Learning and Transformation: How Students and Teachers Define and Shape Each Other

in the Classroom and in Pedagogic Literature

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John A. Borczon

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This dissertation titled
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by

JOHN A. BORCZON

has been approved for
the Department of English
and the College of Arts and Sciences by

Mara Holt
Associate Professor of English

Benjamin M. Ogles
Dean, College of Arts and Sciences
ABSTRACT

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This dissertation explores the relationship between the personal and the political in the composition classroom by examining the writing of three pedagogic theorists: Lad Tobin, Ira Shor, and bell hooks. The research focuses on a rhetorical examination of specific texts in order to surface dissonances and reinforcements between theory, practice, and writing style. The researcher also proposes the concept of the oblique rhetorical challenge as a way to introduce strong political perspectives into a rhetoric and composition classroom in a fashion that navigates around the pitfalls of two more common positions concerning political arguments and the classroom: one holds that all highly charged political perspectives should be kept out of the classroom in order to protect students and the opposite view holds that the teacher’s political views should be out in front in order to protect students.

Approved: _____________________________________________________________

Mara Holt

Associate Professor of English
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In her 1992 essay “Diversity, Ideology, and Teaching Writing,” Maxine Hairston staked out a claim concerning the proper role of freshman composition by criticizing the emergent trends in the field: “I see a new model emerging for freshman writing programs, a model that disturbs me greatly. It’s a model that puts dogma before diversity, politics before craft, ideology before critical thinking, and the social goals of the teacher before the educational needs of the student” (190). Hairston warns that the field of Rhetoric and Composition is being infiltrated by a radical and dangerous strain of thinking that must be resisted. According to Hairston, proponents of this new thinking are bringing left wing ideology into the composition classroom and forcing students to write about such issues as racism, sexism, and class inequalities. Her article documents numerous quotes that highlight the perceived dangers published by opponents in the leading journals. Hairston even presents a list of names of the worst offenders. It is hard to sympathize with Hairston’s fears almost twenty years after the fact. The following sentences demonstrate the fever pitch of the author’s emotional investment in this issue: “Make no mistake—those on the cultural left are not in the least liberal; in fact, they despise liberals as compromising humanists” (187); “They represent precisely the kind of thinking that leads to ‘re-education camps’ in totalitarian governments, to putting art in the service of propaganda, and to making education always the instrument of the state” (188). However, if Hairston’s rhetorical flair feels over the top, her point of view concerning the proper goals of the composition classroom continues to simmer beneath the surface of discussions concerning the goals and boundaries of the field. In 2005, Richard Fulkerson in “Composition at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century” remarked
that Hairston’s article made unfortunate ad homenim arguments, and that she did not succeed at presenting the range of her pedagogical ideas (666). Jaime Armin Mejia in his response to the Fulkerson article observes: “Fulkerson's treatment of Hairston's 1992 CCC essay in his own, while somewhat apologetic, clearly situates his with hers. He continues to misunderstand that all education is indeed indoctrinating; he further considers such a perspective as an ‘obvious absurdity’” (750). Such an exchange mirrors similar concerns that John Trimbur, Robert Wood, Ron Strickland, William Thelin William Rouster and Tone Mester made in their 1993 responses to Hairston’s original article. Hairston’s concerns also seem to surface whenever scholars within the field address various manifestations of the cultural wars that attack the English classroom. David Lazere’s College English review of Stanley Fish’s 2008 book Save the World on Your Own Time, and Patricia Bizzell’s opinion piece concerning Fish’s’ book in a later edition of the same journal, continue to surface the issues brought to light by Hairston’s article. “Diversity, Ideology, and Teaching Writing” continues to attract supporters (see Hansen, Fulkerson, and Brooks) as well as provoke detractors (see Lynch, Boland). Still others like Virginia Anderson use the article as a frame to map out the terrain of the debate surrounding politics and ethics in the composition classroom.

Hairston’s arguments in “Diversity, Ideology, and Teaching Writing” are based upon one of the two conflicting but related ways that scholar in the field understand how human beings interact with language. On the one hand, students, scholars, indeed all language-using human beings are agents capable of using language to engage and transform the world. Hairston’s view of the proper role of the composition class evolved during a time when the goals and boundaries of the field felt more like common sense
than they sometimes do today. For Hairston, we teach students procedural knowledge about how writing can be used to solve problems so that our students can become successful in their college careers and beyond. She argues:

I asserted that we teach writing for its own sake, as a primary intellectual activity that is at the heart of a college education. I insisted that writing courses must not be viewed as service courses. Writing courses, especially required freshman courses, should not be for anything or about anything other than writing itself, and how one uses it to learn and think and communicate. (179)

The problem with this position is exactly how much a course that is not about anything—or only about the safest topics that students are willing to engage without any influence from their teachers—can teach about how writing can be used to learn to think and communicate. This is a problem because when humans use language to think and communicate, they are always thinking and communicating about something. A diverging view of the proper goals of the rhetoric and composition class emerges from scholars focused on a different intersection between humans and language. These scholars argue that even though it is true that individuals use language to engage with and interact with the world as agents, it is also true that individuals themselves are shaped and limited by the language they use. From this perspective, investigating what makes a specific argument persuasive is just as important as, and is indeed an integral part of, searching for ways to help students learn to write. Such scholars are suspicious of the idea that there can exist much useful knowledge about writing in a woefully decontextualized arena such as the one Hairston promotes. If Hairston wants to promote a
view of students as agents learning to produce language, scholars like Linda Brodkey also want to explore how all individuals, including both teachers and students, are constrained by the language they use. This view of language and how individuals interact with it, although it conflicts with the view Hairston promotes, also contains pertinent information concerning the ways in which students use writing to learn, and think, and communicate by acknowledging that language both creates possibilities for human action and also sets limits on what can be understood and achieved.

Perhaps the biggest defect in “Diversity, Ideology, and Teaching Writing” concerns Hairston’s minimal effort to describe the goals of her opponents. In “Making a Federal Case out of Difference: The Politics of Pedagogy, Publicity, and Postponement,” Linda Brodkey describes the events surrounding the proposed syllabus for the 306E freshman writing course called Writing about Difference. These events occurred in 1990 at the University of Texas, Austin where Hairston taught as well, and they serve as one of the developments provoking Hairston’s 1992 article. In “Making a Federal Case out of Difference,” Brodkey argues against the claim that since the syllabus had a topic the course must by necessity be about that topic and not about student writing. In the following passage, Brodkey explains what she believes is the real point of conflict:

What is radical in the syllabus for Writing about Difference is not the topic but the view that rhetorical principles are historically and culturally contingent; hence our insistence that students cannot be taught to write independent of the content and context of writing. This principle, and the scholarship on which it rests, challenges the various instrumental approaches to instruction that have dominated writing pedagogy in this
country from the outset. Reasonable arguments can of course be made for both contingent and transcendent approaches to writing instruction. But the publicizing of one view as writing instruction and the other as political indoctrination dismisses the syllabus, the authority of committee votes, the right of departments to determine the contents of their courses, and the value of scholarly books and journals as the preferred and, I would argue, proper site of academic argumentation and dissent. (252-53)

Brodkey’s article narrates the procedures concerning how the proposed syllabus for English 306E was created and then how opponents to this syllabus brought this debate into the larger culture wars going on in the general public in order to postpone and ultimately defeat the course on Writing about Difference. It is easy to sympathize with Brodkey’s position when one reads the distorted pictures of her goals presented in the *New York Times* by Richard Bernstein, the *Washington Post* by George Will, and *Newsweek* magazine by Jerry Adler. All of these articles focus on dramatic portrayals of controversies surrounding issues of political correctness and then assume that Brodkey’s course is simply one more manifestation of politically correct thinking. None of these authors attempted to articulate Brodkey’s goals and examine them in a critical fashion. They all simply claimed to know what her course of action will lead to and then started making arguments against it.

This difference of emphasis between scholars whose perspective on the college composition class begins with a focus on students as writing agents, and scholars whose perspective begins with a focus on how language use limits student agency and understanding, points to a fault line within the field that I believe continues to surface on
a classroom level every time a teacher considers how much energy to devote to the
development of compositional skills such as drafting, revising, and sentence-level
stylistic issues and how much of our energy to devote to the development of rhetorical
analytical skills such as noticing and naming appeals to logos, pathos, and ethos, as well
as naming and exploring argumentative features such as the slippery slope, either or
logic, or scare tactics. Of course, no one has ever argued that teachers must choose one
set of skills and focus upon it to the exclusion or diminishment of the other, but our
descriptions of our pedagogical preferences as being either social constructivist/post
process or expressivist/process movement points to the continuing resonance of this
debate. My project investigates how specific pedagogic approaches promote both a view
of students and teachers as language-using agents and a view of students and teachers as
being limited by the language they use.

If one cluster of concerns surrounding Hairston’s article centers on the place of
student writing, student agency, and topics in the composition classroom, the other
cluster of concerns centers on the role of political ideas, and specifically the role of the
teacher’s political and social agendas in the composition classroom. Hairston’s position is
clear:

Second, as writing teachers we should stay within our area of professional
expertise: helping students to learn to write in order to learn, to explore, to
communicate, to gain control over their lives. That’s a large responsibility,
and all that most of us can manage. We have no business getting into areas
where we may have passion and conviction but no scholarly base from
which to operate. When classes focus on complex issues such as racial
discrimination, economic injustices, and inequities of class and gender, they should be taught by qualified faculty who have the depth of information and historical competence that such critical social issues warrant. (186)

The diverging perspective focuses on the role of persuasion and argument in the composition classroom. In “The Politics of Teaching Virtue,” Patricia Bizzell argues that the composition classroom should not be a place where teachers promote an ideal of tolerance that turns everyone’s right to their own opinion into an atmosphere where no one opinion can ever be better or more persuasive than another. Bizzell and scholars who stand with her do not concede to Hairston and her supporters when they argue that bringing political ideas into the composition classroom transforms it into a course about politics. Bizzell’s point is also made by Brodkey, among others, when they argue that there is a difference between examining the rhetorical features surrounding a political argument and using the classroom to promote a specific political perspective. However, Bizzell also acknowledges that she does want to influence her students to share her values: “We keep trying to retreat behind method, to claim that value-neutral, objective material is all we are teaching, when what we should be doing is frankly acknowledging that we are promoting those values that seem best to us, as liberal arts educators have always done” (4). This language does seem to play into the worst fears of Hairston, especially if one sees no difference between the promotion of values—such as a careful weighing of all the available evidence before jumping to a conclusion—and specific political positions—such as the support of affirmative action legislation.
In “Teaching Rhetorical Values and the Question of Student Autonomy,” Dennis Lynch presents an explicit position concerning the role of politics in the composition classroom that I believe represents the prevailing view in the field:

[T]he idea that we can or should want to keep politics out of the classroom has receded with the recognition that relations between teachers and students, between teachers and students and academic institutions, and between students and their future civic lives, etc., have an irreducibly political dimension. As a result, the question for most participants in the discussion has become, not, should teachers bring their politics into the classroom, but, how should teachers and students together approach, resist, negotiate, affirm, transform, make use of, etc., the political relations and commitments that circumscribe and define the writing classroom and its activities? (351)

Lynch argues that an exploration of the meaning of student autonomy and how we promote it while still promoting values such as the willingness to try to understand opposing points of view is a better question to ask than whether or not teachers should bring their political ideas into the classroom. Lynch supports this position by arguing that teachers need to take an interest in the rhetorical skills of both students and the country at large, if we expect to continue living in a democratic society supported by the rhetorical skills of its constituents. Personally, I am persuaded by Lynch’s perspective, but I realize that Hairston’s perspective continues to represent the views of many in the field as well. My project investigates the advantages and disadvantages of the pedagogical approaches
of Lad Tobin, Ira Shor, and bell hooks and how each of them addresses issues of politics in the classroom.

In the early 1990s the debate between teachers who wanted to keep politics out of the classroom and those who argued that they should be brought in focused more on what might happen than on examining descriptions of actual classrooms. Hairston ends “Diversity, Ideology, and Teaching Writing” by imagining how issues of cultural diversity would emerge organically in the type of composition classroom she promotes. In “Making a Federal Case out of Difference: The Politics of Pedagogy, Publicity, and Postponement,” Linda Brodkey defends the goals of her English 306E Writing about Difference syllabus by linking her goals to research in the field, but also in part, by imagining how these goals could be implemented. Since the early 1990s there have been a growing number of teachers and theorists writing about the successes and failures that they have encountered with such issues in classrooms that they have taught rather than imagined. This writing describes specific teachers engaging specific students on issues of politics, student resistance, student autonomy, and how these issues intersect with teaching students about rhetoric and writing. My project begins with an investigation of how three influential pedagogic theorists, Lad Tobin, Ira Shor, and bell hooks, negotiate these issues in their writing about their classroom practice and ends with presenting examples from my own pedagogic practice that attempt to synthesize their perspectives.

My claim that Tobin, Shor, and hooks are influential pedagogic theorists in the field of rhetoric and composition rests in part upon the frequency of their names appearing in articles that attempt to define the field. I argue that these authors write books and articles that are read and engaged with by authors who publish in the leading
composition journals such as *College Composition and Communication* and *College English*. The impact that Tobin, Shor, and hooks have on specific classrooms around the country cannot be determined by counting the number of times they are referenced in journal articles or appear at the Conference on College Composition and Communication. However, the fact that these authors are referenced in articles appearing in the leading composition journals says something about the impact of their thought, especially when we consider the fact that many of the people making the references both create syllabi for graduate classes in Rhetoric and Composition and serve as writing program administrators responsible for preparing new teaching assistants for their first undergraduate Rhetoric and Composition class.

In order to support this claim, I point to Richard Fulkerson’s 2005 article “Composition at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century,” where the author maps out the contours of the field by comparing two collections of essays used to prepare new teaching assistants in English for their first composition classes. Fulkerson compares the 1980 collection *Eight Approaches to Teaching Composition* edited by Tim Donovan and Ben McClelland to the 2001 collection *A Guide to Composition Pedagogies* edited by Gary Tate, Amy Rupiper, and Kurt Schick. He finds that since 1980 the field has been diverging into three different theories of value (axiologies):

1. critical/cultural studies
2. expressivism and
3. procedural rhetoric.

For my purposes, I want to point out that chapter one in *A Guide to Composition Pedagogies* was written by Lad Tobin, who was also cited in Fulkerson’s article.
Fulkerson argues that critical/cultural studies represents a major movement in the field of Rhetoric and Composition in the last few years, and he quotes Ann George, who, in the chapter “Critical Pedagogy: Dreaming of Democracy,” claims that Freire, Giroux, and Shor represent “the big three” in critical pedagogy scholarship. While bell hooks is not cited in Fulkerson’s article, she is cited in five of the twelve chapters in *A Guide to Composition Pedagogies*. The prominence of Lad Tobin, Ira Shor, and bell hooks in “Composition at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century” and *A Guide to Composition Pedagogies* suggests that these pedagogic theorists are influential with the people writing and defining the field of Rhetoric and Composition, although Fulkerson’s article and the anthology can not directly suggest that the ideas of these theorists are being engaged in the rhetoric and composition classrooms around the country.

The writing of Lad Tobin, Ira Shor, and bell hooks has also been influential to me on a personal level and in my classroom practice. The expressivist tradition that Tobin upholds and continues to develop was an important perspective in my own development as a writer. I remember learning how to do freewriting and teach freewriting as a graduate student, and how my own development as a writer progressed in graduate school during the time that I provided instruction and advice to my first-year composition students. Ira Shor’s focus on working class students and his political perspective has also interested me because of my lower-middle class upbringing and the political change of heart I went through during my undergraduate years in college. The pedagogic theory of bell hooks interests me because of my experiences with African Americans as a young student, and as a composition teacher in the federal prisons surrounding Columbus, Ohio. I have come to believe that my childhood engagement with African American people and culture
provides me with a perspective somewhat different from the norm represented by professors and graduate students in the field of Rhetoric and Composition, and I read the work of hooks wondering both how my perspective differs from hers and how much my perspective differs from the perspective of my colleagues.

Lad Tobin is a writing teacher and theorist whose *Writing Relationships: What Really Happens in the Composition Class* describes and explores a composition classroom that has many similarities to the type of classroom championed by Hairston. Tobin describes a composition classroom focused on student texts, and while some high risk questions of race, class, and gender occur within these descriptions, these topics come from student writing, not from assigned readings. The two other theorists I examine, Ira Shor and bell hooks, both teach a very different kind of class, and the theories and practice of both writers promote a view of introducing politics into the classroom that Hairston argued against. In *When Students Have Power: Negotiating Authority in a Critical Pedagogy*, Ira Shor describes a classroom where the teacher’s political opinions are very much out in the open. Shor’s goal is to convince students of the efficacy of collective action in order to resist the status quo in society, and his required texts present a distinct political agenda. In three collections of essays: *Talking Back: thinking feminist, thinking black*; *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*; and *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*, bell hooks develops a pedagogic theory that aims to persuade students to notice, analyze, and resist instances of racial, gender, and class oppression in the world around them.

The pedagogic practice of Lad Tobin champions the individual writer and begins with a focus on the personal relationship between the individual writer, the teacher, and
the text. This perspective assumes that relevant questions of societal discourse conventions and argumentative analysis can arise organically along the course of the interactions between writer, teacher, and text. Difficult issues of politics are sometimes seen more as obstacles than as stepping stones for teachers coming from this perspective. The pedagogic practice of Ira Shor and bell hooks and the writing teachers who follow their lead champions the critical analysis of topical cultural problems. These teachers explore such problems in order to better understand the discourse conventions surrounding them. Their perspective assumes that relevant questions concerning the development of the student’s written text can arise organically along the course of a critical analysis of specific arguments. My project strives, in the words of Peter Elbow, to embrace the contraries of both sides of these diverging perspectives. In the article “Reconsiderations: Voice in Writing Again: Embracing Contraries,” Peter Elbow enacts a methodology of embracing contraries. He argues that students should learn to sense and use “voice” in their writing and he also argues that it is important to teach students to read and produce writing that ignores the idea of voice. Elbow goes on to say that it is not a contradiction to promote both ideas in the same classroom when one considers that both perspectives should be promoted at different times for different purposes. Following Elbow’s lead, I argue that it is important to teach students that they are active producers of language in order to help them write their way into the university and the larger society. When pursuing this goal, I believe that it is important not to overwhelm students with social and political perspectives that may challenge the students in some deeply personal way, causing the kind of dissonance that can be debilitating. However, I also argue that it is important to “promote the values that make rhetoric possible” in the words
of Dennis Lynch. This goal is important because the practice of rhetoric and the practice of democracy are linked. For the practice of rhetoric to be possible, citizens must resist the idea that any opinion is as good as any other. When pursuing this goal, it is important to help students see that language and the perspectives that each individual grew up with also limits what she can see - that language not only allows change and action but also sets limits to understanding. In order to demonstrate why some arguments are more persuasive to some people it sometimes becomes necessary to confront students with perspectives that will cause them a certain amount of psychic dissonance.

In “Confrontational Teaching and Rhetorical Practice,” Virginia Anderson performs a rhetorical critique of the pedagogic methods of Dale Bauer and James Berlin before describing her own ideas concerning how teachers should promote their agendas in the classroom. She argues:

Teachers all along the continuum between activism and neutrality recognize that classrooms are rhetorical situations, sites of complex interrelations between speakers, audiences, subjects, and codes. Our field encompasses a large body of scholarship on these interrelations. In this essay, I argue that this scholarship—that is, rhetorical theory—enables a constructive critique of activist pedagogy. (198)

My examination of the pedagogies of Lad Tobin, Ira Shor, and bell hooks follows a similar course in that I provide a rhetorical analysis of their pedagogies by taking a text, (in the case of hooks, several texts) that focuses on their classroom practice and break it down into the descriptive categories that answer the questions: Why, What, Where, Who, and How? This analysis allows me to focus on the relationships between specific areas of
classroom practice and the stated pedagogic goals in order to search for areas of harmony and dissonance within each author’s pedagogic practice. My assumption is that each author will demonstrate moments when their pedagogic practice promotes teaching students to interact with language and writing as agents capable of using writing for their own purposes, and that each author will also demonstrate moments where students confront language as a limit to what a student is capable of doing and understanding. I am searching for moments of dissonance and harmony within each author’s practice not so much to point out imperfections but to show that these dissonances and harmonies have meaning and create spaces for teachers hoping to incorporate and synthesize these authors’ diverging insights into their own practice.

Pedagogic approaches emphasizing the individual student and what she can do to develop her writing skills have been developing for a long time now in the field of Rhetoric and Composition. Pedagogies that promote a perspective on language that make visible the ways that language use sets limits on individual action and understanding have a shorter history. My own classroom practice began with a view of students and language that promoted individual student agency. I saw my role, and continue to see my role, as a teacher, however imperfect I may be, who helps students, however imperfect they may be, write their way into the university, however imperfect it may be, in order to achieve their career goals in the larger society, however imperfect that may be. This is just to say that I understand my role as a teacher of rhetoric and composition to be in service of my students’ career goals. However, the very project of acquiring a college education presumes a certain willingness to explore and change, and the project of exploring why some arguments prevail and other arguments get discarded involves exploring how
language use influences us as individuals. This is just to say, in the words of Dennis Lynch, that language use and writing have “an irreducible political dimension,” and I believe that this dimension cannot be ignored without running the risk of promoting an arena where everybody’s right to their own opinion comes to mean that nobody’s ideas are allowed to be better than anybody else’s.

In my own classroom, I often practice oblique or indirect challenges to students who resist the idea that their perspectives might be limited by the language they use and the habitual lenses they use to see the world around them. These challenges involve making visible dissonances between various expectations that students may have about each other or their teacher and what happens in the classroom. In “Politics in the Classroom,” Richard Marius writes about the English 306E debate and basically takes the same position as Hairston—he imagines how a class called Writing about Difference could easily turn into a class focused on political evangelism. But, he also tells a story about an encounter he had with a teacher when he was a young college student that led to profound changes later in his life. I find Marius’s story to be a good example of an oblique challenge:

My opinions on just about everything were passionate, stupid, and loud. The most significant conversation I had during my university career was with a young political science professor named Joseph Greenberg. He was very kind to me when I took his course on the United States Constitution, just as Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka was kicking the legal legs out from under segregation.
Greenberg was a Jew from Chicago! One day in his office he asked me, “Do you think I'm going to hell?” I replied as bravely as I could. “Well, sir, if you don't accept Jesus as your savior, I'm afraid you are going to hell.” Greenberg laughed and clapped me on the back, and that was the end of the conversation. It took me two or three years of quiet and sometimes tormented rumination on that gentle encounter to realize that it was also a marker on the way to the end of my fundamentalism. I've often thought that if Greenberg had been as ardent as politically correct zealots today, I might remember him with less affection and he might have done me much less good. (10)

My reading of Marius’s story sees the teacher as providing a challenge to his fundamentalist student. The question: “Do you think I am going to Hell?” is a direct confrontation. But Greenberg’s reaction to his student’s argument creates dissonance by moving the interaction between the two into unexpected territory. Greenburg does not say, “Let’s do a Toulmin-based argumentative analysis of your claim.” Instead he laughed and clapped the young Marius on the back. I see these actions as enacting an argument that promotes challenge as well as tolerance, an argument that understands that a student’s education continues long after direct encounters between the student and teacher. And while an analysis of the warrants and claims of a specific argument has its place in the composition class, there are also moments when insisting upon such a discussion might impinge upon a student’s deep view of herself, and where such direct, objective methods may feel more like rhetorical force than gentle persuasion.
My analysis of Tobin, Shor, and hooks searches for new rhetorical tools of persuasion. I am looking for ideas that can serve as oblique challenges to myself, my students, and my colleagues when we write and argue as if the way we see the world is simply an uncomplicated manifestation of common sense. These oblique challenges are part of my pedagogic goals of making visible and promoting a view of language that both sets limits on human action and provides the necessary conditions for humans to take action.

This oblique rhetorical challenge perspective differs from the classroom that Hairston promotes in a number of ways. First of all, the oblique challenge perspective steps around the zero sum game perspective that Hairston promotes when she argues that writing classrooms should be about student writing and not highly charged political topics. I support the right of someone like Brodkey to create a class that uses a collection of themed readings throughout the class, although hers is not the type of class I teach and argue for here. My perspective underlines the benefits of permitting teachers to introduce topics that may carry a powerful political charge, by pointing out that such rhetorical challenges are part of how students learn to write with more rhetorical power. I envision that such readings will be obliquely introduced along side of other kinds of texts. I also argue, along with Bizzell, Lynch and others, that these challenges are meant to promote rhetorical values such as engaging with opposing points of view and carefully analyzing an argument before criticizing it. Such values are necessary in order to make both rhetoric and democracy possible, and they are values that teachers need to enact as well as promote. Unlike Hairston, my perspective recognizes that what a student may want from her education does at times conflict with what a teacher believes to be necessary.
Many students do come into our classroom wishing to be taught how to write in such a way that never challenges any of their assumptions or deeply held beliefs, and that never brings them into any social or cultural conflict with their peers. I understand and sympathize with these desires, and while I believe it may be possible to promote this view of learning in the rhetoric and composition classroom, I do not believe it is the best way to teach writing. Language use, writing, rhetoric, argument, understanding—all of these topics contain an element of conflict and politics. To ignore this is to introduce a distortion into the practice of rhetoric and composition that I and others argue would be much worse than searching for ways to ethically address issues of conflict and politics.

The perspective of oblique rhetorical challenges addresses Hairston’s concern that heavily charged political topics can cause young writers to freeze up and worry about whether or not they are saying the correct things. The surface goals of such a class are simply to develop a student’s writing and rhetorical abilities in order to promote their career goals. By obliquely introducing the idea that learning to negotiate social and political challenges are a component part of these writing and rhetorical skills, students are less likely to feel indoctrinated, although I realize that the teacher is consciously manipulating a component of a hidden curriculum. I make no claims that my motives are all above board and completely pure, only that I am promoting values such as carefully analyzing arguments before pronouncing an opinion that can be shared by people on both sides of the political spectrum. This approach also ensures that students have the possibility of ignoring my challenges and writing about topics that seem safer to them.

This pedagogy of oblique rhetorical challenge promotes the idea that students develop as more sophisticated rhetors and more powerful writers over years, not weeks. It
also encourages teachers to enact the rhetorical values that they hope to promote. In a strong democracy, people engage with a wide variety of well articulated political and social positions. Unfortunately, the vast majority of political debate found on our most popular news networks rarely enacts this kind of rhetorical engagement. Our rhetoric and composition classes can promote student career goals and the rhetorical values most necessary for a meaningful public sphere. The practice of posing oblique rhetorical challenges is one path that can help promote both of these goals.

My analysis of the practice of Lad Tobin, Ira Shor, and bell hooks is meant to serve as an enactment of how divergent perspectives can be explored and critiqued in a spirit of engagement rather than in a spirit of judgment. Chapter Two focuses on the pedagogic practice of Lad Tobin, who argues for a greater awareness of certain psychoanalytic practices and techniques among teachers of rhetoric and composition. In *Writing Relationships: What Really Happens in the Composition Class*, Tobin describes a number of expressivist teaching techniques including student-teacher writing conferences, and the publication of student texts. I argue that Tobin’s practice assumes a transformation of his students’ perspective concerning how language and the imagination work, and that this change in the student is as pervasive and intimate as the more overtly political transformations proposed by Shor and hooks. Tobin explores how teachers can most effectively intervene in a student’s writing process. He suggests that teachers need to be more aware of the Freudian psychoanalytic concepts of Transference and Countertransference. I analyze how Tobin describes his practice by creating narratives that describe imaginative breakthroughs. These narratives demonstrate his argument that teachers need to become more sophisticated readers of their own emotions and the
student’s emotions. I also argue that Tobin’s storytelling technique is a conscious effort to create a writing relationship with his reader that mirrors the type of writing relationship that Tobin strives to create between the students and teacher. My analysis of Tobin brought me to an understanding of his pedagogic practice as being focused on the goal of personal transformation induced by a careful reading of emotions and the hidden meaning inside language itself. When Tobin’s pedagogy succeeds, his students see the world and understand language and their emotions differently.

