of democracy end up in “people rule,” but, as Raymond Williams explains, definitions of both “rule” and “people” have been contentious through the etymology of the term (93).8 Democracy has stood for a form of discourse, a method of decision making (like Addams’ use above), and types of governance that allow for a range of participation from representative democracy to direct democracy (different interpretations of “rule”). When democratic governance signified “a state in which all had the right to rule and did actually rule,” as Williams describes, the term carried largely negative connotations, similar to the classical conception of anarchy (94-96). Since the mid-19th century, the election process associated with representative democracy has been the primary referent of the term, which marked the start of the term’s positive connotations (95).

On democracy, Dewey states:

Democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience. The extension in space of the number of individuals who participate in an interest so that each has to refer his own action to that of others, and to consider the action of others to give point and direction to his own, is equivalent to the breaking down of those barriers of class, race, and national territory which kept men [sic] from perceiving the full import of their activity (*Democracy and Education* 87).9

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8 “People” has stood for men, whites, landowners, the educated, and various other mixtures of identity categories.
9 On the next page, Dewey discusses Plato’s ideas of education, saying “Conditions which he could not intellectually control led him to restrict these ideas in their application […] the society in which the theory was propounded was so undemocratic that Plato could not work out a solution for the problem whose terms he clearly saw” (88-9). It is interesting to consider Dewey’s reflections on Plato when noticing that gender is not a barrier discussed by Dewey, and every time I quote Dewey at length I must mark his masculine pronoun use.
For Dewey, democracy constitutes a process of increasing participation and responsibility for individuals in society, which necessarily topples social inequalities. Dewey recognizes his definition of democracy as ideal and not yet realized, and he asserts that education is the only way to continue moving towards democracy: “Since a democratic society repudiates the principle of external authority, it must find a substitute in voluntary disposition and interest; these can be created only by education” (87). For Dewey, education must create curiosity and engagement with the democratic ideal of rule by the people (meaning all people), and it must educate students to “personal initiative and adaptability” or “they will be overwhelmed by the changes in which they are caught,” leading to “confusion in which the few will appropriate to themselves the results of the blind and externally directed activities of others” (88). In another work, Dewey states that a democracy is insured only when “the rights of public discussion and criticism are held inviolate” (“What Is Democracy?” 474). In these discussions of education and democracy, Dewey describes foundations for both functioning representative and directly democratic institutions—the student’s engagement and curiosity with the democratic ideal, preparation for changing social relationships, and the exercise of critical public discourse.10

Controversy in the Public Turn

Negative reactions to the public turn from both inside and outside academia came in the early 90s as a response to the political theories and topics that came when educators brought public issues into the classroom in more conscious ways than before.11 Maxine Hairston, in an essay responding to radical/liberatory/feminist pedagogies titled “Diversity, Ideology, and Teaching Writing,” asks “Why has the cultural left suddenly claimed the writing course as their political territory?” (183). Hairston names nearly a dozen compositionists engaging in politicized pedagogy, citing their work in large blocks of text. Compiled and out of context, some citations are decidedly troubling; for instance, Charles Paine wonders if perhaps “manipulation” describes his pedagogy, and Patricia Bizzell suggests that “Berlin and his colleagues might openly exert their authority as teachers to persuade students to agree with their values” (qtd. in Hairston 181-182).

10 Taken together, Shor and Dewey show critical literacy and democracy as mutually constituting processes. The maintenance and extension of democracy requires critically literate students, and critical literacy requires equal access to critical education, a product of functioning democracies.

11 As many have noted, the trend did not mark the first time composition pedagogies introduced public issues into the classroom.
182). With these quotes, Hairston constructs radical pedagogues as teachers who consciously shape their students’ values and political affiliations, using their power in the classroom to do so. Many of those Hairston calls out respond by accusing her of misrepresenting the radical/liberatory/feminist pedagogue and emphasize radical pedagogy’s respect for student’s ideas. John Trimbur, for instance, states: “So she argues, if that's the word, that teachers shouldn't be dogmatic, authoritarian, manipulative, or contemptuous of their students, as though there is a range of opinion (248).”12 Trimbur does locate differences between Maxine Hairston’s proposed pedagogy and the pedagogy of radical educators, but it is not the leftist takeover Hairston suggests:13 “There is, as Maxine is aware, a move to reconceive (or perhaps restore is a better word) first-year composition as rhetorical education for citizenship and to place public discourse, as well as students' composing processes, squarely at the center of the curriculum” (“Response” 248-249).14

I have no stake in determining whether Hairston correctly named pedagogues who injected “prescribed political content” or whether she fabricated radical positions in the creation of straw men as Ron Strickland claims in his response (189).15 Instead, I am interested in the questions this debate raises about public turn pedagogy in first-year writing courses: How does a teacher present and discuss social issues in the first-year writing classroom? What is gained and lost in public turn pedagogy? Educators responding to Hairston’s essay begin to address these questions, as Trimbur makes an important distinction between the sort of partisan hackery some educators and members of the general public have become accustomed to with so-called debate shows like Crossfire and the potentially critical and analytical discourses of the classroom (249). Considering the political context and the misunderstanding between him and Hairston, Trimbur makes the following as a statement of what can be gained when bringing social issues into a critically engaged classroom culture:

That people rush to premature closure on complex issues, fail to consider alternatives, and ratify common sense should not be surprising. They have had little opportunity to participate meaningfully in public discourse or to be more than spectators when public discussion is framed as a spectacle of celebrities arguing for and against. But it is

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12 Trimbur and others note that most radical pedagogies find their roots in Freire and theorize against the banking model of expert knowledge and for the empowerment of the student and experiential knowledge.
13 Hairston fails to clearly define what she means by leftist in her essay, making it difficult to engage on that point.
14 Hairston’s proposed pedagogy is one where “students bring their subjects with them” (186), an extension of expressivist pedagogies.
15 In her response, Maxine Hairston says “I see little point in trying to rebut the criticism of those who disagree with me so sharply because I am not in a rhetorical situation with them.”
precisely for this reason that the freshman course can be useful to students. In a course
devoted to rhetorical education, students can learn an ethos of collaborative disagreement
that casts differences as matters of negotiation instead of as fearfully violent (249).

Trimbur’s notion of “collaborative disagreement” marks a mid-point between confrontational
and manipulative pedagogies and the uncritical, “everyone has their own opinion” relativism that
stifles engaged discourse. In Trimbur’s response to Hairston and his work on collaborative
learning, Trimbur theorizes classrooms that create critical, engaged cultures where diverse
positions are invited and analyzed together with students.

Hairston’s article and the ferocity and number of her responders indicated a sign of things
to come, as Gary Olson’s introduction to Christian Weisser’s Moving Beyond Academic
Discourse (2002) suggests, “public writing, especially as it is linked to service learning” is “most
likely to lead us all into the new decade” (ix). An extension of the rhetorical education for
citizenship which brought public issues into the classroom, public writing involves students
moving their discourse out of the classroom and into the public, adding another level of
complication but also increasing the exigency and consequence of their writing. In reflections of
her work with the public turn, and what she calls “composition as democratic work,” Elizabeth
Ervin brings up a number of ethical and practical questions about the field’s move to the public
(“Composition” 41). The focus of Ervin’s concern is on the often marginalized individuals and
groups that compositionists create relationships with, wondering if the field’s public crusade
might ultimately be about colonialization instead of democracy.

The questions of practice raised by Hairston and Ervin can only be addressed by
describing classroom practice in the public turn, which is the focus of this thesis. In chapter one,
I describe my classroom experience of adding a civic engagement project to a first-year
composition course (Eng. 111), locate the creation of my curriculum in public turn pedagogies,
and rewrite theoretical frameworks of reflection and action. In chapter two, I narrate sections of
my composition and literature course (Eng. 112), discuss power relations in classroom discourse
and curriculum design, and look back at debates on consensus and collaborative learning
between John Trimbur and others. Finally, in my conclusion I respond to Ervin’s call for an
“ethical blueprint” for civic engagement in composition, addressing concerns about brining
public issues into the classroom and having students go out into the public with their work.
CHAPTER ONE
PRAXIS LOOPING THE PUBLIC TURN

What avail is it to win prescribed amounts of information about geography and history, to win ability to read and write, if in the process the individual loses his [sic] own soul: loses his [sic] appreciation of things worthwhile, of the values to which these things are relative; if he loses desire to apply what he has learned and, above all, loses the ability to extract meaning from his [sic] future experiences as they occur?
-John Dewey Experience and Education (49)

I had already written plenty of pointless five paragraph essays and long research papers with proper MLA citations. […] However, what I did not posses before this was my own desire to write, the difference between writing and being a writer. Possessing these skills is really pointless unless I was writing with a purpose. I learned that writing is not something I should be afraid to share.
-Amber, an English 111 student16

The following chapter describes my first experiments in the “public turn” with two sections of English 111 (first-year composition), in which I structured the course around a civic engagement project. In the following three sections, I lay out the theoretical framework with which I structured the course, locating the phrase “praxis loop” in my experience with a social justice organization, and refining the idea with the work of Dewey and Freire, who I had been reading when preparing for my English 111 course. After outlining the praxis loop, I provide a short review of the public turn theory and practice that further informed my curriculum and that provide a number of important questions which I intend to reflect on as I describe my own classroom practice. With the rest of the chapter, I demonstrate the application of the praxis loop to my English 111 course, describing the reading and writing exercises involved in each stage of the praxis loop and reflecting on students writing and civic engagement projects.

Finding the Praxis Loop

I first encountered the praxis loop on a Witness for Peace delegation to Chiapas, Mexico, where WiP’s organizers called on Freire to frame our delegation’s experience.17 After breakfast on our first morning in Chiapas, Todd, an organizer who had worked in Chiapas and Oaxaca for

16 I received IRB approval to use student writing and classroom dialogue from this course in my research. All the students whose dialogue or writing I use have signed consent forms and their names have been changed.
17 Chiapas is home to the Zapatistas, ongoing grassroots organizing, postmodern revolution, and successful resistance to neoliberal trade deals and their concomitant cultural homogenization.
over a decade, introduced us to the praxis loop, a process moving through the stages of seeing, reflecting, acting, celebrating, and evaluating.

Applied to our delegation’s experience, the praxis loop visualized a process appropriate for the complex relationship between our identities as American citizens with access and privilege and the historically and culturally complex lives of the people in Southern Mexico. We witnessed the culture in San Cristobal and later Tzajalchen18 (seeing) while meeting with community organizers and leaders for history, analysis, and theory (seeing-reflection), and we wrote notes every night and discussed our experiences as a group each morning (reflection).19 Since the mission of Witness for Peace is to change U.S. foreign policy, our actions were planned in Chiapas but carried out in the United States and evaluated in the coming months with delegation meetings and correspondence with Witness for Peace.

Referring back to the praxis loop in the months after my trip, and finding that the praxis loop fit well with reflective practices of composition’s public turn, I asked Todd where he learned it. He listed a number of Freire’s texts but could not find a passage mentioning the loop. In my own searches, I have not found a mention of the praxis loop either, but I am using it nonetheless, taking it as a revision of Freire’s work that fit Todd’s purposes in Chiapas, and revising the praxis loop for my classroom practices by adding the educational philosophy of John Dewey. Freire states, “It is impossible to export pedagogical practices without re-inventing them. Please, tell your fellow Americans not to import me. Ask them to recreate and rewrite my ideas” (The Politics of Education xxii-xix). Todd’s praxis loop included seeing, reflecting, acting, celebrating, and evaluating. With a cross reading between Freire and Dewey, I have rewritten Todd’s praxis loop to include the ethical subject and growing as stages and have subtracted celebrating because in my idealization subjects reward themselves through praxis—every stage is a celebration.20

18 San Cristobal is the largest city in Chiapas. Tzajalchen is the home of Las Abejas, a catholic indigenous community committed to non-violence but sharing goals like working for autonomy from neoliberalism with the Zapatistas.

20 In Freire’s interview with Gary Olson’s, Freire declines the chance to respond to criticisms and follows, “What I would like to say in closing, though, is that I feel happy” (168).
Praxis Loops in Dewey and Freire

Praxis, most simply, results from the synthesis of action and reflection (sometimes referred to as theory and practice). In critical pedagogy, we often cite Freire for his attention to action and reflection in education, but Dewey too presented an educational philosophy that argued for the importance of action and reflection together and which outlines the way a subject forms a purpose, organizes the means to carry out that purpose, and catalogues the experience in memory and history as a process of “intelligent activity.” While I will discuss Dewey’s educational philosophy in corresponding stages of the praxis-loop, this staging requires a qualification to match Dewey’s educational philosophy. As part of realizing the consubstantiality of action and reflection, Dewey’s ideal educational process treats ends and means only as a useful distinction. As Dewey states, “Every means is a temporary end until we have attained it. Every end becomes a means of carrying activity further as soon as it is achieved (Democracy 106). While I use Dewey to make distinctions between different stages of the praxis-loop, the inter-relationship between the stages is evident, and my classroom practice exposes overlapping stages and praxis-loops folded within praxis-loops.
Most of my revisions to Todd’s praxis-loop come from “The Meaning of Purpose” in Dewey’s *Experience and Education*, a chapter that I assigned my 111 students to generate a discussion on the stages of the class. In the chapter, Dewey details a process towards “intelligent activity,” a form of acting that requires the development of purposes through a process of observation (what I will call seeing) and reflective analysis of the historical consequences of past actions (67-72). Like Freire’s praxis, Dewey’s process of “intelligent activity” is liberatory, as he discusses organizing the means to carry out purposes, i.e. intelligent activity, as the counterpoint to slavery, calling on Plato who “defined a slave as the person who executes the purposes of another” (67).

Dewey emphasizes seeing and reflection in a process of observing and judging consequences, as described above, but he also discusses the necessity of action. Dewey states that “The intellectual anticipation, the idea of consequences, must blend with desire and impulse to acquire moving force” (69). Dewey’s statement reflects the necessary synthesis of action and reflection for intelligent activity. Impulse and desire (Dewey defines desire as impulse obstructed) as anticipation of action provide impetus and momentum for the reflective subject to enter a stage of observation (seeing) and the judgment of historical consequences in intellectual anticipation (reflection).

Evaluating, growing, and the ethical subject connect form around seeing, reflection, and action with the addition of Dewey’s “Criteria of Experience.” In evaluating, the subject is able to judge the merit of action and decide on the correct direction of future moving force (the impulse or desire for action) (38), which equates to the refinement of the ethical being (Dewey does not use the word “ethical” in the text but his use of judgment is similar) and thus constitutes growing.

Freire says that action without reflection is mere activism, “action for actions sake” (88); reflection without action is mere verbalism, “idle chatter […] an alienated and alienating ‘blah’” (87), and the absence of either element from praxis inhibits the subject’s ability to transform reality. In a similar way, the necessity of the ethical subject, seeing, evaluating, and growing (the added stages which create the praxis-loop) are revealed in theorizing their sacrifice, which I attempt according to my reading of Dewey’s educational philosophy in *Experience and Education*. 
Without subjects, there are no experiences, but the lack of ethics (judgment) in subjects inhibit them from judging the moving force of an impetus or desire, so, while they may carry out a purpose successfully, they head in a direction without judgment of that direction’s value. Dewey uses the example of a burglar who may have success in carrying out his purposes but who, without judgment of the moving force of his impetus and desire, limits his growth, and for Dewey the process of growing and the ability of an experience to create conditions for continual growth are the means by which he assesses the educational value of a given experience (36).

Leading to the importance of evaluation, Dewey states, “every experience enacted and undergone modifies the one who acts and undergoes” and “every genuine experience has an active side which changes in some degree the objective conditions under which experiences are had” (39, 35). The subject in experience changes and acts in changing social reality, but without evaluation, which refines the ethical, judging subject, the subject changes uncritically instead of growing in awareness of how the objective and subjective changes affect future actions. Finally, sacrifice of seeing creates the risk of false reflection based on contexts the subject assumes to be similar but which may be different. All missing pieces of the praxis loop affect growing, which is the final and in effect initial term, as the end of growth becomes the new means of growing.

While Dewey discusses a process of agency in the critical formation of purposes, Freire locates the ability to transform the world in language, in the mediation of the word between the individual and society, which lends more easily to application in composition. Still, Dewey helps provide a more complex staging of action and reflection, which is useful for creating a curriculum around a project of civic engagement. Later in this chapter, I describe the praxis loop of my English 111 class and develop the connections between Freire and Dewey’s pedagogy, but I will turn now to a section that helps articulate the seeing (observing, theorizing) of my curriculum development and offers some questions for the evaluation of my experiments in public turn pedagogy.

**Developing the Curriculum**

The process that led Jessica Singer, author of *Stirring up Justice*, to engage in the public turn in her high school English course shares many similarities with my own motivations for adding civic engagement to English 111. After seeing an injustice in her school’s curriculum, she
conducted research, met with colleagues, and eventually helped to change the curriculum, creating untracked English courses for the first time in the school’s history. She states,

I experienced firsthand what it is like to believe in a cause so strongly that I felt driven. I spent the majority of my free evenings working to research and educate myself about untracking, meeting with my department, and planning ways of making this change take place successfully. [...] Through my own activism work, I became interested in finding ways for my students to experience the kind of drive and passion that comes when studying topics they care about deeply. I wanted students to experience the powerful relevance of reading and writing by exploring their own convictions (viii).

Singer asked each student to write about a “time in your life when you witnessed, participated in, or experienced an act of injustice,” and through the process students created definitions of injustice and justice through their own experience. After revisions, students acted publicly by turning these stories into children’s books that they shared with an audience of grade schoolers. The first project of the course both defined students as subjects who experience and reflect on the world and as agents of change who name the world, passing their understanding to others. As Singer states, “these stories offer students a way to think about past experiences as learning lessons that may influence present actions in positive ways” (39). The first assignments laid a foundation for the course on social justice in the student’s own experience, allowing students to create subjective definitions of the concept. Later, Singer allowed students to explore their own convictions by allowing them to choose a “biography, memoir, or autobiography of someone who has worked for positive social change” (45). The variety of texts on social change offered students historical examples of social problems and possible solutions, helping them to refine and expand their understanding of social change.

The first writing assignment in my English 111 class began developing as I read Singer, knowing that I needed to start with the student’s own experiences first. Her text also introduced me to some of the complexities of teaching a socially oriented class, as she states, “A tension exists for an educator between teaching what you believe and leading students closer to articulating and formulating their own beliefs. This tension is accentuated when inviting political or pedagogical material to become the focus of a curriculum” (138). While Singer starts her course hoping that students will find relevance in research and writing by “exploring their own convictions,” she later reflects on student’s agency against the authority of the teacher—a tension present in all classrooms that becomes more important to analyze when the complexities of civic engagement are added.
Nancy Welch’s *Living Room: Teaching Public Writing in a Privatized World* describes the complexities involved in her women’s studies seminar of finding a public space from which to make arguments that create meaningful social change.\(^{21}\) In her courses and scholarship, Welch understands and teaches rhetoric not as a “specialized techne” but as a “mass, popular art” (89). Welch’s populist views on rhetoric and social issues bring her to teach, study, and emulate the rhetorical art of historical labor movements, which were influential before moves to situationism’s autonomous cultural workers, academia’s focus on identity politics, and the free but “largely middle class” electronic sphere of “blog punditry” (110-11). Welch makes sure not to discredit the work of contemporary social change but articulates the need to teach, understand, and practice the rhetorics of historical conflicts that sustained large democratic movements “if we want to have real decision-making influence,” and Welch makes the argument that we and our students sorely need that decision-making influence in an increasingly corporatized and privatized world (111).

Welch’s text influenced me to teach and research historical conflicts, using Myles Horton early in the class and later showing pieces of the free speech movement in English 111. In Freire’s terms, Welch also locates action as the missing element of praxis in English classrooms, as she and her students challenge notions of expert knowledge and search for ways to achieve transformative public discourse. But her work also articulates some of the material risks of public turn pedagogy, starting with an anecdote about a student who was picked up by the police for posting an anti-war poem on a city-owned metal utility box. The anecdote serves as an example of the tightening of public space and displays how that tightening creates new risks for those involved in social change and public turn pedagogy. The anecdote made me examine the restrictions I need to put on public writing, and a meeting with Nick Longo influenced me to create the following four rules for my class’s civic engagement project: non-violent, safe, legal, and approved by me. Even with these rules in place, teaching in the public turn is often risky, and tension may occur between the student’s actions and the teacher’s authority and responsibility for the safety of his or her students.

Finally, Paula Mathieu’s *Tactics of Hope* raises some additional questions, offers a conceptual framework that mirrors the praxis loop outlined above, and provides classroom

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\(^{21}\) I read Welch’s “Living Room: Teaching Public Writing in a Post-Publicity Era” from 2005 in CCC before teaching my class but have quoted from her 2008 text which includes a revised version of the same article.
examples that expand and complicate prior notions of public writing pedagogy. Mathieu’s idea of hope, reshaped from Ernst Bloch, “embodies three important components: emotional desire or longing, cognitive reflection or analysis, and action” (18-19). She mixes the stages of hope, which become critical, with tactical approaches to public writing pedagogy that “seek rhetorically timely actions” (17). Thus, Mathieu’s conceptual framework includes an impetus to act, reflection and analysis, and action, all contextually based.

In practice, Mathieu moves away from a service learning model, looking instead for reciprocal, transitory relationships with the public outside the classroom. Teaching on the topic of homelessness, Mathieu fears that her classes may become either “a voyeuristic exercise in exoticizing an absent and abstract other” or “a boring exercise in liberal political correctness, where students would feel that the only acceptable responses would be […] mechanical responses of pity or superficial gestures of charity” (64). Through her experience as a community organizer and a public turn pedagogue, Mathieu carefully articulates what I see as the difference between justice and charity—justice being critical, exploring the roots of social problems and acting in solidarity with marginalized groups and charity applying temporary aide from a safe distance and maintaining hierarchical relationships. On the way to understanding justice over charity, Mathieu creates a classroom atmosphere that views the community as a source of knowledge for the students instead of the students as benevolent workers imparting knowledge on the community (114). Furthermore, Mathieu understands that students and teachers must be reflective of their relationships with the public outside the classroom because “the rhythms of the university do not necessarily harmonize with the rhythms and exigencies of community groups” (99), a fact that influenced Mathieu and her students to seek short-term, tactical engagements instead of the long-term relationships found in institutionalized service learning programs.

I came into the class wanting to take the civic engagement project slowly and reflectively so that students would not fall into the uncritical philanthropy described by Mathieu but come to understand the root causes of social problems affecting those in “need.” Thus, an understanding of the difference between justice and charity developed as one of my goals for the course. Finally, Mathieu’s definitions of hope as “the tension between reality and vision that provides the energy and motivation to keep working” influenced me to start off each day with quotes
related to social justice for students to critically analyze as an exercise in close reading and to start engaging in the critical hope that Mathieu describes (19).  

The Ethical Subject

Ethics, or the basis for judgment (judgment being Dewey’s term for the basic level of evaluating experience and consequences as favorable or unfavorable), present complex philosophical questions relevant to both decision making and communication. Discussing the ethical subject as a precursor to other points in the praxis loop, Freire says “We can only consider ourselves to be the subjects of our decisions, our searching, our capacity to choose—that is, as historical subjects, as people capable of transforming our world—if we are grounded ethically” (Pedagogy of Freedom 25).

Freire’s ethics are stated specifically in the first chapter of Pedagogy of Freedom, set against “a restricted kind of ethics that shows obedience only to the law of profit. Namely, the ethics of the market” (23). While market ethics rely on fatalism, specifically the fatalism of neoliberalism that accepts domination as inevitable and human suffering as unchangeable, Freire sets his ethics in relation with the human condition of unfinishedness (27).

Grounding his idea of ethics in human’s unfinishedness, Freire’s criteria for educational experience mirrors Dewey’s. Dewey identifies the educative process with those experiences that result in growing, which necessitates the possibility of growth in an unfinished world with an unfinished subject (36). When addressing a potential critique, saying “The objection made is that growth might take many different directions,” Dewey questions whether or not a burglar is moving on a path that provides opportunities for continued growth, saying “only when development in a particular line conduces to continuing growth does it answer to the criterion of education as growing” (36). Dewey does not directly answer the questions he poses, about whether or not a burglar, a gangster, or a corrupt politician can continue growing, but urges his reader to answer and places responsibility on the educator to collaborate with students in articulating the consequences of any moving force, saying “it is the business of the educator to

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22 See appendix one for a full list of the quotes I used in English 111, some of which come up throughout this chapter.
see in what direction an experience is heading,” which Dewey further describes as the responsibility of an educator to create conditions which allow for continued growth (38). In putting responsibility on the educator to help articulate consequences, and in valuing experiences which allow for continued growth, Dewey’s philosophy mirrors Freire’s idea of unfinishedness. As Freire states:

The authoritarian teacher who suffocates the natural curiosity and freedom of the student and the teacher who imposes no standards at all are equally disrespectful of an essential characteristic of our humanness, namely, our radical (and assumed) unfinishedness, out of which emerges the possibility of being ethical (*Freedom* 59).

For Freire, the student as an ethical subject is socially dependent on the conditions of the classroom, which teacher’s must be reflective of in the tension between authority and freedom. Freire also states that “if students are not able to transform their lived experiences into knowledge and to use the already acquired knowledge as a process to unveil new knowledge, they will never be able to participate rigorously in a dialogue as a process of learning and knowing” (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 19). Just as Jessica Singer allowed a space for students to examine the idea of social justice in their own experience, I wanted my students to reflect on their experience with ethical histories, morality, and values in the student’s own subjective conceptions.

Furthermore, ethics or some grounding mechanism of judgment is a necessary premise of argumentation and debate, as Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca find that some level of shared values presuppose argumentation (65).23 The complexity of these premises, however, arise in their relationship with action. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca state, “A particular audience is characterized less by which values it accepts than by the way it grades them” (81). One may value, for instance, the life of all living creatures but choose to save their grandmother in a fire instead of their goldfish if forced to chose, expressing the hierarchy of human life over animal life. Values express themselves in a hierarchy when they are acted upon, and narratives of morals/ethics/values in action express the complex relationship between these stated or perceived grounding mechanisms and action. In addition, the process represents a smaller praxis loop folded into the class’s larger loop by adding the process of reflection through narrative to an experience that describes the ethical subject moving to action. In students reflecting on their

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23 At the same time, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca recognize that the formulation of premises contain “argumentative value” (68), avoiding the question of first causes.
experience, they end one praxis loop as a self-consciously changed and growing subject, ready to start their next reflective action.

Trying to express unfinishedness and the possibility of transformation on the first day of class, I greeted my students with a “hey you all, good morning,” emphasizing the “you all,” and asking students if they knew how to say the plural second person in another language, which students in both my classes named (vosotros/vosotras and ustedes in Spanish). I then asked students what they used in English, writing their answers on the board: you all, everyone, ya’ll, you guys. Next, I narrativized my personal history with the plural second person, switching from “you guys” to “you all” because I think the later demonstrates gender equality linguistically and I believe in the power of language to shape reality. Our short dialogue helped to frame the semester, being reflective of the way language shapes relationships in the world and creating possibilities for positive social change, even through small modifications to communication.

Extending the idea that social reality is unfinished, I assigned students pgs. 71-77 from Pedagogy of the Oppressed, a section that discusses the banking model, lists the authoritarian and hierarchical practices of the traditional classroom, and emphasizes a “critical thinking and the quest for mutual humanization” between the teacher-student and student-teachers (75). For a class anticipating critical civic engagement, an awareness of social structures was necessary, starting with the classroom. Freire starts with the rights of agency for students in the classroom as creators of knowledge through their own experience and “not just a sponge to soak up the information thrown at me,” as my student Mary wrote in her discussion board post on Freire.

Each class started with a quote, as I would write one on the board and ask students to explain what it meant, apply it to experience, and offer alternative or expanded readings after their classmates. In the process, I tried to stay out of the conversation and find comfort in the silence before students began to dissect and apply the quotes. As much as I could, I used the quote to prepare students mentally for the lessons to come, and in preparing for a discussion of morality and values, I placed the following quote on the board: “Never in this world can hatred be stilled by hatred; it will be stilled only by non-hatred—this is the Law Eternal. –Buddha.” Students started the class by discussing an example of moral law, so when I wrote morality, values, motivation, and action on the board, students were better prepared to draw connections between the four concepts. Students gave examples of their own values and described values as specific pieces that when collected expressed morality. Students went on to discuss that values
create motivations, which lead to action. For homework, I had students read the first two chapters of Myles Horton’s *The Long Haul*, asking students to write about Horton’s statements of morality and their connection with his actions.

Students had discussed their own definitions of morality and written about the morality of Myles Horton, so I asked students to write one line representing their own statement of morality and to explain that single line in a page of writing, something similar to the discussions we created out of single line quotations. After these scaffolding assignments, I gave students the following paper topic, asking students to expand on their statement of morality by narrating it in their personal histories.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Morality (Paper 1)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Requirements:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>The paper must have a title and must talk about one of your own life experiences and how this relates to your values or sense of morality.</td>
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| **Expectations:** |
| I am most interested in ideas here. I want you to be working with the statement of morality you have already written and showing how it works in practice through actions. Like Myles Horton said, “you learn what you do and not what you talk about” (16). You all have talked about your sense of morality or your values, but now I want you to write down what you have done because of them, and what may have changed in your statement of morality in thinking about and writing on the relationship between morality and action in your own experiences. |

| I will be looking for some refinement of ideas, meaning that you have spent time thinking about what you are going to write, refining your statement of morality, and playing with different ways to represent an experience in which morality or values led to action. I don’t have any specific structure in mind and am open to creativity of all sorts. |

| Reread some Myles Horton for inspiration on this. The first 30 pages of the book include many statements of his own morality and a description of his values, and they correspond with a number of actions Horton takes. It should be no problem to fill 3-5 pages writing about this experience and your own morality. |

| Finally, writing about yourself is tough, but it is necessary and should be helpful for starting our project. I want you to realize that you have already acted, probably every day, based on your morality and values and that this class is little more than an extension of that same process. |
I had given the students a difficult assignment, even after our discussions and writings scaffolding the paper. After a peer review session and students asking questions in and after class, I received a mix of papers from deep and reflective (but some unstructured), to formal papers describing accomplishments achieved through the value of hard work. Students discussed testing family life, ethical commitments in sports, religion, and their involvement in protests and volunteer work. On one end of the spectrum, Dwayne’s proto-Nietzschean paper meditates on the concept of morality:

Cultural differences along with personal character and interests will directly change how people perceive the concept of right and wrong. As people grow and experience things, their own perception of the world changes to more directly fit their preference. Morality is what you make of it [...] The more I think about it, the more I feel that morality should be something within an individual; a completely unspoken code of conduct, free to change without thought or reason.

In his final line, Dwayne states “Is that morality?” Through the paper Dwayne identifies the flexibility of morality to fit one’s “preference” and the difficulty of expressing morality, which he sees as irrational. In one paragraph he discusses his inability to follow a religious code of morality and in another he reflects on the Iraq war, shifting from topic to topic quickly without sustained analysis. Dwayne’s writing is at times vague and relativistic, but I liked the writing because it embraced the complexity of the writing assignment and resisted the temptation to end on a statement of certainty.

Meanwhile, the following piece of writing from Maggie reflects some of the work I did not want to receive but did little preparation to avoid, revealing some troubles of personal narrative assignments. In “My Journey to becoming Valedictorian,” Maggie writes about the value of education and hard work instilled in her by her parents.

Ever since I was a little girl, my parents stressed the importance of a strong educational background. This is what inspired how much I value the education process today. I learned that a successful education does not come easily; I have to value hard work, dedication, time-management, stress-management, and make sacrifices in order for positive results. In my opinion and my parents opinion, a successful education is putting forth your best effort and getting as much as you can out of each class. My morality system has always been to give your best effort no matter the circumstance. Sometimes you may come up short of what your goals are,

24 Thank you to an observant reviewer for pointing this out.
but this is just something you have to learn to accept as you live your life. This seems to tie in well with my set of values because in order to give your best effort you have to put all of the values I mentioned into action. After finishing an assignment or an everyday task, I seem to ask myself if I have done the best that I could do. If the answer is yes, I am satisfied and I move on to my next assignment or task; but if the answer is no, I re-evaluate my work and make corrections where it is necessary. I am able to do this due to my sense of reality. I have to be honest with myself and for some people that is very difficult to do. My journey to becoming valedictorian is a prime example of my hard working, dedicating, time managing, stress managing, and sacrifice making set of values that my parents have instilled in me. In result to this I could not have achieved this feat if my values and my morality system did not go together hand in hand.[...]

My junior year had arrived and I realized that I had made it halfway through high school, but the hardest part was yet to come. All of my classes were honors classes and as an upperclassman I had to take the initiative to begin leading in all of my clubs, organizations, and extracurricular activities. This was also the year that the honorary clubs, such as National Honor Society and Chy Phy (science scholars honorary club), accepted applications. In order to be accepted into these clubs I had to set aside time for volunteer work. A few examples of what I took part in are the Jerry Lewis Muscular Dystrophy Telethon, Salvation Army gift wrapping, Red Cross Blood Drives, and volunteering at my local veterinary clinic. In addition to this, I had to keep my academic work at its peak. The application processes were long and stressful, but in the end it turned out to be all worth it! I was accepted to both clubs and I had been elected by my peers as the National Honor Society President for the 2006-2007 year.

Maggie begins the paper by giving a causal history of the value of education in her life, inspired by her parents as part of a larger value of hard work. Her definition of a successful education and of her own morality is expressed through the impersonal 2nd person: “In my opinion and my parent’s opinion, a successful education is putting forth your best effort and getting as much as you can out of each class. My morality system has always been to give your best effort no matter the circumstance.” Maggie, an above average writer for my institution when summarizing texts, mixes the first and second person in these sentences—her grammar is unsure if these morals are
her own, her parents, or everyone’s, an indication of the difficulty of discussing morality and the lack of reflection on morality as problematic.

Maggie narrates the action of the value of hard work and education in a list of her high school accomplishments, the things sacrificed for those accomplishments, and the difficulties she faced to achieve her successes. At the end of the first paragraph, she reflects on the process of her hard work in action, a process that reflects on the quality of the work she has done and judges whether or not she could do better, which she ultimately applies to the goal of becoming valedictorian. Through her list of accomplishments, I wanted to know what purpose those accomplishments ultimately served. Were they for herself? For her parents? Or for an unexamined reality in which success in school is a good thing?, I asked, not so bluntly, in my comments on her paper.

In another paragraph, Maggie lists extensive volunteer work, but there is no mention of the people she worked with or of the value of philanthropy fueling her volunteerism, instead she lists the membership in “honorary clubs” as the moving force of her action and lists the action’s “worth” in her eventual membership. Beyond the charity/justice split of civic engagement, Maggie uses volunteerism as a means to a personal end of awards and status, a great example of the “do this, get that,” pop-behaviorism described by Alfie Kohn in *Punished by Rewards*. While my analysis of Maggie’s writing is critical, as a teacher my stage in the praxis loop was at “seeing,” and with the many similar unreflective values of hard work mentioned by other students in their writing, I continued to reflect on what I could do to open up the possibilities of growth beyond the rewards of honorary clubs, class rank, and grades.

In Maggie’s paper, I was hoping for reflection on the complexities of morality and moral histories and a cataloguing of values in action. For instance, Maggie provided examples of the strict code of hard work she maintained in order to achieve her goal of valedictorian, saying “There were many times when my friends wanted me to go to the movies or come over to their houses but in order to give one hundred percent effort in all that I was taking part in, I had to decline these tempting invitations.” Maggie is cataloguing her values, saying that success in school is a higher value than hanging out with friends. In the section about her volunteer work, she implies that membership in honorary communities has a higher value than helping people in need (the people are never mentioned). But, while these values are put into an implied hierarchy in her narrative, she does not reflect on them, does not come to the conclusion that maybe being
valedictorian is not a justified end in itself, and does not question a system of schooling and family life that creates the unreflective desire for success and rewards as ends to themselves.25

Maggie is clearly a hard working student, but her paper was not what I wanted, which allows me to reflect on the genre of the personal essay and its place in a class on civic engagement. Speaking about personal narrative, Joe Harris offers the teacher’s perspective in a quote from *Raising Arizona*: “You’re not just telling us what we wanna hear, are you boy? […] Cause we don’t want to hear that” (43). The student’s task, Harris notes ironically, like a child at confessional or a convict in court, is to “compose a self that seems somehow both authentic and appropriate to the occasion” (43). In Maggie’s work, I see elements of the personal essay that comes along with a college application, something Maggie wrote less than a year ago when applying to Miami University. In fact, one of the options for the personal essay on Miami’s application for admissions comes very close to my assignment: “Evaluate a significant experience, achievement, risk you have taken, or ethical dilemma you have faced and its impact on you.” Instead of offering critical self-reflection, Maggie writes as if her audience needs evidence of her willpower to succeed.