Chapter Three focuses on the pedagogic practice of Ira Shor as exemplified in the book *When Students Have Power: Negotiating Authority in a Critical Pedagogy*. Shor’s vision of critical pedagogy promotes a left wing agenda of collective action as a way to resist and change the status quo in U.S. culture. I explore the consequences of Shor’s decision to introduce contract negotiations to a particular group of students in a class that focused on the topic of Utopia. The students raised concerns that pushed Shor into a further experiment of continued negotiations with a smaller group of students that lasted throughout the entire course. I argue that these experiments taught Ira Shor a deeper understanding of the perspective of his working-class students. I also explore some stylistic features of Shor’s prose that I find problematic. My analysis of Shor brought me to view his pedagogic practice as an attempt to transform his students’ social sense of what is possible in the world around them. When Shor’s pedagogy succeeds, his students feel capable and willing to work together in a group to challenge specific elements of their society that they believe could be improved.

Chapter Four focuses on the pedagogic practice of bell hooks as exemplified by selections from three collections of essays: *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking*
Black; Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom; and Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope. hooks’ vision of liberatory pedagogy is directed towards a student’s sense of who she is and how she fits into the society around her. hooks’ practice focuses on teaching students, especially students coming from a minority background, to learn to see their problems and concerns as being central to their society rather than marginal or of interest only to people who look like themselves. The classroom practice of bell hooks is meant to call attention to thinking patterns of the colonized mind and to encourage students to break free from those patterns. I analyze instances of hooks’ classroom practice that focus on students who resist her perspective. I examine how hooks uses terms such as white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchy and domination to describe the injustices she sees in society. I also examine some of the problems that white middle-class teachers encounter when using the ideas of bell hooks in their classroom, as well as issues surrounding her writing style. My analysis of bell hooks led me to describe her pedagogic project as an attempt to link a personal transformation with the transformation of society. When hooks’ pedagogy succeeds, her students create a transformed sense of how they fit into their society, and they become committed to changing their society and bringing this understanding to others.

Chapter Five is a description of my struggles to address a number of these pedagogic concerns. My composition classroom involves using essay anthologies in order to raise topics that students can explore and investigate in their own writing. I believe that in my class, students spend more time reading each other’s essays than they spend reading the essays in the anthology. My practice aims to enact a pedagogy of oblique challenges to students and hopes to stand outside some of the pedagogic
dichotomies highlighted by Hairston. I seek a classroom where students are neither protected from political ideology nor required to make public proclamations of their politics. I also seek a teacher position where my political views are neither absent from the classroom nor are they front and center. I realize that other teachers are pursuing similar goals. Virginia Anderson, in “Confrontational Teaching and Rhetorical Practice,” and Donald Lazere, in “Teaching Political Conflicts: A Rhetorical Schema,” both articulate practical advice on how to achieve these goals. Unlike Anderson and Lazere, who describe classes with large amounts of outside reading, my focus is on how to take a class that looks more like the one Hairston describes and move it towards the concerns that Brodkey addresses with a different type of class. One of the main goals of my practice is to teach students to see the rhetorical effects of strategically concealing and revealing their personal opinions. My assumption is that such a practice always comes with potential advantages and disadvantages, and my goal is to explore these advantages and disadvantages in the classroom. The analysis of my practice focuses on a number of resonant moments from my teaching career where my students performed unexpected actions that have created dissonance in me. The exploration of the possible meaning of these events is influenced by the pedagogic perspectives of Lad Tobin, Ira Shor, and bell hooks.

My interest in this project springs from my own college experiences as an undergraduate at the University of Pittsburgh and as a graduate student at Ohio University. As an undergraduate I was one of those conservative eighteen-year-olds who resisted and mocked the left wing perspectives of my teachers, until I took a series of Russian history courses that had a profound effect on my political outlook. I was the
student that Hairston worries will be indoctrinated, and my point of view was transformed, but my transformed outlook did not feel like indoctrination because the challenging political ideas I confronted were presented to me in a spirit of exploration. In graduate school, I learned to teach composition alongside highly politically motivated colleagues whose course material I read and discussed and whose classrooms I visited and critiqued. I have seen classroom practices that have felt unproductively confrontational, and I believe that the dangers that an unconscious use of teacher power can create are real and need to be carefully studied, observed, and overcome. Such problems are occupational hazards for all of us. Ultimately, I believe that the transformations possible for both students and teachers within the classroom and the consequent risks involved are what continue to draw my attention to issues of pedagogy.
CHAPTER TWO: LAD TOBIN

Why: The Goals of Tobin’s Pedagogy

In Writing Relationships: What Really Happens in the Composition Class, Lad Tobin demonstrates an allegiance to a core set of concerns occupying members of the process movement within the field of rhetoric and composition by exploring student emotions and teacher emotions that surround the writing process. Specifically, Tobin explores how certain emotional tensions and interactions among teachers and students can encourage a student writer to gain insight into the power of language when writing about personal topics. His expectation is that this knowledge will increase the student’s ability as a writer, and his strategy for achieving this aim involves examining both the physical and the emotional contextual elements surrounding writing students and teachers. He uses the term writing relationship to point to all of these contextual elements. He then explores how writing relationships influence student writers. For Tobin, writing relationships exist between students and teachers, students and other students, and between teachers and other teachers. Theoretical perspectives involving the connection between writing and therapy and the connection between language and the unconscious are important elements of Tobin’s writing relationships. The questions concerning these relationships are unlikely to be answered definitively, but Tobin’s investigation is an important one because of his desire to challenge some of the commonly held perspectives that developed from prominent theorists in the field concerning issues such as the role of competition in the classroom and the links between psychoanalytic therapy and the student-teacher writing conference.
*Writing Relationships* was published in 1993, while I was teaching composition in the federal prisons surrounding Columbus, Ohio, but I was not aware of this book until much later in my graduate studies. I have had various strong and loose ties with friends, colleagues, students, and mentors over the years since 1988, and I remember the early 1990’s as a time when the cultural capital of the Social Constructivists was growing in the literature of Rhetoric and Composition scholarship. *Writing Relationships: What Really Happens in the Composition Class* is part of the expressivists-versus-the-social-constructivists debate that has been on going in the field for a while and continues today. In some ways this debate defines the field and the first division of sympathies involves the relative importance of the terms Rhetoric and Composition. Is it more important to focus on individual writers as the compositionists argue, or is it more important to focus on the social context of writing such as recognizing and analyzing an argument as the rhetoricians argue? Of course these perspectives are deeply intertwined, and it is hardly groundbreaking theory to suggest that each side depends on the other. Nevertheless, most theorists argue from a position that seems to favor one perspective over the other.

In *Writing Relationships: What Really Happens in the Composition Class*, Lad Tobin paints himself as a member of the process movement and argues that teachers who use individual student-teacher writing conferences should acknowledge and learn to embrace an uncomfortable and long-resisted parallel between the student-teacher writing conference and the Freudian-based therapy session. Tobin’s description of how learning transforms a student and a teacher relies on the psychoanalytic concepts of transference and counter-transference. Many of the implicit arguments suggested in *Writing Relationships* such as the importance of teachers learning to read their classrooms as texts
are made fully explicit in Tobin’s 2004 collection of essays, *Reading Student Writing: Confessions, Meditations, and Rants*.

I find Lad Tobin most persuasive when he describes what I would call the emotional ecology of a classroom or a student-teacher conference. His investigations and intuitions pertaining to how emotions influence writers and writing are many. My own development as a writer reverberates with Tobin’s descriptions and suggestions concerning how to learn from emotions and language. Many of my successes as a writing teacher connect with his ideas as well. What I find most compelling about Tobin’s articulation of the writing teacher and how she engages emotions in the classroom, her students, and herself is the way Tobin highlights both the dangers and the opportunities involved. In an essay titled “Fear and Loathing of Fear and Loathing: Analyzing Our Love-Hate Relationship with Emotion,” Tobin explores some of the academic literature focusing on emotions in the classroom. He argues that teachers need to both encourage emotion in the classroom and to fear it a little as well:

My point is that our students’ expression of raw or powerful emotions is not inherently good or bad. What matters is what the student is doing with those emotions as a writer and what the teacher is doing with these emotions as a reader. By asking students to look beneath the surface of things, to explore entrenched opinions and values, to examine new perspectives, to write what they don’t know about what they know, we are likely to make our teaching more exciting and more meaningful—for us and for them. We are also likely to make it more stressful and even a little dangerous. Staying present, without overreacting, in the face of
expressions of trauma or rage or grief can be difficult, frightening, even painful, but that, to my mind, is a good part of what we signed on for.

*(Reading Student Writing 84-85)*

Tobin’s description of the teacher’s duties emphasizes the dramatic. He persuades his readers by encouraging us to imagine that our writing classrooms and writing relationships can be as dramatically charged as an engaging work of fiction, but this passage also expresses Tobin’s focus on the writing student as an agent learning to use language to solve problems. Tobin’s focus on emotional issues points toward the type of problems he believes students can learn to address by writing in his composition class. The majority of stories he tells about his students concern their personal writing and the personal problems they explore in his classroom. The analysis of arguments and how language use sets limits on perception and understanding is not the main focus for Lad Tobin in this book.

*What: The Main Activities of Tobin’s Pedagogy*

The main activities in *Writing Relationships* concern helping students in college composition classes learn to write richer more complex prose capable of revealing more powerful insights by becoming more thoughtful readers of their writing, the circumstances surrounding how they write, who they write for, and what they are trying to say with their writing. Tobin hopes to achieve these goals by building what he calls writing relationships. A central component of Tobin’s description of writing relationships involves learning how to perform a version of Freudian textual analysis on a number of different but related texts. Tobin also teaches his readers—but not necessarily his students—how to interpret the text of student writing, the text of teacher behavior and
emotions, and the text of student behavior and visible emotion. Each of these texts contains hidden meanings that can be discovered when reading them through the lens of Freudian analysis. Discovering these hidden meanings helps to build writing relationships and strengthen student writing abilities by creating a deeper involvement between the student and the writing. The excitement that comes with these breakthroughs presumably leads to a renewed desire on the writer’s part to continue improving all facets of the essay. Tobin also argues that teachers must make a greater effort to see through the eyes of the students, to understand how students experience what goes on in the composition classroom. One of his main concerns is that many teachers have allowed themselves to ignore students’ actual experiences in the classroom when reflecting upon their classroom practice. Tobin suggests that this sometimes happens while exploring the ideas of composition theorists who have reacted too strongly against the process movement’s focus on the individual writer:

Perhaps as an overreaction to decades of microanalysis of the individual writer (Donald Murray’s conferences and Linda Flower’s protocol analyses are prototypes here), we have leapt over relationships to macrotheories about social construction, discourse communities, woman’s ways of knowing, sociocognitive theory, and cultural critique. (Writing Relationships 5)

Tobin’s pedagogic theory and practice strives to move the conversation away from the larger social theories occupying the profession back toward writing relationships. For Tobin, writing relationships occur within a context specific environment and contain highly charged psychic energy that is always in danger of manifesting itself in
unproductive forms of intense emotional response like accusations, or dreams of violent
revenge rather than the type of emotional response that can be harnessed into deeper
writing insights. His research activities include thick descriptions of his students in his
classroom, detailed reconstructions of conversations that occurred during teacher-student
writing conferences, teacher journals, and the results of student questionnaires and
interviews. Tobin’s reporting on all of this focuses on the dramatic and the emotional
energy produced by these encounters. He argues that writing relationships must contain a
certain amount of tension, and that teaching writing is, to a large extent, about learning
how to make this tension productive by channeling, manipulating, conjuring and being
exposed to it in ways that encourage students and the teacher to want to write more and
read more. His pedagogy relies heavily upon Freudian Psychoanalytic theory and could
be described as a form of “the writing cure” in distinction to Freud’s psychoanalytic
practice, sometime referred to as “the talking cure.”

In order to understand how Tobin’s focus on writing relationships could possibly
lead to improved student writing in a composition classroom focused on the type of
personal writing that Tobin describes, it will be necessary to understand how theorists
using Freudian psychoanalytic theory understand the relationship between a writer and
language. In “Re-Writing the Subject: Psychoanalytic Approaches to Creative Writing
and Composition Pedagogy,” Judith Harris, while exploring a poet’s relationship to
language, makes the following observation:

This raises an interesting question about writing in general, and one which
is not exclusive to writing poetry: Do subjects control or choose the
language they want, or are subjects driven and determined by language
processes that operate them? Language liberates the subject from the inner bondage it must escape in order to confirm its own presence—to see itself from the outside—as others would see it. Language reflects back on itself and often tells us more than we know. (179)

So from this Freudian perspective, Harris suggests that language, itself, has a kind of agency of its own; it is never really completely under control of the author, but it is also never completely under control of the reader either. There is always a tension between what the writer would like language to do, and what language would like to reveal about the writer. Kathleen Martindale, in “Theorizing Autobiography and Materialist Feminist Pedagogy,” makes a similar point concerning language in reference to autobiographical narrative, which she argues always reveals some things while at the same time concealing others. Tobin explores writing relationships by coming up with various classroom activities that make this tension visible and productive for individuals in his classroom. I feel confident in suggesting that Tobin shares Harris’s and Martindale’s views on language because much of his student-teacher writing conference practice demonstrates how to use this view of language to generate productive comments on student writing. It seems that learning how to make productive use of this kind tension is largely what Tobin means when he writes about the teacher student writing relationship. Of course it is not possible to use these tensions to produce a profound writing epiphany with every student at every conference, and Tobin acknowledges that writing relationships are also about keeping open the possibility that these tensions could be productive in the future even when such tensions overwhelm students or teachers and do not lead to creative breakthroughs at any given specific moment.
Another component of writing relationships concerns how students influence each other, or what Tobin refers to as student-student writing relationships. Tobin’s main strategy to promote the student-student writing relationship is to organize the classroom into a place where students are able to influence each other and learn from each other in positive ways. One of his concerns is that some rhetoric and composition theorists demonize the very notion of any competition in the writing classroom. Tobin’s view is that certain forms of student competition always exist within the writing classroom or any other classroom, and that composition teachers should spend more time trying to find productive ways to channel this energy rather than attempting to snuff it out: “We need to discuss the complicated, powerful, and sometime positive role that competition plays in every classroom; we need to acknowledge not only that students learn from and identify with one another but also that they define themselves against their peers” (15). This emphasis on competition might have led Tobin into a discussion of the ways in which language use sets limits on students by exploring how competition necessarily defines social parameters, but Tobin is interesting in the ways that the inherent tensions involved in competition can push an individual writer into more powerful agency. His approach suggests that limits are less interesting or less useful than the promise of increasing abilities and power.

The title of Tobin’s book *Writing Relationships: What Really Happens in the Composition Class* points toward another of his goals. His use of the word “really” contains the suggestion that composition theorists have allowed themselves to produce politicized descriptions of our classrooms that better support our theoretical agendas than represent actual student experiences. Tobin’s enactment of teacher research—he
interviews his students, quotes his journal, gives his students questionnaires—is meant to counter the influence of more abstract theoretical descriptions of the classroom. By interviewing students, sharing his teacher response journals, and describing students’ emotional struggles with language, the teacher, and other students in minute detail, Tobin takes a kind of methodological high ground and suggests that his theoretical perspective is better informed by practice than some of the views of his opponents. Peter Elbow, in “Exploring Problems With ‘Personal Writing’ and Expressivism,” remarks upon Tobin’s achievement in using personal writing that explores the possible meanings of his students’ feelings in order to come to general conclusions about classroom pedagogy. Tobin’s teacher research methodology and the dramatic quality of his prose is part of his rhetorical strategy to persuade readers.

In some ways Writing Relationships represents a rather limited and conservative approach to pedagogy in terms of how the main goals of the pedagogy relate to society at large. Tobin concentrates on college students and the kind of improvement they can achieve following his writing-to-learn style of pedagogy. While his concern with how students influence and teach each defends his pedagogy against the charge that his view of the writer is anti-social and solipsistic, he does not attempt in any obvious way to tie his pedagogic practice to any specific tensions found in the social order outside the classroom as both Ira Shor and bell hooks most readily do. Lad Tobin appears content to provide his students with the skills that many parents, administrators, and students believe necessary in order to advance in the social order as it exists right now. Whether or not these skills will readily lead to these goals, or whether or not our current society will continue to value the type of writing skills Tobin has to offer goes largely unexplored.
Although the Freudian project his theory and practice is based on contains an implicit narrative of inner personal development and transformation, this personal transformation is linked to improved writing skills and not to the possible transformation of any political or social structures in the larger society. While there are moments in his book where issues of racism, class prejudice, and sexism erupt within his classroom, these questions are addressed primarily on an individual basis pertaining to the stress they put on the writing relationships within the classroom. Because Tobin’s pedagogy focuses on increased power and agency for students, questions surrounding rhetorical techniques, argumentative use of language, and how perspectives limit understanding go largely unexamined. Tobin’s model suggests that everything worth knowing can be learned as the writer gains more insight into the nature of language and emotions. The reasons why some arguments or some political positions are more persuasive than others get passed over while he concentrates on the fascinating connections between emotions, writing, and insight. In many ways Tobin’s pedagogy keeps well within the bounds that Hairston argues for and ignores much of the political and rhetorical concerns articulated by her opponents.

Where: Issues Surrounding Location

Learning to use writing as a means of discovery and exploration is perhaps the ultimate goal of Tobin’s pedagogic praxis. This ability develops, presumably, in the student’s brain. This development in the brain is not readily visible to either the teacher or the student, but indications of this change, evidence suggesting this change has begun to occur, is observable if one knows how and where to look. Historically, we have looked at student writing for this evidence. Process theory has taught us to look at the behavior
of the writer while writing for some of this evidence as well. Tobin is trying to get us to look at writing relationships, including the emotions surrounding them, in order to provide further evidence. Judith Harris brings Tobin’s focus to a sharp point when she argues: “In fact, the teaching of both composition and creative writing would benefit from focusing less exclusively on the writing process and products and more on the writing subject” (201). Tobin’s writing relationships require teachers to acknowledge and explore their own multi-layered identity that includes the teacher, the person, and the writer. Writing relationships also require the teacher to acknowledge and explore the multi-layered components of student identity which include the student, the person, and the writer.

For Tobin the focus on the personal tends to translate into a focus on emotions. He writes about a student crying during a conference; about different instances when he became angered while in the classroom; about awkward silences when students exposed extreme points of view while reading their drafts aloud. He explores moments when he feels very self-satisfied with himself as a teacher or with a particular student essay. He relates how a particular student-athlete wrote about competing with another teammate during a larger competition with an opposing team. He writes about specific arguments that colleagues make that anger him. Writing Relationships is filled with minute, carefully observed states of emotionally charged consciousness, and Tobin’s main pedagogic tool is a Freudian-influenced close reading of these states of consciousness and the language surrounding them. His theoretical model suggests that these states of consciousness always contain latent meaning beneath the surface, and that careful observations of written language, spoken language, and the language of emotional
representation will lead to clues to deeper meanings and a more powerful emotional energy often locked within the text. His practice makes visible how writers find and use this latent meaning in language in order to come to writing breakthroughs. Tobin teaches students and teachers how to read their emotions as a text; their relationships as a text; their mistakes, frustrations, desires, and fears as a text; and all these texts are presumed to contain latent meaning. This latent meaning has the potential to lead to writing breakthroughs that are really nothing more, nor less, than new perspectives on what the writer is trying to do in the writing, but these new perspectives, these breakthroughs, come with a large emotional charge, an excitement that Tobin wants his students to know and experience. This charge allows the writer to return to the essay with a renewed sense of purpose. In many ways *Writing Relationships* is most concerned with helping students create, experience, and know this type of energy, this kind of emotional charge that is so closely related to writing and the kind of discovery that sometimes comes from writing when we are writing to explore and learn. When these breakthrough moments have been experienced and made visible, they can be incorporated into writing.

These descriptions of emotions, excitement, and multiple layers of identity within the teacher and students become visible quite possibly because the scope of Tobin’s analysis leaves largely unexplored questions pertaining to issues such as how language defines and limits what can be seen and understood, why some arguments and points of view are more persuasive than others, and the relationship between education and the structural hierarchy of society. Tobin’s pedagogic activity occurs in a limited range of locations: in the college composition classroom, in the teacher’s office during the teacher-student writing conference, and in the mind of the students and teachers. It is
quite possible that his scope and his insight both reveal and conceal. Kathleen Martindale argues that autobiographical writing always reveals some things and conceals others, and Tobin’s pedagogy, because it is so concerned with personal writing, may be performing a similar function. Tobin is able to draw vivid pictures of how writing and reading is able to produce and transform powerful emotions, but he does this while at the same time concealing larger tensions between language use and how it can limit perspectives and understanding.

In *Writing Relationships*, Tobin has left his readers with a notion of literacy closely associated with the career goals of many students and parents. These students want to learn how to perform writing in a way that will help them perform in society in order to get the jobs and do the work the business world asks of them and for which it will reward them. If Tobin were a cook instead of a teacher, I would claim that the main focus of his restaurant was satisfying his clientele. His clientele is interested in knowing how to cook, but they are more interested in their personal health than the health of the nation. If a different educational theorist were viewed as a cook, say Ira Shor or bell hooks, I would claim that the main focus of their restaurants would be on how an individual’s health is related to the health of a nation, a gender, and a race. I do not want to suggest that Tobin’s pedagogic praxis does nothing more than reinforce the status quo, but I do want to describe, as accurately as I can, what is revealed and what is concealed by Tobin’s contribution, and I believe that a focus on location reveals certain limitations regarding the scope of agency for the students in Tobin’s classrooms. Tobin’s praxis presumably prepares students for the demands of the business world and social world as it currently exists by helping students to develop their writing skills while writing about
personal issues. He teaches students to write better in order to fit in and move ahead in the society they know and live in. Whether or not that society is just, sustainable, or particularly in need of the talents Tobin encourages must be investigated elsewhere, outside of the classroom, or office conference. Tobin’s view of student agency is focused on increasing student insight into how language works, how writing about personal topics can be used to learn procedural knowledge about writing in general that will help students achieve their career goals. The rhetorical view that writing is also used to evaluate goals, arguments, political positions, and assumptions receives far less attention in the descriptions of his student-teacher conferences and classroom activities.

Tobin’s teacher research methodology, his student-teacher writing conference notes, his student-focused interviews, and student surveys describe the immediate experiences of teachers and students. And while I have no doubt that his students are learning some powerful ways to interact with writing as a mode of exploration and discovery, I remain curious and ambivalent about his unstated assumptions about literacy in general and how well his particular literacy tools are valued by society. Are the writing abilities as described by Lad Tobin, such as the ability to delve deeper into the potential meaning of a topic, the attractive qualities that allow people to get ahead in business or the university? I believe that they can be, but there are many new perspectives challenging this assumption such as calls for greater attention to technological literacy and visual literacy. Is the composition classroom and the current university structure a sustainable entity? Perhaps they remain so, even after almost twenty years since the publication of *Writing Relationships*, but we are currently experiencing economic
developments and technological changes that may come to challenge this paradigm as well.

Who: Issues Surrounding the Actors

All of the teacher action and the student action Tobin describes in *Writing Relationships* involve producing, reading, and interpreting texts. Tobin describes student actions as well as student writing as a kind of psychological text that the teacher must learn to productively read or misread. Tobin describes all of his students and himself as different texts waiting to be read. The dramatic energy in Tobin’s literacy narratives come from placing different characters in his classroom story next to each other, having them read the texts before them and then describing the powerful emotions or lack of emotions these readings produce. Of course, for the emotional responses to become strong, the reading of texts and actions as texts must be mutual and must progress toward a breakthrough of insight into deeper possible meanings behind the topic. Tobin’s description of the writing relationship, when it is most successful, follows the plot line of the Freudian breakthrough: the writer is frustrated and unhappy; Tobin asks a few pointed questions, frustration gives way to an insight, a creative breakthrough, and a renewed sense of desire to work on the writing.

Unlike the two theorists whose work I investigate in the following chapters, Ira Shor and bell hooks, Lad Tobin puts very little energy into attempting to decenter his authority in the classroom. Perhaps because the psychoanalytic theory he employs attempts to channel the power disparity between the two participants rather than rearrange or diminish it, Tobin questions the very possibility of ever achieving decentered authority in a classroom:
Many writing teachers deny their tremendous authority in the classroom because it does not fit the image they would like to project. Most of us are uncomfortable admitting that we are the center of a “decentered” classroom, that we hold so much power, that we are largely responsible for success and, even worse, for failure. But while there are good reasons for our discomfort—many of us would like for political reasons to think of our classroom as democratic, supportive, and non hierarchal—there are even better reasons to face the truth: from a student’s perspective a writing teacher is an authority figure, even—or especially—in process classrooms.

(Writing Relationships 20)

Instead of attempting to lessen the teacher’s classroom authority, Tobin’s pedagogic praxis attempts to make visible the strong mutual learning opportunity possible in the composition classroom. Tobin argues that strong teachers must and do learn from students in important ways, and he seems to imply or perhaps hope that the realization of this fact should protect students from an encounter of teacher authority that is woefully damaging. Tobin’s praxis is based upon a relationship between the teacher and the student where the teacher learns from the student as well as teaches the student. A concern for the potential abuse of power between teachers and students is one of the main focuses of the critical pedagogue Paulo Freire, especially in his book Pedagogy of the Oppressed. In this book, Freire writes about “overcoming the teacher student contradiction” as a way to point to the issues surrounding the power differential between students and teachers and the need for students and teachers to work together in order to determine what type of knowledge should be investigated. While Tobin does not self-
identify as a critical pedagogue, his pedagogy does provide some suggestions which address Freire’s teacher-student contradiction. In Tobin’s praxis the teacher learns from the student by closely monitoring countertransference emotions in the writing relationship. The underlying assumption is that the teacher will at times misread the student’s writing and actions because of deep unresolved tensions in the teacher’s unconscious mind. When a student’s writing or a student’s action seems to produce a particularly charged response in the teacher, Tobin advises the teacher to be on the lookout for countertransferential issues. In a nutshell, transference is a term Freud used to describe the emotional energy inside a patient that makes the patient want to please the analyst or fight with the analyst as if the analyst were an important authority figures in the patient’s personal life. Transference causes the patient to react to the analyst in deeply emotional and personal ways—emotional and personal ways that would probably not exist in the typically more objective relationship between a dentist and a person with a tooth ache. Countertransference is the other side of the coin; it causes the analyst to react to the patient as if the patient were somehow a deep and personal part of the analyst’s life. Tobin provides examples from his own classroom experiences in order to demonstrate how countertransference emotions can be used to deepen the teacher’s understanding of what is going on in the classroom.