I hope that my teaching persona separates me from the people I imagine reading personal essays for the office of admissions, but acknowledging the difference in audience and writing for it may have been difficult in the third week of undergraduate study, even after reading Horton, Freire, and quotes from Buddhist texts. For students like Maggie, I could have provided more tools for critical reflection on morality and values, or given examples of what I consider critical reflection, but I also must recognize that critical reflection sharpens over time, like most mental processes, with experience and practice. At the very least, students wrote about themselves as ethical subjects, acting in the world and exercising judgment.

Finally, a number of writers wrote about community work and even public writing that they had engaged in as expressions of their morality in non-violent action. Katharine, for instance, wrote about her religious convictions for the life of all people, applying these convictions to abortion, the death penalty, and the Iraq War.

Every week, I volunteered at a woman’s clinic that encouraged pregnant women to choose life for their child. In doing so, I had a few powerful conversations with teenagers my age that were deciding the fate of their fetus. It was through

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25 In contrast with Dwayne’s work, Maggie is hopeful and confident but unreflective. Dwayne is critical but apathetic.
these conversations that I believe my morals saved lives. In addition to my work at the clinic, I spent several Saturday mornings peacefully praying the rosary in front of the abortion clinic in my town. […]

I learned that the state of Texas is known for its frequent use of the death penalty. To share my disapproval and attempt to change the situation, I wrote a letter to the governor of Texas. I did not receive a response from the governor but my letter was published in my city’s newspaper and several other students wrote letters to governors in America. As a junior and senior in high school, I organized a club, Conviction for Life, which spoke out against the death penalty.

Although the war is legal in the eyes of the government, it does not follow the laws of God in that war includes killing and God teaches, “thou shall not kill.” My belief is that violence should not be dealt with by using additional violence and that death should not be prevented by killing. […] Along with twelve students of my graduating class, I stood on the sidewalk in front of my school with anti-war posters for one week. […] Following the commandment, “thou shall not kill,” I believe in life for all. My morals have become more than an internal system of beliefs by acting upon my disgust for abortion, the death penalty, and war.

Learning about Katharine’s and other students’ experiences with civic engagement helped me and the class, as I could call on them to provide perspective and experience in community organizing and public writing, treating them as knowledgeable subjects in these areas.

Seeing

Dewey states, “The only freedom that is of enduring importance is freedom of intelligence, that is to say, freedom of observation and of judgment exercised in behalf of purposes that are intrinsically worth while” (61). With the ethical subject, the praxis loops starts with the subject grown to a specific stage of their lives, which will be different for everyone in the classroom, but the ethical subject is always a reflection of the growth that has come before it. In their first writing assignment, students reflected upon themselves as subjects who act upon values, completing a praxis loop, ready to start another.
To break up two weeks of reading and writing after the student’s first paper (what some might have called celebration), our class watched an episode of *30 Days*, a program created by Morgan Spurlock (the documentary filmmaker of *Super Size Me*). In the program, Spurlock and his wife Alex live on minimum wage jobs in Cleveland for 30 days. Spurlock and Alex struggle to pay for housing, food, and utilities and end the month nearly one thousand dollars in debt after Morgan’s landscaping job leads to a strained wrist and Alex suffers a urinary tract infection. At the end of the show, I asked students if the Spurlock’s experiment reflected reality, and how it might qualify as research—in other words, what knowledge comes from Morgan and Alex’s experience? Students identified a number of factors of the Spurlock’s identity, including the fact that both were white, educated, without children, and in good health. These identity factors helped them to find jobs and an apartment (although in a dangerous area) without being employed or able to pay all of the first month’s rent. In addition, their *ethos* as renters strengthened with the camera crew that followed them around. Other students identified that Morgan and Alex only lived for 30 days in what others experience for lifetimes. In her discussion board post on the documentary, Dana wrote that Morgan Spurlock “works to create public knowledge about poverty because the film shows how every purchase whether it is a bus ride or a $1.20 donut can have a great impact on a person who is living on minimum wage.”

Writing on experience as persuasive research, Lindsay states:

> Although poverty is of wide-spread concern in this country, I do not think that individuals consider how hard it would be to actually live on minimum wage. If they were to be put in this type of situation, I think that the knowledge that they gain from the experience would change their ideas about poverty, minimum wage, and the class system in the United States, despite it being one of the richest countries in the world.

In these writings, the class identified that not only does the documentary reflect a difficult reality (although less extreme in some cases), but it represents the personal struggle of people facing that reality, something more persuasive than national statistics or the calls of politicians.

After showing *30 Days*, I assigned students a number of readings to get them thinking about how issues connect with action including a section of Mathieu’s *Tactics of Hope* about the homeless in Chicago writing and selling *StreetWise*. In reading the text after watching *30 Days*, students analyzed a similar problem from different perspectives—while *30 Days* challenged expert opinion with first-hand experience, Mathieu’s chapter on *StreetWise* expressed the
importance of community knowledge created and distributed by marginalized individuals, and her section on StreetWise practices that importance by including four texts written by homeless people. I also assigned David Owen’s “NYC is the Greenest City in America” to challenge fixed assumptions about social progress by giving students a counterintuitive argument for positive environmental change.

In analyzing poverty and environmentalism, I hope students began to see experience as research, rethink assumptions about positive social change, and find marginalized groups as sources of knowledge. In practicing these modes of analysis and to extend the idea of unfinished social reality, I asked students to find a news article describing a social problem and a social group working to solve that problem. To start, we discussed various news sources and I brought students to the Jobs with Justice website that lists hundreds of programs for social change, including labor unions, environmental activism, and faith based community groups. In letting students choose the topic, I hoped students would begin “exploring their own convictions” as Singer states, or work on issues they find “intrinsically worthwhile,” to use Dewey’s phrase, but I also recognize the teacher’s assumed authority in guiding students to their conceptions of what issues of study are worthwhile, a point I return to in the following sections and focus on in the following chapter.

Seeing-Reflecting

In preparation for an exercise on connecting consumption to production, I had students read Mathieu’s “Economic Citizenship and the Rhetoric of Gourmet Coffee,” an article analyzing Starbucks coffee and the psychosocial processes of consumption which narrativize production and separate it from social realities. After students read the article, I asked them to catalogue their production and consumption for 24 hours (telling them to leave out whatever they felt uncomfortable writing). The next class period, I wrote one of my favorite quotes on the board: “If you are a poet, you will see clearly that there is a cloud floating in this sheet of paper” (45). Students began puzzled, partly because they had to imagine the words on a page instead of the board, but with a bit of help they made the connections (tree, water, rain, cloud) between the paper and the floating (i.e. active) cloud. After the students discussed the quote, I talked about Thich Nhat Hahn’s epistemology and the image of the cloud floating in the paper as an example of the interconnectedness of all things, supporting his epistemology of “non-duality.” Hanh uses
the term “non-dual” instead of saying that everything is “one” because he is conscious that linguistically “one” relies on the existence of “two” and he states “if you want to avoid two you have to avoid one also” (39).

For the next class, students were to investigate one item of their consumption and draw the connection out as far as possible. As an example, I had students read a number of articles about the Chiquita Corporation and their funding of paramilitary groups in Columbia (groups who were on the U.S. terrorist watch list),26 something Chiquita had recently been fined for. Students read articles about the Columbian paramilitary massacring villages with AK 47s and machetes and raping the women, all while being funded by Chiquita. Seeing the floating cloud in the paper became seeing the state-terrorism in the banana.27

Along with the assignment, I provided students some links with resources like antislavery.org, which provides detailed reports about modern slave trade used to maintain production in a number of industries, and the National Labor Committee, which focuses on clothing production and broke the first major news about sweatshops to the United States.28 Students came back with an amazing amount of supplemental research, finding the unfair labor practices in their shoes, the assassination of union leaders in their soft drinks, and the multiplication of waste in their bottled water. Reflecting on her clothing, Lindsay compared The Gap’s public relations campaigns against AIDS in Africa with their use of sweatshop labor and narrated their attempts to gloss over sweatshop allegations:

When the National Labor Committee raised the issue of human rights violations existing at the Mandarin factory, the GAP’s first response was to sue the committee. However, switching tactics, the GAP then distributed corporate codes of conduct on treeless paper with soy-based ink. When asked by the NLC about the applications of the codes of conduct, workers in El Salvador factories had never seen them before

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26 While Columbian paramilitaries are among the most deserving to be on the terrorist watch list, the list is flawed and fabricated for political purposes. Recently, Condoleezza Rice expressed embarrassment that Nobel Peace Prize winner Nelson Mandela was on the U.S. terrorist watch list.

27 In an exercise of rhetorical analysis, we later looked at Chiquita’s website, which appeared to be geared towards children and used an image of a female other as the mascot (fitting, considering the rape). There were also links to “corporate responsibility,” and if one looked hard enough the connection between Chiquita and the fines for funding Columbian paramilitary was referenced (as of right now, that information has become even harder to find, but is available in the site’s catalogue of press releases).

28 In 1996 Kathie Lee Gifford’s line of clothing sold at Wal-Mart with labels stating that a portion of the proceeds went to children’s charities. Ironically, the clothing was made in dangerous Honduran factories by women as young as thirteen, making 31 cents an hour and working 75 hours a week (with forced overtime). The controversy sparked congressional legislation and Gifford helped in advocating against sweatshop labor.
and had definitely not been treated accordingly [...] Minors and their parents went on record and revealed the forced overtime hours that stretched into 18-hour shifts. The GAP claims that they have no armed guards in factories, however, during their trips to El Salvador, the National Labor Committee photographed several guards with shotguns monitoring the factories.

In another paper, Curt connects his consumption of footwear with his hobby of jogging, bringing him to analyze New Balance. Curt found that Jim Davis, the CEO of New Balance, makes the Forbes top 400 list while the average salary of those making the shoes calculates to less than $800 a year. In reflection, Curt states, “The company itself has long stated that it intends to ‘act as a socially responsible citizen.’ How can this company, that has an owner pull in a whooping 1.6 billion, not put in some money and start living up to its own ideal of being socially responsible?” Through the exercise, students connected their consumption, a normally objectified activity, to the people, social conditions, and gross inequalities which created the products. As the class began to see and reflect on problems connected to themselves, our class moved to more intense reflection in the formation of projects to deal with some of the problems students had been seeing.

Reflecting

Five weeks into the class, I asked student to write a short post on issues they were considering working on.29 Students posted on a wide variety of topics, from gay rights, to MADD, to violence in Darfur, and some students described community work they were already doing and wished to continue. I again asked students to research organizations and issues, showing them a list of Miami University organizations and having them post on another two websites, student organizations, or news articles related to what they wanted to work on. I assigned a three-page project proposal due in a week and a half and canceled one class period in between for students to meet with me about their projects. For the proposals, I asked the following questions:

What issue are you dealing with?

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29 The final result of all the student’s civic engagement projects (all the students who I received consent forms from), are summarized in Appendix 2.
Why are you interested?
What do you have to add to the issue?
How can you make the project local?
What time or resource constraints will you face?
What is the first thing you need to do?
Who will benefit?
Is the project safe, legal, and non-violent?

In Christian Weisser’s work on public turn pedagogy and public discourse, he suggests that students find counterpublics, discursive spheres that “emerge in response to exclusions and omissions within dominant publics” (106). Furthermore, he finds that “As compositionists, it is our responsibility to help students discover the various counterpublics where their public writing might have a receptive audience and, consequently, might result in significant outcomes” (107). Weisser points out that public turn compositionists must not only develop in students the desire to take issues public but must work to create public space in collaboration with the students. “Obviously, public writing need not be limited to a single discursive arena like a newspaper,” states Weisser, moving from the idea of public writing as a letter to the editor to engagement with “adult literacy programs,” specific internet forums, “volunteer organizations and community outreach groups” (106-107). In my course, every student would engage in public writing and public discourse by creating a website and giving a class presentation, but neither necessarily have both a receptive audience and the possibility for significant change. Creating a website about animal abuse, for instance, and throwing it on the web receives only a small and unspecific audience and does not provide a space for dialogue. 

I assigned the webpage not as a form of effective civic engagement in itself but to empower students with a flexible technical literacy and as a writing exercise in reforming the research paper and civic engagement into a new medium. Class presentations offered students a receptive audience to teach about the issues they studied and receive constructive feedback, but student’s topics and goals would be too diverse for significant change to occur through classroom presentations alone. In meetings with my students about their projects, I hoped we could find spaces where dialogue refined their ideas about issues and where action could be taken or planned for.

Some students came into the meeting already working with groups like Habitat for Humanity, others had contacted student groups and community organizations, and many students came with interests and desires but little else. Together, we discussed what engagement projects

30 “Animal cruelty” receives over three and a half million hits on Google.
would be feasible and looked for local connections when possible. I had contacted a friend in Green Oxford, a student group advocating for environmental change on campus, and a few interested students went to their meetings and ended up working with individuals in the organization on the beginning stages of a biodiesel project for the University’s bus system. I also had a friend who created a local Spanish-English language exchange called SALCE, and a Spanish education major looking for a project related to her discipline ended up in Hamilton teaching and learning once a week.

While some students found connections through me and others were finding their own successful connections, many students did not have feasible plans, and some came in with ideas that tested the non-violence policy and my assumed neutrality as a teacher. Three students came into meetings with me talking about abortion as the potential issue for their project. Students had mentioned abortion in their morality essays and in their exploratory topic posts, so I was prepared for the discussion. Not wanting to restrict any student from the reflective action they wanted to take, I talked to students first about where they thought the abortion debate was headed and if pro-choice or pro-life organizations (both of which were active on campus) had been making progress. I then asked students what they thought they could contribute and finally if they would consider working on root causes of abortion that both pro-life and pro-choice organizations could support, like unwanted pregnancy caused by rape or lack of sexual education. I thought that students working with either pro-life or pro-choice groups might result in unsafe or aggressive projects, but I left that decision up to the students after giving my perspective on the nature of the debate. Ultimately, one student found a campus group working on women’s safety and sponsoring “Take back the Night,” another student worked on a project connecting speech pathology (her major) and child abuse with a professor in her department, and the third student worked on bringing more fair trade foods to campus. Later in class another student, Adam, pressed my definitions of safety, wanting to take the “food stamp challenge” and live on a dollar per meal for a week, a project likely influenced by Morgan Spurlock’s experiments. I reminded Adam of the course policy and pressed him on whether or not the

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31 I am non-partisan, but certainly not neutral, a fact I neither hid nor identified in the class.
32 Later in class another student, Adam, pressed my definitions of safety, wanting to take the “food stamp challenge” and live on a dollar per meal for a week, a project likely influenced by Morgan Spurlock’s experiments. I reminded Adam of the course policy, pressed him on whether or not the project would be safe, and asked him to talk to me with more details if he was serious. He decided to find another project.
project would be safe, and asked him to talk to me with more details if he was serious. He decided to find another project.

Realizing that some students were still having difficulty finding projects to work on, I came back to class after the meetings with two exercises. First, I had students go around the room and talk about what they were doing or wanted to do with their projects. This allowed students who had projects in mind to articulate their ideas and receive feedback, and those who had an issue or list of issues but no project ideas heard about how other students connected to community groups and found projects to work on. With the second half of class, I had students again read Mathieu, this time about her class’s “tactical writing” projects, an idea similar to the notion of counterpublics discussed by Weisser. Mathieu’s text describes students who created a photo gallery representing homelessness in the area, worked on projects in the local street paper through Mathieu’s contacts, wrote to a Boston Globe reporter who “covered homeless issues in unusual and potentially disturbing ways” and invited him to visit the class (he obliged), created lesson plans and children’s books for pedagogical purposes, organized a meeting on the topic of homelessness with a member of Homeless People’s Network as a speaker, and made critical maps marking the causes of homelessness around Boston’s Freedom Trail and placed them in the kiosk alongside the official maps. I had students read about, rank and explain their ranking of these projects (75-80). The class allowed us to discuss the merits of different civic engagement projects and to create an expanded notion of public writing and civic engagement.

Into the second half of the semester, I left definitions of the community engagement project up to the students, assuming that strict guidelines would limit their creative potential, but students continued to ask about assessment so I wrote broad guidelines which encompassed all the projects students had already begun working on (and referenced a few of them). While working on civic engagement projects, students were also writing related research papers and preparing for class presentations. Below are the guidelines for the research project and civic engagement project.
Civic Engagement

Evidence of civic engagement must be shown either in the research, the presentation, the website, or in the final reflective paper (ideally it will be present through all of these). In your research paper you should be able to identify the issue and the people who are affected. Furthermore, you should be arguing for the relevance of the issue and your contribution.

The goal of the community engagement is to be doing something active with the knowledge you have obtained. This can be done through direct contact with those in need (like creating a program for those with cancer to look better and feel better or teaching English to the Latino/Latina population), through working with the structures of power that make conditions unfavorable for certain people (like talking to the administrators on campus who choose food options and asking them about fair trade foods or through starting a letter writing campaign to congressmen about an issue you’re researching), through the education of others that could do something to help out (like giving a presentation on debt cancellation to a group of students interested in Africa), or through any other creative means you can think of.

Research Paper

The paper should start with the identification of your issue. The issue should be focused enough that you can answer the following questions in ways that acknowledge its complexities: Who is negatively affected? Who are the stake holders in the issue? What can be done to make the problem better?

Requirements:
- 8–10 pages double spaced
- 8 reliable citations from a broad range of sources
- MLA citations and a works cited page
- You must look into and address another side of the issue (make it complex by providing another perspective—either one that is in disagreement with your position or that makes parallel arguments)
- Add a note to the end of the paper about why this issue is important to you and what you are doing or plan to do with the research
Charity should be abolished and replaced by justice.
-Norman Bethune

The importance of the above quote revealed itself slowly as the class went on, and I placed it on the board a week after the project proposals were due, too late to direct some students from projects in which they collected money for food pantries and other acts of charity. These were not unintelligent actions, especially when they wrote research papers about the problems causing hunger in local communities, but they lack long-term evaluation of the consequences of charity. Despite focusing on the issue late in the class (it had been implied with Freire, Mathieu, and Horton), many students acted on projects of justice, but a few worked for charity, and others mixed the two or engaged in projects where the distinction did not necessarily apply.

Paulo Freire uses the phrase “true generosity” against the idea of charity when discussing the concept in Pedagogy of the Oppressed. He states:

False charity constrains the fearful and subdued, the “rejects of life,” to extend their trembling hands. True generosity lies in striving so that these hands—whether of individuals or entire people—need be extended less and less in supplication, so that more and more they become human hands which work, and, working, transform the world.

Keeping to the mantra of abolishing charity, any social group or institution should seek its irrelevance if it works in true solidarity with historically marginalized people (or other living things). The end goal should be the abolishment of the oppressive social conditions that create inequality, which would end the necessity of charitable foundations because they rely on and help define an unjust and artificial social hierarchy.33 My hope in the course was that through reflective, intelligent action my class would work for justice.

Earlier in this chapter, I mentioned a student, Alexi, working on a Spanish-English language exchange in Hamilton, Ohio. In Alexi’s research paper, she discussed immigration in

33 Someone may have a number of scientific, sociological, or historical justifications for inequalities, but my point here follows from a principle of equality, a notion I discuss in the conclusion.
the United States and especially in Hamilton where the Butler County Sheriff runs on an anti-immigration platform, engages in racial profiling, and had thrown 200 immigrants in jail after raiding a factory during the semester she worked in Hamilton.\(^{34}\) Her paper moved on to discuss the philosophy of SALCE, her language exchange program, which based their program on the teachings of Paulo Freire. Within the historical context of the immigrant population in Hamilton and the work of Freire, Alexi analyzed and contextualized her work in the language exchange.

About her experience working with SALCE she states:

> During my field experience so far, I have not only taught but have learned so much. Every Wednesday I meet with other members from the Student Activists Language and Cultural Exchange (SALCE) group and we teach English to Spanish speaking people on the Hamilton Campus.[...]

> At first, I thought teaching would be extremely difficult because I am not completely fluent in Spanish and I have never been a teacher before. When I teach [Lupe] a new chapter, the most innate way for me to teach is that I first explain in Spanish so she can understand exactly what she is learning, and then I explain in English so she can start to hear the English language and understand it when she is spoken to. However, sometimes I don’t know the correct words or translations in Spanish so she teaches me new vocabulary and sentence formations so I can improve my Spanish skills as well. Her daughter, [Elena], also comes in about half way through each session and helps teach. [Elena] is fluent in both English and Spanish and wishes to become an English as a Second Language (ESL) Teacher. [...]

> By traveling to Hamilton I am able to get a feel for teaching English to non-English speaking people and using my Spanish skills. This experience also shows how we are trying to close the gap between the Spanish and English speaking communities by teaching everyday American culture as well as American traditions. We are also learning about the Spanish culture and learning their language. By this interaction we can start to cooperate in a society and live in peace with mixed culture and equal rights for all.

Alexi identifies that she is learning Spanish and learning how to teach while working with SALCE. While she calls herself a teacher, she recognizes when Lupe also teaches, and she references the knowledge of Lupe’s daughter Elena who also teaches and learns for her future as

\(^{34}\) Butler Country Sheriff Richard K. Jones also billed the federal government for the money his jail spent feeding and housing undocumented immigrants and placed a large sign next to his jail which states “Illegal Aliens Here” with an arrow pointing to the jail.
an ESL teacher. While SALCE has power in organizing the teaching situation, their relationship with community members is a reciprocal exchange of teaching and learning. Furthermore, Alexi’s work with SALCE constitutes a tactical counterpublic, as she exchanges immediately relevant cultural and linguistic knowledge through dialogue, works against divisive social structures, and empowers everyone involved as actors of continual growth.

As for Alexi’s relationship with the organization SALCE, she clearly added to the success of the organization, instead of sapping resources or time. She brought her Spanish speaking skills and a desire to teach to the program, and, as the founder of the SALCE told me, she was a blessing to the group.35 Alexi even made her website assignment relevant to the organization, working with the founder to create SALCE’s website instead of her own personal site.

Other students had a tougher time finding local contacts and did not engage in reciprocal relationships. Joe, for instance, changed his topic from ethanol, a topic he never had a clear civic engagement project for, to drunk driving, scurrying before his class presentation and rough draft to meet with the Oxford Police Department. Meeting with me to discuss his change, he complained that the OPD worked on “dog time” and was not responding to his emails or phone calls. When Joe told me he did not have a project to propose for the OPD, I wondered if I should intervene and tell him to leave the Police Department to do their work, and he could write about the barriers between him and a successful project. Mathieu discusses times when academics “enter a scene carrying an agenda” and the flaws of this approach for both the academic (or student) and those in the community (63), but I allowed Joe to continue trying to contact the OPD because he was clearly concerned about his grade and I did not have a ready solution to offer him in exchange. I had designed the class to work with a variety of engagement projects and prepared to consider student’s work in the class successful even if their civic engagement was not, but I had not prepared for complete inaction as acceptable. Both Joe and I were constrained by the classroom structure and the system of grading, which pushed him into what we could assume to be an unproductive engagement project and left me with a choice between punishing him with a bad grade or letting him proceed with the project. In his reflection paper,
he wrote about his meeting with two police officers and the possibility of his helping with “a movie about drunk driving” to show at “scheduled task force meetings,” an ambiguous project that, based on Joe’s attitude, probably never materialized. Later in the reflection, Joe argued for his grade (something I offered as an additional writing option since an argumentative piece of writing for a grade represents a writing situations with a palpable goal and a clearly defined audience), again complaining about his “non-cooperative contact.” Joe’s project clearly aimed for a grade instead of justice or even charity, as he argued not for what he learned or what the OPD gained but how much work he put in by “putting up with” the OPD on his assignment.

Finally, some students created their own sites of positive engagement through an intense desire for social change and determination to follow up with contacts and modify plans based on their available means. Lauren, in one of the most ambitious and successful projects in my class, served as the connecting node between the ontology clinic at Oxford’s hospital, the American Cancer Society, and “Look Good, Feel Better,” a program that brings cosmetics and offers workshops for women with cancer. Through the workshops, as Lauren explains in her research paper, patients make themselves up, helping them to cope with the “emotional and psychosocial distress” that often occurs with the “loss of hair, nails, etc” after chemotherapy. Lauren, after having women in her family go through chemotherapy, succeeded in scheduling bi-annual workshops in Oxford after countless phone calls and emails. Since Lauren started early and made progress quickly, she served as a resource for the class when we discussed how to approach community organizations, allowing us to read some of her email correspondences and identify what made her communications so successful.

Evaluating

36 In writing for their grades, students do not “inscribe their positions in a vacuum,” as Wells writes of good public writing assignments (328).
37 The one thing I stressed in Lauren’s research was to look at possible critiques of the program (as a guideline for the research paper suggests), and she did with an article that pointed out the carcinogens in most cosmetic products. I also asked questions of stereotypical gender roles promoted by the program, but Lauren, I think rightly, shaped the program as one of empowerment where women “refuse to let cancer control their lives” by returning to the cosmetic practices and outward appearances they had been accustomed to before chemotherapy.
In order for students to evaluate the class as a whole process and to reflect on their civic engagement, I gave the following reflection assignments:

**Part 1**: 400-700 words
Describe your civic engagement as specifically as you possibly can and show some evidence of what you have done. Answer all of the questions that apply in a narrative about your civic engagement: What was the goal of your civic engagement? Who have you had discussions with? What was the process of your civic engagement? How did it apply to what we read at the start of the year? What were some of the frustrations you experienced? How did you overcome these frustrations? What was effective? What was ineffective? If you had more time, how would you have improved your engagement with the community? (This last question is an important one and I think everyone should answer it.) To show evidence of your experience you might list all the people you’ve had conversations with, attach emails, attach documents such as flyers and pamphlets, and/or send videos or presentations you’ve used.

**Part 2**: 500-800 words (pick 1 option)
Option 1: Speculate to the effects of your civic engagement. What does it have the potential of doing for an individual or a community? Write a story of this speculation—follow your civic engagement and narrate the effects it has.
Option 2: Write a narrative about what you’ve learned in the class. Add in daily quotes, major themes from readings, information from documentary film, classroom experiences, and what you gained from your own project. Look through our discussion board to remind yourself of the different things we’ve done.
Option 3: Based on the readings we did earlier in the year, write a short paper on civic engagement, action, and/or education within a community. This should reference bits of those readings directly and talk about the ideas in those works. This is a more objective, distanced paper than the first two.
Option 4: Write on two of the above options, both 500-800 words, for some extra credit.

**Part 3 (optional):**
Argue for your grade. This is an effective assignment because it is a real writing situation; you will have to use the different appeals (ethos, pathos, logos) to persuade your audience (me) into seeing your perspective on the issue. You can take this seriously or not, depending on what you think is effective. I’ll consider it to the extent that the argument presented warrants consideration.

On the praxis loop, evaluating meets the loop on its way back down, after traveling a distance through seeing, reflecting (on past actions and historical consequences), and acting. In student’s reflections on their civic engagement and on the course as a whole, I wanted them to leave the class on a positive note even if their projects had not worked out as planned. For students to identify their frustrations and the boundaries between themselves and successful projects was a critical exercise in defining the way the objective world (to use Dewey’s
terminology) affects their subjective desires for social change. The exercise also allowed them to consider what they might have done with more time and to imagine what future effects their projects will have on the communities and individuals they worked with. My aim in these reflections was for students to leave the project unapathetic and more likely to engage in dialogue and action.38

In their reflections, some students discussed continuing actions. Aaron and Nick, my students working on a project “to convert all Miami University owned buses and vans from petrol-diesel to biodiesel” worked with a graduate student who planned to train my students to become managers of the project. Aaron and Nick were excited but listed a number of boundaries between the idea and its realization: working with student and faculty government, convincing the board of trustees, dealing with existing contracted labor, building a converter, and collecting waste oil—quite a list. Whether the project ends up successful or not, the students are engaging with the complexities of social change and if the class has balanced hope, experience, and communicative skill in civic engagement, the students will continue working for environmental change, even if the biodiesel project ultimately falls through. For now, they are committed, as Aaron states, “There is always something to fight for in our environment, and I have found my battle, and I will not stop until we stop causing such terrible harm to our Earth.” Along with identifying the limits and boundaries between the project and its successful result, the reflective exercise allowed them to dream. As Aaron further states, “In my head, Miami University is only the first step. After we successfully convert the transit system here, we can tell other colleges, ‘Look at what we accomplished. We converted to biodiesel, and now we have both saved money and lowered emissions. So what is to stop you from doing this as well?’” In these reflections students restated Mathieu’s critical hope, “the tension between reality and vision that provides the energy and motivation to keep working” (19).

38 I use the word “evaluating” in the praxis loop to fit with Dewey and to separate it from the earlier stage of reflection which comes after and along with seeing, but I like to think of the evaluation stage as a second reflection and have trouble sticking with the term “evaluation” because the word’s connotations are too technocratic for me (the term implies grading or assessment, when the stage of the praxis loop is meant for self-reflection in consideration of the prior process of seeing, reflecting, and acting). Apologies for any confusion.
Growing

The goal of the praxis loop, as set in Dewey’s terms, is to grow in a way that leads to continual growth. If students became too frustrated with their civic engagement projects with social change then the course may have limited growth and the possibility for continued growth. If, on the other hand, the class demonstrated the unfinishedness of the world, the influence of a history of people conditioning our present and the possibility of action in renaming and recreating future social conditions, then the class succeeded in creating conditions for student’s growth and continued growing. As Susan Well’s states, “direct experience of the social can be a very convincing argument for the impossibility of change,” so the attitude with which students enter public engagements and the outcome of those engagements are important for continued growth. In order to evaluate and grow in my own practice, and with the continued growth and the ethics of the relationships between my class and the public in mind, I need to consider what adjustments I would make to the class if I taught it again.

As I noted above, I should have brought up the charity/justice divide more fully earlier in the semester, since much of the volunteer or service learning work students were accustomed to falls on the side of charity. With the weeks of preparation and in-depth research project, most students understood and acted on the side of justice, but the concept is complex and variegated and raises a number of questions about how or if one should act, and, most importantly, the charity/justice divide considers those who the students are working with (or for) more critically as people within an oppressive social system. Charity, which I discussed as unwanted through much of this chapter, is positive in the way it addresses immediate need, like offering food to starving people. Charity becomes uncritical and potentially oppressive only when an understanding of and action on the root causes do not follow.39

Along with a deeper theoretical discussion of charity and justice, students would have benefited from a connection with projects that allowed them to put justice into practice. In some cases, charitable projects, like collecting money for a Cleveland food pantry, came from the inability for the student or myself to come up with an alternative project. I came into the class

39 The following quote, which I started a class period with, comments on the popular desire for uncritical charity: “When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist” (Don Helder Camara, Archbishop Saint of Brazil).
with contacts for at least four active student groups, and at least one student worked on projects
with each group, but there were limited spaces for student’s active participation during the
semester. I contacted student groups before our class began, but I could have prepared more
thoroughly by discussing what types of projects my students might do with those groups and
expanding my knowledge and communication with additional local organizations. Stemming
from the scarcity of organizations seeking part-time engagements, the most common frustration
mentioned in my students’ reflections described the inability to find groups working on the
issues they were interested in. While I tried to shape frustration as educational, too much
frustration with the inability of students to work on issues important to them creates apathy. At
the same time, students who found their own counterpublics and organizations learned more
about the complex realities of engaging in social change by initiating contact and working in
dialogue to find projects of collaboration, like my student who worked with “Look Good, Feel
Better” and a student who joined a local food co-op and wrote about the declining markets for
local farmers. For public turn pedagogues, connections with local organizations working on
social change with positions available for students (like my connection with SALCE) will be
important, but the freedom and motivation for students to find and develop their own
counterpublics need to be considered as well.

Some students never found a counterpublic or a civic engagement project, and respect for
the public outside the classroom means, no matter what else, to not harm the public with the
actions of the class. Knowing what I do now, I would have been more straightforward on this
point (part of the justice/charity discussion) and would have developed alternatives to student
action for those struggling to find a civic engagement project. For instance, I should have had an
assignment ready for Joe, possibly an extended reflection about the difficulties of engaging in
public discourse for positive social change. A handful of other students could not find a
reasonable engagement project, and they described groups they wanted to do projects but could
not find something in that semester and proposed actions that they wanted to take in the future. I
think their writing and research still benefited from the anticipation of public work, and, as Freire
says, “Critical reflection is also action” (*Oppressed* 128).

In creating a retrospective wish list for the class, I would also add more time for in-depth
end-of-the-year evaluation and reflection, but adding that to more theory before action (what in
the praxis-loop is labeled reflection), and more productive action exposes the inability of a
semester to accomplish all that a compositionist desires from public turn pedagogy. An educator must focus on one of several goals depending on the context and their subjective reviews of student need. In my class and in this chapter, I have implicitly made arguments for attention to the charity/justice divide, for student’s writing and research to be always tied to the anticipation of action, and for the end product of continued growing and an understanding of unfinishedness against fatalism or apathy.

Preparing for my English 112 class the next semester, I evaluated the accomplishments and drawbacks of my English 111 curriculum and decided against a required civic engagement project because I did not want to work in a classroom where even one student did not recognize the difference between charity and justice or where one student engaged in a project that disrupted the work of a social organization. Before I began another civic engagement project, I wanted to make sure I would get it right, having contacts with social groups ready and preparing students for responsible public work. In my Eng. 112 course, I wanted to focus more on theories of democracy and grassroots organization, choosing Myles Horton’s *The Long Haul* as the course text and developing spaces for action on these theories inside the classroom.
CHAPTER TWO
CONSSENSUS DECISION MAKING IN THE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

There is, I think, no point in the philosophy of progressive education which is sounder than its emphasis upon the importance of the participation of the learner in the formation of the purposes which direct his [sic] activities in the learning process, just as there is no defect in traditional education greater than its failure to secure the active co-operation of the pupil in construction of the purposes involved in his [sic] own study.
- John Dewey (Experience 67)

Out of respect for freedom I have always deliberately refused its distortion. Freedom is not the absence of limits. What I have sought always is to live the tension, the contradiction, between authority and freedom so as to maintain respect for both. To separate them is to provoke the infraction of one or the other […] The undoubtedly correct position, though the most difficult, is the democratic one, coherent in its utopian pursuit of solidarity and equality. Here, it is not possible to have authority without freedom or vice versa.
- Paulo Freire (Freedom 99).

Writing on the historical usage of the word consensus, Raymond Williams found it “remarkable that so apparently mild a word has attracted such strong feelings” (78). The word, combining the Latin con for “together” and sentire for “feel,” has been used to signify an agreeable middle ground and critiqued for not allowing “issues not already important” to be expressed in a given discourse community’s debate (77). Williams explains that “It is now a very difficult word to use […] from the positive sense of seeking general agreement […] to the implication of a ‘manipulative’ kind of politics seeking to build a ‘silent majority’ as the power-base from which dissenting movements or ideas can be excluded or repressed (77-78).

The radical difference in the usage and connotations of consensus are no clearer than during the WTO Ministerial Conference of 1999 and its subsequent protests. Here, what has been called the “Washington consensus” of free-trade and neoliberalism set out to make expanded global trade deals and were physically opposed by over 40,000 peaceful protestors who operated by what David Graeber cites as the primary example of the “apparent miracle of consensus decision making in which one can see thousands of people coordinate their actions without any formal leadership structure” (4).

Discussions of consensus in composition studies have, likewise, balanced conflicting connotations, processes, and outcomes, mainly in debates about collaborative learning ushered in by social construction theory. Responding to debates from the mid to late eighties, John Trimbur states that “the notion of consensus is one of the most controversial and misunderstood aspects of
collaborative learning” (439). The two competing descriptions of consensus and the goal of these debates are made clear in the following statement from Trimbur: “To develop a critical version of collaborative learning, we will need to distinguish between consensus as an acculturative practice that reproduces business as usual and consensus as an oppositional one that challenges the prevailing conditions of production” (451). I intend to summarize Trimbur’s attempt at this distinction further along in this chapter, but I also hope to provide inquiry-based reasons for arguing that the apparent dichotomy offered above by Williams and Trimbur is in practice variegated and complex. This chapter will present a different view of consensus, showing that its usefulness in developing “critical version[s] of collaborative learning” is ultimately based on context and the process of decision making.

To better analyze consensus in the history of composition studies and my own use of consensus in the classroom, I draw on work from a few scholars outside of the field, including David Graeber’s anecdotal and anthropological findings on consensus, and Kevin Sagar and John Gastil’s experiments in communication studies. Sagar and Gastil, in a study researching the outcomes, benefits, and communicative precursors for consensus on issues of public policy, discuss an “autocratic-participative continuum” in which they taxonomize (in the following order) a number of decision rules, including decision by authority (those who have the power), decision by expert (those assumed to be knowledgeable), decision by majority rule, and decision by consensus (3). Especially pertinent to my discussion here is the distinction they make between “consensus outcome,” which “refers to group member’s unanimous agreement on a particular issue or course of action” and “consensus decision rule,” which “by contrast, is a complex, time-consuming social process during which members must reach full agreement prior to coming to a final decision” (3). Compositionists have largely disregarded this useful distinction, critiquing consensus outcome without considering the many participative processes of consensus decision making. I use “consensus decision making” to mean both what Sagar and Gastil call “consensus decision rule” and what Graeber often calls “consensus process.” In the following pages, I abbreviate “consensus decision making” as CDM and I discuss more fully my specific use of consensus decision-making process in my classroom, which is a modification of the “fist-of five” CDM process.