Tobin describes a moment when he walked into his classroom and lost his temper with a group of boys wearing baseball caps who were leaning back in their chairs and talking before class. During this exchange the students made some comments about Tobin’s language and behavior that, upon reflection, provided him with a breakthrough explaining why he was inclined to overreact to these particular students. These students
reminded Tobin of painful moments he experienced in high school (33-35). This story is cited in the research of Douglas L. Robertson, who in the article “Professors’ Perspectives on Their Teaching: A new Construct and Developmental Model” (1999), uses this excerpt from Writing Relationships to serve as an example of systemocentric teaching. Robertson is most interested in how Tobin’s description of his classroom difficulties involves specific students reacting to his specific actions. Tobin’s reading of this situation, his interpretation of it, and the action he takes to address it represent a kind of breakthrough that comes with renewed energy for teaching. This renewed energy for teaching is what Robertson sees as the hallmark of systemocentric teaching. When a teacher confronts a problem in the classroom but maintains a sense of fear where “teaching becomes a courageous act rather than a joyous or even comfortable habitual event” (282), this teacher has yet to reach the systemocentric stage. Robertson’s perspective relates to Freire’s concern with the student teacher contradiction because Robertson too is interested in describing how teachers learn from students, but unlike Freire neither Robertson nor Tobin seems worried that the teacher-student power differential will destroy the possibility of genuine learning for the student. Robert Yagelski, on the other hand, in “The Ambivalence of Reflection: Critical Pedagogies, Identity, and the Writing Teacher” (1999), is interested in wedding Tobin’s focus on transference and countertransference emotions to Freire’s student teacher contradiction: This complex student-teacher relationship, then, although it is affected by some of the same factors that influence all relationships, as Tobin suggests, and although it is shaped by complex and deeply rooted cultural attitudes toward teaching and learning, is not equivalent to other kinds of
relationships we might have. What is crucially different is that the teacher’s agenda must ultimately become secondary to the student’s needs even as the teacher’s identity remains a central part of the student’s education. (43)

Yagelski, unlike Tobin, feels this position to be a deep contradiction and feels disturbed and uneasy about the implications this point of view has for teaching composition but decides that embracing just such a contrary can help him use his feelings of ambiguity and tension to sharpen his teaching practice.

I am rather intrigued by the possibilities Tobin’s Freudian perspective brings to scholarly discussion of the student-teacher relationship. On the one hand, Tobin acknowledges the teacher’s greater institutional power and the greater interpretive powers, but Tobin’s personal stories demonstrate that these greater powers are no guarantee of productive readings of any specific situation. Tobin’s perspective seems to demand that teachers acknowledge that our students do have the power to sometimes read and interpret the teacher’s actions in ways that are much better and stronger than the teacher. Tobin quotes Freud’s explicit argument claiming that the psychoanalyst is able to help the patient only as far as the analyst is aware of her own countertransference issues, suggesting that a writing teacher unable or unwilling to learn from his students will never be as effective as one willing and able to do so. While Freire appears to be exploring the issue of the teacher-student relationship out of a desire to protect the student from potentially noxious influences of the teacher, Tobin seems to suggest that the teacher must acknowledge and learn from the interpretive powers of the students if the teacher hopes to improve.
Nevertheless Tobin’s pedagogic praxis still feels vulnerable to critiques concerning teacher authority, even though an exploration of that very power differential is a part of Tobin’s self reflexive pedagogic project. I am concerned with the idea that the very practice of the individual teacher student writing conference might produce a kind of dependency within the student that Tobin has not sufficiently explored. This suspicion comes from the language Tobin uses to describe the problems he finds with his classroom experiment with collaborative learning practices:

[I]t all seemed so labor-intensive and so rigidly scripted that I began to have real doubts: if I had to work so hard at making my students feel like a real group, maybe they were not a real group; if I had to spend so much time telling them how to collaborate in the way that I wanted them to, wouldn’t that defeat at least part of the purpose of peer group work, that is, of making them less dependent on me? (*Writing Relationships* 130)

My sense is that Tobin’s vision of the proper function of student peer critique is skewed. He is concerned because students do not produce the type of criticism of their classmates writing that the teacher wants them to (116), and this concern, it seems to me, places too great an emphasis on the student draft and not enough emphasis on the student activity of reading and commenting on writing. Struggling with Tobin’s analysis has forced me to consider the possibility that, perhaps, the most productive point of peer critique is in presenting students with a forum to evaluate and critique writing outside of the influence of the teacher’s authority and watchful eyes. Tobin is concerned that the goals of peer critique may place students in unproductive writing relationships because students are in some real senses in competition with each other for grades. If teachers assume that all
good students naturally want to help each make their essays better, we may be creating unhealthy tension for everyone involved. I take Tobin’s point here very seriously, and I now make it a point to underline to my students my belief that it is writer’s job to improve the draft not the job of the reader/responder. The students read their peers’ drafts and respond to scripted questions in my classroom with the belief that this activity has benefits for the reader/responder; any information that can be used to improve the essay is extra; it is not necessary, and this is why weaker writers are encouraged to make comments on the writing of their stronger peers. This process reinforces writing habits, habits of mind within the responder. Tobin’s practice might be in danger of reifying the notion of the Freudian breakthrough moment within the writing conference. It is, of course, difficult enough for a highly skilled reader to help bring this breakthrough process along, so why should teachers put their students into this situation where they will in all likelihood fail? The answer has two important components. Students need to make reading and interpreting developing texts part of their conscious practice. Observing the mind of the reader, when reading either a very underdeveloped student text or a very highly developed student text, reinforces useful habits of mind. Students also need to experience a developing text in a Zone of Proximal Development outside of the teacher’s influence. Tobin sees himself as the sort of sympathetic, more skilled peer that Vygotsky refers to in his research, and I agree that teachers can be that peer in some circumstances, but it is also necessary for teachers to remove themselves from this zone in order for students to gain some sense of what it feels like to write when they do not have a teacher around. This removal of the teacher makes clear that a major goal of our pedagogy is the development of student abilities, not student texts. Peer critique can make visible the
tensions between the text that students can perform with the help of the teacher and the
text that students can perform without this help. The exploration of this tension does not
seem to be a major concern of Lad Tobin in this book.

How: Issues Surrounding Tools and Techniques

In order to develop student writing abilities during student-teacher writing
conferences, Tobin exposes and explores moments in his students’ written and emotional
texts that might contain latent meaning. Later on, Tobin teaches his readers how to read
teacher behavior and teacher emotions as texts containing latent meaning as well. When
describing the student-teacher writing relationship, Tobin relies primarily on the
individual student-teacher writing conference. Writing Relationships contains many well
described pictures of writing conferences that vary in their degree of success. Tobin
begins his book with a thick description of a memory concerning a writing conference
with Polly. It was the last conference of the day, and Tobin was mentally tired. Polly
brought a rough draft that described how much she loved kittens. Tobin paused to find
something to say that would not discourage the writer, and then noticed a strange
intensity in Polly’s emotional connection to her subject. Then Polly blurted out a number
of her anxieties concerning her draft. The other students were writing about homelessness
and death, and all she could think of was her kitten. When Tobin asked her why she
chose this topic, Polly realized that her parents probably allowed her to get a kitten right
before she left for college as a kind of place holder for her in the family while she was
away. Tobin became excited and started to imagine all the places this idea might go,
when all of a sudden, he realized that Polly was no longer listening. She was crying. She
realized that she was homesick, that she used to feel that her friends were immature
because they were afraid to leave home for college, but now it appeared that they were all out having fun and she was the one who looked immature and felt terribly homesick. Tobin wondered what sort of advice to give while at the same time he worried that his colleagues down the hallway might have overheard crying coming from his office. Polly decided to continue working on the kitten paper, presumably with new found insight into what the paper might be about. The plot of this student-teacher conference follows a kind of Freudian breakthrough story pattern. Tobin’s advice to teachers holding student-teacher writing conferences is to pay closer attention to the larger context of the writing relationship, not just the words on the page:

Suppose that instead of focusing on the structural and mechanical flaws on Polly’s essay, the faulty process she used to produce the text, or the conventions of academic discourse she ignored, we first examined factors that are usually considered extraneous or trivial in the teaching of writing: the tension Polly and I both felt during the conference about her weak writing and powerful emotions; my disappointment in the essay that I read; my excitement about the essay that I “misread”; our mutual fear and embarrassment that our respective peers might overhear her crying; her competitive feelings toward the students that she felt wrote on more important topics; my concern that my preoccupation with personal narrative had led to her embarrassment and pain; her sophisticated analysis of her roommate as an unreliable reader; and so on. (Writing Relationships 6)
Here Tobin tells a heroic story about what a great reader and teacher he is: He described the care it took not to simply dismiss Polly’s writing as inappropriate and poorly developed. He found something interesting that was not really in the text, but in the context: Polly’s intense feelings toward her rather sentimental subject matter. He waited and allowed the tension to build between Polly and himself and between Polly and her subject matter. Tobin’s willingness to find something interesting in his encounter with Polly’s writing, and his waiting to allow the tension to push Polly deeper into the meaning of her language, created a breakthrough. The cat meant more than she thought at first. Tobin participated in this moment, and he wants to encourage his readers to believe that they too can perform the same magic by learning how to become more sophisticated readers of the student-teacher writing conference. This advice becomes more and more persuasive as Tobin tells a range of dramatically compelling stories about himself and his students. He provides a number of hero narratives that teachers of language find pleasing and motivational. These stories follow the literary pattern of the detective story where the climax occurs as a form of imaginative breakthrough—at first I couldn’t see the connections; all of the clues just confused me; I was blind, but then the clouds parted, and now I see. Tobin persuades both students and readers by performing and writing emotionally satisfying narratives that enact and describe his writing pedagogy. Of course, he also argues that his stories are not just compelling narratives, but how people, students as well as teachers, sometimes experience language when writing personal essays that attempt to discover meaning that the writer is not fully aware of when writing. The discovery of this meaning is also understood to unlock renewed energy for the more mundane activities such as reworking sentence construction and editing.
Not all conferences in Tobin’s book lead to creative breakthroughs, and not all emotionally intense moments lead to a productive focus on student writing. Tobin tells many student-teacher conference stories that do not end in a creative breakthrough but in frustration. In these instances, Tobin writes about the emotions surrounding the desire to simply give up on the student, and writing relationship. His advice, unsurprisingly, is not to give up, but to believe that even this frustrating energy contains latent meaning in it somewhere, and Tobin tells these less successful stories and focuses on these more messy emotions in order to help his readers build up a sense of what it takes to do his type of Freudian textual analysis. This approach to language, as Judith Harris’s arguments suggest, places Tobin’s writing pedagogy in close connection to the pedagogic practices of poetry and fiction writers. Tobin paints a picture of his project that is romantic enough to compel teachers, but at the same time realistic enough to warn teachers of the amount of work it takes and the amount of success that one can be reasonably expect.

Sometimes it is the teacher’s emotional outburst and not the student’s that deepens the writing relationship. In a later story, Tobin narrates how he lost his temper with a group of four male students wearing baseball caps and sneakers with untied laces. These students talked about the parties they went to the night before instead of the drafts in peer editing groups, and they seemed to challenge the teacher in snide and passive ways. This situation had been bothering Tobin for weeks, and he felt at first that he had to hide this fact so that the students would not know that they were getting to him, but that idea failed. The tension continued to build and one day it overflowed:

Finally, one day, I snapped. I walked into class, saw them together, laughing and leaning against the wall, and in a voice that conveyed much
too much anger and disgust I said, “I have never had to do this in ten years of college teaching; in fact, I left high school specifically so I wouldn’t have to deal with shit like this, but you guys are completely out of control. I don’t want you to sit together any more.” There was an awkward silence and then one of the boys said in a mocking voice, “Completely out of control? Fine, I’ll move.” Another asked, “That’s why you left high school?” It was an embarrassing moment because it was clear—to them and to me—that I was the one who felt out of control. (Writing Relationships 35)

When analyzing this event later, Tobin focused on his “mistake” about why he left high school, and made a connection between the kind of young man he was in high school and the way he was reacting to these writing students:

That’s when I realized the significance of my slip about high school. I had meant to say, “That’s why I left high school teaching,” but I had referred accidentally to my own experience as a high school student. I remembered periods when I acted like these students and later periods when they were the type I felt I was competing with. And I realized how much, for whatever reasons, I was still bothered by the group behavior of adolescent males. The realization helped: by recognizing and somehow naming the source of my anger, it dissipated and became more manageable. I’m not saying I suddenly felt comfortable with these students or with their texts, but the situation now seemed within my own realm, somehow within my control. (Writing Relationships 35)
Tobin then connects this breakthrough concerning the meaning of his emotional outburst to one of the students involved during a successful series of student-teacher writing conferences. Jack, who was the most contentious student of this group, came to a conference with an essay about how to make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. After reading the essay Tobin decided that the essay might be an attempt at satire and suggested this idea to Jack:

> When I asked him why he was writing a comic essay on making a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, he had no idea. I suggested that if the essay was meant to be satiric, he ought to think about who or what was being satirized. He seemed totally confused and asked for an example. I said that the essay could, for example, be making fun of technical writers who complicate simple processes. He looked irritated. “Or, maybe you are making fun of teachers who give foolish assignments.” He looked surprised for a second, then laughter. I had not planned to confront him in that way, but as soon as I did I was convinced it was the right move.

(*Writing Relationships* 37)

Jack later decided to change his topic, and Tobin narrates a few details concerning their improved relationship, but it seems clear that when Tobin acknowledged that the essay could possibly be an attempt to satirize the assignment, something in the emotional energy between Jack and Tobin changed. Tobin’s acknowledgement of the satirical impulse behind the peanut butter and jelly sandwich essay seems to acknowledge something Yagelski observes about the teacher’s position in the learning process. Teaching, Yagelski argues, ultimately places the teacher “at the center of an enterprise
that is ultimately not about you” (46). This position, especially when it goes
unacknowledged by the teacher, when the teacher sees his position in front of students as
the most natural thing in the world, can drive students into viewing the teacher as an
inappropriate obstacle in the room, something to make fun of or move around.

The story of the writing conference between Tobin and Jack demonstrate one
example of overcoming teacher countertransference emotions in a way that leads to a
more productive writing relationship. In this instance Tobin was able to imagine that Jack
might indeed be writing something satirizing the teacher, and he was able to engage this
thought without becoming defensive, without feeling threatened or insulted by the
student. Tobin’s interpretation suggests that this increased ability to connect with Jack
during his later conferences was the pay off for investigating the meaning behind his
earlier emotional outburst in class. Tobin is encouraging teachers to pay special attention
to moments where we either want to give up on a student or moments where we feel
immense personal pride concerning a student. Each of these moments, he argues, is an
area fraught with highly charged psychic energy that could be coming from
countertransference. Teachers able to catch such moments, dive into them, and search for
a deeper meaning are likely to find useful breakthroughs and connections in their
teaching and in their developing writing relationships with students. This opportunity is
at the core of Tobin’s investigation into the relationship between therapeutic models and
the student-teacher writing conference.

Tobin encourages making visible the writing relationships between students as
well, and he tells some interesting stories describing how students influence each other in
positive ways when they read their essays out loud in class. In one story, he describes the
events surrounding a student who read aloud an essay arguing against the wisdom of a national holiday for Doctor Martin Luther King. Tobin described how he squirmed as the class seemed to accept much of the essay without direct counter-argument, until the tension became too much for him and he provided the counter-argument at the end of the lesson. Tobin then relates this story to a later story where a different student in the same class wrote an essay exploring her experiences of racial bias in America and her emotional reaction to her mother asking her why she had no black friends. Tobin interprets the performance of this essay as a sort of counter-argument to the earlier essay, and then notes how this student ended her essay with a list of highly personal rhetorical questions:

Am I insulting my mother by not having black friends? I have Jewish, Asian, Hispanic, and white friends, so why have I excluded blacks from that circle? Am I secretly racist myself? Am I denying the darker side of myself? Am I afraid in America to be black? These are all questions I can’t answer. I am afraid to answer.

Then again why should I have to? (Writing Relationships 116)

In later assignments Tobin began to notice other students ending their essays with highly personal rhetorical questions. The ease with which students identify with each other and learn from each other is the focus of this sequence of stories.

Tobin aims to make his classroom a place where the positive sorts of student identification can easily occur, but he is also very aware that students influence each other in negative ways, too. His interviews with students produced fairly strong anecdotal evidence to support the idea that while students want good grades they also do not want
to appear to be working too hard or to be getting too much help from the teacher, suggesting that students do not necessarily want to be seen as someone who needs, seeks, or takes help from the teacher.

When investigating the student to student writing relationship, Tobin sees his main goal as encouraging students to identify with their more talented peers:

Again, part of the answer—as I’ve tried to point out in the first three chapters—is to revise our relationships to one another. Vygotsky’s often quoted argument about the zone of proximal development applies here. The key to teaching and learning, he argues, is not to discover what a student can accomplish alone but to discover what she can accomplish with the assistance of a more talented peer. But for this positive student-student interaction to occur, we need to establish conditions that foster it. Part of our job, then is to set up our classroom and course in such a way that students identify with their more capable peers. (Writing Relationships 120)

The classroom practices meant to enact this idea seem to me to be nuanced wrinkles on fairly standard process movement activities. Tobin calls for student-authored textbooks where the essays of the previous classes are used as the reading material, in order to provide both models to follow and examples to critique, and he also calls for coauthored, dialogic, nonlinear texts, which seem to me to amount to a group writing project with well thought-out guidelines and goals. His goal for the activity is to allow students to see up close how other students write, and to experience how multiple voices can change both the form and content of what is written.
My main critique of Tobin’s pedagogic practices concerning student-to-student writing relations is that he does not attempt to connect what the teacher does during writing conferences to what students learn to do for each other. In this sense, it appears that Tobin imagines one set of reading skills for advanced writers like himself and a different set of practices for students. His Freudian readings of texts in conferences seems unconnected to what students learn to do in the classroom. When do students get to read each other’s drafts and search for latent meaning in the language and nudge each other towards creative breakthroughs? Is this activity saved solely for the more experienced teacher? The creative writing classroom praxis I have experienced as a student does presume this type of involvement from students, but from Tobin’s point of view this activity might be considered too advanced for his students at the moment. Or perhaps he imagines that students will eventually learn from the example of his conference practice. In any case it appears that his practice concerning student-to-student writing relationships is focused more specifically on what students already do to influence each other and not as much on what they could learn to do to influence and teach each other. This division between what the students do and what the teacher does goes unnoticed, perhaps, because Tobin is so intensely focused on student writing that student reading is less well scrutinized, or perhaps his use of the Freudian breakthrough narrative supporting his understanding of the risks of teacher power allows this issue to escape deeper scrutiny.

Writing Issues: Stylistic Features that Promote or Detract from the Pedagogic Goals

What I find most compelling about Writing Relationships: What Really Happens in the Composition Class is how Tobin’s ideas are explored through the re-creation of dramatic scenarios. Stylistically, the book is similar to the novelistic/journalistic practices
of Tom Wolfe in *The Right Stuff* but applied to complex problems found within Lad Tobin’s process writing classroom. Readers move back and forth between sequences of dramatic action and the narrative commentary. Lad Tobin is the author of the story, but he is also a character within the story. His findings and his suggestions take on the persuasive quality that one typically finds in the personal essay or the novel. In many ways his book takes on a persuasive quality fueled more by the dramatic quality of his writing than by appeals to logic, or the thoughtfulness of his teacher research, participant observer methodology, or the authority and appropriateness of the rhetoric and composition theory he engages. Of course, Tobin’s book is not the only or even the most influential cross genre experiment in rhetoric and composition research. Victor Villanueva’s *Bootstraps* is the example that comes most quickly to my mind, and the books of Ira Shor and bell books also stretch and experiment with the genre of academic discourse.

I believe that many of the writing decisions made by the author of *Writing Relationships: What Really Happens in the Composition Class* are part of a conscious decision to create a mutual dialogic relationship with the reader. This desired relationship with the reader is a reflection of the relationship that Lab Tobin the teacher hopes to form with his students. In essence, I argue that Tobin calls the reader’s attention to contextual elements that most readers of this book are likely to share with the author. To support this position, I focus on a few of the techniques that Tobin uses to persuade his readers to identify with him.

In this book, we see the author perform a writing maneuver that looks very much like a post-modern novelistic practice. Tobin’s relationship with his editor Philippa
Stratton intrudes into his narrative on at least two occasions. On the first occasion, we see Tobin pondering over two of the most obvious objections to the main thrust of his arguments in this book: 1 Writing courses should focus more on academic discourse and research writing than on self-actualization and confessional prose and: 2 There is not enough time to work on interpersonal relationships with every student and meet in one-to-one conferences. He then confesses that even his editor makes similar arguments:

But it’s not just my critics who will tell me this. My editor, Philippa Stratton, already has. She told me she liked my kitten story, but even as she said it I knew there was a “but” coming eventually. (After all, I’m a writing teacher. I know the tricks: “Always say something positive about a text before you criticize it”.) She continued slowly: “This example might work . . . for those already in the ‘process’ camp” (she was being kind here: one outside reviewer described it as the “so soft it almost squishes” camp), but for teachers who do not rely so much on personal writing and individual conferences . . . there might be problems.” And to back this up, she showed me a comment from another outside reviewer: “I had a negative reaction to the Polly example. Polly, the kitten, etc.—yes, I can relate to it, did in fact, but in the current scholarly climate, it’s risky to begin with this.”

“So you can see,” Philippa concluded, “there’s a lot for you to mull over.” (Writing Relationships 6-7)

This dramatic sequence is a meta-narrative containing four different voices: Tobin, Philippa, and two nameless outside readers. Tobin is describing the process of writing the
work we are currently reading. It is highly probable that the vast majority of readers of this work are themselves teachers of rhetoric and composition. The majority of these readers are teachers who also write rhetoric and composition research. Tobin is asking his readers to identify with him in a very specific way in this passage. His writing suggests that he is like his readers because he is a writer of rhetoric and composition research, and as such a writer, his ideas do not always fit in neatly with what is currently popular in the field. Eric Branscombs’ review in the article “Shadows of Doubt: Writing Research and the New Epistemologies” anticipates very similar objections. In other words, Tobin the writer sometimes has trouble imagining his audience and this sequence with his editor seems to cry out, “Identify with me, dear reader, you too have fought for ideas that have not been immediately recognized as valuable; identify with me as a writer, facing a writing problem that does not necessarily have a neat and clean solution.”

This story continues in the next paragraph with Tobin explaining his emotional reaction to his editor’s comments. He wanted approval and affirmation, not more problems, negotiations and compromises. He felt very much like a student writing for a teacher. But this interaction forced him to restate his position in the following paragraph one more time in an attempt to make himself clearer:

I could see her point, which is probably why I felt so defensive. But my point was that the dynamics of interpersonal relationships shape reading and writing in all English classes—not just in ones that employ process teaching, personal narratives, and one-to-one conferences. Whether a student is writing a new critical explication of “Because I Could Not Stop for Death,” an argument about affirmative action laws, or even a lab report
on a water pollution experiment, these issues are always present, always shaping how we as teachers read and respond, and how they as students write and rewrite. And how editors respond (“If you want to reach more than just the process audience, it might help to start with an example about academic writing and classroom dynamics”) and how writers respond to an editor’s response (“OK, but I still want to start with an example where these tensions are especially intense and dramatic”) (Writing Relationships 7)

In these passages, Tobin (the author) makes his point by creating a dramatic character Tobin (the writer) and placing him in relation to another character Philippa (the editor). This story creates a kind of literacy narrative where Tobin the character/author/teacher looks very much like the typical student writer known to the readers of this book. If this analysis feels persuasive, it is really only a very small leap to conclude that Tobin the author is attempting to build a relationship—a writing relationship—with his readers very much like the relationship Tobin the teacher builds with his students.

Part of what intrigues me about Tobin’s novelistic stretching of academic discourse is how it might relate to Audre Lorde’s famous insight: “We will never dismantle the master’s house using the master’s tools.” It is not clear to me that Tobin’s project really centers on dismantling the master’s house, but it does seem clear that he is very interested in imagining new investigative and communicative tools. And these tools may prove useful to those interested in pressing forward with Audre Lorde’s feminist project. How teachers identify with students, how writers identify with readers, how women identify with men, how citizens identify with each other: all of these issues seem
to be related. Tobin writes academic research that asks its readers to identify with him in ways that differ from most other academic discourse. He aims for much more than simply collecting his classroom teaching practices and running them up the flagpole. He discusses his ideas on pedagogy in a way that dramatizes those ideas. He writes his academic research in a style that is personal, dramatic, engaging, and theoretically rigorous. These are all qualities that he hopes to encourage in his student’s writing as well. Tobin’s writing project seems to ask of him as the author: Can you write academic research in the prose style that you love, value, and attempt to teach your students?

Some of the problems that all writers face when we claim that this idea or that practice is very important are the questions: Who are you? And why should I care? In traditional academic discourse these questions are often obviated by all kinds of rhetorical positioning markers. I am a tenured professor at a prestigious university. I am someone who gets her articles published in *College English*. I am someone who has written many books. I am a young hip new graduate from a prestigious rhetoric and composition program. I am someone who has read many books and articles—look at my bibliography. All of these markers are important, but questions of pedagogy often require a deeper kind of engagement between a writer and a reader because writers of pedagogy often ask for a deeper kind of reaction from a reader. Lad Tobin, Ira Shor and bell hooks all ask for more than a simple consideration of their ideas on pedagogic practice. All of these authors propose that their readers consider changing their practices, and perhaps even changing their outlooks, their behavior, and their lives, in order to undergo the kind of transformation that their perspective promotes. One of the ways these authors gather
the courage to make such audacious requests is to remind their readers that we as teachers very often make the same audacious requests from our students.

When embarking on such a deeply personal persuasive project, all of the available means of persuasion are on the table, and one of the most powerful means of persuasion is identification. How am I, the author, like you, the reader? Let me count the ways. Tobin explores the identification between writers, but he will also take a page out of the Russian Realist tradition and reminds readers that he, like the rest of us, had a childhood. Childhood stories are an element of identification that hooks and Shor experiment with as well. While describing a classroom discussion about E.B. White’s essay “Once More to the Lake,” Tobin analyzes the emotional turmoil teachers go through when an effort at class discussion bombs. He tries humor, when that doesn’t work, he considers guilt. The most desperate strategy, he argues, is the divide and conquer maneuver:

In perhaps my worst moments I try to divide and conquer, to complain to the “good” students about the “bad” ones. It is, of course a pathetic strategy: “I know that some of you are working really hard and I’m really pleased with your work. Unfortunately, though, for a class of this sort to work, everyone needs to make an effort and there are people in there who are not contributing anything.” I wonder where I learned to teach like that? Was it from Mrs. Pollack, my fourth-grade teacher, who used to lecture us in exasperation and disapproval: “I am sorry that some of you have to sit and have your precious time wasted by your classmates who are apparently just too immature to listen to what I am trying to teach.” And then perhaps worst of all: “Why can’t the rest of you be more like Jeremy
and Diane?” thereby guaranteeing not only that we would hate Mrs. Pollack but that we would also hate poor Jeremy Mandell and Diane Rosen. Or maybe I learned it from Pogo, the clown my parents hired to entertain at my fifth birthday party. According to family legend, as soon as he started to perform, I burst into tears, yelling, “I’m scared; I want him to leave.” Pogo was upset, then embarrassed and hurt, and finally very angry. And so as he left the party he went over to the other kids and asked: “You liked the show, didn’t you? And you wanted to see more of it. But now you can’t and it’s all because of Laddy. Don’t you think Laddy is a little crybaby?” (Writing Relationships 78)

The wedding of an intense emotion with a childhood story often has the power to create a deeply emotional response in a reader. We have all, as teachers, been exasperated at one time or another with our students. Tobin looks at that bit of dust under the rug, and asks: where have we learned our responses to this type of anger? His purpose for doing this is to propose the alternative strategy of combining and conquering, but his willingness to take his readers deep into his family’s legend about little five year old Laddy is a writing maneuver, a stylistic technique meant to persuade the reader to identify with the character. He is demonstrating to his readers his connection with questions of pedagogy and the depth of his engagement with those questions. These questions run straight through the way I understand myself as a person, and the way I live my life, he argues. This is why you, dear reader, should see me as trustworthy and this is why you, dear reader, should consider what I have to say about living and teaching as well. Tobin’s dramatic pictures of himself as teacher, author, writer, and child reverberate with the
dramatic pictures he writes about his students, and persuade and motivate readers to take what he has to say seriously. Tobin strives to illuminate how learning to read and write with greater insight and complexity necessitates a psychological transformation. He also argues that teachers who understand the kind of psychological transformation that come from delving deeper into the potential meaning of personal writing, who have undergone such transformations in their writing and their lives and have reflected upon the opportunities and dangers involved, are better equipped to help writing students with similar transformations.