While Sagar and Gastil find that consensus is the most participative mode of decision making and compositionists consistently argue for teaching practices that allow for increased
student agency and participation in discourses inside and outside the classroom, the term “consensus” in composition studies has by now been either abandoned completely or relegated for use as an opposed term to “conflict.” In the following sections, I return to composition’s debates on consensus in order to locate my use of CDM within the discipline’s historical context and to reflect on my teaching practice in light of the theoretical critiques of consensus offered in these debates.

Consensus and Composition Studies

Starting with a view of knowledge as made rather than found, constructed and not uncovered, and in the wake of liberatory pedagogy, Kenneth Bruffee and Peter Elbow discussed classrooms in which the teacher stepped aside as the knowledgeable authority and allowed students to create knowledge together.40 The classroom, as a discourse community in these conceptualizations, creates knowledge through collaborative interpretations, writing, decision making, and problem solving. In the early to mid 90’s, Joe Harris, Mary-Louise Pratt, Sidney Dobrin, Susan Jarratt, Evelyn Ashton-Jones, and Greg Myers all critiqued the classroom-as-community in different ways, offering “contact zone” and “public” as alternative metaphors for community, inserting “conflict” as an agonistic replacement to what was often deemed the maternalistic goal of consensus,41 and interrogating the role of ideology and identity in the classroom.42

These critics point out that allowing students to create knowledge in collaboration does not eliminate power hierarchies. Gender, race, and class interests along with socio-political histories and ideologies shape and inform classroom debate, even when the teacher attempts to give up authority. Furthermore, they argue that Bruffee and Elbow’s construction of the classroom as a community with the purpose of consensus limits the possibility for dissent or viewpoints not already important.

40 Greg Myers’ “Reality, Consensus, and Reform in the Rhetoric of Composition Teaching” offers a critical history of consensus in collaborative learning, which goes back further than the debate I discuss here.

41 Is it telling that “maternalistic” is not in my word processor’s dictionary while “paternalistic” is? Does Microsoft Corporation acknowledge the possibility of feminine social systems? In addition, paternalism is in the free version of Merriam Webster online, but one must pay for a definition of maternalism. Is “maternalism” a concept for the privileged?

42 See Christian R. Weisser’s chapter “Radical Approaches to Composition” in Moving Beyond Academic Discourse for a discussion of consensus in Bruffee, Myers, Trimbur, and Ashton-Jones. Also see Harris’s chapter “Community” in A Teaching Subject and Dobrin’s chapter “Feminist Theory and Composition Pedagogy” in Constructing Knowledges for sides of the debate I will not be able to cover in these pages.
I accept the critiques summarized above, as they locate potential problems in discourses that prescribe consensus outcomes. However, these discussions lose the more democratic view of consensus process that takes dissent into account and challenges expert and authoritative knowledge production, allowing everyone to have power in making decisions.43 By looking back at one of the main debates over consensus in composition studies among Bruffee, Myers, and Trimbur, and by describing my use of consensus decision making in the classroom, I hope to reconceptualize consensus process and revive it for specific moments in the classroom where it can serve as a model for participatory democracy, create a space from which to critique less participatory social systems, and give students agency in classroom structures where little agency currently exists.

**Bruffee, Myers, and Trimbur on Consensus**

While Bruffee’s “Collaborative Learning and the ‘Conversation of Mankind’” engages with discussions of student agency against the traditional authority of the teacher, it focuses on collaborative learning as an effective method of acculturation, stating that one of the “main goals” of collaborative learning is to “provide a context in which students can practice and master the normal discourse exercised in established knowledge communities in the academic world and in business, government and the professions” (402). Bruffee complicates this idea to an extent, stating that “the interest of the larger community is to resist this conservative tendency” and ultimately stating that teachers are responsible for acting as both “conservators and agents of change” (409-410). Bruffee’s idea of the “larger community” is not defined any further in this essay, and, as Bruffee states in the previous quote, the teacher acts as an agent for change, not the students, a process which maintains the teacher’s agency and authority.

Bruffee mentions the word consensus only a handful of times in his essay, once when referring to collaborative interpretation, saying that his students “converse in order to reach consensus in answer to questions the teacher has raised about the text” so students can learn and practice “in this orderly way, the normal discourse of the academic community” (404). He also cites collaborative consensus decision making in the medical field, where it has been shown to be more efficient and effective in diagnosis (395). Despite only occasionally using the term,

43 I dichotomize here, but I intend to discuss the overlap of good consensus process (open dialogue that takes into account dissensus and mediates for group action) and bad consensus outcome (acculturation through hierarchical systems that prescribe agreement and engage in manipulation) in the following pages.
Bruffee’s conception of consensus was enough for Greg Myers to claim, in response, that “lack of analysis of this consensus is the weak point of his theory” (428). Myers states that collaborative learning pedagogies aiming for consensus can be “fierce enforcers of conformity” and “consensus […] must mean that some interests have been suppressed or excluded” (418). Myers accuses Bruffee of treating consensus as an unquestionable reality, saying that he “takes consensus as something that just is, rather than something that might be good or bad” (429). In response, Myers inserts social critique into his conception of collaborative learning, calling for “more skepticism about what assignments do to reproduce the structures of our society” and asking for assignments and classroom structures that emphasize “conflict as well as collaboration” (432-434). While Bruffee errs on the side of acculturation when discussing consensus in collaborative learning, Myers calls for a deeper look at the ideologies that inform both the classroom and society, something that cannot be done through consensus as Bruffee explains the concept. From my perspective, Myers’ critique is warranted, but he concludes his essay by stating “I have no specific new ideas for what we should do Monday morning” (434), and that conclusion is simply not good enough. Without new visions of a way forward, he stifles the progress Bruffee makes in collaborative learning, and, without an alternative route, his critiques only stand as justification for a return to traditional, authoritarian teaching roles.

Trimbur recognizes Myers’ critique of consensus and critically revises the term so that it includes dissent. He looks at consensus not as an outcome, but as “a strategy that structures differences by organizing them in relation to each other” (446). For Trimbur, collaborative learning is less about “collective agreements” and more about “collective explanations of how people differ, where their differences come from, and whether they can live and work together with these differences” (448). In fact, Trimbur’s view of consensus is so far removed from consensus outcome and committed to process that his definition of consensus becomes what he labels a “necessary fiction” and a “utopian instead of a ‘real world’ practice” (451). He states that “the revised notion of consensus I am proposing here depends paradoxically on its deferral, not its realization” (454). Trimbur draws on Habermas to differentiate between “spurious” and “genuine” consensus. The former being reached through “coercion or systematic distortion” while the latter is a “counterfactual anticipation” that agreements can be found through “a

44 In Myers’ use of the term here, he moves backwards from consensus outcome and implies that an oppressive system necessarily produced it.
utopian discursive space” organized “according to relations of non-domination” (451). Trimbur uses his fictitious consensus as an ideal from which students can critique authoritarian discourses. I concur with Trimbur that “genuine consensus” as he describes it (an ideal speech situation outside of hierarchy) is a fiction, and I too recognize this utopian ideal as a necessary fiction if students and teachers want to produce a more democratic discourse. However, I question whether his use of the term consensus provides the critical version of collaborative learning he calls for.

Trimbur and the End of Consensus

Trimbur is a useful precursor to my work with consensus decision making because he revises consensus to include dissent, focuses on the process of consensus as the determinant for its success as a participatory method, and acknowledges that through movement along the autocratic-democratic continuum one can find the distance necessary to critique hierarchical systems of knowledge.45 However, Trimbur lacks relevant classroom examples showing his notion of consensus in action, and this absence raises two questions. First, if actually making a consensus decision is removed from the process and consensus is instead treated as a necessary fiction of ideal discourse, how does the absence of consensus outcome (as an action occurring after consensus process) affect discourse in the classroom? Second, why is the term consensus necessary to describe an ideal speech situation?

The first question I pose is similar to some posed by Joseph Harris in response to Mary Louise Pratt’s conception of the classroom as a contact zone. Harris asks for classroom examples that show the reasons why differences emerge in the classroom and come into contact with each other. In a chapter about the notion of community in composition, Harris says that he prefers the word “public” because “it refers not to a group of people (like community) but to a kind of space and process, a point of contact that needs both to be created and maintained” (109). While Harris acknowledges the benefit of conflict in the classroom, drawing on critiques of consensus in the early and mid nineties (as summarized above), he searches for a space between consensus and conflict and a reason for students to act in that middle space. Through anecdotes of his own experience with intellectual conflict in which “neither argument produced anything but a victory or a loss; no refinement of ideas, no negotiation of perspectives” (120), Harris looks for a space

45 As Rosa Luxembourg states, “Those who do not move, do not notice their chains.”
that “like a city […] allows for both consensus and conflict” and offers the term “civility, a willingness to live with difference,” as one that may forward his idea of classroom dialogue (106, 109). Harris’s goal of civility leads him to Pratt’s idea of the classroom as a contact zone, “a contested space where many discourses and cultures may meet and struggle with each other” (117). However, Harris critiques Pratt for a lack of classroom examples, and he questions the practical use of her theories, asking “who could blame students in such a class if they chose not to venture into the ‘contact zone’ that sprawls dangerously beyond?” (124). Harris concludes by moving on from conflict and the contact zone and calling for the following:

We instead need to imagine a different sort of social space where people have reason to come into contact with each other because they have claims and interests that extend beyond the borders of their own safe houses, neighborhoods, disciplines, or communities. And so I would argue that we need a new rhetoric of courtship and identification […] to accompany the rhetoric of division or conflict that currently dominates so much of our talk about teaching (124).

Harris is identifying an absence in Pratt’s idea of contact zone because, while participatory and critical in theory, she gives no clear example of how or why differences are negotiated, spaces are contested, or cultures struggle with each other. Similarly, when Trimbur removes the decision making stage (the action) of consensus from his theory, he leaves no reason for students to engage in participatory discourse.

The second question I posed to Trimbur is whether or not consensus, considering his theory, is a useful term. Trimbur writes against consensus outcome and for process but to an extent that he no longer engages in consensus decision-making process because no decisions are being made. In “John Trimbur Responds,” an essay published with four critiques of Trimbur’s essay on consensus, he writes against “expressivist pedagogy” and states that collaborative learning is different and empowering because it imagines “collective forms of social action” (697). Taking action is part of Trimbur’s theory in his response to critiques of his essay, but, curiously, the word consensus is missing. In its place, Trimbur makes a distinction between “social activity” and “collaborative learning,” saying that the latter “is a normative term that tries to imagine relations of non-domination and mutual reciprocity that exist only in partial and fragmentary forms” (699). Perhaps Trimbur realized that consensus was not a useful term in his theory once the actual practice of decision making was subtracted, so when he got the chance to revisit his work, he redefined collaborative learning to represent everything that “genuine
consensus” (ideal discourse in relations of non-domination) represented in his original essay. Consensus, it seems, has not been used except in opposition to “conflict” in composition theory since.

Harris and Trimbur both complicate terms in collaborative learning, acknowledging the pedagogical and democratic necessity of difference. In Trimbur’s collected work, he seeks group action along with the cataloguing of difference, and Harris searches for a middle term between the acculturating idea of consensus commonly discussed in composition and the opposed term of conflict, not content with Pratt’s writing on the contact zone because he cannot find the reasons for student’s differences to emerge and be negotiated.

Since consensus decision making has been effective as a process of non-domination and group action in native cultures, progressive religious institutions, and social activist collectives, I feel the need to revisit the idea as a way to create spaces in the classroom where differences emerge in solving problems in which everyone in a class holds a stake. Specifically, I work on consensus decision making for collaboration in the curriculum with my students, something that has been experimented with by Peter Elbow and Ira Shor, among others. Ira Shor’s work, specifically in *When Students Have the Power*, speaks more closely to my classroom practice than the early social constructionist debates over the idea of consensus, but the debate around consensus adds a new level of questions to experiments with collaborative curricula and class contracts, asking about the ways in which identities in the classroom affect discourse. In addition, consensus process may be a useful expansion of Shor’s experiments in collaborative curricula.

In the following sections, I do my best to narrate my English 112 class from my perspective and follow my narration with some deeper reflection. William Thelin and John Tassoni, on a collection of teacher blunders in critical-democratic pedagogy, state that “Student empowerment and challenges to the status quo obviously could not run seamlessly and still be what they claim…” (2). For the sake of demonstrating consensus process to the reader, my narrative will run more or less seamlessly, with only some footnotes to interrupt, but in my final

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46 Anthropologist David Graeber finds examples of consensus in cultures thousands of years old and states that “In North America, ‘consensus process’ emerged more than anything else from the feminist movement in the ‘70s […] The idea of consensus itself was borrowed from the Quakers, who again, claim to have been inspired by the Six Nations and other Native American practices” (“Anarchism” 3).
section I will engage in a more complex stage of reflection, questioning and blurring the coherent narrative I created about student empowerment through consensus decision making.

**Fist-of-Five Consensus Decision Making**

At Highlander Folk School’s 75th anniversary, an organizer introduced me to the “fist-of-five” method of consensus decision making, which I later used in the first-year composition and literature course (Eng. 112) that I describe below. Like other models, this consensus process includes a period of discussion over a problem, encourages everyone to speak on and modify solutions, and gives all participants the power to block or stand aside from decisions. In the Eng. 112, I facilitated the process, which meant that when I had a “sense of the meeting” that we had reached consensus, the class tested it. In the test for consensus, students can raise a closed fist signifying a “block,” raise fingers from 1 to 5 signifying their level of acceptance with a proposal (5 being the highest), or not raise a hand, which means standing aside. In the case of a block the proposal halts, the blocking student discusses her/his grievance, and another round of discussion begins. Standing aside means that the student is not in favor of the proposal but allows it to go ahead nonetheless. When students have variations in their level of acceptance with a proposal, the facilitator or other participants may inquire about them and add an amendment even after consensus has been tested for.

**Test One:**

My class practiced the fist-of-five consensus process a number of times on different areas of curriculum and policy, leading up to a larger task that I would give students—six weeks with no set curriculum and a week for the students to create one. In the first week, in January of 2008 when the debates for presidential nominees were just beginning, I proposed that we spend four class periods researching presidential candidates with the students “muckraking” and then presenting in groups. I offered a general proposal for what those class periods might include: a day in class discussing presidential politics and picking teams devoted to candidates, a day in class researching and drafting presentations, and two days of group presentations to the class. I asked for suggestions, amendments, or oppositions. Some students expressed disinterest in

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47 I also used the method in the English 111 course discussed in chapter one but with less regularity and on decisions of less weight.
politics, which through further discussion generalized to a distaste of Washington culture and the political process, but as a whole the class found consensus on the importance of knowing every candidate’s political positions, especially since most of my students had just turned 18. Through discussion, the assignment took form: we would attempt a greater level of objectivity by students researching candidates who they did not already support and students would report the candidates’ positions and refrain from voicing their own personal opinions on issues; the students would form groups of two and three devoted to one issue and one candidate and would look at voting records and funding as part of their analysis, writing a two page paper along with their presentation. Once the proposal was set, we tested for consensus. Students raised mostly 4s and 3s, and I asked those students raising 2s what we could do to make the assignment better. Students reiterated their aversion to politics, not offering amendments to change the assignment.

Our first experience with consensus process went relatively smoothly and the discussion and voting lasted no more than 20 minutes. I had a fairly detailed proposal and no concrete problem for students to discuss, but I structured class time for discussion and gave students some time to develop problems and help solve them in collaboration with me. A few politically savvy students, for instance, raised the issue of subjectivity and spin and the media and public’s focus on the candidates’ personalities instead of their views on issues, and together the class helped create a structure for the assignment that minimized these negative characteristics. In this first experiment with consensus, I talked too much and set the boundaries of our discussion by coming in with a proposal but was pleased by the amount of discussion in the first week of class and hoped that students would become increasingly comfortable about their role in shaping the curriculum.

Test Two:

A few weeks later, I came in with a problem instead of a proposal. Students had been reading Myles Horton’s *The Long Haul* and turned in proposals for their final paper on the book. Students had the weekend ahead of them to write drafts, but before doing so, I wanted to discuss assessment. I asked the students if a rubric would be helpful, and after they respond that it would be, I asked students to make the rubric themselves. I asked the class to start by naming the characteristics of a good paper. Students said that a good paper has “original content” and “stays on topic” and that the “thesis should be supported by evidence.” I started listing these items on
the board. The discussion allowed students to ask questions about the assignment, for instance, if using “I” in these papers was alright. I posed these questions back to students and together we found types of papers in which using “I” seemed appropriate and inappropriate. The rubric thus stated: “use fitting pronoun choices.” Once we had a healthy list, I asked the students to categorize these characteristics. Categorized, the students then ordered the importance of each category to their overall grade: “content, citation and sources, tone and style, argumentation, grammar/mechanics, general guidelines” stood as the final ranking with which students raised 5s and 4s for consensus. Overall, the class had argued for content over grammar, and, as a common request, they looked for less writing, placing “general guidelines” including that the “paper’s complexity should warrant 5-7 pages” into the last category. I set these guidelines and the students used their power to diminish it. 48 In grading, I experienced frustration with three and four page papers, but returned them with questions that asked for more original content and deeper analysis instead of marking off for students not meeting a page requirement. 49

In the two examples above we rarely came across a disagreement that would stop the class from reaching consensus. While some students said they did not follow or care about politics, and while students had different strengths as writers and definitions of writing that influenced their views on fair assessment, the class negotiated their differences and came up with proposals that worked for everyone.

Test Three:

I used CDM in class a third time when weighing grades between four papers, including the presidential candidate’s paper, a paper on student’s ethical histories following Horton’s model in his first two chapters (how he came to realize and test his “principle of equality”), a piece of writing that argued for the next social movement using criteria outlined by Horton (a social movement is “yeasty” — it grows because the chemistry of the idea is simple, and a social movement is strong when its demands intensify instead of capitulate), and the final paper on Horton where students picked their own topics (comparisons of Horton’s democratic education to contemporary forms of higher education being the most popular topic). This time, I came in

48 Having moments when students use their power to lessen workloads is part of what Shor calls a “discomfort of democracy,” something he struggles with throughout When Students Have the Power (82).
49 I could modify my critique and interpret the rubric how I wanted as the consensus process did not cover these powers. Although, students used what Shor called “protest rights” to speak out about the ways I would usurp power in the classroom.
with no proposal, so students developed their own solution. I shaped the debate by asking what criteria we would use to weigh these papers and the students discussed complexity, page length, and amount of time spent on each paper.  