**Conclusion**

I have been able to adapt Tobin’s Freudian breakthrough narrative technique as an oblique rhetorical challenge in one of my freshman writing courses at Saint Joseph’s University. I once had a student come to my office in order to read his critical analysis of a poem to me to make sure he was on the right track. He chose a war poem by Siegfried Sassoon, and in the middle of the paper he started rewriting lines of the poem and making arguments for why his version was preferable to the author’s. I remember repressing my desire to say, “What on earth made you think you were supposed to rewrite the poem to your satisfaction!” After he finished reading, I ask him why he felt the need to rewrite the poem, and during the conversation it came out that he was distressed by Sassoon’s resigned tone concerning war. I then asked the student if he had any friends in Iraq, and he told me he had. Once it became clear that the student was upset by Sassoon’s pessimistic view of war, I was able to assure him that he did not have to agree with Sassoon or me about war. I argued that as a writer examining a poem concerning war, he was obligated to tell me about how he felt about the fact that our country is currently at
war. I assured him that this is how to engage the poem, and that this is also how to
engage a reader who does not agree with your perspective. Had I stopped him in the
middle of his essay and told him not to rewrite the poem, I would probably have missed
the fact that he was struggling with his own support of our current war on a campus
where most people seemed to support Sassoon’s view of war. My enthusiasm concerning
the development of my student’s essay did not match up with my feelings about the topic
of war in general or my views of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. I experienced a certain
dissonance that I expect my student felt as well. I hope that my student might wonder
why someone who disagrees with his position would feel positive about helping him
make his argument stronger. This question may have a number of answers, and thinking
about them would, I believe, help make visible why rhetorical exploration is so
important.

Lad Tobin’s classroom pedagogy encourages a psychological transformation from
a naïve reader into one who senses the possibility of deeper meanings in everyday words,
emotions, and texts. He promotes this transformation in order to develop greater insight
and agency for the student writer. Teachers and students learn to read deeper into the
context surrounding their writing, behavior, and emotions and these details, observed
through a Freudian lens, produces imaginative breakthroughs unleashing greater energy
that can be useful during revision. Analyzing Writing Relationships by breaking it into
Why, What, Where, Who, and How categories has allowed me to notice several salient
characteristics of Tobin’s pedagogy. The Where category indicates that for Tobin’s
pedagogy, the teacher’s office during student teacher writing conferences is just as
important if not more so than the classroom. And that learning is understood to occur
within the mind of writing subjects who are viewed as multilayered individuals who are students, persons, and authors all at the same time. The Who category indicates that Tobin is not concerned with attempting to decenter teacher authority. His Freudian analysis technique is also something that the teacher seems to consciously perform, but the students do not. The How category indicates that readings and misreadings of words, actions, and emotions are the primary tools used by the teacher and students. All of these readings are geared toward the production of breakthroughs that will produce greater awareness and energy for the project. The Stylistic Features subsection indicates that Tobin is attempting to enact a dialogue with his readers that is a version of a writing relationship that he has with his students. Tobin’s description of the teacher’s duties emphasizes the dramatic and engaging. He persuades his readers by encouraging us to imagine that our writing classrooms and writing relationships can be dramatically charged in the same way that a moving fictional story can be.

In the next chapter that focuses on the pedagogy of Ira Shor, I will examine the book *When Students Have Power: Negotiating Authority in a Critical Pedagogy*. For Ira Shor, learning is described as a transformation that happens in the political consciousness of the student and teacher. In contrast to Tobin’s pedagogy, which focuses on a psychological transformation or breakthrough, Shor’s pedagogy focuses on the transformation of a passive and accepting student into a student with a developing critical consciousness.
CHAPTER THREE: IRA SHOR

Why: The Goals of Shor’s Pedagogy

In the previous chapter I argued that the pedagogy of Lad Tobin focused on the emotions of students and teachers. Tobin’s practice involves reading emotions through a Freudian lens and learning how to use the insight gained to create writing breakthroughs. This process enacts a vision of learning that I describe as a psychological transformation brought about by a specific understanding of how language and emotions operate to create meaning. Tobin describes learning as occurring in a place that is only slightly under control of the conscious mind. In the present chapter I argue that the pedagogy of Ira Shor focuses on criticism and negotiation. Shor’s practice involves students and teachers making their expectations about their classroom, their careers, and their society visible and then exploring the limitations of these thoughts by submitting them to criticism. The criticism that Shor enacts and promotes is loosely based on the class struggle paradigm of Marx. An ideal description of how learning occurs in Shor’s classroom involves encouraging students and teachers to expose their various expectations concerning their lives, careers, and society and then criticizing and exploring the limitations of these expectations. This process of exposure and criticism is meant to develop a critical consciousness, and it enacts a view of language where language is understood to define and limit its user as well as create the conditions for action. For Shor, a critical consciousness develops when students become persuaded by, and then internalize, the superior insights that come from a critical perspective. For this reason I call Shor’s description of learning a transformation of political consciousness.
Few scholars have produced as much pedagogic insight and scholarship as Ira Shor. His pedagogic project is closely associated with Paulo Freire’s version of critical pedagogy, and Shor’s concern for the material conditions of the classroom and the political implications of our pedagogic decisions has been demonstrated on many occasions over the past thirty years. In *When Students Have Power: Negotiating Authority in a Critical Pedagogy*, Shor writes with a nuanced sympathy for his students that he has not always achieved in his earlier works. In works like *Critical Teaching and Everyday Life*, a much younger Shor wrote with a passion and a philosophical directness that at times felt smug and dismissive of some of the complexities of human psychology. His confidence at times made his version of critical pedagogy seem like an easy recipe for changing the world:

The teacher who changes to liberatory modes accepts responsibility for a process which converts students from manipulated objects into active, critical subjects. This empowering conversion is the result of re-perceiving reality. The teacher can prepare for this eventuality by studying the students in advance of teaching, and by grasping the overall process as *self and social inquiry designed for consciousness-raising skill development*. This formulation asserts the integral development of the liberatory process in each student. (*Critical Teaching and Everyday Life* 97)

I think what I find missing from Shor’s description of this process is a healthy respect for the rhetorical skills of those promoting the ideology of the status quo. I recently saw Michael Moore interviewed by Amy Goodman on *Democracy Now*, and Moore was explaining a strange feeling of admiration he has for Fox News and like media because,
although he hates what they do, he somehow, as a filmmaker, stands in awe of how good they are at what they do. Ira Shor, especially in his earlier works, sometimes wrote in such a way as to make the project of critical pedagogy seem much easier than it is, and then at moments when he wrote about his frustration over his inability to break through, he tended to blame his students’ false consciousness. In *When Students Have Power*, Shor demonstrates a deeper mutuality between his self-exploration as a teacher and the self-exploration he asks of his students. In the above quoted passage from *Critical Teaching and Everyday Life*, Shor calls for this mutual exploration in words but demonstrates very little actual self-examination while describing his classroom practices, experiments, and ideas.

This tension between how we describe the dramatic features of our classrooms—the teacher, the students, the activities—and how we describe our larger pedagogic philosophy and goals is the very core of my project, and I am drawn to Shor’s argument that a classroom, like a democratic society, ought to be a place where everyone participates freely, that a stronger classroom, like a stronger society is such a place. My classroom practice has been influenced by Shor’s focus on the power differential between the teacher and the students and how this power differential influences who speaks, what the speaker has to say, and how often or how long someone speaks. I am interested in Shor’s conception of a democratic classroom not only because of my commitment to the ideals of democracy, but also because I believe that such a classroom and society is a more energetic, a more fun place to live and work, than a society that is too narrowly focused on skills and academic norms. Shor’s classroom enacts a view of language that sees how language both enables action and also sets limits on perspective. Shor also
demonstrates an infectious kind of improvisational pedagogical joy at coming up with ideas that he tries out in the classroom and then either refines or discards in subsequent classes. He creates a challenging example for any who would follow in his footsteps and strive to enjoy all of the excitement and messy problems of teaching.

And yet there is something about Shor’s author persona that even in his later works continues to provoke me to criticism. Sometimes, I find Shor’s emotional appeals too melodramatic to be deeply moving. His picture of the drudgery of working-class student life somehow seems too constructed, not cognizant enough of the mitigating factors that allow a working-class individual to see his own life as deserving of something other than pity and outrage. At other times I get the impression that all of the restraint and fairness that Shor puts into his teaching persona mutates fiendishly in his writing persona where the careful teacher who was once so concerned with listening to his students’ thoughts and ideas transforms into the headstrong writer who is willing to overindulge in stories of his own daring and brilliance. It is almost as if Shor feels compelled to treat well the material beings in his classroom, but feels less restraint when it comes to the virtual members of his readership. The dissonance between these two versions of Shor seems like a problem to me because it suggests that he is unable or unwilling to write in a manner that dramatizes and promotes his pedagogic ideals.

I have learned many useful teaching techniques from Ira Shor, and my engagement with his writing and ideas continues to provoke me inside the classroom and while writing on my laptop. My goal in this chapter is to explore Shor’s pedagogy as enacted in When Students Have Power: Negotiating Authority in a Critical Pedagogy and measure my thoughts against other writers who engage Shor’s ideas. I describe Shor’s
pedagogy and explore a number of broad thematic issues such as: how his pedagogic
goals define the view of writing he promotes in his classroom; teacher and student
identity in the classroom; the relationship between pedagogic location and the working
definition of literacy; pedagogic techniques and negotiation, and how the prose style of
the author reinforces certain assumptions and calls others into question.

What: The Main Activities of Shor’s Pedagogy

Ira Shor’s main activities in *When Students Have Power: Negotiating Authority in a Critical Pedagogy* concern exploring the relationship between power and learning by encouraging students to identify problems in their society and then seek solutions. Typically, when teachers envision power in the classroom, we explore how our power can be best used to produce student learning. This is more or less Lad Tobin’s approach. Shor’s project involves revising this typical scenario and exploring how teacher power can be best used to awaken latent student power, and then to experiment with ways these two power bases can negotiate with each other to create a better learning environment for the students as well as the teacher. The main goals of Shor’s pedagogic practice involve linking the classroom to the larger society, and linking the transformation of students and teachers through education to the transformation of society through collective action. For Shor, who is working in the critical tradition of Paulo Freire, these transformations occur in the consciousness of the human subject as well as in society. When this human subject understands and experiences the world as a place of ongoing change, a place that is never complete, is always in need of more social justice, and more equal conditions among its members then this subject has acquired a critical consciousness. When this human subject understands and experiences the world as a fixed and static place, a place where in order
to participate one must accept society exactly as it is, then this human subject is suffering under some variety of oppression and false consciousness.

For Freire and Shor, classroom dynamics are a subset of the larger text of everyday life. One goal of critical pedagogy is to investigate the ways in which this text of everyday life reflects and resists the political dynamics found in the larger society. A related goal involves persuading students to search for solutions to societal problems by resisting the forces of the status quo. Teaching students how to interpret the political dynamics found in their lives and how to relate this insight to their education is what develops critical consciousness and allows students to transform their inner lives and the world around them. One of Shor’s starting places is the arrangement of the desks in the classroom. Shor asks his students to consider whether or not they would like to sit in rows or to arrange the desks in a circle. He then proceeds with a guided discussion comparing the virtues of a circular arrangement of the desks—everyone can see each other, the teacher is not physically separated from the students—to the deeper implications of a room where students sit in rows—the students face the teacher and cannot easily see each other, the teacher’s point of view is totally different from the student’s point of view. This arrangement of the desks discussion is important to Ira Shor because his pedagogic goals link the world inside the classroom to the political and social world outside, in order to demonstrate to his students that the classroom, like the larger social world, is not static, that students and teachers can rearrange the chairs in the classroom or rearrange the social structure outside if they put their minds to it, make a decision, and do the work.
The implementation of Shor’s critical pedagogy depends largely upon the students’ willingness to search for the hidden political nature of the material objects and the social relationships in their everyday lives. While Tobin’s project teaches teachers to see their emotions and their relationships as texts that contain latent meaning that could be unlocked by applying a Freudian analysis, Shor’s project teaches students to see plastic classroom desks, the organization of the furniture in the classroom, or the syllabus for their college course as objects containing latent political meaning that can be unlocked by analyzing them through a lens of cultural analysis.

A Marxist-influenced analysis, from the viewpoints of most young college students, is more controversial than a Freudian analysis and requiring students to look through this lens has sometimes led to resistance and accusations of indoctrination. Some students resist teachers who argue in support of such seemingly dangerous ideas. They do so for a number of reasons that may be more psychologically compelling than driven by cold abstract reason. Such students wonder what their parents, their church communities, their high school teachers, their friends would think of these ideas, and ask questions like: Why should I give up the way I see the world, the way everyone I know sees the world, and risk looking at the world the way you do? In the minds of some students, left wing perspectives are associated with a kind of visceral distrust that can not simply be gotten around with an appeal to logic. Throughout his teaching career, Shor has addressed this issue of suspicion and mistrust with a problem posing pedagogy of investigation. Such a project usually begins by asking students to think about their daily life experiences and to search for problems there. Then Shor teaches students how to consider solutions to these problems. To do this, Shor may have the students form groups and work on a proposal to
address some specific problem. In this way the students go through a procedure that encourages them to think about their daily lives; consider a problem; gather together collectively to see what other people think; and then propose a solution.

In *When Students Have Power*, Shor describes a class focused on the exploration of Utopia. Students consider what Utopia means to them, read literary descriptions of Utopia, and plan projects to make their society a little more perfect. Shor’s subject matter, his critical pedagogic goals, and the organization of his classroom all blend together in this project, and his book is a description and exploration of how these topics and goals interacted with each other. The Utopian subject matter of the class pushed Shor and his students into the utopian experimentations that occur within the classroom. Shor’s first day of class begins by focusing on the everyday life occurring within his classroom. He invites students to consider their teacher’s institutional authority, syllabus, reading list, and grading policy. He leads students to a critical appreciation of these seemingly natural objects, deconstructing the world where the teacher stands atop a place of unexamined privilege. Shor’s decision to start his critical project from this vantage point led to many surprises for him and perhaps to a deeper engagement between the students and teacher than he had experienced before:

The Utopia class obliged me to become more critical and experimental than I had been before. It called out from me and the students some mutually transforming actions I hadn’t seen before. Student resistance and acceptance drove me to test new methods I hadn’t imagined. This, then, is a personal story about what happened when students shared authority in
some disturbingly unexpected ways, when the power of knowledge was
cconnected to the knowledge of power. (4)

I argue that this success grows out of Shor’s willingness to test the persuasive power of
his own critical pedagogic perspective first, before asking his students to search for
hidden ideology in their more personal everyday life perspectives. Shor’s story
dramatizes an argument that addresses Freire’s concern about the student teacher
contradiction. The experiences described in When Students Have Power support the view
that the education process must somehow become mutually transforming for both
students and teachers for it to be deeply liberating.

Ira Shor’s project directly focuses on rhetoric and ideology, and he teaches from a
left wing position committed to social justice. Whether or not his students are required to
accept the same position in order to learn is another question entirely. Shor describes
students who do not appear to sympathize with his politics engaging with his assignments
and classroom discussion, but whether or not these students have learned what Shor
wants to teach them depends perhaps on how we understand what it means to develop a
critical consciousness, and how this project is related to developing skills in rhetoric and
composition.

The stories told in When Students Have Power revolve around two organizing
principles: the Siberian Syndrome and Power Sharing. The Siberian Syndrome is an
everyday occurrence in the classrooms of many teachers. It refers to the mindset and
resistance of that group of students who prefer to sit in the back of the classroom far
away from the teacher. Shor works to understanding these students and hopefully channel
their resistance into more politically critical and productive outlet. Power sharing refers
to a group of pedagogic practices that Shor has experimented with over the years. These practices are essentially negotiations between the students and teacher where each side makes visible their expectations and exposes them to criticism. These negotiations dramatize a form of radical classroom democracy. In the utopia class, Shor developed new pedagogic tools for fostering power sharing that gave students the power and opportunity to alter the teacher’s plans concerning paper topics, grading policies, attendance policies, and for the upcoming classroom activities.

Where: Issues Surrounding Location

The vast majority of the activity described in When Students Have Power occurs in a basement classroom at Staten Island College. Ira Shor’s pedagogic practice, much like Lad Tobin’s, is directed toward college students, except where Tobin describes specific college students without attempting to define the categories these students come from, Shor specifies working-class college students. His description of the working-class college student contains minute observations of their diet, teeth structure, and skin conditions. While Shor mentions that he too was once a working-class college student, his pedagogic practice focuses almost exclusively on describing and measuring the critical perspectives of these working-class students against his current academic perspective.

I am compelled by the ideas of Ira Shor because I find much of my own college experiences dramatized in his pedagogy. I am a version of one of his working-class students. At the same time, I am agitated by the way Shor describes his working-class students to his readers because his arguments sometimes appear to draw unreasonably large inferences from surface level details:
Still some things always make a global impression on me as I look out at a large group of students like those in the Utopia class—the make up, jewelry, and perfume used by some of the women, the look of the men’s and women’s hair, the cut, color, fabrics, and quality of their clothes, the corporate and celebrity names on their shirts and jerseys, the particular femininity and masculinity in the way men and women carry themselves, the heaviness of their searching gazes as they fix their stares on me (…), the great range of the apparent “whiteness” in their ethnic skin colors and the ill health reflected in their faces (…), the frequency of bad teeth (…). All in all, they look and sound like people who come from working homes, whose fate it is to sell their labor every day to make ends meet, working too many hours and earning too little, able to save peanuts and to invest less, with little or no authority in the job or in the halls of government, little or no power to control the decisions that affect them at work and in their communities. (8)

It is not that I find Shor’s version of the working-class student untrue. I find that his description too often lacks sufficient emotional and psychological details that could allow for a rounder, more complex, individual to emerge. I feel that Shor’s pedagogy sometimes focuses so intently on the general character of his students as members of different groups—working class, deep Siberians, scholasticons, or the After Class Group—that he misses the disparity, this generalized characterization can create between himself and his students. One might argue that there is a subtext to Shor’s description of his students that suggests that students are best understood in groups, while teachers are
“naturally” presented as individuals. I offer a short description of my own working-class student history to fill in some of the emotional and psychological details that I find missing from Shor’s picture.

I grew up in a working-class neighborhood in Erie, Pennsylvania. Our neighborhood included a growing diversity of ethnic groups including Italian-Americans, Polish-Americans, African-Americans, and religious traditions including fundamentalist Christians, Baptists and Catholics. During my education at Strong Vincent High School, I had a friend, one of the high academic achievers in our neighborhood, who one day told his mother that he had to write a research essay for class. She suggested that he write his essay on the existence of Angels because she had recently collected a lot of Bible verses mentioning Angels. She was very excited by the thought that her son might use her research, and I believe he wrote the essay. He later attended a religious college and settled down somewhere around Dallas, Texas. It seems unlikely to me that this friend could have ever been deeply persuaded by Shor’s critical perspective because of the amount of energy he and his family put into relating their religious traditions to their everyday lives, but he is always in the back of my mind when I prepare to introduce Shor’s ideas to new students. The problem of imagining how a teacher could possibly present ideas like those of Ira Shor to a student like this childhood friend have led me to search for such possibilities in oblique rhetorical challenges. My goal is not so much to convert this student away from his religious traditions, but to imagine the possibility of Shor’s fight against the status quo intersecting in some genuine way with views that might simply discount this perspective out of hand.
In 1982 I arrived at the University of Pittsburgh as a very pious and fairly conservative Roman Catholic. This school was not exactly the same type of place Shor describes in *When Students Have Power*, but I had many values and outlooks in common with the students that he taught. Both Shor’s students and I shared views concerning how the world worked, and these views held that self-reliance and individualism were the best ways to resist the societal forces we believed were diminishing our potential.

During my first few semesters, my engagement with teachers using powerful critical perspectives in philosophy classes and history classes led to some rather deep cognitive dissonance and then a rather abrupt change of perspective. I changed from a pious and angry young man into a callow young left wing intellectual, and this all seemed to come about because I learned to look through critical perspectives that allowed me to explore the ideology behind various everyday institutions, arguments, and objects. It was enough simply to persuade me of the possibility that the leaders of the Russian Revolution might have believed in their own revolutionary perspective in order to induce severe cognitive dissonance, for my education in a Catholic grade school had encouraged me to believe something quite different. Once I started questioning the institutional structures supporting the education I received, my conservative Catholic view of the world evaporated quite quickly. Soon, my parents worried about my soul, and my friends worried their parents would find out about my Marxist political leanings. I slowly learned to keep certain political interpretations to myself out of concern for the feelings of those around me. I had a younger brother going through a similar transformation at a different university and this made my life a little less stressful, but there was a social price to pay for this new perspective, and I paid it. I no longer enjoyed attending mass with my
family, watching the news with my father, or discussing geo-political developments with my high school friends. Many social routines that I had never thought about before became problematic and somewhat painful. My sense of humor began to change. I regret neither my life, nor the way I interpret the world, but I do sometime wonder what it might have been like to have been born into a place where these ideas were considered more routine, less radical. I wonder whether or not teachers like Ira Shor ever went through similar conversions, and I am always eager to listen to the experiences of people in general, or teachers in specific, who went through similar transformations.

As a teacher, my thoughts concerning how to persuade students to look through such powerful rhetorical perspectives are influenced deeply by the social alienation that I negotiated through these years. I have sometimes worried that my empathy for my conservative students has led colleagues to suspect that I am some sort of recusant neoconservative. In truth, I do find the connection between a left wing social agenda and a powerful moral certainty a highly distasteful combination, and no doubt my race and gender, as well as the institutions in which I have taught, have influenced my thoughts and experiences on all of these subjects. All of these tensions have alchemized within me and produced a perspective that tends to find virtue in ambiguity. As a teacher and rhetor, I feel most comfortable standing before a classroom enacting the amoral position of a sophist. As a person and a citizen, I have no problem making my political views known. In the classroom, I value the pedagogic strategy of demonstrating multiple views, multiple arguments, multiple problems, tensions, and opportunities. And I realize that this way of being in the classroom, does indeed deemphasize the perspective of wholeness, of
oneness, of consensus, of unity in favor of seeking some sort of cold comfort in the
tension existing between alienation and wholeness.

It is probable that my transformed relationship with my home community has left me with a perspective that tends to focus on and dramatize the agonistic relationships that can occur when a student changes his political outlook because of his college classroom experiences. This issue is explored in the writing of bell hooks, but Ira Shor seems to pass over it in relative silence, and this is another reason that I want to argue with Shor, even while I admire and emulate several of his specific classroom practices. After reading *When Students Have Power*, I have asked for a student time keeper for each class I have taught to warn me when class officially begins and ends. Shor has also taught me to become much more conscious of encouraging student comments before I introduce a critical perspective on a reading. I have come to negotiate my reading list with students as well.

Much of the pedagogic practice described in *When Students Have Power* centers around the creation of social action. Shor’s project contains a picture of students who interact with written and spoken language while experimenting with different ways that they can reshape their society in order to fit student needs, rather than imagining how students can learn to reshape themselves in order to meet the needs of society. The students in *When Students Have Power* begin the negotiation of a collective contract with their teacher that describes the parameters of the individual contracts between the students and the teacher. The first part of Shor’s pedagogy concerns organizing the students in such a way that they can put reasonable limits on the teacher’s authority within the classroom. The second part concerns having students identify problems in their
community, get into groups, propose solutions to these problems, and present these
solutions to their classmates. Shor’s classroom strategies require students to bring societal
issues and tensions into the classroom. In this sense Shor’s classroom is a kind of
exploratory brainstorming session where students experiment with possible solutions to
problems existing outside the classroom. In Shor’s pedagogy, the classroom does not
serve the needs of society as much as problems in society serve as material for the
students. Shor’s main text is really the problems and possibilities that develop when
students begin to imagine reshaping the world around them.

Who: Issues Surrounding the Actors

Resistance, critical analysis, and negotiation are the main forms of student and
teacher action that Shor describes in this book. In When Students Have Power, Ira Shor
and his students perform these actions in order to better understand power as potential
energy, the stuff that allows people to act. Shor and his students analyze each other and
society, negotiate with each other, and resist each other in order to attain the pedagogic
goal of helping students come together and democratically challenge their society. To
achieve this goal, students must first develop a critical consciousness. In the classroom
Shor begins this project by focusing on teacher power and the possibility that teacher
power can be used to incite or awaken latent student power. Shor argues that he is
institutionally authorized to have power in the classroom, but he seeks a different sort of
power, which is also a different relationship with students: “The power that uses power to
share and transform power is the power I am seeking” (20). Shor understands his
pedagogic project as an attempt to develop agency potential in his students or to empower
them. His goal is pursued in two stages. In the first stage, students are to define and set
reasonable limitations on the power of their teacher in a series of contract negotiations where the students and teacher decide such issues as: what is expected in order to receive the grade of A, B, or C for the class; how many minutes constitute being late for class; whether the teacher will call on students during class discussion or allow the students to attempt to self-regulate; how many absences are allowed. Here we see the teacher and various students negotiating with each other in what serves as a model for the type of intervention possible in the larger society. In the second stage, the students look to their community for situations where they might intervene and improve things. Here, students form groups and analyze problems in their society, and propose changes in what is meant to serve as a potential plan for real world collective action. In Shor’s classroom we see the teacher encouraging students to identify problems, study them, negotiate possible solutions and then to write proposals and make presentations. We also see students expressing their opinions concerning the meaning of education, the desirability of wealth, and the work they hope to do in the future. These opinions are then interrogated by the teacher and various students in the class in a public investigation meant to help make visible, encourage, and deepen a critical consciousness in the students.

Cutting against the easy implementation of this plan is the theme of resistance, a different form of action that both teachers and students perform. Shor argues that his institutional power as a teacher exists within an unjust system of mass education in our country that induces a type of student resistance to teacher authority that he labels the Siberian Syndrome:

Essentially, the Siberian Syndrome is one form of student agency in the contact zone of mass education. It is a defensive reaction to the unequal
power relations of schooling, which include unilateral authority for the teacher and a curriculum evading critical thought about the history, language, and cultures of the students. Facing unilateral authority that disempowers them politically and disables them intellectually, most students in my classes position themselves in the Siberian corners where they can carry out a variety of guerilla resistances I will enumerate shortly. Given the outlaw status of their home dialects and community cultures in school, they construct themselves as subordinates who can’t escape authority but won’t cooperate fully with it either—hence the contradictory position of Siberian exile being inside and outside of school discipline simultaneously, receiving and rejecting official supervision at the same time an unhealthy pattern of agency and dependency worthy of the name “syndrome.” (13-14)

This student resistance, Shor believes, comes from a societal injustice that could be changed if he could only persuade his students to believe that such a change were possible. He would like his students to redirect their misguided energy currently directed toward the teacher and point this energy towards the larger injustices involving mass education in the United States of America.

Shor also describes a type of student behavior diametrically opposed to the Siberian Syndrome—one where students sit close to the teacher and support and please the teacher—and he calls these students Scholasticons. While Shor’s desire to convert the resistant students suffering from the Siberian Syndrome is understandable, his willingness to see their behavior as a type of pathology feels problematic to me especially
because he feels no inclination to pathologize the behavior of the Scholasticons. It seems to me that had Shor studied the Scholasticons of a different teacher, say an economics teacher who taught his students the virtues of the capitalist means of production, he might have been more inclined to investigate the problems associated with students who uncritically accept the institutionally sanctioned authority of a teacher. I guess this is only to say that Shor, like many of us, is more interested in investigating the problems of his opponents than in investigating the problems of his friends. Shor never questions whether or not the Scholasticons share his views on power in the classroom. They may simply be acquiescing to his authority.

*When Students Have Power* contains descriptions of the students questioning Shor’s understanding of what is fair in his proposed classroom contracts, and readers see an uncomfortable Ira Shor, one who invites and receives a certain amount of critical heat from his students. But by describing his own discomfort, and his willingness to face it by renegotiating the classroom practices described in the contracts, Shor enacts a positive model of behavior for students. He publicly faces criticism and charges that he is unaware of his students’ true needs. He faces these charges, and he changes his behavior and perhaps even changes his opinions concerning what is fair. His willingness and ability to do this in front of his students serves as an example of what he would like to see his students do when challenged with a critical analysis of their desires and perspectives. Ideally, this criticism would come from more critically aware student allies, but at times this criticism comes from the teacher. These classroom actions are meant to enact a critical thought process, to make it visible, and to demonstrate the virtues of a critical consciousness.
Critical thinking is a form of analysis, an action that permits students to resist, or challenge, the status quo rather than unknowingly collude with it. Shor describes the use of critical thinking in his classroom practice and its relationship to reflective action:

“Critical thinking” in this pedagogy doesn’t mean “micrological analytical skills,” as Richard Paul (1993) called philosophy-based thinking methods such as induction, deduction, fallacy detection, etc. In a Deweyan-Freirean model, critical reflection is more social than the “thinking skills” practiced as logical operations. I define critical thinking as a holistic, historically situated, politically aware intervention in society to solve a felt need or problem, to get something done in a context of reflection action (see Dewey’s model of thought in How We Think and Freire’s discussion of Dialogic inquiry in A Pedagogy for Liberation). Further, as Stephen Brookfield (1987a; 1995) has argued, this form of critical reflection is not an academic exercise dissociated from the many venues of everyday life; rather, it involves questioning the cultural assumptions underlying our home to work to education to politics to media, as well as questioning the values and practices of the institutions and society around us. According to Brookfield, critical thinking means imagining and acting on alternatives to the culture we are part of. This fits Freire’s (1970) definition of critical consciousness as subjective intervention into history, as consciousness of, for, and against something, as “intentionality” vis-à-vis social experience, a reaching out to rethink reality and to act purposefully in it. (163)
Shor feels a deep desire to help students develop critical thinking skills because he sees these skills as a prerequisite for any type of successful collective action brought against the forces of the status quo. The development of critical thinking abilities is the area where Shor’s pedagogy feels most politically direct and oppositional. In *When Students Have Power*, critical thinking is encouraged on the very first day of class when Shor asked what the students want out of life or an education.

The further development of critical thinking involves the teacher and other critically aware students investigating the shortcomings of some of these opinions and positions. In the later part of this book, we see Shor and his students questioning the proposed solutions that have been presented to the class. In his comments on a group presentation that investigated the problem of non-native teachers at their college, Shor makes the following comments:

> In the discussion following their report, I backloaded some comments, including a distinction between foreign teachers and native full-time/adjunct faculty who lecture students into silence. Then, I questioned why foreign teachers are being hired just now (nonstop budget cuts at an impoverished public college like mine result in hiring the cheapest academic labor available). (184-85)

Presumably students deepen their critical consciousness by experiencing Shor’s more pointed critiques of their arguments, acknowledging their points, and internalizing the perspective.

In *When Students Have Power*, Shor places his description of how he challenged his students’ collaborative utopian projects long after the very detailed description of how
his students examined Shor’s own enactments of teacher authority. This writing decision demonstrates a type of ethos described by Min-Zhan Lu and Bruce Horner in their article “The Problematic of Experience: Redefining Critical Work in Ethnography and Pedagogy.” In this article, the authors explore problems associated with teachers who simply politicize the experience of students without considering the power dynamics involved:

This version of critical pedagogy fails to interrogate who is politicizing whose experience. This points to the need for those of us committed to contesting asymmetrical power relations to learn to make productive use of, rather than dismiss, the challenges students’ lived experience poses for the teachers’ discursive understanding of that experience. We need to involve the student as well as the teacher in politicizing the students’ experience. And we need to explore as well how to use the teacher’s own and others’ lived experiences to problematize the teacher’s knowledge. In other words, the confrontation between the ontological and epistemological levels of experience needs to occur for both the teacher and the student. (267)

Shor spends the first part of his book showing how various students interrogated his sense of what was fair and just in the classroom contracts as part of a dramatic enactment, a sort of proof, that he can take powerful criticism as well as dish it out. This negotiation process demonstrates not only what a critical thought process looks like, but also demonstrates his willingness to undergo criticism before he criticizes the views of his students.
In many ways the actions described in Shor’s classroom seem to focus sharply upon speaking rather than writing. From the very first moment that he walks into the classroom, Shor has his students get into groups and speak to each other before the teacher speaks in order to build a sense of community. The class negotiates a policy determining who will speak and how. Groups of students present oral reports to the classroom before handing in written documents to the teacher. Much of the activity in Shor’s classroom is verbal, and Shor seems to be unconscious of the view of writing that these actions promote which I see as a type of reporting. In contrast to this view of writing as reporting which seems hidden, Shor directly points out the virtues of student public speech:

While their nonacademic speech is very complex, the students do not develop in school as academic rhetors. They have not had a dialogic curriculum where diverse, contending voices think out loud and discover meaning. Students rarely experience each other as sources of formal knowledge in an academic setting, so they lack habits of listening carefully to each other and of thinking together in class, where the words that count and the grade giving power that matters have routinely belonged only to the teacher. (175)

Shor describes students negotiating their solutions to problems before writing their report. He does quote student writing, but the student writing in this book, and in many cases his own writing in this book, reflects an emphasis on recording what happened. The tension between a view of writing that records thoughts and actions and a view of writing that imaginatively transforms thoughts and actions by the very process of putting them onto
paper is an issue that never appears to surface in Shor’s classroom. Shor’s practice also suggests how verbal and rhetorical skills sometimes align in a view of language diverging from the written and compositional skills promoted by Tobin.

In “Revision as a Critical Practice” Joseph Harris accuses Shor of being far more interested in the social rather than the textual: “[H]is focus remains pretty much on the level of ideas, on problems and alternatives rather than on close work with texts” (580). The concerns of Joseph Harris diverge sharply from the goals of critical pedagogy. The crux of Harris’s argument assumes that critical pedagogues are more concerned with what students believe or the development of a critical consciousness than what students learn to do in terms of written performance:

But while I understand that how students learn critical or academic writing may be shaped by the ideologies of their schools and cultures, I think that the relationships between practices and values are extraordinarily complex, mediated, and unstable. I am thus not convinced that there is any necessary link between learning a critical practice and acquiring a critical consciousness—or any other kind of consciousness, for that matter. (578)

Harris doesn’t see this as a problem for his practice because his idea of empowering students concerns teaching them how to enter into the cultural and political discussions of their day with as much rhetorical power as teachers can help them acquire. Ira Shor concentrates on the kind of textual/personal/political power that can come from class awareness and critical inquiry into questions concerning which groups of people are best served by the status quo. Harris’s goals are much more ambivalent concerning the nature of social change, preferring to let students decide for themselves which side of these
questions they wish to support. He wants to help students master a form of literacy viewed as a fairly politically neutral skill. Shor and his allies want to focus on the structure of society, and the university in order to argue that students are already powerfully influenced by the status quo and therefore are not really capable of making a “free” decision. My observations suggest that Shor’s pedagogy focuses more intently on the verbal performance of students rather than the written work of students because Shor’s political goals seem to privilege collective public action, which. like speech, is more visible than private revelation that tends to be easier to express and analyze in writing. Shor’s A grade-level contract requires 1000 words on three assigned books read in class. His C grade-level contract requires 500 words on three books read in class. This simple equation of length with value seems to support my observations. Shor also quotes extensively from the students’ collaborative utopian projects, but I do not remember any quotations from the essays on the readings.

How: Issues Surrounding Tools and Techniques

In the last subsection I concentrated on the actors (the students and the teacher) and what they do in Shor’s pedagogy (resist, analyze and negotiate). In this subsection I isolate and analyze the tools they use while performing their actions (contracts, student protest rights, the After Class Group). The basic plot of Shor’s pedagogy starts with critical analysis then moves to negotiation and ends with political action and critical consciousness. In the first part of When Students Have Power, Shor uses contract negotiations with his students concerning their class room procedures and grade requirements as a model for how students can move through this process and attain a critical consciousness. In the second part of the book, Shor gets his students into groups
and directs them toward problems in their social lives outside of the classroom. My analysis of the tools will focus on the in class contract negotiations because here Shor describes in detail a kind of deepening of his own critical consciousness concerning his students that I find compelling.

Before Shor can enact any critical analysis in his classroom he has got to persuade the students to loosen up and speak to each other and the teacher about the issues they find important. This is why the first thing Shor does on the first day of class is to pass out questionnaires focused on why the students chose this class and what they hope to learn from it. The students wrote their answers and then got into groups to discuss their ideas. After small group discussion, they made presentations to the class while Shor took notes. At this point Shor was searching for generative themes as well as students who might be allies in his attack upon the status quo. His goal here was to make this group activity a performative reinforcement of an argument he will make later on, that this class will value student voices and opinions. That is why this group activity happens first, and Shor takes notes to both help him remember the issues when he starts talking, but also to reinforce the ideas that the students’ voices are important, so important that the teacher takes notes on them. Shor pays meticulous attention to how much class time is devoted to the teacher’s voice compared to the students’ voices.

After the questionnaire, Shor introduced the idea of negotiating the procedures of their classroom. Shall we sit in rows or in a circle? Shall the teacher call on students who raise their hands or shall we try to self regulate who speaks and when? What is required to make an “A” for this course? These negotiations begin a process that will end in a contract that will describe the class work students agree to perform in order to guarantee
a final grade of either A, B, or C. Contract grading is an idea that has been around for a while. Jane Danielewicz and Peter Elbow, in “A Unilateral Grading Contract to Improve Learning and Teaching,” compare their conception of student contracts with the ideas of Shor. Jane Danielewicz and Peter Elbow are very interested in Shor’s use of student contracts. The authors explore the differences between Shor’s use of contracts and their own, arguing that even though these contracts are very different in certain respects—Danielewicz and Elbow do not negotiate the details of the contracts with student, but give them a choice between already determined contracts—both types of contracts emphasize hybridity and negotiation. Indeed Danielewicz and Elbow see a similarity between their project and the goals of Shor’s critical pedagogy:

Yet in spite of these striking differences, we’d insist that we are in fact engaged in critical teaching. Consider the important parallels between the way Shor and his colleagues use contracts to resist the culture of capitalism and the way we use them to resist the culture of grading and assessment—and the nontrivial links between those two cultures. (248)

Danielewicz and Elbow argue that notions of hybridity and student teacher negotiation benefit student learning by foregrounding power issues and making them explicit and revisable rather than hidden and static. The mapping out of how one’s particular approach to teaching aligns and diverges from Shor’s critical pedagogy and the related goals of Paulo Friere is a reoccurring theme in the scholarship engaging When Students have Power.

Shor’s version of contract negotiations is intended to create a form of constitutional convention in his classroom, although he is very aware that the
constitutional conventions in France and in the United States erupted under very different circumstances. This classroom convention is Shor’s project and not the students’:

Because students are not self-authorized to share power but rather are teacher-authorized in this situation (I authorize them instead of them authorizing themselves) the Utopia course represents a cultural exercise or laboratory, not a social movement of broad change in school and society. Had the students democratized the classroom at their initiative, an entirely different counterhegemonic politics would be represented here. They, ahead of me, would have brought to class the intention to reconstruct authority in favor of cultural democracy. As it is, I am inviting them into a critical stance toward knowledge, knowledge-making, and power. If they had invited me to teach that kind of class, it would mean that they had previously developed this intention through various social experiences in class and out. Under those circumstances, we would all be situated in a very different history than the one described in this book. That history would represent a grassroots, mass constituency contending for authority from below, at this site and others. (74-75)

This observation highlights the fact that Shor is not afraid to confront the fact that he is presenting the students with a possibility that he wants for them, but that they might not necessarily want for themselves. The students do have the power to resist, and even sabotage his plans if they are of a mind to do so, and without this power to resist, I do not believe that Shor’s negotiations could possibly move the students toward a critical consciousness. If the students did not need to be persuaded, to be brought on board, then
Shor might simply have been deluding himself and exercising unacknowledged teacher authority by forcing the students to negotiate with him. Shor persuades the students to negotiate with him; he does not force them to do so, and his pedagogic goals require that he acknowledge and steer through this difference.

At first, Shor succeeds in getting his students to go along with his contract negotiation project fairly easily. He presents options; the students debate the pros and cons of his proposals; the class votes. However, as the story progresses we see Shor having to make a number of concessions before the students are willing to ratify his contract. This is when the negotiations heat up and start to require deeper thought in order to satisfy everyone involved. The easy phase of the negotiations is over once Angela, the student most willing to directly confront the teacher, brings up the question of attendance:

In the negotiation, Angela’s special complaint was about attendance. She objected to the part of the contract that limited absences. I had proposed one absence for A level, two for B level, and three for C. This was totally unacceptable to her. Directly, firmly, unapologetically, she proposed having no attendance requirement at all. An attentive silence filled the room as she made her proposal; the deep Siberians were listening. Angela offered an amendment to the contract: Coming to class should be completely voluntary for all grade levels. Students could miss as many classes as they wanted. In fact, according to her, students could miss ALL classes and still qualify for an A, B, or C. She asserted that students really didn’t need to come to this class or any other and they’d still be able to do
work that qualified for an A. I looked around and noticed increasing student attention to her. (94)

Angela is as idealistic and as radical as Shor himself, and without her I do not believe this class could have reached the insights they achieved. For negotiations to be experienced as genuine, they have to be uncertain. Without Angela, Shor may have taken his good intentions as counting for more than they should count for. In a very real sense, Angela forces Shor to negotiate. Without her, Shor might simply have been forcing the class to play his reindeer games. The attendance issue, it seems to me, is what allows Shor’s project to take on a deeper level of reciprocity. Angela causes Shor discomfort, and he confronts this discomfort, thinks critically about it and finds useful solutions and a deeper awareness of the problem and people involved as a consequence. Shor’s confrontation over attendance allows him to enact his pedagogic process live in front of his students to serve as a model for how Shor would have his students confront discomfort in their own lives.

Angela’s argument against required attendance relies on a critique of a part of the status quo that benefits Ira Shor and his pedagogic project. Why is it that students are forced to attend school and are punished when they resist? This question forces Shor to confront the thought that there might be strong, persuasive reasons that students do not want to come to class, and that these reasons may be more difficult for him to see because they are hidden by elements of the status quo that benefit teachers more than students:

Given her experience in the College, Angela concluded that her presence in class was not really necessary. From her point of view, to get an A, all she has to do is to memorize the lectures, read the assigned books or
chapters (if any), show up on the days tests are given, and hand in any papers on their due dates. Her physical presence in class is otherwise irrelevant. It’s a bureaucratic formality, a ritual of control, not an intellectual necessity—in a word, a nuisance, a waste of time. (109)

Shor points out that Angela is not arguing against the way the professors conduct classes or the types of assignments they give—this is the argument he is interested in making—as much as she is arguing against the demands the school makes on her time. Shor is sympathetic to Angela’s point of view, although he cannot really conceive of giving in to it. Angela has argued Shor into a perspective that allows for only one winner. Either the teacher wins or the students win. Shor’s problem, at this point, is to come up with some other persuasive way to view the issue of attendance. He can not simply proceed with business as usual and argue that the attack upon the status quo will begin somewhere else, somewhere more comfortable for the teacher:

I wondered how to deal with the expectations raised by Angela’s amendment. Just imagine—they could get A’s without having to come to class—this was truly Utopia! Instant Utopia in one classroom! No required attendance was within their reach, like getting paid without having to go to work, promising free time to make life a little more civilized and a little more under their control. Intuition nagged at me and said I couldn’t agree to this and still keep a dialogic process. But, how could I deny their delicious Utopian dream, their desire for greater control in education and in life? How could I compel their attendance in a supposedly democratic process? That seemed impossible, and so did agreeing to let the class
vanish out the door, perhaps never to return, leaving me alone in airless B-34 to ponder the virtues of critical pedagogy and power-sharing. (96)

The class period ended before any decisions were made on Angela’s proposal. Shor was grateful because he really did not know what to do, how to attempt to persuade his students. He was stalling for time. Don Dippo, in “Ira and Me: A Highly Contextualized Reading of Three Works by Ira Shor,” finds the focus on the attendance problem “both overwrought and superficial” (297). Dippo argues that all of this is just Shor being more melodramatic than necessary. I disagree because I believe this part of the story shows Shor in the sort of systemocentric relationship with Angela that Douglas Robertson describes in his pedagogic research. The problem between Angela and Shor takes on the quality of an interesting research project for Shor. He becomes interesting in exploring Angela’s perspective, and why he has not been able to see it quite so well before now. Ira Shor evidently has a much deeper personal need to negotiate the attendance issue with Angela than would either Don Dippo or I. The tension produced by this particular situation created the heat necessary for Shor to find a more satisfying solution to this problem, and that solution changed the nature of the entire class, and perhaps even led to a deeper appreciation on Shor’s part of some of the problems facing his students. The attendance problem is the specific occasion that allows for the pedagogic innovations that follow, and Shor seems to need to resolve it for personal as well as pedagogic reasons. The attendance issue is interesting to me because it suggests a kind of pattern or narrative plot line leading to one possible source for improvisational inspiration. Shor walks right into a deep binary where neither side seems to offer a suitable solution. He experiences the tension involved, makes a decision, but feels a deep need to make sure that his
decision is not simply following the usual pattern of decisions that benefit the more powerful side. At this point in the process he sides with the solution most desirable for himself and not with Angela’s solution, but he is compelled to do something that might twist the relationship between them, that might change it somehow.

During the next class, Shor offered his students an argument for class attendance that included the promise that this class would be different, that attendance would be necessary because the students would be involved in mutual discussion with each other and the teacher. Shor noticed silence at the end of his speech. He realized that this solution appeared to give the teacher too much and the students too little. He needed something more to justify an attendance policy and then announced to the class that everyone would have “protest rights”:

“Protest rights,” I hypothesized on the spot “means that each student has the right at any time to protest what we are doing. This means that students should notice how you are feeling in class, especially when you are unhappy or uneasy, bored, angry, confused, or lost in any way, and then do something about it instead of only swallowing it in silence or stewing about it in anger or acting it out in a negative manner. You should raise a hand and protest, saying, ‘I’m bored,’ or ‘I’m angry,’ or ‘I’m confused,’ or ‘I disagree’ or ‘I don’t like what we’re doing.’ We can then stop and figure out if we should do things differently. I’ll invite the protesting student to explain her or his objection, find out if anyone else feels the same way, and then ask for suggestions and alternatives for us to do our work. We’ll debate alternatives and vote on what to do next. With
‘protest rights,’” I concluded, “students don’t have to sit through a class that drives you nuts or leaves you confused or frustrated or angry or insulted or just plain dulled out.” (112)

Angela used her protest rights right away to renegotiate some time issues in the class contracts. She wanted their two-hour class to be let out ten minutes early if there was no break between classes. She wanted late to mean more than 15 minutes late—Shor conceded to no more than 10 minutes late. She wanted there to be late paper options for A and B grades. She wanted to have an option to do extra credit work to work off a lateness or absence. Shor had the class vote upon these requests and conceded to their demands. This one renegotiation of the contracts seems to be the only use of student protest rights which suddenly morphed into the After Class Group. In the following passage, Shor explained this transformation:

After my intuitive announcement of “protest rights,” I found myself sensing the need for something more that would seal the negotiations. I had held on to required attendance, for which I was still feeling uncomfortable. I felt the need for a sweetener in the contract that would draw students into the critical process after they had used the democratic forum to reduce the course’s demands for their time. My thoughts were drawn to inviting continuous student intervention in the syllabus, so that they and I would not simply slip back into passivity on one side and authority on the other. Thus, on the spot, I intuited and proposed that we form a committee that would be permanently in session over the term for evaluating the class process and my teaching, to meet immediately after
each class ended. I named this committee “the After Class Group.” I had never named or proposed something like this in any class. Once again under the pressure of negotiation, I said out loud words I had never used before, “the After-Class Group.” What did I mean by it? I didn’t know. The students were looking at me for an explanation. I was searching, my own mind for an explanation. (116)

The student protest rights and the After Class Group sprang into Shor’s mind because he was feeling uncomfortable about his hard negotiations with his students over an attendance policy. Shor’s improvised pedagogic techniques represent, it seems to me, a creative rhetorical breakthrough analogous to a writing breakthrough. But the movement from the student protest rights to the After Class Group points to a buried theme in Shor’s pedagogy. Student protest rights give power to individual students, but Shor seems more eager to give power to groups of students rather than individual students. Shor names and describes a number of groups of students—Siberians, Scholasticons, Working Class—and while he does describe individual students, I believe that he favors groups of students with more critical attention because his pedagogy focuses on teaching students how to come together in groups so that they will be powerful enough to challenge powerful social and political forces. I suggest that the transformation of student protest rights into a student committee—the After Class Group—is evidence of this tendency in Shor’s practice. It is perhaps something of a performative contradiction that When Students Have Power was not coauthored with a few other like minded teachers. A coauthored text would have been able to further dramatize Shor point about the power of forming groups.
I argue that the reason Shor’s students were persuaded by his contract negotiations, protest rights, and After Class Group is because Shor succeeded in showing his students a different picture of his goals as a teacher. I call this different picture a backstage perspective, drawing from the work of Erving Goffman. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman uses the language of the theatre and applies it to daily life encounters in an attempt to explain why people behave the way they do in certain social situations. One of his most illuminating metaphors concerns how actions are interpreted differently when viewed from the front of the stage as opposed to the back of the stage. From a front stage perspective the audience is encouraged to interpret behavior simply and literally. The actor is crying because he feels sad. From the backstage perspective the same actions are seen as much more complex, inverted, and ironic. The actor is crying because he has been cutting onions offstage in order to easily tear up and appear sad in front of the audience. One function of Shor’s pedagogic tools is to help persuade his students to explore a more backstage perspective of his critical pedagogic goals and actions. At the same time, these tools help Shor explore a more backstage perspective of the students perhaps more status quo influenced goals and actions. I find evidence of this deeper understanding on Shor’s part when he analyses the issue of parking on campus:

The nagging truth is that I have a superior class position that allows me to love trees and still park my car in comfort. The different class position of my students gives them a different relationship to trees and cars at the College and in society. Environmentalism is not a moral issue but rather a class one here. (182)
I find such an argument more psychologically compelling than claiming that students are simply duped by the forces of the status quo, and I believe that Shor’s negotiations described in *When Students Have Power* brought him to a deeper understanding of why students sometimes resist his critical perspective.

Shor wants his students to experience and acquire the power that comes with negotiating in an organized group. From the front stage, this is part of a critical pedagogic practice that is meant to encourage greater democratic awareness and social justice. Shor wants to see a more just society, but experimenting with classroom practice is, from a more backstage perspective, also a personal joy, as well as a research opportunity, for Ira Shor. He needs his students to come to class, not only for the front stage benefits for the students and the transformation of society, but also for his own personal backstage satisfaction. Shor’s personal need to negotiate the attendance policy and to spend so much time writing about it in his book must have something to do with not wanting to demand that his students come to class simply because his front stage goals of critical consciousness and social justice are so important that they excuse an unexamined use of teacher power. Rather Shor bargains with the students because he acknowledges a personal backstage perspective that exists alongside his professed front stage political and pedagogic goals; he can see both the front stage and back stage perspectives of his own goals. It is also probable to surmise—from a backstage perspective—that the students who signed up for the After Class Group did so not because they believed this was a fair solution to the issue of mandatory attendance—this would be a front stage interpretation—but because they were interested in seeing what kind of effects they could
have on the class. Shor’s pedagogic tools encouraged a mutual exploration of the motivations behind the teacher’s actions and goals as well as the students’.

**Writing Issues: Stylistic Features that Promote or Detract from the Pedagogic Goals**

Mary Cain, in the review article “Situating Praxis in an Age of ‘Accountability,’” notices some peculiar features of Shor’s *When Students Have Power*. While her review is generally positive, emphasizing that Shor teaches readers “how much learning we gain when things go wrong” (225), Cain also finds fault with the way the story was told. Ultimately, she accuses Shor of making the book too much about himself and too little about his students:

As much as Shor tries to steer the narrative into a critical reflection of critical pedagogy, the story keeps veering back to Shor’s “author-ity.” It is, in the end, his version of what happened, his students’ voices locked within his quotation marks. Despite Shor’s strenuous efforts to situate critical pedagogy at the center of his inquiry, it is his representation of himself as the powerful teacher that, in spite of itself, steals the spotlight. (224)

I am inclined to agree with Cain, and my desire is to explore a bit more of Shor’s “author-ity” and to speculate on why perhaps Shor writes the way he does.

Ira Shor makes certain writing decisions in *When Students Have Power* that demonstrate a disconnect between his classroom pedagogy, which appear to achieve a high level of mutuality between the teacher and the students, and his authorial written voice, which sometimes maintains and reinforces a more static relationship between the teacher and the student and between the author and the reader. For instance, listen to the
voice Shor uses to explain his understanding that working-class students are more than just a collection of defining characteristics:

It’s hard to fix the “working-class look” of these students without falling into stereotypes. Their human variety is wonderful and substantial from student to student, not just in their “look” but also in their personalities, levels of maturity, academic desires, ethnic family histories, work conditions, voices, and intellectual development. Still, I know them when I see them and I can see them with my eyes closed by now, after twenty years plus at this job. (5)

This passage introduces a bulleted list of sixteen points of defining features of working class students where the author describes working-class students as if they were a species of tropical fish. Shor writes of his students “human variety” as if somehow his voice is coming from some stable place outside of that human variety. He feels entitled to do so because he realizes that what he is about to say may sound stereotypical. His argument seems to suggest that this self awareness permits him to sound as stereotypical as he sees fit. Shor’s prose style relies heavily on concrete pictorial details, and when he is convincing it is often because he describes a situation in surprising detail. The details themselves lend rhetorical weight to the argument. However, Shor seems to be completely unconcerned by his written tone of voice; it is almost as if he can not hear himself while writing. He starts typing in this rigid ethnographic voice—where the writer describes the exotic natives from an unexamined place of power—as if this were the only possible way to intelligently describe working-class students. Nowhere in his book do left wing academic critical pedagogues as a large social group undergo the same type of
description. Shor enjoys the unacknowledged luxury of being represented as an individual; his students are too often viewed through the filter of large social categories like class, and Ira Shor seems completely unaware of this power differential deeply embedded in his prose style.