Having grades already returned on the presidential and ethics papers, students had immediate, material reason to argue for certain papers to be weighed more heavily than others and discussions based on the criteria we mentioned were not neutral. The males had done better on the presidential papers while they had trouble expressing their ethical histories and argued that each paper should account for 25% of the grade while the Horton paper should account for 40% of the grade and the social movement paper (which was 2 pages long) should account for 10%. A few female students began discussing how hard they worked on their ethics papers, looking to change the ratios in their favor. A group of extroverted males interrupted these individuals, arguing that since the presidential paper involved presentations as well as papers, it should be weighed as much as the longer and decidedly more complex ethics paper. When the males finished speaking, I asked for more discussion, and a female student argued more aggressively for the position offered by other females in the class, saying that the group of males was being ridiculous and that the ethics paper took considerably more effort. I asked for a counter proposal and even proposed that I change the ethics paper to 30% and the presidential paper to 20%. When the group of males began to argue again, the female student conceded that the previous proposal was okay. After asking if she and everyone else was sure, I reluctantly tested for consensus and the female student who had argued stood aside, meaning that she did not approve of the proposal but that she would allow it to go ahead (other students rose a mix of 2-5 fingers). After our test, I asked her about standing aside, and she stated her position again but once again minimized its importance, saying that the weighing was unfair but that it did not matter to her (she made good grades on all the papers).

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50 I will have more to say about the way I shaped and framed debates in the final section of this chapter.
51 From my perspective, the female students were correct and the ethics paper required more effort. Some of the male students, especially those arguing, wrote bland and depthless papers without critical analysis or reflection (some, again, on “work ethic,” which I explicitly asked them to develop further) while some of the female students (including the one who stood aside) wrote complex reflections on religion and family life. Consensus process, in this case, failed to account for a reasonable difference in opinion, and the gender hierarchy may have stifled productive and justified debate. I will further discuss the issue of gender in consensus process in the final section of this chapter.
Student-led Workshops

The first three examples of CDM led up to the class’s much anticipated planning for the final six weeks. In the week before spring break, I gave the students one week (three class periods) to propose and negotiate six weeks of curriculum, including assessment and a delegation of roles. Hoping for a specific process of thinking, I started the first day of planning with Dewey: “The formation of purposes and the organization of means to execute them are the work of intelligence” (*Experience* 67). With this quote I pushed for an organizational structure by equating it with intelligence, but students started in a place more logical to them, with a wish list of possibilities for what we could do in those six weeks. One student wanted to examine genre by watching and critiquing three different types of film; another student (who I had in a class the semester before) wanted to get involved in civic engagement and protest, practicing the activist end of Horton’s *The Long Haul*; a collection of students wanted to make a film, citing previous uses of film-making in composition courses, and one of them said he had written a script that they could work from; hoping that we could read a play and then travel to watch it live, another group of students started to negotiate schedules, trying to find a time when students could take a field trip to see a play in Cincinnati. In this class period, we caught a glimpse of the many “alternative worlds” and the “inexhaustibility of difference” that Trimbur describes as the result of genuine consensus process (454). Our first class period ended with me asking how we might pull some of these ideas into a structure that worked for everyone, harkening back to the organizational idea I posited at the beginning of the class. Just before our class let out, a student proposed the idea of student-led workshops and explained that each small group could pick one of the different topics we had discussed and lead in teaching it, similar to what Horton was doing at Highlander.52 With our time running out, I told students to reflect on our class period and write in our online discussion board about the content and organizational structure that they thought would work, preparing something for our discussion in the next class period.

Since we had just one week to develop a curriculum, assessment plans, and divide responsibility, our second class had to focus on feasible ideas and an organizational structure. I asked students to consider organization first, and brought up the student led workshops, which some students had written about positively in their discussion board posts. An objection arose as some students wanted to work on a film and the student-led workshops would not allow the film

52 I will have more to say about my role in choosing this organizational structure in the coming section.
enough time. Students who were not interested in film raised their own disputes, saying that in addition to being uninteresting, making films meant the added difficulty of finding equipment and using editing software and, they argued, it has little to do with English. The students negotiated for a structure that included four weeks of student-led workshops with each week having a different theme and two weeks of making “short film compositions.” The student-led workshops would include small scaffolding exercises using multi-media technology and relating to their topics. With the organization set, we created a list of topics on the board for our student-led workshops. Ideas discussed in the first day were raised again and some new ideas appeared. When the board was filled with over 20 proposals, I encouraged students to consider which topics would be difficult to carry out, and we eliminated field trips and other proposals with added complications. Then I asked students if we could merge similar or related topics into one another, and students merged a study of music genre into a section on poetry and the idea of “social breeching projects” into a section on watching and studying the movie *Fight Club*. The board had about ten ideas left, and we took votes on how many students were interested in each idea. Poetry and *Fight Club* came out on top and became two of our four topics. There were about four topic ideas with close votes, so I gave students a writing assignment to post about their top choice and also to write about any potential problems they saw in our current classroom organization, asking them to think specifically about how we would grade the workshops and what would make good teaching environments for them.

The final day, students decided the two final workshop topics, one on the media and the other on corporations. Students volunteered to lead each of the workshops, a process that went relatively smooth, although it was clear that not every student had a topic they were familiar with as two students ended up in the *Fight Club* group without having seen the movie. Our next task, choosing the order of workshops, proceeded to be one of the more intense debates of the semester. Debate came up as some students said they simply could not lead in the first week of workshops because of time constraints. Students from three groups raised their voices, stating different reasons for why their group could not lead first. The *Fight Club* group was planning a movie showing for one of their days and decided to do it the Monday we returned, giving them some extra time to plan the rest of the week’s classes. Based on a discussion of student need, the

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53 The phrase “short film compositions” was the result of a negotiation process. Some students thought it was too much work to do a documentary or what they considered a film in two weeks, so we created a name that defined the type and amount of work students negotiated for.
students found a way to negotiate this problem, although the debate was long from finished. The three remaining groups, after expressing the value of leading class later in the semester, began to argue about which group would go second. After a few minutes of unproductive debate about which group had more time constraints, a group of students proposed that the matter be resolved through a game of rock-paper-scissors.

In the first scheduling dispute, students expressed their variations of need against each other and determined which group was most able to lead the first week. When the three remaining groups could not come to a decision based on the same criteria, they decided to leave it up to a game of chance. The matter was decided quickly, and the contests added some more excitement to our decision making. Rock-paper-scissors was not a structure built into consensus process, but it was a decision-making process that students were familiar with in their own social relations. For me, the goal of CDM is to give students experience in participatory democracy, which is a social arrangement of faith in the ability of people to make decisions themselves.

That last day we also discussed how much responsibility and authority the students wanted when they led the class. Students decided that they wanted to share responsibility in assessment (they would be graded in groups and the groups would be graded by the class) and that they would give me the responsibility to referee the class if someone was being disruptive. The schedule and course policies were written on the course wiki and after reviewing the document, we tested for consensus (see appendix 1 for the document). Most hands held up 5s, with a few 4s and a 3. Students looking around the class noticed the 3, so I asked if there was anything we could alter in the curriculum. Instead of volunteering for a workshop, the student was placed in the corporation group when it became the last option and had been uncharacteristically quiet during most of the discussions that week (the student was normally one of my most vocal students). The student said, flatly, that none of the topics were of interest.

Questions for Reflection and Critique

Why use consensus for curriculum decisions?

54 I accomplish more intellectually by reading and listening to interviews than any other mode of communication. In doing question and answer with myself in this section, I follow the method of question and reflection that bell hooks (writer’s voice) creates with Gloria Watkins (“real” name) in Teaching to Transgress and the reflective section that Ellen Cushman creates at the end of her article “Critical Literacy and Institutional Language.”
Curriculum decisions create the structure of the classroom, binding students with a set of rules and a course of study. Harris called for the creation of a space where students have a reason to come into contact because they have overlapping claims and interests, and since a curriculum shapes the social space of a classroom, it creates a shared interest when a teacher opens it to the students. As a shared and commonly teacher-determined space, collaborative curricula offer possibilities for critical-democratic practice, as Elbow, Shor, and others have discussed and experimented with. The addition of consensus process to collaborative curricula offer students and teachers a structured process within which to acknowledge and negotiate differences while practicing direct-democracy.

Under David Graeber’s definition, consensus process is a “problem solving mode,” so it needs to start with a problem. I created problems for my class by saying, “We don’t have anything planned for the last six weeks,” and, “Would a rubric be helpful? OK, well, make one.” Bruffee uses consensus for interpretations of texts, which, according to Graeber would be a dangerous place for consensus since, as Graeber states, “in good process, one is very careful to avoid getting into issues about the definition of reality” (“An Interview” par. 6). A population may disagree indefinitely on a question of reality, and they may disagree indefinitely about an interpretation of a text, but if they have an immediate problem, they need to make decisions, regardless of whether or not they share a common view of reality. Consensus process on matters of curriculum opens up a space for difference but also creates an immediate, material problem that must be acted upon within a certain time frame.

Reviewing the history of “consensus” in composition, critics often argue that consensus does not allow dissent; what has your classroom practice shown?

David Graeber writes about his experiences with CDM in organizations like the Direct Action Network, and I asked him about dissent in consensus. Graeber responded by saying, “For me, the real power of consensus is that it does preserve dissent. Good consensus is not unanimity […] It's an agreement to go ahead with a certain course of action” (“An Interview” par. 7). While most definitions of consensus list unanimity as a synonym, Graeber draws a line between consensus process and unanimity. If we review Sagar and Gastil’s definition, consensus outcome includes the word unanimity but consensus decision rule (their term for CDM or consensus process) does not. Reviewing the Latin roots, consensus literally means “together feel” and
unanimous means “one mind.” These definitions make a distinction between consensus process—through which diverse individuals (with different minds) move towards shared action on contingent agreements with material consequences—and unanimity as a shared universal viewpoint or perspective.

My classroom expressed dissent when students negotiated their different needs and perspectives with each other. For instance, we had a multiplicity of proposals for what to do in the final six weeks of class, and nearly every student had a different conception of their ideal six weeks, but the students started to merge ideas and consider their classmate’s perspectives and concerns and a proposal slowly formed that everyone was willing to move ahead with. In the end, we made a decision with strong consensus which aligned with no individual’s idea of the ideal six weeks of class—we were far from unanimity, but we did have an agreement to actualize the proposed curriculum.

Focusing on specific cases of dissent, there was the moment when a female stood aside—her dissent was heard in discussions and then symbolized in our test for consensus. What that student proposed was not acted upon, but, as Graeber states of decision makers in similar situations:

The fact that they knew they were free to have halted the whole process in its tracks if they wanted to makes their compliance […] take on a whole different meaning. I’ve been in that situation a lot, and it’s strangely liberating […] In a way it’s a very profound experience of freedom” (“An Interview” par. 7).

The structure of CDM provides not only a space for discourse where differences are encouraged, but it empowers each participant with the ability to remain in discussion.

Are there any constraints on this process?

Certainly some constraints exist, including the power a student’s identity brings to a class and the social structure that exists outside of consensus process. Keeping with Graeber’s discussions of consensus for a moment, he adds the following rule to consensus process as practiced historically: “One can only block if one feels a proposal is in violation of the fundamental principles or reasons for being of a group” (“Anarchism” 4).55 Graeber again articulates the individual empowerment of consensus process for group decision making, but he

55 He relates the reference to founding principles to the way the Supreme Court strikes down decisions as unconstitutional.
defines the group as a set of stated, common principles, and this addition as a precursor to consensus process complicates my practice of CDM in the classroom.

My class had no founding document or statement of principles, although Peter Elbow and others have created class constitutions, which would have been helpful in combination with the rule given by Graeber above. Our class discussed the motivations of students in higher education in comparison to Myles Horton’s experiments in democratic education, and through these discussions we came to understand the purpose of boundaries like assessment and the need for some level of authority because of the different functions and purposes of Miami University and Highlander Folk School. At Highlander, students came to class out of necessity because they were learning things about social survival—tactics and knowledge for union and civil rights organizing; at Miami, most students come for a diploma. I asked students, for instance, what would happen if I gave everyone A’s and allowed students to come to class when they wanted to. Very few students said that they would keep coming to class. Through our discussions, the students and I came to understand the untouchable structures of English 112. In addition, my shaping of each problem for the class and my equal power in the process (having the ability to block), meant that possibilities were again confined. While we did not outline a statement of purpose, or a class constitution (a mistake, on my part), students and I engaged in discussions that articulated the foundations of the class, within which anything was possible.

Did your process allow for a leveling of power regimes between class, race, and gender?

At Miami University, students are mostly homogenous in economic status and race. In the English 112 class I have been describing, we did not have any students that I would classify as other than white, while class is a more easily hidden factor, which at Miami means that upper-class status is generally assumed (even in cases when it is not necessarily performed). The absence of apparent class and race diversity certainly plays a role in classroom discourse, but the identity difference that I can discuss most concretely in my course is gender.

I’ve used the fist-of-five method in three classes, and the only students that ever stood aside or blocked a proposal were female (one female student in Eng. 112 stood aside, and in a previous course a female student blocked a proposal). This says to me that they trusted the

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56 Ira Shor deals with this basic constraint when his students argued for no required attendance. Shor states, “I couldn’t imagine being a critical teacher without a class” (104).
method enough that they were willing to challenge the rest of the class as individuals (a sign of empowerment), but this also means that the student’s concerns were not heard in the discussions prior to voting, which is a sign of being overpowered in discourse.

While giving everyone the power to block proposals was a leveling factor, it was not enough to curb gendered discursive norms. Prior to my female student standing aside in the debate about weighing grades, she voiced her concerns and stuck to her position, but other female students may have had more reason than she to argue the same position (receiving a greater disparity in grades between the two papers) and they remained silent against a group of extroverted males. I thought that she conceded the point because she personally was doing well on all the papers, but other female students appeared to have been silenced and their interests left out of the debate.

Another clue about the participation of female students in the process may come from the use of rock-paper-scissors in the class I describe above. Not surprisingly, it was a decision made mostly by the males in the class, and it was three males who participated as representatives from their groups in the game. Rock-paper-scissors, from my perspective, is a masculine mode of decision making, and it took over my classroom to end a debate that might have been decided by more carefully listening to each other’s perspectives.

Can you imagine the fist-of-five method or similar types of consensus decision making being used to manipulate or control instead of evoking participatory democracy in a classroom?

Relationships between decision makers are never equal, despite everyone having the ability to voice their dissent and block. Within the formal CDM process, everyone has the same power, but everyone brings a milieu of privilege, access, and influence into that process. The teacher, especially, carries historically and institutionally embedded power over decision making into the classroom. I had the power to say, “That’s not feasible, and here’s why…” and it would be, more or less, the end of the discussion on a given point.

Similar sorts of control could go much further and have the chance to be authoritarian in the guise of a democratic decision making mode. As Myers says of an early educator using collaborative learning, “The danger is that the teacher has merely embodied his or her authority in the more effective guise of class consensus. This guided consensus has a power over individual students that a teacher cannot have alone” (420). I know that when students were
discussing possibilities for the last six weeks of class, I would perk up at some ideas that I thought were more intellectually stimulating and question ideas that seemed like a waste of time. I tried as much as possible to not veer the discussion in any particular direction, but it was a bit like being a driver’s ed. instructor. I was sitting to the side of the class having some experience directing a classroom safely in past semesters, and in the back of my mind I was hoping that this whole thing did not crash and burn. Driver’s ed. cars have a second brake pedal in the passenger seat, and I tried my best to forget that it was there and allow autonomy, which meant not slamming on the break or grabbing the wheel. Instead of doing those things, I commented positively on routes that seemed safe and questioned routes that seemed dangerous, but my inquires and comments constituted a level of persuasion, as much as I was aware of my intrusive authority and trying to stay out of the discussion.

While writing this chapter, I looked back at a note I had written in early March of 2008, a moment before our workshops when I was questioning whether or not my class, which I considered (and still consider) the most unruly and boisterous group of students I have ever taught, was responsible enough to create their own curriculum for six weeks of class. In that note, I described the six weeks of class that I wanted, and it included five weeks of student-led workshops (not using that term). In the note, I mention everyone coming to agreement on what the students would teach, so I still planned to leave that part up to the students, but the organizational structure I wanted was curiously decided by consensus. Part of me wants to make a causal relationship, acknowledging my power in the classroom and saying that I manufactured the desired result in the guise of consensus decision making (exactly what Myers warns against). But the reality likely holds a middle ground between me perking up when someone mentioned student-led workshops and students getting the idea from reading a text in which Myles Horton organizes community-led workshops (the same place that I got the concept from).

As far as content goes, Fight Club is one of my favorite movies (and I have considered using it in classes but never had), I wanted students to study some form of literature (we went with poetry but students also mentioned picking their own books and reading Harry Potter), and I try to include analyses of both the media and the corporation in all of my classes. Six students

57 Mr. Razo, my driver’s ed. instructor, called it a “chicken brake.”
58 See appendix 2 for the full text of said note.
had been in my class the semester before and had analyzed both the corporation and the media
with me, and if other students had not keyed in on my intellectual curiosities, they probably
realized from my engagement in discussion that these topics would be acceptable. Causality in
decision making is difficult to determine, and all I can say for sure is that I was happy about the
outcome of the curriculum and remain suspicious (a more truly democratic curriculum may have
necessitated my unhappiness with the outcome) yet unsure about the extent of my influence in
creating it.  

As for having power over individual students, one of the aspects of consensus process
that distinguishes it from majority rule is that there are losers—or, in fact, no one has to be any
more of a loser than anyone else—so that means there is really no need for enforcement. If the
proposal in action is successful, then it is a sign that enough time was given to negotiate
difference and good consensus process was practiced. During the four weeks of student-led
workshops, for instance, I let students teach their topics how they wanted to, which was part of
the agreement, and in return they took their teaching seriously and other students treated them
with respect. In contrast to my teaching, the student-led classes were more creative (creating
“coffee-house poetry day,” for example), students listened to each other more carefully (a
comment that was made often in student’s reflections), and student leaders held better
discussions (even taking agency by making sites of analysis out of classroom conflict when one
student called Lil’ Wayne’s “Georgia… Bush,” a song delivering an angry response at Bush in
the aftermath of Katrina, racist and another student insinuated that the student and his response
were racist).

For my part, I came to class every day treated as and feeling like another student. They
delegated the responsibility of referee to me in the workshops, but, in what I had known as a
characteristically unruly class, I never needed to use that authority once. After the workshops
finished, the students and I renegotiated the “short film compositions.” Students had not done an
adequate job scaffolding as nobody felt comfortable with any editing programs or video

59 In a teacher hero narrative, I suspect that the information offered in these two paragraphs would be pesky details
(pesky enough to leave out), but I want it to stand as a place for the complex reality of classroom practice and
attempts at democratic pedagogy where the teacher’s authority can never be erased.
60 On a related note, Sagar and Gastil find no evidence to support that better decisions are made though consensus
decision making (a tough question from which to gain conclusive evidence considering everything involved in
defining a “better decision”), but their surveys found a significant rise in happiness and feelings of usefulness in
groups using consensus process compared to groups using decision by majority. Attesting to this attribute, my
teacher rating for the course was 3.95/4.
equipment (I realize now that scaffolding for the film projects was not written into our agreement), so I offered students an option between carrying on with the films or writing three short papers, one of them a creative journal and the others modes of reflection on our workshops. I framed the decision in a way that offered little choice, and, even with students asking for consensus process, I took authority and asked students to vote by majority (something I justified to myself as necessary for the class to complete the amount of reflective writing I asked of them and for the decision to be made quickly—I had experienced enough discomforts of democracy for one semester).

As I reassumed my position in front of the class, answering questions about our freshly assigned papers, the distinction between students leading class after making an agreement for action by consensus and my regaining power of the class after spurious agreement became clear. A common practice in the course had been students asking increasingly less and less relevant questions until discussion derailed and opened up to chaos. My first day back, they tested me, asking of the creative paper (an adaptation of Berthoff’s double entry object journal), “How many paragraphs do we need, Can we type them, Can we go horizontal instead of vertical, Can we use crayon…” Before I knew it, the class became six separate groups, a six-headed beast, screaming personal conversations, a practice that had been curiously missing for four weeks. I stood still, looking at the class, wishing that I was back in my corner seat watching a successful group of student-teachers. I made eye contact with a few students who began to recognize the same thing I did, looking at me to stop the escalating insanity. We waited for what might have been a minute (which in class, seems like a lifetime), until a student, one of the more boisterous athletes who started the fiasco, raised his voice to quiet everyone down. Together, the class and I experienced a moment of reflection. The class’s unruliness before they created their own curriculum had made me question whether or not they were responsible enough to be given that freedom, and after the most successful five weeks of class in the semester (the planning and the student-led workshops), I had usurped power and the classroom reacted with unruliness. There is an anarchist belief that the irresponsibility referenced by those in power to justify their power is actually a reaction to the imposition of that power, which means that perceived irresponsibility is

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61 I experienced a discomfort of democracy in wanting to be an open and benevolent leader by addressing every question asked of me honestly (hoping to receive honest questions), but the practice is a slippery slope. Other students listening to the discussion see it as irrelevant and think of their own irrelevant questions or begin to engage in equally irrelevant conversation with their neighbors.
nothing but an inherent desire for freedom, and my classroom experience stands as reference to that belief.

*What were the successes of consensus decision making process in your classroom?*

We experienced dissent and discussion on issues of immediate material importance, practiced direct-democracy, and witnessed a glimpse of the inexhaustible differences and possibilities of curriculum within the confines of our classroom. We experienced some setbacks, and in my reflection I have come to many complications about collaborative decision making in a structure of unequal power relations, but I have come to realize that a classroom can open up as much as possible to participatory democracy and then use the distance they have moved on the authoritarian-participatory continuum to critique authoritarian structures and to begin to articulate the boundaries keeping them from more full participation and agency (as my additional reflections here have allowed me to do). These analyses can be done in the classroom with reflective writings, with the hope that students begin to understand social hierarchies as arbitrary and unfinished; that is, available for transformation.
CONTINUED GROWTH

In her “Composition and the Gentrification of ‘Public Literacy’,” Elizabeth Ervin names colonialism, imperialism, and gentrification as terms that may describe the public turn, stating “because of our discipline’s long-standing devotion to democratic ideals and practices, both the motives and the consequences of this will to public may have become obscured” (45). Ervin is right in finding a long history of democracy and civic accountability in rhetoric and composition, as both James Berlin and Paula Mathieu cite Fred Newton Scott’s work in the early 20th century and Scott’s work cites Plato’s relationship with rhetoric as publicly accountable:

The principles of this Platonic rhetoric are twofold, relating in part to function, in part to form and structure. As concerns the first, Plato takes what we should now call the social or sociological point of view. The value of any piece of discourse, or mode of communication, is to be measured by its effect upon the welfare of the community. Good discourse is that which by disseminating truth creates a healthy public opinion and thus effects, in Plato’s words, “a training and improvement in the souls of the citizens” (415).

Acknowledging the power of discourse, Plato, Scott, and those who practice “composition as democratic work” assume responsibility for the consequences of their discourse. But Ervin argues that disciplinary ennui and the pressures of professional success can reprioritize the consequences of public work in composition and cites three places where she sees educators and scholars in the public turn working unethically in the pursuit of professional success instead of asking critical questions about the consequences of their work on the public(s) they work with, all of which she names with the help of Graham Huggan’s work in postcolonial studies:

The first is privileging the conceptual and interpersonal dynamics of “global metropolitan culture” […] The second hazard is exoticizing the object or location of our gaze, which includes not just perceptions of cultural difference but also “the sympathetic identification” with those differences […] And the third is engaging in “rhetorics of

62Certainly, our scholarship in English studies complicates any notion of truth, and many rhetoricians would claim that rhetoric comes before truth. In certain ways, Scott already begins down this path in his rereading of Plato, judging discourse not on its inherent truth but on its function and consequence. Noam Chomsky, described by some as a hyper-rationalist, also skews truth in the direction of its function when discussing the responsibility of intellectuals: “We demand a commitment to discover the truth, and beyond that, concentration on what is important: in short that those who comment on contemporary affairs attempt to determine and tell the truth about matters of importance. […] One index of importance is how information leads to action. What are its likely consequences for victims of oppression? The proper focus of concern for us lies in areas where we have a responsibility for what is happening and the opportunity to mitigate or terminate suffering and violence (Towards a New Cold War 8-9).
liberation” that “run the risk of being seen both as presuming to speak for [supposedly marginal cultural groups] and daring to make intellectual capital out of their material disadvantage”’ (46).

In response to the problems mentioned, Ervin calls for an “ethical blueprint” for composition scholars and educators to follow that would “minimize exploitation and displacement (whether unintentional or merely rationalized) and maximize reciprocity” (49-50). In the following pages, I simply point to some ideas that could function in the ethical blueprint that Ervin asks for, generalizing some of my experiences and the founding theories which underlie democratic education, critical pedagogy, and public turn pedagogy. Nothing I have written or will write is a method for anyone to follow without revision, and my own work on the subject remains unfinished.

**Reread Freire**

Hairston’s concerns about demagogy and public issues coming into the first-year writing classroom took aim at the critical/radical pedagogies of many educators whose work was influenced by Freire, and I began to discuss the irony of that position in my introduction with John Trimbur’s response and clarification of critical/radical pedagogy but want to continue that discussion after using Freire’s idea of unfinishedness in chapter one and after continuing Trimbur’s discussions of classroom power dynamics in chapter two, hoping to pull together some ideas for ethical practice when bringing public issues into the classroom along with the ethical practices for the classroom intervening in the public that I discuss in the following sections.

Freire’s most famous concept, for western educators at least, is the banking model of education and Freire’s aversion to it. The banking model separates knowledge from the inquiry of social conditions (separates the word from the world) and locates it in the teacher. The student passively receives information—“Four times four is sixteen; The capital of Pará is Belém”—without connecting information to the student’s active intervention in the world (*Oppressed* 71). Following Freire’s work against the banking model, educators cannot prescribe any knowledge without the complications of social reality and student’s own interventions and perspectives, which means that educators remaining true to Freire’s work cannot prescribe political content or views on partisan issues without risking the same passive reception and sonority of knowledge.
Furthermore, educators’ following Freire’s notion of unfinishedness in the way they interpret and engage in political thinking and discourse, work beyond mere partisanship. As I began to discuss in chapter one in a section on the ethical subject, Freire’s notion of ethics relates to the unfinishedness of social relations, a view that works against static political ideologies or viewpoints. Freire’s unfinishedness creates the possibility of social change and thus the possibility of ethical subjects and is non-partisan in its aversion to static or stable views of society and knowledge, but Freire’s politics are not neutral either, and, if he aligns with any political ideology, he does so in the way he demands more equal social relations both in society and the classroom. At Freire’s ethical base, he believes in a principle of equality (a phrase I apply to Freire from Horton). Applying the principle, Freire states:

> It’s of no use coming to me with arguments justifying genetically, sociologically, historically, or philosophically the superiority of whites over blacks, men over women, bosses over workers. All discrimination is immoral, and to struggle against it is a duty whatever the conditionings that have to be confronted. In fact, it is in this very struggle and duty that the charm, even the beauty, of our humanity resides (Freedom 60).

Freire’s principle beliefs and the moves towards multiculturalism in composition during the early 90’s may be the start of Hairston’s responses to leftist positions. Dewey also started with a similar sort of belief in his educational and democratic philosophy, although perhaps applying less certainty to the belief than Freire, as Rorty describes:

> For Whitman and Dewey, a classless and casteless society—the sort of society which American leftists have spent the twentieth century trying to construct—is neither more natural nor more rational than the cruel societies of feudal Europe or of eighteenth-century Virginia. All that can be said in its defense is that it would produce less unnecessary suffering than any other, and that it is the best means to a certain end: the creation of a greater diversity of individuals—larger, fuller, more imaginative and daring individuals. To those who want a demonstration that less suffering and greater diversity should be the overriding aims of political endeavor, Dewey and Whitman have nothing to say. They know of no more certain premises from which such a belief might be deduced. (30)

With Dewey and the American pragmatists’ skepticism about Truth, beliefs such as equality are difficult to base in arguments of truth or inherent characteristics of humanity, and in debates over equality Freire and pedagogies following his philosophy may become politically

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63 I like to align Freire’s ideas to two notions of Zapatista philosophy, both of which share similarities with contemporary anarchism. The first concept is to “lead by following” and the second is for the creation of “a world where many worlds fit” (Marcos 203). Both phrases are founding principles of structured non-domination.
controversial. For compositionists introducing political topics into the classroom, it may be useful to analyze political positions looking for foundational beliefs; for instance, using stasis theory as Virginia Anderson suggests. And, in discussions of equality, it will also be useful to extend ideas further than material wealth and to the process of decision-making, the ability to critique and analyze society, and the formation of purposes, as both Freire and Dewey have.

Freire’s work also applies to students and scholars entering the public, and as Weisser states, Freire “is directly responsible for the discipline’s current focus upon public writing” (37). Through rereading *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* we may pull a number of ideas about ethical practice in the public sphere, which I return to in the following sections:

The oppressed, as objects, as “things,” have no purposes except those their oppressors prescribe for them. […] Given the preceding context, another issue of indubitable importance arises: the fact that certain members of the oppressor class join the oppressed in their struggle for liberation, thus moving from one pole of the contradiction to the other. Theirs is a fundamental role, and has been so throughout the history of this struggle. It happens, however, that as they cease to be exploiters or indifferent spectators or simply the heirs of exploitation and move to the side of the exploited, they must almost always bring with them the marks of their origin: their prejudices and deformations, which include a lack of confidence in the people’s ability to think, to want, and to know. Accordingly, these adherents to the people’s cause constantly run the risk of falling into a type of generosity as malefic as that of the oppressors. The generosity of the oppressors is nourished by an unjust order, which must be maintained in order to justify that generosity. Our converts, on the other hand, truly desire to transform the unjust order; but because of their background they believe that they must be the executors of the transformation. They talk about the people, but they do not trust them; and trusting the people is the indispensable precondition for revolutionary change. A real humanist can be identified more by his trust in the people, which engages him in their struggle, than by a thousand actions in their favor without their trust (60).

**Trust the Public**

In an earlier discussion of charity vs. justice, I quoted Freire as saying that true generosity seeks for the “trembling hands” of the “fearful and subdued” to “be extended less and less”—true generosity, which Freire sets in opposition to false charity, seeks to become irrelevant as

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64 In Rorty’s quote above, he discusses material inequality, which becomes controversial as it potentially conflicts with the equality of everyone to rise in the social hierarchy through the American dream or other social ladder narratives. In Hairston’s discussions, we have two notions of freedom and equality conflicting: one side promotes equality through multiculturalism and the other says that making a student learn about or accept multiculturalism is an imposition to the student’s freedom. Discussions of conflicting applications to foundational concepts like freedom and equality are useful in the classroom, as Freire states: “Freedom becomes mature in confrontation with other freedoms” (*Freedom* 96).

65 See Anderson’s “Confrontational Teaching and Rhetorical Practice.”
social conditions become equal, abolishing charity (Oppressed 45). For some “converts” this process may be counterintuitive as Freire, in the above quote, states that “because of their background” the privileged, and largely undeservedly privileged, “believe that they must be the executors of the transformation.” Those members of society used to control of their own lives may find it difficult to extend decision-making power to marginalized groups (who are not used to controlling the decisions that affect their own lives) as producers or potential producers of knowledge and solutions to their own problems (or greater societal problems that affect them and others), but any work done with a marginalized public must seek the empowerment of those groups and individuals. As Dewey states, “It is, then, a sound instinct which identifies freedom with power to frame purposes and to execute or carry into effect purposes so framed” (Experience 67).

Paula Mathieu’s work, like Freire’s, contains its own ethical blueprints for composition in the public turn, seeking tactical, rhetorically timely projects that “tap into existing debates and campaigns and define small interventions into that debate” (76), as opposed to institutionalized service learning projects that are long-term and dependable but “not necessarily beneficial, especially [in] top-down relationships. The very advantages of institutionalized service learning—measurable success, broad institutional presence, and sustainability—create a generic set of needs and priorities that make it difficult to respond to communities’ needs and ideas” (98). Mathieu further states that “Such models proceed from a problem approach, in which the community is defined as the source of the problem, which the university defines and on whose behalf the students work” (99). At the roots of these institutionalized service learning programs are the same student-public relationships which create the colonizing, gentrifying practices Ervin warns against. The first deterrent to these sorts of relationships are epistemological, founded in a desire for social justice, solidarity, and trust in the publics students work with. As Myles Horton states, “you have to trust the people, and you have to work through it to the place where people

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66 On civic engagement and compositions, Ellen Cushman writes: “To empower, as I use it, means: (a) to enable someone to achieve a goal by providing resources for them; (b) to facilitate actions—particularly those associated with language and literacy; (c) to lend our power or status to forward people’s achievement” (The Rhetorician as an Agent for Social Change” 14).

67 At the same time, we must remember Freire’s more critical notion of freedom: “Freedom becomes mature in confrontation with other freedoms” (Freedom 96-7), which is similar to Dewey’s discussion of democracy as extended participation and interest in communicated experience.

68 In Tactics of Hope, Mathieu provides five examples of community service projects gone wrong, which may be useful for both students and teachers to read before beginning a civic engagement project as an introduction to life on the other side of public writing assignments.
respond to that trust. Then you have to believe that people have the capacity within themselves to develop the ability to govern themselves” (8).

Find Reciprocal Relationships

Ervin and Susan Wells both discuss relationships that find their students engaging in the public for personal interest and for the sake of democratic work. Wells describes four possible strategies for public writing, the last being “to work with the discourses of the disciplines as they intervene in the public,” citing an interdisciplinary approach to public writing (339). On the same point, Ervin lauds Derek Owen’s work in Composition and Sustainability: Teaching for a Threatened Generation for its descriptions of interdisciplinary public writing. If civic engagement projects in writing classes remain flexible, students can find intersections between their work in the composition course and their disciplinary work. Alexi, a Spanish Ed. major, interacted in an interdisciplinary, reciprocal relationship with SALCE, finding an engagement project in which she learned to teach and expanded her Spanish skills while sharing the common goal of language acquisition with two members of Hamilton’s Hispanic community. Nick and Aaron’s project converting busses to bio-diesel also worked within their disciplines, as Nick was an engineering student working on environmental projects in other classes and Aaron was a chemical engineering student interested in environmentalism. In their projects they wrote about the environmental benefits of converting the busses to bio-diesel and the mechanics involved in building a converter.

Nick and Aaron’s project did not involve the complexities of ethical relationships with marginalized groups; instead, it worked on an endangered environment affecting and affected by everyone, meaning that action with their site of interaction was a benefit in itself, even without the added benefit of disciplinary connections. Ellen Cushman writes about Freire’s notion of solidarity in identification through a shared common goal, which works in both the abstract sense of collective humanization and in concrete terms like the exchange of language acquisition mentioned above. Furthermore, Cushman develops a process of identification and dialogue on the way to reciprocity with the public. Cushman identifies with women near her university because of their shared proximity to and history with poverty: “We’re no strangers to welfare offices, cockroaches and empty refrigerators” (18). Through dialogue, Cushman and her neighborhood partners discuss a reciprocal sharing of status and access with Cushman helping in
many daily tasks of literacy and discourse and the neighborhood helping Cushman’s scholarship by allowing her access to their writing practices and revising her work, among other mutual exchanges (17).

In other examples, students and scholars can engage in public writing as an expression of their own empowerment and agency, as the oppressor and oppressed merge at certain points, according to Freire.69

The pedagogy of the oppressed is an instrument for their critical discovery that both they and their oppressors are manifestations of dehumanization. Liberation is thus a childbirth, and a painful one. The man or woman who emerges is a new person, viable only as the oppressor-oppressed contradiction is superseded by the humanization of all people (Oppressed 48-9).

“Who Rules Columbia,” a document created by striking students at Columbia University in 1968, exemplifies student public writing for their personal interest and for collective humanization.70 They label themselves as oppressed, in a sense, because they find that “Columbia University is set up not to service the needs of its constituency—faculty and students—but rather to service outside interests” (1). At the same time, the students’ impetus to act was through their identification as oppressors, complicit with a university that, through a number of military contracts and work with the CIA, was complicit with violence in Southeast Asia—a complex nexus of oppressor-oppressed in which the students worked for their own humanization along with the humanization of the university and the U.S. military in stopping a system that did not benefit students in their studies on one side of the world and produced inexplicable slaughter on the other. In addition, the document educated other students about their local connections to unjustified war and served as an example for other students in the U.S. to identify the connections between higher education and the military industrial complex.

69 For some compositionists in the public turn, it may be beneficial to move past or trouble the oppressor-oppressed distinction. Reading Freire for the first time, I wrote in the margins: Who is oppressed, my students, the public, me? One can only begin to answer by analyzing specific relationships, and even then the distinctions can be blurry.