In the introduction to *When Students Have Power*, Shor tells his readers that he is consciously attempting a writing experiment that will complement his classroom pedagogic experiment. In the following passage, he focuses specifically on his desire to experiment with the form of academic writing:

In this story about a Dewey-Freire model of democratic power relations, I will try to make my writing itself an experiment about the experiment. That is, I want this personal report to cross genres. On the one hand, I will draw on creative nonfiction and literary narrative to produce “teacher lore,” an emergent genre on composition studies (North 1987; Downing, Harkin, and Sosnoski 1994). On the other hand, I will include extensive materials from the students and the curriculum by using the genres of ethnographic reporting and classroom inquiry. For this, I’ll be doing some “thick description” of college, classroom, and community experience, as urged by Clifford Geertz (1973), along with discourse analysis of the classroom “speech community” as recommended by Dell Hymes (1974), combined with teacher-research into methodology and learning as described by Dixie Goswami and Peter Stillman (1987) as well as by C.H. Knoblauch and Lil Brannon (1993). Further, I will situate this “blurred genre” narrative and research (Geertz 1983) in a cultural studies approach
to everyday life, drawing out issues of class, race, and gender through sociological, economic, and historical frameworks on one side and subjective experience on the other. [. . .] By thus crossing genres, I want to avoid a traditional voice of academic discourse, which Peter Elbow (1991) argued denies its own subjectivity, which James Berlin (1988) claimed denies its own ideology, and which Lillian Bridwell-Bowles (1992) said denies the diversity of positions actually at work in the academy. (xi)

It seems to me that Shor’s prose in this book achieves a number of these goals. He does carry out a dialogue with himself, and the book does present a number of different genres. Overall, however, the effect reads like a bunch of different perspectives interrupting each other, and perhaps that is how he understands a heteroglossic narrative. I would prefer larger passages of greater personal narrative that could provide a more intimate storyline before pulling the storyline apart for analysis. Dippo makes a similar observation about Shor’s text: “Just when the story gets rolling, Shor’s attention turns to a discussion of some particular theme or issue which, for a reader interested in what will happen next in class, seems a digression” (296). As a writer Shor feels much more like a newspaper reporter than a fiction writer. He finds it necessary to get all the different perspectives down on paper one after another. He does not seem to be interested in searching for a writing solution that might blend and blur these perspectives into a smoother narrative. The above quoted passage, for instance, demonstrates a writing decision that Shor uses throughout this book. He cites large lists of academic authors in order to support and amplify his ideas, rarely does he cite authors in order to refine their ideas or argue with them. His citation preferences enact the idea that there is safety and
power in numbers. *When Students Have Power* begins with a picture of the recently deceased Jim Berlin and then seven different quotes pertaining to the major themes of the book. I am assuming that these quotes are meant to somehow frame the arguments made in the book, but for me seven different voices introducing a book confuse rather than heighten my interest and engagement. There are too many perspectives for one to serve as an overarching frame for the project. The idea of finding and standing with like-minded people is a major theme in Shor’s pedagogic project. His citation style highlights his pedagogic concern with forming like-minded groups of actors. The possibility that political action might be possible within contention and disagreement does not receive much exploration.

Like Lad Tobin in the last chapter and bell hooks in the following one, Ira Shor writes about his childhood as a means to search for connections with his students. When Shor describes himself as a young student he does manage to complicate this distant, academically-minded voice of impartial objectivity by describing himself as a representative of several large categories:

While I’m Jewish and not Italian or Irish like most of them [. . . .] My identity reflects that of the “anxious and uprooted” scholarship boys and girls (Hoggart 1957) who left crowded homes and teeming urban neighborhoods to study at picturesque university towns where we lost touch with our roots (for accounts of the gains and losses of such upward mobility, see Ryan and Sackery 1984; Rose 1990; Tokarczyk and Fay 1993; Zandy 1990, 1995; Brodkey 1994; Dews and Law 1995.) While I’m an upward climber from the South Bronx working class who went from
the Bronx High School of Science to the handsome elite Universities of Michigan and Wisconsin, my students at Staten Island generally don’t claim working-class identities and do not win scholarships to the green grounds of fancy campuses. My school and social experiences are thus very different from theirs, and so are my politics, but I once shared their dreams of middle-class Utopia when I first started on a climbing path. So, if we don’t share politics, at least we occupy a significant past as well as a conflicted pedagogical present where a culture war gets underway every opening day of class. (9-10)

Here Shor reaches into his personal history to identify with students who live in neighborhoods similar to the ones he grew up in, but who do not necessarily share his political perspective. This passage also points to at least one element that Shor is not as eager to share, namely what happened to his one-time “dreams of middle-class Utopia.” It feels odd to me that Shor describes his classroom arguments against this version of the status quo as it exists within his students, but feels no need to interrogate with his readers how similar perspectives and expectations were burned out of his own consciousness. Actually, when I look deeper into this question, it seems unfair. Shor is rather reserved on this subject, and this creates an odd distance between his written representation of himself as teacher and his representation of his students.

Conclusion

While my classroom practice does not focus on organizing students into politically active groups, I am interested in attempting to negotiate with my students in way similar to Shor. Specifically, I encourage students to choose at least one half of the
readings from our anthology in order to allow them some change of influencing me rather than assuming that my influence is what is most important. I am also interested in attempting to present Shor’s critique of the status quo as a topic for investigation. Oftentimes I do this by assigning an excerpt from Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, especially in classes where there are a large number of education majors.

Ira Shor’s classroom pedagogy dramatizes a type of learning that can be described as a transformation of political consciousness, where consciousness is understood to be a type of relationship with the daily reality, or social world, that is more under the control of the conscious mind than the psychological picture of the mind that Tobin describes. Shor’s pedagogic goals necessitate a teacher who will encourage students to continually test the limitations of their social world, and imagine ways to improve it. Analyzing *When Students Have Power* by breaking it into Why, What, Where, Who, and How categories has allowed me to notice several salient characteristics of Shor’s pedagogy. The Where category indicates that the book foregrounds Shor’s conception of the classroom as a type of experiment where societal tensions and power relations that exist outside the classroom are brought into it and examined. The Who category indicates that Shor’s pedagogy focuses on how working-class students develop a critical consciousness by requiring that both the teacher and the students imagine solutions to specific problems found in their every day lives. This section also produces evidence that suggests that Shor’s pedagogy privileges speech over writing in the classroom. The How category indicates the importance of building classroom community. Shor hopes to build this community using contract negotiations, the After Class Group, and student protest rights.
The Stylistic Features investigation indicates a disconnect between Shor the physical body teaching in the classroom and Shor the author writing for a virtual readership.

In the following chapter that focuses on the pedagogy of bell hooks, I will examine the essay collections *Talking Back: thinking feminist, thinking black*, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* and *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*. For bell hooks, teaching is also concerned with a transformation of consciousness, but where Ira Shor foregrounds the political implications hidden beneath everyday physical objects and relationships, bell hooks begins her classroom exploration with issues of race, gender, and class. This shift of focus also alters in some ways the way hooks and Shor describe a critical consciousness.
CHAPTER FOUR: BELL HOOKS

Why: The Goals of hooks’ Pedagogy

In the previous chapter I argued that the pedagogy of Ira Shor focused on criticism and negotiation in the classroom with the goal of producing a critical consciousness, where critical consciousness was understood as a relationship to everyday life that allowed students to understand that objects, institutions, and social relationships are made by people and can be changed. Shor also encourages his students to imagine and implement changes to their society. In this chapter I argue that the pedagogy of bell hooks focuses on an explicit link between the personal transformation of the student and teacher and the transformation of society. Like Shor’s critical consciousness that requires a transformation in the consciousness of an individual student, hooks describes the development of a liberatory voice that requires a student to decolonize her mind. In hooks’ writing, the transformation that produces the liberated voice and the decolonized mind does not happen in the mind or consciousness but within a new understanding of the relationship between the mind and the body where the body and the mind are no longer viewed as separate dichotomous parts. Shor’s critical consciousness and hooks’ liberated voice share some of the same functions in that each are necessary in order to bring effective challenges to the status quo, and both Shor and hooks encourage this change in students by critical exchanges in the classroom. However, where Shor examines a specific course and group of students as a sort of case study, hooks uses her personal educational history—starting from when she was a young child and continuing through graduate school up to what she is now learning as a teacher—as a sort of case study meant to make visible how a student might learn to develop a liberated voice. If
Shor examines his students in great detail to obviate the need to deeply explore the development of his own critical consciousness, then hooks in some sense does the inverse, shielding the minute details of her students’ personal lives by going to great lengths to examine the details of her own personal memories.

bell hooks has written three collections of essays focused specifically on issues of pedagogy: *Talking Back: thinking feminist, thinking black*; *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*; and *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*. Unlike the books by Lad Tobin and Ira Shor, hooks’ essay collections do not present a systematized view of her thought and practice. Instead, these essay collections focus on reflections, collaborations, speculations, analyses, and theory creation from different periods of her career as writer and teacher. hooks’ view of education is deeply influenced by the feminist project committed to relating education and literacy to personal growth and personal transformation. Literacy is not viewed simply as a neutral skill or tool used to gain access to the business world but also as an evolutionary, revolutionary, and alchemical potential that can help students transform personal pain into a better way of being in the world and in doing so, help create a better world. Where Tobin’s pedagogy is most focused on teaching students how to move from personal writing towards learning writing skills—although he does see a connection between writing skills and psychological awareness—and Shor’s pedagogy is most focused on teaching students how to come together to resist the institutionalized power of the status quo, hooks’ pedagogy is most focused on teaching students a kind of personal self-actualization that develops while resisting everyday forms of sexism, white supremacy, and class bias. For hooks, the self and society heal and improve at the same time and for similar reasons.
The title of her first book on pedagogy, *Talking Back: thinking feminist, thinking black*, consciously evokes a number of rhetorical situations. A sassy child refusing to accept the authority of her parents talks back, but talking back also has undertones invoking an earlier time and a place where a defiant African-American arguing with a white person would be considered a crime. For hooks, the transformation from oppression to liberation entails a certain willingness to talk back. The title of hooks’ next major collection of pedagogic essays, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, underlines a continuation of the oppositional strategy explored in *Talking Back* by weaving together the themes: transgression, education, and freedom. The essays in *Teaching to Transgress* highlight the idea that literacy, theory, and education in general must be thought about, theorized, and written about within a context much wider than the university. One of the transgressions implied by the title concerns the transgression of the predominant focus on the university classroom as the most natural starting place to introduce students to critical theory. The educational project of bell hooks is committed to transgressing against this thinking by promoting the idea that theory is something desirable for many different kinds of people, not only university students. The essays in *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* continue the argument against the view of education that separates the knowledge appropriate for university students from what is appropriate for the rest of society. In this book, hooks argues that students in the classroom learn best when they come together as a community, and she deepens her exploration of the relationship between spirituality and education.
What: The Main Activities of hooks’ Pedagogy

In “bell hooks on education,” Barry Burke highlights three of the most salient themes in hooks’ pedagogic writing. I reorder these and use them to organize my exploration of her activities:

1) The fight against domination and the spread of harmful ideologies like imperialist, white-supremacist, capitalist, patriarchy;

2) Liberatory and engaged pedagogy and the self actualization of students and the teacher;

3) Literacy and its importance to all people, and the relationship between literacy and the development of a critical consciousness.

To Barry Burke’s themes I add:

4) the value of conflict and personal pain in the education process.

According to Barry Burke, bell hooks uses the term domination to point towards the interlocking of various harmful ideologies:

A central aspect of her work is that she sees discrimination and domination not in separate categories but all interconnected. She sees no hierarchy of discrimination. Gender, race and class distinctions are not viewed as one being more important than the other.

hooks describes the most pervasive forms of this domination with the words imperialist white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchy. This interlocking and reinforcing combination of dominating ideologies is viewed by hooks as a corrosive force, a kind of social and rhetorical acid rain that slowly but surely destroys the ecology of social relations around us. Her theoretical perspective and pedagogic practice involve pointing out and challenging these thought processes both within individuals and within society. Her
perspective is politically charged, revolutionary, and unapologetic. The term “imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchy” is used by hooks to force attention onto rhetorical constructions that are, in the minds of many, taken for granted, seen as representing common sense, or not seen at all. This term is much more direct and dramatic than Shor’s use of the term status quo.

White supremacy is a term hooks created to address certain problems she found with the term racism. For hooks, white supremacy is part of a mindset that can include people of both dominant and minority groups. It is a mindset that either consciously sees whiteness as a gold standard against which all other peoples and perspectives are measured and valued, or unconsciously sees whiteness as a neutral universal backdrop against which all other people and perspectives are marked:

The assumption that “whiteness” encompasses that which is universal, and therefore for everybody, while “blackness” is specific, and therefore “for colored only,” is white supremacist thought. And yet many liberal people, along with their more conservative peers, think this way not because they are “bad” people or are consciously choosing to be racist but because they have unconsciously learned to think in this manner. Such thinking, like so many other thought patterns and actions that help perpetuate and maintain white supremacy, can be easily unlearned. (Teaching Community 39)

For hooks, white supremacy is the reason that a Hollywood film with a majority of African-American actors is marketed toward an African-American audience while a Hollywood film with a majority of white actors tends to be marketed toward the “general public,” which includes concentrations of African-Americans, whites, and other races. It
is the reason that an African-American woman working in a law office can be considered radical for deciding to come to work in a natural hairstyle rather than the “traditional” or “more conservative” office look of straightened hair. Standards of beauty and marketing strategies that mark white traits as universal and African-American traits as special partake of white supremacy. For bell hooks and others, economic philosophies and policies that normalize inequalities of wealth and opportunity partake of the capitalist mindset; and arguments and social policies that regard typical male interests as universal and typical female interests as special partake of patriarchy.

The term “imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchy” may feel like a tag applied to a hated other, a term used to describe all the attributes of the enemy, but hooks is actually more concerned with making the concept of domination large enough to implicate us all rather than creating a hierarchy of the dominated:

Every black person and person of color colludes with the existing system in small ways every day, even those among us who see ourselves as anti-racist radicals. This collusion happens simply because we are all products of the culture we live within and have all been subjected to the forms of socialization and acculturation that are deemed normal in our society. Through the cultivation of awareness, through the decolonization of our minds, we have the tools to break with the dominator model of human social engagement and the will to imagine new and different ways that people might come together. *(Teaching Community 35)*
“Imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchy” is a term meant to point to a wide field of different practices of domination, but for hooks, a large part of what humans have in common is the ability to dominate each other:

To understand domination, we must understand that our capacity as women and men to be either dominated or dominating is a point of connection, of commonality. Even though I speak from the particular experience of living as a black woman in the United States, a white-supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal society, where small numbers of white men (and honorary “white men”) constitute ruling groups, I understand that in many places in the world oppressed and oppressor share the same color. I understand that right here in this room, oppressed and oppressor share the same gender. Right now as I speak, a man who is himself victimized, wounded, hurt by racism and class exploitation is actively dominating a woman in his life—that even as I speak, women who are ourselves exploited, victimized, are dominating children. It is necessary for us to remember, as we think critically about domination, that we all have the capacity to act in ways that oppress, dominate, wound (whether or not that power is institutionalized). It is necessary to remember that it is first the potential oppressor within that we must resist—the potential victim within that we must rescue—otherwise we cannot hope for an end to domination, for liberation. *(Talking Back 20-21)*

This passage highlights Barry Burke’s point concerning both hooks’ description of domination as a force with many different aspects and that seeing the connection between
different forms of domination is the best way to fight against any single form. This passage also suggests the ease with which humans take the domination and sufferings inflicted upon them, and then reproduce a related form of domination and suffering to inflict upon others. The educational project of bell hooks is an intervention meant to break this cycle. The liberation she hopes to see for her students, herself, and her society is a liberation from this perpetual cycle of domination. When I first encountered the writings of bell hooks, I sometimes felt that she was creating a hierarchy of domination in order to decide who suffers most and who suffers least. As I studied her thought more deeply I came to understand that her witness is not meant to create stable categories identifying which groups are the most privileged and therefore the most to blame. This reaction misses her deep purpose. I now understand her goal to be to speak to the innermost personal core of her readers and attempt to point out how domination exists both within ourselves and within our society, as well as to argue that it must be challenged in the same places.

Perhaps the most central theoretical issue for bell hooks concerns the idea of a liberatory pedagogy or education. This perspective is closely connected to the critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire, but hooks calls for a more specific investigation into the issues of race, gender, class, and the colonial mindset than did Freire. Her engagement with the work of Paulo Freire was an important step in the development of her pedagogic ideas and this engagement began with her meditation upon a single line of his writing:

There was this one sentence of Freire’s that became a revolutionary mantra for me: “We cannot enter the struggle as objects in order later to become subjects.” Really, it is difficult to find words adequate to explain
how this statement was like a locked door—and I struggled within myself to find the key—and that struggle engaged me in a process of critical thought and was transformative. This experience positioned Freire in my mind and heart as a challenging teacher whose work furthered my own struggle against the colonizing process—the colonizing mind-set.

*(Teaching to Transgress 46)*

While Freire and Shor investigate how the status quo prevents people from realizing that they can shape history rather than simply react to the will of the already powerful, hooks explores how the status quo affects certain groups of people, women, minorities, and the poor. She then argues that these groups of people face specific challenges different from those faced by other groups while learning to see themselves as the subjects, the makers of history, rather than the objects and victim of history. The most salient of these differences is marked by her term “white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchy,” a descriptive tag hooks explains and explores throughout her writing. hooks’ pedagogic project is meant to dramatize and underline Freire’s point that the struggle to learn, to grow, to transform oneself, is an important part of the project to transform society. One cannot delay the personal transformation until after the social transformation, or enter the struggle as an object with the hope that later, after the revolution, one can become a subject.

For bell hooks, education, writing, and arguing are part of an ongoing process of transformation that takes place both within the person and outside the person in society. The transformation from object to subject within the student is the beginning of the
transformation of the outer society. An engaged pedagogy also sees a relationship between the self-actualization of the students and the self-actualization of the teacher:

Progressive, holistic education, “engaged pedagogy” is more demanding than conventional critical or feminist pedagogy. For, unlike these two teaching practices, it emphasizes well being. That means that teachers must be actively committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students. (hooks *Teaching to Transgress* 15)

One of the goals of liberatory education as hooks describes it is to teach all students to write and think as if their own desires, interests, fears and anxieties are central, and part of the universal condition, rather than marginal, or a special case, of interest only to people like themselves. The problems a teacher committed to these goals may encounter when implementing this project are well explored by Elizabeth Ellsworth in the article “Why Doesn’t This Feel Empowering? Working Through the Repressive Myths of Critical Pedagogy.” Ellsworth describes a class she designed and taught: “[A] course in media and pedagogy that would not only work to clarify the structures of institutional racism underlying university practices and its culture in spring 1988, but that would also use that understanding to plan and carry out a political intervention within that formation” (299). She uses the events in this class to present both a critique of certain critical pedagogic myths and a revision of some critical pedagogic goals. Her classroom contained a range of diverse students, and this forced her to confront the thought that there is no single stable place for a critical pedagogue to stand and unproblematically side with and support the various types of oppressed others that exist in our society and
classrooms. She concludes by suggesting that her own ongoing unlearning of privilege is deeply intertwined with her attempts to encourage her students to confront difference and learn from it:

The terms in which I can and will assert and unsettle “difference” and unlearn my position of privilege in future classroom practices are wholly dependent on the Others/others whose presence—with their concrete experiences of privileges and oppressions, and subjugated or oppressive knowledges—I am responding to and acting with in any given classroom. My moving about between the positions of privileged speaking subject and inappropriate/d Other cannot be predicted, prescribed, or understood beforehand by any theoretical framework or methodological practice. It is in this sense that a practice grounded in the unknowable is profoundly contextual (historical) and interdependent (social). (323)

Of course Ellsworth’s practice does presuppose a kind theoretical framework or an attitude toward the idea of theoretical frameworks. Her argument is meant to suggest that neither a single framework nor any stable combination of frameworks will be likely to be able to anticipate all the perspectives she is likely to encounter within her classroom. Ellsworth’s connection of her personal transformation to the teaching of her class is ultimately an enactment of the feminist, liberatory and engaged pedagogic goals of bell hooks:

When education is the practice of freedom, students are not the only ones who are asked to share, to confess. Engaged pedagogy does not seek simply to empower students. Any classroom that employs a holistic model
of learning will also be a place where teachers grow, and are empowered by the process. That empowerment cannot happen if we refuse to be vulnerable while encouraging students to take risks. Professors who expect students to share confessional narratives but who are themselves unwilling to share are exercising power in a manner that could be coercive.

(*Teaching to Transgress* 21)

Engaged pedagogy requires teachers willing to explore and expose some of their own struggles with the issues under consideration, along with the student’s. It is not enough, it seems to me, for a teacher wishing to stand with bell hooks and her pedagogic project to bring the writing of bell hooks into the classroom and discuss it as if the experiences of bell hooks are emblematic of some kind of truth that obviates the necessity of students and teachers interrogating how their own lives intersect with the issues involved. It is imperative that both teachers and students interrogate their personal experiences and search for and investigate instances of resistance to and complicity with the larger forces of domination operating in our society. bell hooks cannot do this for anyone other than herself; she can only encourage us, provide us with an example of what it looks like when she performs this interrogation of her own experiences.

Another important goal for bell hooks is the feminist project of relating literacy, education, and theoretical exploration to people outside the university. Barry Burke argues that this perspective comes from the need to promote a critical consciousness for all people and not just students:

hooks is a feminist and for her, literacy is essential to the future of the feminist movement because the lack of reading, writing and critical skills
serves to exclude many women and men from feminist consciousness. Not only that, it excludes many from the political process and the labour market. She regards literacy as more than being able to read and write, however. For her, it allows people, particularly those who are marginalized and discriminated against in society to acquire a critical consciousness.

This critical consciousness is like the one Shor describes in his pedagogy in that it allows a person to see herself as a subject and not an object of history, but for hooks, a critical consciousness also allows one to speak and argue as if one’s own concerns partake of the universal condition of being human and are therefore important to everyone. Presumably this ability is already developed in many of the students belonging to the most dominant groups, and hooks is not trying to simply replace one dominant paradigm with an opposite paradigm, but trying to develop and create a new, more inclusive paradigm. The educational project of bell hooks is about bringing these perspectives to students, but she is just as concerned with bringing these perspectives to people outside the university.

Perhaps the most influential theme of bell hooks from the perspective of scholars publishing in the field of rhetoric and composition concerns the issue of conflict and how conflict can be useful in the classroom. Susan Jarratt, in “Feminism and Composition: The Case for Conflict,” argues that hooks’ willingness to encourage more direct conflict in the classroom may be a corrective to certain expressivist tendencies that have taken hold in the writing classroom:

We must again take a political pulse to determine the effects of our practices and to reconsider strategies. The expressivist focus on student
experiences and concerns is an important starting point for feminist pedagogy. But my double concern about those feminist compositionists who advocate such pedagogies is not only that they are positioned unequally in the expressivist discourse but also that they spend too little time helping their students learn how to argue about public issues—making the turn from the personal back out to the public. (120-121)

Jarratt, like hooks, is concerned with something that might be called the rhetorical health of students. Both teachers are concerned that too much focus on personal feelings and cooperative environments may promote a type of student less able to stand up and fight in the face of strong opposition. This position is an implicit criticism of the writing class that avoids politically charged topics promoted by Hairston. In *Talking Back*, hooks argues most directly for the benefits that facing conflict can bring to the classroom, but her concern with the necessity of facing conflict derives from her experiences in feminist movement and continues through *Teaching Community*:

> The principles that govern interaction between black and women folks in a white-supremacist society, that help us resist and form solidarity, need to be identified. One principle is the will to form a conscious, cooperative partnership that is rooted in mutuality. Striving to be mutual is the principle that best mediates situations where there is unequal status. Of course, we cannot forge boundaries across the barriers that racism creates if we want always to be safe or to avoid conflict. In feminist settings, during my first year of college, I was always confused when my peers would encourage us to participate in activist revolution on the one hand,
and then on the other hand stress the importance of safety. The emphasis on safety in feminist settings often served as a barrier to cross-racial solidarity because these encounters did not feel “safe” and were often charged with tension and conflict. Working with white students on unlearning racism, one of the principles we strive to embody is the value of risk, honoring the fact that we may learn and grow in circumstances where we do not feel safe, that the presence of conflict is not necessarily negative but rather its meaning is determined by how we cope with the conflict. Trusting our ability to cope in situations where racialized conflict arises is far more fruitful than insisting on safety as always the best or only basis for bonding. (63-64)

The tension between feeling safe and being willing to risk, to talk back, is a theme that recurs in pedagogic writing of all sorts. The Hairston debate concerning the place of politics in the writing classroom is one such example. A number of related binaries seem to restate and revise similar tensions: collaboration versus competition in the classroom, and relaxation versus anxiety within the writer. hooks argues the case for conflict in the classroom, but she also warns against the extreme versions of competition among students in the classroom and how this can shut down a spirit of community and engagement.

*Where: Issues Surrounding Location*

While bell hooks creates several vivid pictures of herself in front of a class of students, much of her pedagogic focus concerns teaching people outside of the college classroom. I argue that the educational transformation that bell hooks hopes to induce
takes place in the personal life of the students and teacher, and consequently, hooks downplays the importance of the college classroom. If the pedagogy of Lad Tobin takes place in the teacher’s office during student-teacher conferences and the educational transformation he envisions takes place in the psychic regions where emotions and language first come together, and the pedagogy of Ira Shor takes place in a classroom where students, willing to talk about the political implications of the everyday material objects surrounding them, transform into beings with a critical consciousness, then the pedagogy of bell hooks takes place in the daily life where students critically explore their sense of who they are and how they fit into society. This exploration can happen in a college classroom, a prison, or around a table in a restaurant, and hooks envisions how this exploration leads to a transformation of consciousness and being, demonstrated by speaking and writing with a liberated voice.

In order to explore this transformation and to make it visible, hooks spends a lot of time examining her memories of her education. She describes her primary school experiences and how they shaped her as a person. She uses this information to gather insight on students like herself and how they learn. As a young girl, bell hooks, or more precisely Gloria Watkins, went to school in the segregated South. In grade school she encountered teachers who had a clear understanding of the specific political dimensions of their job, even though they did not use the language of Paulo Freire:

Almost all our teachers at Booker T. Washington were black women.

They were committed to nurturing intellect so that we could become scholars, thinkers, and cultural workers—black folks who used our “minds.” We learned early that our devotion to learning, to a life of the
mind, was a counter-hegemonic act, a fundamental way to resist every strategy of white racist colonization. Though they did not define or articulate these practices in theoretical terms, my teachers were enacting a revolutionary pedagogy of resistance that was profoundly anticolonial. Within these segregated schools, black children who were deemed exceptional, gifted, were given special care. Teachers worked with and for us to ensure that we would fulfill our intellectual destiny and by so doing uplift the race. My teachers were on a mission. *(Teaching to Transgress)*

In many ways, hooks experienced a version of critical education before Friere popularized the term. Later in her life, as she thought about the writing of Freire and reflected upon the practices of the women responsible for her own education in the segregated South and how this school environment changed when she entered a newly integrated high school, hooks began to formulate her ideas concerning liberatory pedagogy. A primary focus for bell hooks became how to develop the kind of education that can allow an individual to fight dominant and biased representations of race, class and gender. She developed her ideas within the context of her relationship to and critique of feminism.

Perhaps the most central concern of feminism that permeates the work of bell hooks is the question of personal experience, and the belief that understanding, education, and transformation start with the everyday details of one’s personal life. Many of hooks’ pedagogic contributions are based upon a close reading of her own educational experiences and struggles, and the exploration of these memories through various theoretical lenses. Her most influential critique of feminism began with an analysis of her
graduate school education where she began to notice how some of her teachers created a picture of the category “woman” that did not really include herself. She also began to notice other inconsistencies between her own experiences and the pictures scholars created when painting pictures of broad categories like black experience:

Scholars usually talked about black experience when they were really speaking solely about black male experience. Significantly, I found that when “women” were talked about, the experience of white women was universalized to stand for all female experience and that when “black people” were talked about, the experience of black men was the point of reference. (Teaching to Transgress 120-121).

hooks’ critique of feminism began as an exploration of feminist writing that excluded the experiences of non-white, poor women, and the intention of this critique was to revitalize feminism by making it more diverse and inclusive. hooks’ feminist project begins with an exploration of the interplay among race, class and gender and her pedagogic project is an attempt to teach in a way that recognizes how these forces shape a student’s sense of herself and to help counter the diminishing effects of the worst forms of race, class, and gender bias in our society.

hooks also provides descriptions of her willingness to confront questions of race, gender, and class within her intimate family setting:

Always seeking to share knowledge with family, with my parents and siblings, I encounter difficulties. It is oftentimes a struggle, especially confronting the sexism of my dad and my brother. I have never wanted to be an educator who offers knowledge in the classroom that I do not seek to
share in family settings, thereby creating a disjuncture between what I do
as work and how I live in intimate settings. The closed-minded thinking I
challenge in classrooms must often be challenged in our family, from
internalized racial self-hatred, homophobia, to the Christian
fundamentalism that sees all other religious practices as Satanism. Just as I
openly challenge family members I must be open to their critiques of me
and my ideas. This mutual willingness to listen, to argue, to disagree, and
to make peace is the positive outcome of our collective commitment as a
family to learning. This is education as the practice of freedom. (Teaching
Community 120)

This passage emphasizes the idea that the personal life is the most important site of
education, and in its intensity, this passage rather reminds me of some of Thoreau’s
arguments in Walden Pond. Both hooks and Thoreau share a passion for testing out their
theoretical ideas in their daily lives, and neither is afraid of looking a little strange while
doing so.

Who: Issues Surrounding the Actors

The pedagogic practice of bell hooks encourages students to find a liberated
perspective from which to think and argue rather than a confined perspective. hooks calls
communicating from this perspective speaking with the liberated voice. It is clear that
speaking, thinking, and writing in order to develop a liberated voice are the primary
actions that hooks encourages from her students. This voice, or this rhetorical position,
would allow the rhetor to argue from a position where her insights and concerns feel
natural, pertinent, and central rather than strange, marginal, or uninteresting to most
people. A student develops a liberated voice by interacting with other students in class in an atmosphere of genuine, but guided agonistic discussion. hooks does not want her classes to degrade into the kind of fierce verbal combat that silences anyone unwilling to play the most brutal version of this game, but she also makes it quite clear that she does not want her classroom to be a “safe zone” where nobody runs the risks of ever getting their feelings hurt. Kathleen Martindale, in the article “Theorizing Autobiography and Materialist Feminist Pedagogy,” uses her working-class childhood memories to enact a critique of the prevailing middle-class norms in the university concerning the relationship between nurturing and teaching. Martindale critiques the tropes surrounding teachers, and she begins by assuming that her experiences of childhood need not be viewed as less important simply because they were less common than the experiences of her colleagues:

I want to question the process by which nurturing is constructed as what is sensitive, normal, and feminine for mothers, and, then, by extension, is assumed to be appropriate for female teachers, and then, by an even greater extension, is appropriated, sometimes, in my opinion, without critique, for and by feminist university teachers. (323)

Martindale’s critique of nurturing serves as an example of the type of scholarship possible when following hooks’ proposal that more people need to learn, to write, and to think as if their concerns and perceptions are central to the concerns and perceptions of others, not special, lesser, or of interest only to people like themselves. Martindale’s critique of nurturing also seems to support hooks’ notion of the value of conflict within the classroom.
In the essay “toward a revolutionary feminist pedagogy” in the collection *Talking Back*, hooks creates a snapshot of her classroom:

My classroom style is very confrontational. It is a model of pedagogy that is based on the assumption that many students will take courses from me who are afraid to assert themselves as critical thinkers, who are afraid to speak (especially students from oppressed and exploited groups). The revolutionary hope that I bring to the classroom is that it will become a space where they can come to voice. Unlike the atmosphere of safety (one in which we are all going to be kind and nurturing), I encourage students to work at coming to voice in an atmosphere where they may be afraid or see themselves at risk. The goal is to enable critical discussion. Many students find this pedagogy difficult, frightening, and very demanding. They do not usually come away from my class talking about how much they enjoyed the experience. (53)

This is a very telling passage because it explains how hooks sees her students and who her pedagogy hopes to reach. She imagines a student who must struggle in order to get her voice heard, a student who has been taught over time that her perspective is not what “most people” want to discuss. When I think of the students I have taught at Ohio University, Saint Joseph’s University, the University of Kansas, and Johnson County Community College, I envision a somewhat different student. Typically, I see a fairly affluent white student who is quite capable of politely dismissing viewpoints that do not already conform to his understanding of the world. One way this student does this is by labeling his teacher a typical left wing humanities professor, and once he does this, he
feels entitled to ignore most of what he reads in class as long as he is somewhat polite. By such actions, a student can take an invitation to take risks and decline it perhaps because of a perceived need to remain safe in the classroom. While I am not sure how hooks would teach such students in her classroom, my strategy of oblique rhetorical challenges is an attempt to persuade such students to engage with the issues brought up in her pedagogic practices.

In “Participatory Deep Learning in Diverse Class on Minority Literatures,” Evan Mwangi, a literature professor at Northwestern University, investigates how to promote more participation from his students, and remarks that white male students are sometimes the quietest in his classroom. Mwangi argues that the African literature that he teaches contains an explicit critique of one way communication, a mode of communication associated with colonial control. The theme of interaction is important in such literature and Mwangi hopes to explore this theme and make it more explicit by his classroom practices. He associates these goals with the writing of bell hooks where she writes of the need to create a democratic feeling in the class where everyone feels the responsibility to contribute. Mwangi’s techniques include an email questionnaire, and something he calls the muddiest point exercise, where students write a one minute response to a question asking students to articulate the most difficult-to-understand point of the class.

How the teacher’s body shapes the rhetorical context of the classroom is a subject directly related to the pedagogic project of bell hooks. The ways that students react differently to the different bodies of teachers is a subject that is currently being explored in pedagogic literature. Homa Hoodfar, in “Feminist Anthropology and Critical Pedagogy: The Anthropology of Classrooms’ Excluded Voices,” describes how students
in Canada reacted with open hostility towards her critical perspectives. She theorized that much of this hostility came from the students’ suspicions of Hoodfar’s Iranian and Muslim culture. Hoodfar describes her experiences while teaching Anthropology in two Canadian colleges and focuses on the scholarship concerning student resistance to critical pedagogy and how her specific experience complicates some of this work:

A female teacher who is also a member of a visible minority cannot lay claim to the authority of the teacher in the same way that a white female might or that white males usually do. Moreover, what little discussion has taken place on the issue of minority authority in the classroom has been about courses that explicitly deal with anti-racist themes. (306)

Hoodfar is critical of the idea that teacher authority must be diminished and shared with students. She decides, perhaps paradoxically, that in her specific situation, she must assert her authority as a teacher and use lectures to sometimes provide a distance between her students and herself in order to help her students to think critically. This view of classroom authority seems in line with hooks’ practice in that Hoodfar is learning how to directly confront unhelpful attitudes, where the views of Ira Shor concerning authority might suggest negotiation rather than confrontation.

In order to dramatize and encourage the formation of the liberated voice, hooks creates a classroom where everyone is required to speak. Being a silent witness is not permitted because hooks wants the classroom to come together as a community where everyone participates rather than a community where the vocal set the agenda by making visible their concerns and the rest of the class act as if those concerns are the most important concerns or the only concerns. The speaking rules in hooks’ classroom outlaw
some of the problems Shor associates with the Siberian Syndrome and mandate an atmosphere of engaged participation associated with an idealized form of participatory democracy, where all stakeholders in the class understand that part of the project of their class concerns the development of everyone’s rhetorical abilities. In the article “Embracing Change” hooks makes explicit the connection between building community and requiring each student to speak in class:

It has been my experience that one way to build community in the classroom is to recognize the value of each individual voice. In my classes, students keep journals and often write paragraphs during class which they read to one another. This happens at least once irrespective of class size. Most of the classes I teach are not small. They range anywhere from thirty to sixty students, and at times I have taught more than one hundred. To hear each other (the sound of different voices), to listen to one another, is an exercise in recognition. It also ensures that no student present whose voice cannot be heard remains invisible in the classroom. Some students resent having to make verbal contribution, and so I have had to make it clear from the outset that this is a requirement in my classes. Even if there is a student present whose voice cannot be heard in spoken words, by “signing” (even if we cannot read the signs) they make their presence felt. (Teaching to Transgress 40-41)

hooks is deeply committed to the idea that each student must make her presence felt. I assume that she demands that her students must speak in class in the same way that other teachers demand that their students must turn in their written work—with the threat of the
final grade. She even encourages students to speak in their native languages and then translate what they say believing that the drama of speaking, of declaring oneself present is of importance equal to having the rest of the students understand what one is saying. Her pedagogy sees the recognition of each individual as a prerequisite to understanding and community building. Speaking is an action required by students within her pedagogic project.

In the essay “When I was a young soldier for the revolution: coming to voice” hooks stakes out a clear position regarding a student’s requirement to speak in her classroom. She wants to encourage her students, especially the ones traditionally positioned on the margins, to dare to speak and write as if their position were just as important and relevant as the perspectives of the most powerful members of society. However, she knows that her call to develop this liberated voice requires great courage from people, courage some people might not have just yet. Towards the end of this essay hooks quotes the words written to her by a young black woman who was afraid to speak in a room full of 120 students:

My voice is not fit to be heard by 120 people. To produce such a voice, my temperature increases and my hands shake. My voice is calm and quiet and soothing; it is not a means of announcing the many secrets my friends have told me—it quiets the rush of running stream that is their life, slowing to make a mirror to reflect their worries, so that they can be examined and problems rectified. I am not relieved by voicing my opinions. Placing my opinion up to be judged by the public is a form of
opening myself to criticism and pain. Those who do not share my eyes cannot see where to tread lightly on me.

I am afraid. I am, and will always be afraid. My fear is that I will not be understood. I try to learn the vocabulary of my friends to ensure my communication on their terms. There is no singular vocabulary of 120 people. I will be misunderstood; I will not be respected as a speaker; they will name me Stupid in their minds; they will disregard me. I am afraid.

(17)

On the surface, this young woman is resisting hooks’ speaking requirement, but with her written note she enacts a performance of the liberated voice. Readers are not sure whether or not this student does speak out loud in front of the class; we do not see the student embrace hook’s pedagogic perspective by the end of the essay. hooks knows that this frightened student’s perspective is true and deep and cannot simply be argued away completely. hooks is silent regarding the issue of what happened with this particular student in this particular class, but she very much wishes to continue the larger discussion with her readers. To continue this discussion within the essay, hooks quotes “Litany for Survival” an Audre Lorde poem, as a counter argument in a further attempt to persuade:

and when we speak we are afraid

our words will not be heard

nor welcomed

but when we are silent
we are still afraid

so it is better to speak

remembering

we were never meant to survive

(qtd. in hooks *Talking Back* 17)

Lorde stands with hooks, who stands with most writing teachers when we argue that “it is better to speak,” and yet the perspective of the frightened student is not erased. Her fully realized and beautifully articulated fear remains, and it is the reverberation between these positions that create the tone and tension in this essay. And for me this tone is far more persuasive than many other descriptions of personal persuasion that involve a teacher convincing a student, because this tone demonstrates a willingness to hear and listen to the fear and resistance of those who do not see as we see. hooks’ rhetorical strategy seems to argue: “Yes, I share your fear at times, it is inside me as well, even though I fight against it as a political position. What you see and feel, I can see and feel as well. You are not an external enemy to be defeated, or destroyed, or converted by the sword.” It seems to me that his type of persuasion is among the most powerful techniques that a teacher can employ because it seeks to diffuse the impulse to experience a difference of opinion as a reason to ignore or demean the position of the alternative perspective. This perspective is so important to me because of the assumptions I make about my students, which are not exactly the same assumptions hooks makes about her students. Where hooks wishes to continue to persuade a frightened student to speak in class, I wish to
continue to persuade a frightened student to listen and attempt to understand a challenging rhetorical position, even when this student is not inclined to agree with this position.

When describing her memory and her experiences, hooks uses many concrete details, but when describing her classroom, she often writes on a fairly high plane of abstraction, meaning that she does not go into many particulars of her practice such as describing the arrangement of the chairs, naming her students, or analyzing the consequences of a classroom assignment. It seems logical to surmise that hooks feels a responsibility to protect the privacy of her individual students when describing her pedagogy because so much of her pedagogic practice relies on the analysis of personal life and memory. This is probably also why hooks relies so heavily on the descriptions of her own personal life. It is one thing for a teacher to encourage stories of an intimate nature in the classroom, but quite another thing for the teacher to feel entitled to repeat everyone’s stories in order to describe the pedagogic process.

The ability to recognize issues like white supremacy, patriarchy, and class exploitation can cause profound shifts within students, and some consequences of these shifts in perspective can be painful. In an essay titled “Embracing Change,” hooks writes about how she learned to appreciate the pain of her students:

Students taught me, too, that it is necessary to practice compassion in these new learning settings. I have not forgotten the day a student came to class and told me: “We take your class. We learn to look at the world from a critical standpoint, one that considers race, sex, and class. And we can’t enjoy life anymore.” Looking out over the class, across race, sexual
preference, and ethnicity, I saw students nodding their heads. And I saw for the first time that there can be, and usually is, some degree of pain involved in giving up old ways of thinking and knowing and learning new approaches. I respect that pain. And I include recognition of it now when I teach, that is to say, I teach about shifting paradigms and talk about the discomfort it can cause. White students learning to think more critically about questions of race and racism may go home for the holidays and suddenly see their parents in a different light. They may recognize nonprogressive thinking, racism, and so on, and it may hurt them that new ways of knowing may create estrangement where there was none. Often when students return from breaks I ask them to share with us how ideas that they have learned or worked on in the classroom impacted on their experience outside. This gives them both the opportunity to know that difficult experiences may be common and practice at integrating theory and practice: ways of knowing with habits of being. We practice interrogating habits of being as well as ideas. Through this process we build community. (Teaching to Transgress 42-43)

It is important to feel compassion for student suffering caused by their ability to see from new perspectives. It seems to me that in many cases students refuse to engage these perspectives precisely because they want no part of this suffering. When attempting to prepare students for some of the possible pain that hooks points to, I try to introduce perspectives on race, class, gender, and sexual preference in ways that encourage students to try on these perspectives without feeling that they need to embrace them or reject them
on the spot. This provisional approach to new critical perspectives is part of a strategy of
oblique rhetorical challenge. I am interested in getting the students to recognize the
perspective before considering whether or not they understand it or agree with it. hooks’
recognition of her students’ pain also reminds me of how a creative breakthrough
oftentimes works. Often to achieve a deeper understanding of a topic or a deeper
performance ability of an activity it is necessary to step outside of your current
knowledge and perspective. When doing this your performance may feel diminished for
a while, but this experience is necessary in order to achieve a new higher level of
performance or understanding. The inability to undergo this process, to face this
temporary diminishment, limits many people. Josh Waitzkin in his book The Art of
Learning describes this unwillingness to grow as being like an anorexic hermit crab that
refuses to eat because he does not want to grow into a bigger shell. The fear that such a
metaphorical crab might feel during the time between leaving his current shell and
finding a larger one is a discomfort that many people are unwilling to face. Such fear
might persuade one to starve oneself rather than risk growing bigger.

How: Issues Surrounding Tools and Techniques

Unlike Lad Tobin or Ira Shor, bell hooks does not describe the minute details that
occur within her classroom, and consequently, her writing has far fewer descriptions of
lesson plans and student activities. Much of her pedagogic thought is focused on the
necessary close relationship between theory and practice, but her arguments be more
theoretical than dramatic. She seems to feel comfortable describing the mind of bell
hooks as a student, but not quite as comfortable attempting to describe the minds of the
students in her classrooms. Of course to some extent, this is true of all pedagogic writers.
We are oftentimes more eager to create pictures of ourselves as young students and describe how we learned something than to presume to understand what goes on in the minds of our students.

In “Re-Ethicizing the Classroom: Pedagogy, the Public Sphere, and the Postcolonial Condition,” Ajay Heble explores a literature class called Honors Critical Practice that he taught in 1996. This class contained conflicts that provoked him into further pedagogic exploration. Unlike Hoodfar, in the previous article, Heble enjoyed teaching this class for many years, but in a particular class in 1996, the students yelled at each other and came to his office hours to explain how threatened and violated they felt. Heble’s main goal in this article is how to bring an ethical spirit of interaction into such a class. His interaction with the writing of bell hooks is critical of her lack of specific classroom details explaining how she achieves her pedagogic goals:

While work by Giroux, bell hooks, and other theorists of critical pedagogy is genuinely salutary for its visionary sense of intellectual purpose and its inspirational insistence, via Paulo Freire, on democratizing the classroom, their essays frequently lack sustained attention to the specificities of the teaching and learning situations they describe. So, for example, when hooks talks about the need to “create participatory spaces for the shaping of knowledge” (1994, 15), she never really tells us what such a move would involve, nor does she connect that suggestion (which has to do with giving students a voice) with an earlier comment in which she describes a largely resistant class. What’s missing is a rigorous account of the specific teaching strategies hooks evolved for altering the dynamics of a class.
which clearly was not committed to the engaged pedagogy their teacher was trying to promote. (148-149)

The writing of bell hooks did not provide Heble with the specific guidance he hoped to find, and his article seeks a solution. Concerning the problems associated with his particular class, Heble’s conclusions focus on attempting to persuade students that they “may not be as truly self-willed, as autonomous, or as freethinking as they might believe” (155). He is interested in a conception of agency formulated by Kathleen McCormick in her book *The Culture of Reading and the Teaching of English*, where agency is tied to an awareness of why one has the beliefs and values one has.

There are, however, a few vivid moments where hooks does describe classroom activities. In as essay titled “Talking Race, and Racism,” hooks shares some of her thoughts on how to help students examine the topics of race and racism. For hooks, an awareness of race is deeply related to rhetorical perspective and unexamined assumptions about how the world works as well as how everyone ought to behave or argue. One way that hooks introduces a discussion on race and racism is with a thought experiment:

> In classroom settings I have often listened to groups of students tell me that racism really no longer shapes the contours of our lives, that there is just no such thing as racial difference, that “we are all just people.” Then a few minutes later I give them an exercise. I ask if they were about to die and could choose to come back as a white male, a white female, a black female, or black male, which identity would they choose. Each time I do this exercise, most individuals, irrespective of gender or race invariably choose whiteness, and most often white maleness. Black females are the
least chosen. When I ask students to explain their choice they proceed to do a sophisticated analysis of privilege based on race (with perspectives that take gender and class into consideration). This disconnect between their conscious repudiation of race as a marker of privilege and their unconscious understanding is a gap we have to bridge, an illusion that must be shattered before a meaningful discussion of race and racism can take place. This exercise helps them to move past their denial of the more unbiased approach to knowledge. *(Teaching Community 25-26)*

This exercise is an example of an oblique rhetorical approach that ends up landing in the heart of a difficult place. This activity shows hooks searching for ways that students can begin to see and discuss issues of race rather than demanding that they simply do so. It also seems that this is an exercise that white teachers could use just as easily as African-American teachers.

*Writing Issues: Stylistic Features that Promote or Detract from the Pedagogic Goals*

Perhaps the most salient feature of the prose style of bell hooks is its oral quality. hooks writes her essays as if she were speaking out loud to an audience. Sometimes she sounds as if she were speaking to a classroom full of students, at other times a church congregation, or a mass of soldiers on the battlefield. In many ways her writing style is a dramatization of her concept of the liberated voice. The liberated voice of bell hooks differs from the traditional voice of standard academic discourse in a number of interesting ways. First of all, she demonstrates a broader range of emotions than usually appear in traditional academic discourse. She sometimes writes and argues when she is angry. In addition, her sense of her audience is much larger than most traditional
academic discourse. She writes for an assumed audience that includes her students and people outside of the typical academic audience. And, perhaps not surprisingly, she investigates messy questions of race, class, and gender during various types of academic inquiry. Consider the following passage from the introductory essay to *Teaching to Transgress*:

> Before this class, I considered that *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* would be a book of essays mostly directed to teachers. After the class ended, I began writing with the understanding that I was speaking to and with both students and professors. The scholarly field of writing on critical pedagogy and/or feminist pedagogy continues to be primarily a discourse engaged by white women and men. Freire, too, in conversation with me, as in much of his written work, has always acknowledged that he occupies the location of white maleness, particularly in his country. But the work of various thinkers on radical pedagogy (I use this term to include critical and/or feminist perspectives) has in recent years truly included a recognition of differences—those determined by class, race, sexual practice, nationality, and so on. Yet this movement forward does not seem to coincide with any significant increase in black or other nonwhite voices joining discussions about radical pedagogical practices (9-10)

The tone of this passage is serious and academic, but unlike most academic prose it also acknowledges students as part of her imagined audience. Much of hooks’ prose deliberately disrupts academic decorum with the hope of creating the space necessary to
question the relationship between professional academic ways of knowing and writing and systems of domination that continue to privilege some and disenfranchise others. The strategy of acknowledging students as part of her imagined audience is a further enactment of the idea of transgressing borders.

hooks does not create elaborately detailed visual pictures in her essays; she seems to prefer intonations, overtones and undertones, rhythms, and harmonies, cadences, scoldings, and calls to battle. In the following passage from the article “Standards,” found in *Teaching Community*, one can hear a number of rhetorical influences present in hooks’ prose:

Since dominator culture promotes and encourages competition, traditional academic settings are not usually locations where colleagues learn to trust one another and to work in mutual partnership. When I forged bonds with white and / or male folks deemed racist and /or sexist by progressive colleagues, I was then viewed by these folks as a “traitor” because I refused to bond on the basis of fixed notions of the enemy. To the extent that I remain ever-mindful of the potential for me to be “the enemy,” I am able to view my colleagues who maintain allegiance to dominator culture with compassion. When I demonize them or see them as only and always capable of being enemies, I become part of the problem and not part of the solution. This is especially the case when racism is the issue. (75)

In this passage hooks is confessing, scolding, and teaching all at once. The words “traitor,” “alliance,” and “enemy” point toward a merging of the language of politics and warfare.
It seems to me that within this written, oral sounding prose, some issues are better explored, better examined than others. I find that many of hooks’ essays are directed more towards her supporters than her opponents. This might be because hooks feels deeply the need to remain hopeful when doing transformational work in society, while my inclination is to start the confrontation of society by claiming that we need to acknowledge the more difficult emotional mess, the frozen sea within us—to use an expression from Franz Kafka—before we can become more hopeful. Within the classroom, teachers are in close contact with all sorts of differences; some of our students sometimes view us as opponents, and this is why the issue of how deeply a teacher can reach the heart and mind of an opponent is important. Perhaps many of hooks’ essays are more about mobilizing people to act because it is through action that hooks believes that true persuasion best takes place.

A certain amount of self-reflection on my own raced and gendered body, along with my awareness of my class background, forces me to investigate my desire to engage with the thinking of bell hooks. The relationship between white academic liberals like myself and bell hooks begins with profound difference. White academic liberals like myself simply can not jump onto the stage and move and speak in the same way that bell hooks moves and speaks. When we claim that we can, things feel dishonest. Unlike hooks, most of us white academic liberals have been taught in a different place, under a different light. For most of us, the centrality of the white world within our education was unquestioned and unquestionable. It simply represented the way things were. Most of the men among us have only the slightest hint of how it feels to be a colonized person—and when we try to imagine it, we all too often think in terms of a simplistic melodrama. In our minds, the
colonized are too often and in too many situations completely powerless—there is little joy or richness in their lives—they have less of everything and need to be pitied and championed. Sometimes, we think along a different track and place the perspective of someone like bell hooks in a zone that can only be agreed with but not deeply engaged. Because the experiences of bell hooks are so different from many of those who would like to engage her thought, we act as if we can only hope to understand her perspective and explain it to others who will no doubt have difficulty as well. In this scenario, any difference of opinion on the part of our students is too often read as misunderstanding. The problem here is that the main thrust of hooks’ thinking concerns the meaning of personal experience—not simply the personal experience of bell hooks, but the personal experiences of those who disagree with her as well. It is my belief that we cannot stand productively with bell hooks if we can not interrogate the meaning of our own personal experience. hooks is not asking anyone to diminish the meaning of their own lives in order to better understand the perspective of bell hooks. She is daring us to perform the exact opposite action. She is daring us to engage deeply with our own personal experiences in order to better understand ourselves and the world around us. When bringing the perspective of bell hooks to students with conservative points of view, it is important that teachers expect that there will be differences of opinion and plan for ways that allow the students to disagree with hooks in ways that are productive and exploratory rather than try to encourage some sort of polite tolerance or acceptance of her ideas.

For me the most important lesson of hooks’ writing is how she connects her personal experience with critical thought and action. While studying her writing, it has become clear to me that it is imperative that a reader does not look to hooks to provide
ready-made answers to personal, political, and local problems. Her writing is meant to encourage readers to explore how their own life stories support or resist the ideals they claim to uphold. It is not useful to approach hooks’ writing with a sense of being white and privileged and therefore completely ignorant. A white liberal reader such as myself should not read hooks with a feeling of: “What do I know? I am white and privileged. Come bell hooks and teach me what I do not know.” The meaning of her writing is more than her critique of American society. It is in her critique of American society combined with, and filtered through, the story of her life. A reader unwilling to accept both sides of this perspective is unable to experience the deeper power of hooks’ writing. For a middle-class white to simply accept and reproduce hooks’ critique of American society without connecting it in any way to the story of their own life seems simply pretentious and wrong. My engagement with the pedagogic thought of bell hooks makes visible a variety of contradictions and disruptions in my own pedagogic practice. I find it easiest to stand with hooks on the issues of mutuality between teachers and students and the relevance of the personal to education. These are areas of concern that I attempt to dramatize with my entire being every time I step into the classroom. I find it more difficult to follow her lead in challenging white supremacy, sexism, and classism in the classroom. This is not because I disagree with her analysis of the harm done by these systems of thought. My reticence has more to do with my position as a white working-class male and how this position relates to the places where I have typically taught and my relationship to these institutions. Ohio University, where I learned to teach rhetoric and composition, and Saint Joseph’s University, where I currently teach, are both places where the average income of the incoming first-year student is much higher than the
family income of any of the families living in the neighborhood where I grew up. The majority of the students that I teach come from a middle-class position that they fully expect to reproduce for their own families. These students are predominantly white. My position as graduate student and adjunct teacher at these universities also underlines my weak political, economic, and institutional connection to the places where I teach. All of these considerations, along with my own personality, which perhaps has not been blessed with the same sort of sass that hooks so eloquently demonstrates, lead me to prefer a more oblique attack on the rhetorical forces of white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchy than bell hooks demonstrates in her writing and classroom practice.