70 The document referred to was not created in a classroom or a composition course but done by the student’s own initiative, which brings up an interesting point about the commodification of public work when required in courses. It is likely that more effective work comes at the student’s own initiative, but public turn composition can recognize this tendency in creating broad ranging options for public work and providing foundational principles for the student’s continued public work outside the classroom.
Create Conditions for Continued Growing

“It isn’t a matter of having each one teach one. It’s a matter of having a concept of education that is yeasty, one that will multiply itself.”
-Myles Horton (The Long Haul 57)

In the introduction I noted Dewey’s definition of democracy as conjoint communication which necessarily breaks down the borders of identity difference that separate a society, and in chapter one I discussed Dewey’s goal of education as growing which leads to continued growth, a goal which he refers to when judging the ethics of education. Dewey’s notion of democracy as conjoint communication and ethical education as continued growing are mutually constituting processes, which can be applied to the relationships students have with the public in civic engagement projects. Finding reciprocal relationships for public work and trusting the public as a source of knowledge production both create conditions for continued growing in the public. While complex and difficult in practice, an ideal public turn classroom creates conditions for student’s continuing growth through work with the public and teaches students how to work for the public’s continued growth.71

With my Eng. 111 class, I was successful in creating conditions for continued growth when students understood the difference between charity and justice, understood the unfinishedness of social relations, and developed both critical and practical skills for working with the public. My students created conditions for continued growth in their public work if they acted on issues of justice in reciprocal relationships that trusted and allowed for the growth of others. Again, I could site Alexi’s work with SALCE as a successful project on both ends but was ultimately troubled by the number of projects that failed to engage meaningfully and responsibly. In Eng. 112, my students and I worked on theories of justice and democracy and demonstrated the possibilities of more egalitarian social structures, something that hopefully will stand as a critical space from which they critique unequal social relations in the future. Finally, my hope is that the notion of unfinishedness combined with the practice of social change continues to be viral, as it came to me and hopefully spread to my students, who may spread it to the neighborhoods and communities they identify with.

71 As Freire states, “Any situation in which some individuals prevent others from engaging in the process of inquiry is one of violence. The means used are not important; to alienate human beings from their own decision making is to change them into objects” (85).
Bibliography


Wells, Susan. “Rogue Comps and Health Care: What Do We Want from Public Writing?” *College Composition and Communication* 47.3 (1996): 325-341.


Appendix 1: Quotes from Eng. 111

Man is condemned to be free; because once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does.
-Jean Paul Sartre

If you aren’t spending your time here to better the world you live in then you’re missing the point.
-Lawrence Ferlinghetti

Charity should be abolished and replaced by justice.
-Norman Bethune

Prejudices are what fools use for reason.
-Voltaire

I do not know with what weapons World War III will be fought, but World War IV will be fought with sticks and stones.
-Albert Einstein

Those who do not move, do not notice their chains.
-Rosa Luxembour

Thinking which does not include thinking about thinking is mere problem solving, an activity carried out very well by trout.
-Ann E. Berthoff

We demand a commitment to discover the truth, and beyond that, concentration on what is important: in short that those who comment on contemporary affairs attempt to determine and tell the truth about matters of importance. [...] One index of importance is how information leads to action. What are its likely consequences for victims of oppression? The proper focus of concern for us lies in areas where we have a responsibility for what is happening and the opportunity to mitigate or terminate suffering and violence.
-Noam Chomsky

Monkey. And Mashed Potato. Popcorn, can’t stand myself, see you later alligator.
-James Brown, “Papa’s Got a Brand New Bag”

The man who fears no truths has nothing to fear from lies.
-Thomas Jefferson

Cannibals prefer those who have no spines.
-Stanislaw Lem

I pray to God that he will permit us to turn the United States into a shadow of itself.
-Osama bin Laden, 1996
If you are a poet, you will see clearly that there is a cloud floating in this sheet of paper.
-Thich Nhat Hanh

Washing one’s hands of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless means to side with the powerful, not to be neutral.
-Paulo Freire

One can stand still in a flowing stream, but not in a world of men [sic].
-Japanese Proverb

Never in this world can hatred be stilled by hatred; it will be stilled only by non-hatred—this is the Law Eternal.
-Buddha

_Sous les pavé, la plage!
(Under the cobblestone, the beach!)
-French Situationalists, Paris student riots 1968

When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist.
-Don Helder Camara, Archbishop Saint of Brazil

If you’ve come to help me, you’re wasting your time. If you’ve come because your liberation is wrapped up with mine, then let work together.
-Lilla Watson
Appendix 2: Student’s 111 Projects

Sara worked with Ariel and Mary on a project to bring more fair trade products to Miami’s campus. They met with the manager of purchasing twice to discuss the fair trade coffee already on campus and to try and expand the selection of fair trade foods to include teas, fruits, and chocolate. The students also wrote a 21 page research paper and expanded that paper with their revision to the website, ending in an extensive review of fair trade foods, focusing on specific foods and locations and discussing the broad influences of globalization that affect all food trade.

Mandy wrote about hunger in Africa, making compelling comparisons, for instance between what U.S. citizens spend on their pets each year (41 billion) to how much it would cost to feed every starving person in the world (13 billion). In drafts, I challenged Mandy to think of Africa as a continent with many different specific situations depending on the country and historical context. Mandy responded by writing a section on Ghana, where she hoped to visit the next year. For her civic engagement, Mandy looked into volunteering at a food pantry in Cincinnati but had to decline because of scheduling constraints. Next, she and Adam discussed plans to make their own food drive, creating flyers and discussing details but that project too fell through. In the end, she collected money from her family to support C.A.R.E. and created a Facebook group committed to solving hunger, inviting her friends and relatives and linking to a number of informational websites.

Ariel worked with Sara and Mary on the fair trade project.

Julian looked into the creation of an anti-sweatshop campaign on Miami’s campus, talking with United Student Against Sweatshops. He played on the hockey team, which receives sponsorship from Nike, so he focused his research on Nike and the company’s history with sweatshop labor. Julian outlined the steps to Miami endorsing a no sweatshop policy, including educating the student body, contacting interested student groups, and creating petitions, all with the help of USAS. He left the class with the project in its beginning stages.

Emma had a contact at home who created a program called One Block at a Time that builds homes in Haiti. In her paper, she wrote about the history of poverty in the country, including the Haiti’s complex financial relationship with the World Bank. She presented her information at a fundraising event for One Block at a Time.

Geneva wrote what might have been the most informed paper in the class. She used her nine pages to efficiently discuss the current status and debates in America’s health care system. As a pre-med undergraduate with a father who practices as a pediatrician, Geneva took the topic seriously, hoping to cover all sides of the issue. She looked into SCHIP, proposed legislation that would extend health care to lower and middle class children that Bush had recently vetoed, and discussed the benefits and drawbacks to the single-payer and HSA (health savings account) plans. In the end, Geneva did not argue for one system over the other, instead she outlined all the issues a good healthcare system would need to address. For her civic engagement, she acted on

72 In the future, I think I will ban the possibility of students collecting money from their families because it involves a group outside the class but not in a critical way. I cringe thinking of a student at Thanksgiving saying “Will you donate to cause X? I have to do a civic engagement project for school.”
the piece of research she was sure of, sending a well considered letter to her representatives, encouraging them to override Bush’s veto of SCHIP.

Katharine, whose project I discuss in chapter one, worked with animal abuse for her project. She focused specifically on animals used in experimentation, providing research on laws and their interpretations. Her action included creating signs about hygienic products and laundry detergents conducting animal testing and posting them in the dorm’s bathrooms and laundry rooms.

Roger took his time finding a project. When he decided on a project, it happened to be with Students for Staff, the living wage campaign I had become a leader of. I encouraged Roger to look for a different civic engagement project, but he insisted on his desire to work with the group. I showed him to some websites for information, supplied contact information with a staff member he could talk to or interview, and let the other members of SFS engage in email correspondence with him. I had a number of reservations about Roger working with SFS. First, SFS is probably the only student group at odds with the university administration. Second, SFS often relies on civil disobedience or the threat of civil disobedience in the living wage campaign, something against the rules for the course. Finally, I wanted students to experience civic engagement, but I did not want to appear to be forcing students into my campaign, especially for the reasons given above. Having a leadership role with SFS, I could monitor Roger’s work and make sure he stayed out of anything that would get him in trouble, but I wondered if Roger could engage critically and still maintain a distance from the actions of the group. He ended up interviewing a staff member and summarizing the campaign without ever coming to a SFS meeting. I was close enough to the campaign to know that Roger did not contribute anything useful to the group and to know that the staff member he interviewed spent as much time finding Roger as Roger did finding the staff member.

Chris’s father is an immigration lawyer, and, hearing about the local tensions in Hamilton, Chris researched and wrote about the issue locally. For his civic engagement project, he wrote a letter to Barack Obama, his senator, about his stance on immigration.73

Tyler researched and wrote about cancer and gave a presentation to his local Lyon’s club about the high rates of cancer in his home town.

Jordan, a student in exercise science, wrote about steroids, a topic I pushed him to explore in more depth than what normally characterizes a paper on the topic. He looked into other performance enhancing substances, including creatine and whey protein and interviewed the coach of the hockey team for advice on responsible weight training. Jordan created pamphlets for the front desk of Miami’s rec. center about the dangers of steroid use and the dangers and benefits of legal supplements.

Leah wrote about the benefits of giving blood and her experiences with the process. Before a local blood drive, she created and posted flyers about the event.74

73 Most letters to representatives were somewhat last minute attempts at civic engagement, but they were successful in changing the mode of writing and raising the consequences of that writing.
Dwayne, whose work I use in chapter one, had an advanced technological literacy and wrote about illegal downloading and legal alternatives. Since he had difficulty finding a project, and resisted the idea of civic engagement, I suggested he write about downloader’s rights, maybe in pamphlet form for his friends or other students in the dorms, or for the computer labs. He looked at the legality of cases against downloaders for his paper, but I hoped he would look at the issue further and reform it for a group of his peers. Dwayne responded by expressing the futility of most civic engagement projects I suggested, including the pamphlet idea. In the end, Dwayne talked to classmates about a free and legal online forum for downloading music, and in his reflections he defended the action as the only worthwhile action available to him. Throughout the class, Dwayne offered his knowledge of computers regularly, helping other students and myself, and suggesting programs and methods for creating web pages, which constituted some level of civic engagement.

Rachel was one of a few students who did not schedule an appointment to meet with me about civic engagement projects. With others, I contacted them or they contacted me later in the semester to meet, but, even after a number of emails to her, Rachel never met with me, never posted an idea about a civic engagement project, and never created a project proposal. Until she presented in class, I did not know what her topic was. She wrote on environmentalism, but in her presentation and research paper she referenced *An Inconvenient Truth* and little additional research. Of all my students, her resistance to civic engagement was the most extreme.

Will wrote about the Ivory Coast diamond trade. The issue has come up in pop culture, with popular movies and songs, which Will attempted to use in his civic engagement project. Contacting the Black Student Association, Will developed plans to show the movie *Blood Diamonds*, facilitate discussion afterwards, and possibly invite a speaker to discuss the issue. Late in the semester, these ideas did not come to fruition, and Will’s frustrations and dead-ends were detailed in his reflection paper. Will settled for creating table tents (folded pamphlets to place on tables in the food courts) about the issue.

Adam wrote about poverty in Cleveland, Ohio, his hometown. After plans with Mandy fell through, he collected money for the Cleveland food bank from his housemates and family.

Maggie, whose work I use in chapter one, became an active member of Women Against Violence, Exploitation, and Sexual Assault. She brought her four-inch thick binder of related materials to class and wrote a well-informed paper about local problems. She also presented at two meetings held by the organization as part of her active membership. In contrast to her first paper which only discussed the personal benefits of civic engagement, Maggie’s later work details the experiences she had with the group, especially during “Take Back the Night,” an event with a candle-lit march through town and “speak-outs” about sexual assault. Maggie’s reflections reference time management as a concern for her involvement, but say that she will continue working with the organization even after she receives her grade, citing Ferlinghetti’s

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74 Posting or handing out flyers were additional last-minute civic engagement projects. Leah had trouble finding a project, and I had to find her contacts and information about local blood drives for her project when she was having trouble.
quote as her motivation to stay actively involved. In an update about her work with the group, she says that she may become the President or Vice-President next year.

Louise wrote on depression in college-aged students, focusing on the problem at Miami University. She investigated the resources available for students at Miami and looked for something to add, discussing the possibility of a support group. Most of her ideas were already available on campus and she did not have access to help out because of the sensitivity of the issue. Louise did not successfully engage a group outside the class, but her knowledge of the issue and available resources came out in her classroom presentation and were helpful to her classmates.

Mary worked on the fair trade project with Ariel and Sara.

Amber wrote about youth voting, looking at local and national statistics and researching the reasons why different youths were not voting. For her project, she intended to make posters with information in upcoming elections and work with the Miami’s student government, who she had been in contact with, on spreading voter awareness. 75

Daria wrote about education in Uganda and worked with the Schools for Schools program on campus, attending meetings, creating a Facebook group, and giving a presentation at a fundraiser. In one of her reflection papers, she applied Dewey’s “The Meaning of Purpose” to her actions with the Schools for Schools program.

Rick wrote about Jamaica’s economic problems after watching Life in Debt, a documentary about Jamaica’s relationship with international loan organizations like the IMF. He focused on Jamaica’s post NAFTA economy. Rick raised awareness on Jamaica’s poverty and problems of the IMF by holding a showing of the documentary.

Alexi, whose project I discuss at length in chapter one, worked with SALCE, a language exchange program in Hamilton, Ohio. She also made a website for the program and wrote her paper about the local immigration issues in Hamilton and the teaching philosophy of SALCE.

Stef wrote about energy saving techniques, specifically those that universities had taken up to “go green.” In reflections about her civic engagement project, she wrote about how she was changing the ways she used energy and wrote a pamphlet for other students to be aware of their personal energy use on campus. Stef also reflected on her failed attempts to contact and work with student groups and how she would go about it differently in the future.

Susan wrote about animal abuse, focusing on local issues with pet abandonment around Miami University. For her civic engagement, she brought three puppies to class and explained the process of renting pets for the day or weekend through the animal shelter as an alternative to buying pets without a long-term plan for them.

75 Amber, like a number of other students, could not find rhetorically timely actions which fit their topics and detailed future plans instead of acting during the semester.
Mark looked at the voting record of Ohio senators on stem-cell research and wrote a letter of support to one and a letter attempting to persuade the other. He also tried to contact the College Democrats but did not receive a response.\textsuperscript{76}

Sam worked with Best Buddies, a program for people with intellectual disabilities. The school’s football team worked with the program for one day a year, but Sam looked into setting up a long term relationships and encouraging his teammates to do the same. Sam started late on his project and had only began talking to coaches and making connections by the end of the semester.

Rich joined a local food co-op, writing about organic food and the effects of corporate farms on Oxford farmers.

Keith wrote about cancer prevention and joined a group on campus that spreads awareness.

Nicole wrote about recent legislation on gay rights, including a bill written by an Ohio congresswoman. For her civic engagement she attended meetings for a gay-straight alliance organization and drafted a letter of support to the congresswoman. I could tell that Nicole was uncomfortable discussing and writing about her topic, so I think the action of going to the meetings may have been helpful for her to become more comfortable with diverse groups of people.

Joe, whose project I discuss in chapter one, contacted and met with the police department and wrote a project on drunk driving in the area.

Nick worked with Aaron on a research and civic engagement project for fueling Miami’s bus system with bio-diesel, writing an 18 page paper and discussing long-term plans with members of a campus environmental group.

Daniel wrote the following in his reflections: “After a couple of weeks contacting associations and hearing nothing back, I decided I would have to take the issue of genocide awareness on by myself.” He wrote an intelligent paper about the ongoing conflicts in Darfur and made a tree banner stating “remember Darfur, 200,000 killed, 2.5 mi. displaced” to hang on campus.

Aaron worked with Nick on the bio-diesel project.

Ray compared different types of alternative energy in his research project and attended meetings with a campus environmental group.

Lauren, whose project I detail in chapter one, worked to bring a cancer program for women to Oxford.

\textsuperscript{76} Mathieu discusses some organizations that do not respond to students as part of their policy because they have engaged in student relationships in the past that were not useful. Organizations not responding to students was definitely a trend, one that we discussed in class. Sometimes, students were not finding correct or up to date contact information, and some student groups were not working similar projects (I do not think stem-cell research was on the agenda of the College Democrats); I am not sure if any student groups refuse to respond because they have been burned by civic engagement projects in the past.
Robin researched the effect of child abuse on children’s speech, part of her interest as a speech pathology major. She met with a professor to discuss the issue and tried to find a program where she could work with children’s speech, but she left class without finding that connection.
Appendix 3: Syllabus 112 FA Kuebrich

From Composition WIKI

Ben will be the authority figure in the class. He will be "that guy", "peace keeper", and "rule enforcer." [Name Removed] will be sub enforcer...thanks to the beanie.

Grading
Student led workshop (35%)
On a 1-5 scale, each group member will post a paragraph under the blog about how the workshop, meetings, workload, and presentation went. Ultimately Ben will decide the grade based on the post, and the presentation.
Participation (15%)
During the week if you are not presenting, the same participation rules apply.
Student assignments (15%)
During the weeks of the workshop, if the student presenting assigns things to do, your participation and completion of the assignments comes from this grade.
Short Film Compositions (35%)
Guidelines TBD

Order of the Group
Determined By An Epic Battle Royale of Rock Paper Scissors

Week 1: Fight Club
Week 2: Poetry
Week 3: Media
Week 4: Corporate

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77 I do not have IRB approval to publish this student work, but it was collaboratively written on a forum understood as open to outside viewers within Miami University.
78 It is strange how, even in a collaboratively written document, my name as enforcer starts the page, although in a sort of kidding, mocking way, which may be a sign of resistance or an assertion of student power.
79 This was an inside joke/poke about/at a 90-pound, outgoing male in my class.
80 Meaning the same participation guidelines used in my syllabus up to this point.
Appendix 4: Note to Myself before Student-led Workshops

112 Wednesday

The 4 days before break can be used to come up with a syllabus that everyone agrees to

6 Weeks left over after spring break

We can split into 5 groups, each with a week to work with. In that week, groups can pick their own topic of discussion, come up with readings, video, activities and assignments.

The groups will meet with me on the Monday or Tuesday before their week begins to help them pick readings, activities, and assignments.

On the Following Monday or Tuesday the students will help me assess the assignments they gave for the week.