The writing of bell hooks demands that the reader be willing to investigate, explore and reflect upon his or her personal life along with the life of the author. bell hooks does not argue with tight syllogistic statements, neither does she suggest that such writing can persuade anyone deeply. The bell hooks character in so many of her essays is there partly as a dramatic argument to suggest that we too as readers must learn to follow her lead—not simply accept or reject her point of view. Her writing is a dramatization of how her personal life history reverberates in and through her critical thought. In these pedagogic works, hooks describes the problems she experienced as a student in a number of different settings. Her story emphasizes the conflicts she went through in order to receive her advanced degrees, and the further conflicts she experienced while working inside the university. The deep meaning of her writing is to encourage her readers to risk allowing their personal life stories to enter into, and reverberate in and through, their own critical thought. bell hooks does not critique American society so that white liberals can see it, internalize it and become bell hooks; she critiques American society so that
different people coming from different perspectives can see how her critique intertwines with her personal life story and be encouraged to attempt similar performances, so that more of our experiences and critiques can reverberate through our arguments and lives in more meaningful ways.

Conclusion

bell hooks’ pedagogy dramatizes a type of learning that I describe as a transformation of voice and consciousness, where voice and consciousness are marked by suffering under domination or struggling for liberation. hooks’ pedagogic goals necessitate teachers and students willing to explore how their personal lives support or work against the forces of white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchy. Analyzing Talking Back, Teaching to Transgress, and Teaching through breaking them into Why, What, Where, Who, and How categories has allowed me to notice several salient characteristics of hooks’ pedagogy. The Where category foregrounds hooks’ conception of the classroom as a place not confined within a college campus. The Who investigation indicates that hooks’ pedagogy focuses on how minority students and other students afraid to challenge the status quo develop a liberatory voice and a critical consciousness by learning to talk back. This investigation relies heavily on hooks’ self examination of her educational memories. The How category analysis indicates that hooks has only a few specific pictures of classroom activities. She seems to prefer more abstract descriptions of the classroom. The Stylistic Features investigation reveals a prose style heavily influenced by oral features.

I see my engagement with the pedagogic ideas of bell hooks influencing the ways I engage my students in a rhetoric and composition class. I do not make her core
pedagogic concerns the central themes of my rhetoric and composition classroom, but I cannot ignore the power of her perspective, and her writing and practice challenges me to imagine what might be possible within my classroom. Her voice lingers in my head asking questions about the influence of rhetorical formulations of race, class, and gender, and the politics of representation. I continue to adjust the amount of classroom time I commit to exploring parts of the pedagogic project of bell hooks, and I continue to be compelled to engage with her ideas and imagine how they could be brought into my life and classroom. My own strategy of oblique rhetorical challenges relies on a similar kind of challenging, daring, and haunting rather than direct confrontation, and in the next chapter I will go into greater detail concerning my use of this practice.

Reading hooks’ analysis of white supremacy, and how minority individuals often internalize these systems of thought, allows me to sense a number of differences and similarities between how bell hooks describes and understands her students and how I describe and understand mine. Some of the internalized class biases so prevalent among working class individuals—and this thought comes more from examining my personal educational history than from observing my students—are becoming more apparent to me. These internalized class biases manifest themselves politically when members of the working class support the most conservative political positions, even to their own economic disadvantage because they believe in the justice of the current hierarchy of wealth and economic opportunity, no matter how disproportionate. They believe in the justice of this hierarchy and in the arguments of those who broadcast this perspective. The logic of this position suggests that those who have more, have more because they are better; they work harder; they are more deserving. Any tampering with the current
hierarchy is viewed as an attempt to take from the deserving and give to the undeserving. This view of society among the working class can be as deeply internalized as white supremacist versions of beauty can be among some African-Americans.

My engagement with hooks’ ideas concerning white supremacy and the damage it does to minority groups has led me to speculate on some of the things that white supremacy requires of white males. There seems to be three important positions white males must take concerning domination in order to receive all the imagined benefits of white supremacy reserved for the truly privileged: a. you must be willing to dominate others b. you must be willing to overlook the most brutal forms of domination—which is to say that there is no bearing witness to the domination of others and c. you must be willing to argue, and believe, that all the brutality and domination in society is perfectly natural, that it all represents an absolute state of nature. Such a position is usually supported with arguments like: “If we weren’t doing the dominating somebody else would be.” Any reservation about any of these concerns seems to make one both less white and less of a man. I have often felt that the absurdity of the character of Stephen Colbert on The Colbert Report is a dramatization of these issues surrounding race and domination. Much of the humor of the show is simply a dramatization of Stephen Colbert arguing for the rightness and the whiteness of every extreme rhetorical perspective as if it were the most natural thing in the universe. Whether or not this humor represents a counter-hegemonic act of resistance to white supremacy or a reinscription of the same white supremacist values is a difficult question, and perhaps this humor performs both functions at once representing a trope Slavoj Zizek has called “a chocolate laxative.” His phrase points to the binding properties of chocolate and the absurdity of attaching these
binding properties to a medicine supposed to produce a loosening of the material within one’s intestines.

Ultimately, engaging with the pedagogical ideas of bell hooks encourages me to investigate exactly how a white male such as myself can most effectively and most persuasively stand against the pervasive rhetorical onslaught of white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchy. It seems to me that he can not do so in exactly the same way that bell hooks can as a black woman. For bell hooks and a student such as herself wounded by white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchy, the development of a critical consciousness is more a matter of personal survival. For a white male who has been given some of the privileges of a white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal society, the development of a critical conscious represents something a little different, something perhaps more fueled by a moral sense than a sense of personal survival. On the surface, a white man who stands against every instance of white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal rhetoric might be seen from the perspective of other people supportive of these perspectives as an individual filled with self-hate, someone who is completely crazy, irrational, and incomprehensible. This rhetorical situation is reminiscent of the joke in Annie Hall where the Woody Allen character is worried that some day he will end up like a homeless man standing on the street corner, with drool dripping from the side of his mouth screaming about socialism. This is not to argue that a critical consciousness is not worth having if you are a white male, but to point to some of the differences between what a critical consciousness might mean for a white male and what it might mean for a member of a minority group. Figuring out how to present the concept of a critical consciousness to students coming from the white majority in the United States in a way that will encourage
them to engage with the perspective rather than ignore it is an ongoing area of concern for me. The pedagogic writing of bell hooks poses challenging questions concerning my own complicity with a white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal society, within the classroom and within my life, and these challenges cannot simply be obviated by pledging my allegiance to the pedagogic project of bell hooks, as if my pledge of allegiance or my good intensions is what is most required. Some of the strongest arguments made by bell hooks concern the disparity between what we profess in our writing and teaching and how we live our daily lives. The need for a connection between these two areas is a primary concern for hooks: “It always astounds me when progressive people act as though it is somehow a naïve moral position to believe that our lives must be a living example of our politics” (Teaching to Transgress 48). One way the pedagogic theory of bell hooks suggests these challenges might be met concerns finding disruptions and places of resistance within our lives and teaching practices, and examining them and discussing them with others to help determine what sort of effect they might have.

The concluding chapter of my dissertation describes my own classroom practice and investigates three moments of provocative disruption from my teaching experience. My analyses of these disruptions explore several issues raised by hooks, Shor, and Tobin.
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Learning and Transformation

In “Diversity, Ideology, and Teaching Writing,” Maxine Hairston surfaced anxieties concerning politics and indoctrination that I believe run much deeper than the questions surrounding politics in the rhetoric and composition classroom. Her argument is one manifestation of the larger culture wars being fought in U.S. culture concerning political correctness and the university where Hairston displays sympathy for those who criticize the cultural left without believing herself aligned with the forces of the extreme political right. One of the reasons her position continues to resonate with many people concerns the relationship between learning and transformation. Most students come to college, and most parents send their children to college, in order to learn how to succeed in our society, as it is currently understood. Even teachers committed to transforming society concede this point. Victor Villaneuva, in “Considerations of American Freirestas,” acknowledges that college settings are difficult places to promote the idea that the status quo must be challenged precisely because most of the people who come there enter with the belief that the college experience will help them become successful members of society. Most students do not come to college with the dream of becoming social or political reformers or change agents.

Hairston’s concern for the place of our students’ religious traditions within the classroom is also a topic of continued relevance that raises a different aspect of the relationship between learning and transformation. How much of our students’ community traditions and values will they be expected to challenge or change in order to succeed in college or to succeed in the larger commercial society? College and commercial society
are both places that will challenge these community traditions and values, and this fact is frightening to many parents, teachers, and students. This fear can be minimized or exacerbated, but it seems unlikely that it can ever go away completely given the nature of society and our educational system. Must we bring the topics and challenges that Tobin, Shor, and hooks write about into the rhetoric and composition classroom? It is certainly possible, as Hairston argues, to teach students useful knowledge about writing while minimizing these challenges, but I stand with the people who argue that it is better, for the students, to introduce such challenges because learning how to analyze arguments can be used to either promote or resist all sorts of new challenging ideas. My position is that such challenges are brought into the classroom in order to provide students with the opportunity to practice confronting such challenges, not with the direct desire to transform the world. I also believe that even teachers more willing to bite the bullet and argue for a direct link between their classroom activities and the desire to encourage students to transform themselves and the world realize that helping students face challenging rhetorical situations is an important part of their practice.

When Hairston described the goals of her opponents, she saw very little concern for their students. She saw a wide divide between pedagogic approaches promoting social reform and approaches promoting a focus on student writing. She felt a need to encourage teachers to stay within their areas of specialty and criticized teachers who want to have freshmen write about political topics in the writing classroom. In effect, Hairston wants to widen the divide between the personal and the political in the writing classroom, while her opponents argue for the importance of exploring the connections between the personal and the political in the classroom. Hairston fears a classroom where teachers
indoctrinate students. Her opponents fear a classroom where the connection between the personal and the political is kept artificially separate in order to make everyone (parents, students, teachers, administrators, and politicians) feel comfortable. My approach to bridging this gap involves what I call oblique rhetorical challenges. Such an approach hopes to use student experiences, as well as selected readings, to opportunistically find challenges to the traditions and values of students and teachers in various instances throughout the semester. The point is not to make the entire class about challenging each other’s values, but to allow and encourage such challenges to occur within the classroom in order to provide the opportunity to practice how one reacts to such challenges. Toward the end of “Diversity Ideology, and Teaching Writing,” Hairston describes an ideal writing course where students themselves would bring such challenges into the classroom. My approach is similar to Hairston’s, in that students are encouraged to bring such challenges into the classroom, but I see a greater role for the teacher in terms of highlighting and obliquely provoking such challenges, and I also see making such challenges a part of the unstated but conscious goals of the teacher. Such challenges happen throughout life, and learning how to defend ourselves and how to adapt ourselves in such situations is an essential part of learning how to write, argue, and communicate. The social and political perspectives of Lad Tobin, Ira Shor, and bell hooks inform the types of challenges I seek to introduce into my classroom.

Lad Tobin, Ira Shor, and bell hooks all describe learning as a form of individual transformation rather than an incremental acquisition of knowledge and skills. Each author presents a vivid psychological portrayal of the transformational process as it occurs in mind of the teacher. This narrative of transformation is most often assumed to
follow a similar pattern in the minds of the students and is sometimes used to explore the possible motivations of students who behave in unexpected ways. Tobin focuses upon a psychological transformation developed within a composition classroom that promotes a writing-to-learn agenda. His description of himself, as teacher, and his students is very literary and essayistic. He focuses directly on the act of writing essays, and he values and promotes a type of writing that focuses upon the personal and leads to the discovery of multiple layers of meaning. His practice persuades students of the effectiveness of a specific view of how language and the imagination work. Ira Shor focuses on the transformation of the political consciousness within a classroom that promotes a view of learning that centers on collective social action within the community. Shor’s prose style seems to foreground a vision of writing as reporting, and he devotes a large amount of *When Students Have Power* to describing how he and his students speak and respond to each other in class. The learning transformation he describes is induced by a combination of the assigned literature, the conversation in the classroom, and the action involved in a group project in the community. His book resembles an experimental documentary where the main story of the events unfolding in his class is interrupted by many philosophical digressions. bell hooks focuses on a transformation or liberation of the social consciousness in a classroom that promotes a view of learning that reverberates between the theoretical and the personal. Much of the pedagogic writing of hooks focuses most directly upon the mind of the teacher, but where Shor dramatizes the mind of the teacher from moment to moment in front of the classroom, hooks explores the long term development of the teacher, her memories of how she learned and from whom. The prose style of bell hooks feels directly influenced by public speech. If Lad Tobin describes his
classroom as if he were writing a novel, and Ira Shor describes his classroom as if he were writing investigative journalism, then bell hooks describes her classroom as if she were speaking from a pulpit. The public force of her writing style and the intimate details she offers up create a juxtaposition which transgresses many academic written discourse conventions. hooks describes numerous instances where she remembers who she was at transformational moments of her life and then measures the details of how that younger version of herself learned while looking for meaningful connections to the students in front of her. The narrative of hooks’ pedagogic practice is based on an intimate connection between personal transformation and the transformation of society. Tobin, Shor, and hooks are important to me because their vision of teaching focuses on the personal transformation of the teacher and the student. In my classroom, I look for ways to introduce their perspectives to my writing students in order to help students practice how a writer confronts a challenging, and unfamiliar, rhetorical perspective. I also continue to search for ways that students can bring challenging perspectives that they are familiar with into the classroom for the same purpose.

The composition classes I teach blend the concerns of the expressivist focus on student texts and personal writing with the constructivist focus on discourse analysis and political arguments. I usually use an anthology of essays, many of which contain works that focus explicitly on topics of race, class, and gender. The anthologies are typically organized into themed groups of essays. Currently I am using *The Presence of Others: Voices and Images That Call for Response*, edited by Andrea Lunsford and John Ruskiewicz. This text is perhaps a little unusual in that the editors feature essays that represent both liberal and conservative points of view. The organization of my classroom
activities is fairly straight forward. We read and discuss a number of essays from the anthology. Then we come up with individual paper topics that in some way relate to the readings. We then write and critique a rough draft, a first draft, and a final draft. The essays we write have slightly different requirements from paper to paper, but, typically, I ask the students to quote from an article we read, summarize and analyze an argument, consider an opposing point of view and relate a personal story to the topic under discussion.

*The Presence of Others* contains chapter themes such as: Education; Identities; American Cultural Myths; and Business and Labor. Each chapter contains articles that are fairly uncontroversial, for instance, John Spayed’s “Learning in the Key of Life” as well as articles more directly political such as Adrienne Rich’s “What Does a Woman Need to Know?” My goal with classroom discussion is to generate a large range of entrances into the theme and to help connect the essays to the theme. All of the classroom discussions consider possible ways to use the article in the next writing project. I have two contradictory goals in mind when I assign readings and prepare for classroom discussions. On the one hand, I want the students to feel invited into a conversation. For this goal, I need to make the readings and topics feel low risk, a place where students can experiment with ideas and arguments, where they are allowed to be wrong publicly or to revise their ideas publicly. To promote this goal, I strive to be very affirmative of all my student’s opinions on the subject during discussion. I usually do this by assuming that every point of view, at its core, is reasonable and then I help the students formulate reasonable and well considered arguments and perspectives during class. On the other hand, I also want the students to feel that there is some worthwhile stake involved in
entering any one of these conversations. In order to achieve this goal, I sometimes perform different dramatic scenarios with my students. For instance, when I have the students read an excerpt from Paulo Freire, I usually preface the reading with a highly provocative introduction. I tell the students to be on guard and to read very carefully because Paulo Freire represents exactly the kind of left wing radical thinking that right wing media personalities like Bill O’Reilly love to expose and rail against. “This is the type of reading that could challenge and endanger the values that you grew up with,” I warn with a mock sense of high seriousness. I deliver this deliberately provocative introduction as an attempt to both shock the students into being interested in Freire and also to enact a teacher role that does not suggest that I am simply promoting Friere’s perspective. I want the students to look for and explore the perceived dangers in Freire’s arguments. In order to successfully wear this kind of teacher mask, it is important that I come off as unconcerned about whether or not my students enjoy reading or agree with Freire. To present myself in this light, I usually play a very simple game of reverse psychology and pretend to expect that all of the students will be scandalized by Freire’s radical ideas. I never cease to be amazed by the number of students who fall for this little trick and come back to the next class prepared to stand bravely against me and defend the reasonableness of Freire’s position. This type of introduction is an enactment of oblique rhetorical challenge in that I am inviting students to measure what they might believe about a radical intellectual against how they experience an excerpt from his writing rather than requiring that students tell me about how their hometown communities view left wing intellectuals and then compare those views with how they felt while reading Freire. Such an assignment would be a more direct rhetorical challenge.
The persuasive effectiveness of a strategic placement on one’s personal opinion within a student essay is a writing technique that my students and I explore all through the course. The exploration of this issue is one of the main goals of my pedagogy. I aim to persuade my students that it is best, that it is most persuasive in an academic environment, for a writer to demonstrate to a reader that she is capable of describing fairly and generously the arguments of an opponent before she criticizes and finds fault with such arguments. This point of view is the ideology that I bring to my classroom and try to persuade my students to adopt, and I believe that this perspective is an ideal of the university that finds little support in popular political discourse. While I structure my assignments in such a way that promote this point of view, I also create assignments and introduce topics with the assumption that different students will want to argue different sides of the topic. I try to prevent students from writing essays where they are unwilling to consider the opposing points of view by telling them that their exploration must be about an angle on the topic in which they are not already completely convinced. This is why I describe these student essays as exploratory essays. Choosing to write an exploratory essay on a topic in which the writer has already made up his mind is a serious problem.

In order to promote this spirit of exploration in the classroom, I also try to present my own personal beliefs on the topics involved in a loose and revisable manner. Over the years, I have learned to perform a teacher persona that presents dispassionately many of the ideas that Borczon in his civic life or personal life feels very passionately about. I argue that this mask, this teacher persona, allows me to exist in a space that is neither the idealized apolitical realm of Hairston and her supporters nor is it the committed out-in-
the-open political arena of Ira Shor, bell hooks, and their supporters. When my students ask for my opinion on a particular subject, I tell them that my views are typical of liberal views that most people in the humanities hold. I then immediately search for ways to reveal conservative aspects of my point of view in order to confuse and complicate the picture the students may have of the typical liberal views that most people in the humanities hold. This activity is an oblique rhetorical challenge in that it is meant to destabilize and make revisable certain political categories while at the same time defusing some of the anxiety surrounding how students read what they think their teachers secretly want to hear about political and social issues.

In the following stories from my teaching experience, I analyze particularly resonant pedagogic events through three different pedagogic lenses related to Tobin, Shor, and hooks. These stories demonstrate some of the specific problems I have experienced when introducing the highly charged issues of race, class, and gender inside my composition classes, and all of them are examples of oblique rhetorical challenges.

*Discussing Maya Angelou in State Prison outside of Columbus, Ohio*

In 1993-1994 I taught composition classes for Ohio University’s, Lancaster Program for the Incarcerated. I had just turned in the last of my course work due for the completion of my Master of Arts degree in English Literary History. It had been almost three years since I taught my last composition class, and I was thrilled to be teaching again. I was teaching a freshman composition course of around 20 students, the majority of whom where of African American descent. We were discussing a famous passage from Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* where Angelou describes the expectation and excitement she felt about her grade school graduation, and how this
excitement turned to outrage, shame, and hatred when the guest speaker, a white politician, began to praise the African American race in terms of their sports achievements.

When discussing this passage, one of the students, a very tall white man sitting in the middle of the room, expressed confusion over the young Angelou’s reaction. “How could she be so upset?” he asked. “The man was simply praising her people.” I asked this student to consider the fact that Angelou was expecting this ceremony to highlight her academic skills, that this was not supposed to be a night about sports at all. The student still felt bewildered. “How could that lead to the violence and intensity of her fantasy?”

I asked him whether or not he had any children, and he told me he had a daughter. I then asked him to imagine that it was five years from now and that he was at a father-daughter breakfast where I was a keynote speaker. He had come to this church basement expecting to hear a speech on parenting, when, all of a sudden, I started speaking about model prisoners who studied hard when they were in state prison then got out and made successes of their lives. I asked him whether or not he might be shocked and angered in such a situation. I remember his voice shaking as he said, “If you ever did anything like that in front of my daughter. . .” And then I said, “How could you be angry? I am just praising you and your people.” At this moment, I remember seeing one of the African American students leaning forward in his desk with a sly smile on his face. I think I was naively hoping to see some support from the black students in class, some recognition that I understood Angelou’s outrage, but all of the sudden I realized that the sly smile was in anticipation of a physical encounter between me and the tall white student. Some instinct kicked in and told me to quickly move on to the next passage and not to underline
the point I was trying to make. Everyone calmed down, and the class ended without incident.

This story has haunted me for years, in part because it surfaces issues of role playing, passion, stereotypes and the potential for violence in the classroom. I am not sure whether or not this student was in any way convinced of the aptness of my comparison (it is more of an emotional comparison than a physical one), or that he agreed that the young Angelou had something to be angry about after our little bit of role playing, but he did feel, for a severe moment, intense anger toward the hypothetical Mr. Borczon, when he attempted to argue, “What’s the problem, I am simply praising you. What have you got to be angry about?” From my current, more scholarly, perspective, I see this impure analogy as an attempt to incite rather than compel learning see Audre Lorde(“An Interview: Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich), and while I am unsure whether or not this activity incited any learning in the students, I feel certain that it almost incited a riot in the class. There is no good logic that equates young black scholars listening to praise about black athletic abilities during graduation with student, parent, ex-prisoners listening to praise about academic fortitude at a father-daughter breakfast. The connection is not spatial or logical. The connection—if one exists at all—concerns the rhetorical position of the young black scholar versus the speaker at her event and the student, ex-prisoner, parent versus the speaker at his hypothetical event. In both cases the speaker attempts to use praise to deflect criticism (or even awareness) of his rhetorical repositioning of the audience members. In Angelou’s case she was not seen as a scholar; in my hypothetical scenario I did not see my student as a father. By creating this scenario, I was trying to place my student within such a rhetorical situation so that he could—even
if only theoretically—experience why such a rhetorical relationship might cause anger. At the time, I believed my desire behind enacting this little bit of role playing was to attempt to incite learning rather than compel assent to a particular reading of Maya Angelou. So if this student did not like my analogy or simply agree that the young Angelou had something to be angry about after our role playing, all was not lost—I did not have to look at the activity as a failure. The activity was an attempt to communicate on a different level—an emotional level rather than a logical one. It may not have succeeded, but such experiments resonate with me because they are attempts to invent different tools to dismantle the master’s house, in the words of Audre Lorde “Because we cannot fight old power in old power terms only” (102-103).

However, looking back at this story through the lens of Lad Tobin’s pedagogy, I also see a story of counter-transference. I had taught this Angelou passage before and confronted similar bewilderment over the intensity of the author’s emotion without feeling the need to force the student to stand in Angelou’s rhetorical position. Looking back, I now believe there was something in the context of the classroom, the fact that there was a majority of African American men in the classroom that allowed me to believe that my white student should be more able to understand Angelou’s outrage in this setting than he would have been able to in a classroom with nearly all white students. I believed that somehow the scene, this prison classroom with a majority of African American men, gave me the power to coerce this student into understanding Angelou’s rage. As a young boy, in Erie Pennsylvania, I spent many hours with black children on the streets, on basketball courts, and at house parties. I have always understood my experience of Midwestern African American urban culture as a privilege, a privilege
hipper and easier to own that the privilege of being white and male, and for some personal reason felt compelled to force some of this understanding on this student, perhaps because I saw in him all of my white friends, classmates, and family members who did not quite understand or see what I understood and saw growing up. That my experiences with African Americans on the streets of Erie might not equate so simply and easily to the racial experiences of a young man in a state prison did not occur to me at the time. I think I saw a white man in a room full of black men and instinctively and wrongly felt that he must be able to see and understand what I could see and understood.

I also believe that this story explains some of my personal need to bring students gently to issues of race, class, and gender—to construct an oblique approach to these issues. My naïve use of my teacher authority and my too-easy-assumption that white men who have lived in predominantly African American communities should understand what I understand quite nearly caused a violent incident in my classroom. Lad Tobin’s pedagogic thought has allowed me to revise, and rewrite, this memory in such a way that I now feel it fits more neatly into a story about how I became the teacher I now am. His idea of exploring emotionally charged teaching memories in search of transference and counter-transference feels genuinely productive to me. This process has helped both the teacher and the writer in me.

When I look at this story through the lens of Ira Shor, I feel compelled to add more concrete physical details about the scene. I had to pass through two check points, a metal detector, and tall barbed wire chain linked fences to enter the prison. There were guards posted outside of the classroom. They were unarmed. I seem to remember all the students being dressed in dark blue slacks and light blue button down shirts. I had a
seventy mile drive to the prison. I drove an Ohio University car. Many, perhaps all, of the final essays were written by hand. There were a number of students deeply committed to learning about writing. Some of them had been actively writing fiction long before this class. The desks in this classroom were arraigned in rows not in a circle. The students were required to refer to me as Mr. Borczon. I was required to reciprocate and referred to them as Mr. as well. The power dynamic between me and the students felt like a living entity. On the one hand, I was an official authority figure, but on the other hand, I knew nothing of how a prison official was supposed to treat a prisoner—nor did I want to know. All of the teachers I knew teaching in the prison treated the students as if they were students, and this view, this looking upon them as students not prisoners, felt deeply appreciated, and acknowledged in some very alive but unspoken way. My perspective on classroom power dynamics and how they play out between the teacher and the students, how classroom power dynamics support or resist the larger power dynamics found in society has always been filtered through my prison teaching experiences.

I have often wanted to formulate this prison teaching experience into an argument that could be used to refine some of Shor’s rather direct arguing concerning how classroom procedures either support or resist the status quo. For instance, Shor criticizes teachers who create long-winded syllabi, arguing that the student teacher relationship presented in the syllabus can corrupt and limit the possibilities available within the classroom. This is no doubt sometimes true, but my prison teaching experience has taught me that it is also possible to work against even more severe institutional limitations restricting the interaction between students and teachers. Prison authorities require that the students within the prison classroom address the teacher as an authority figure. They
discouraged the teachers from giving any personal information about themselves to their students, arguing that such behavior might lead to former students looking up their old teachers once they get out. Many teachers of language skills feel a need to be able to identify with students so that they can help them think of better ways of expressing their thoughts. My prison teaching experience often placed me in a position where the institutional advice and regulations seemed to work against my pedagogic goals in extreme ways.

When I look at this story through the lens of bell hooks, I hear her asking me, “Who were you in 1993, and what did you know about those black men in your prison classroom?” When I began my prison classes, I had just recently moved out of my parents’ house in Erie and moved back to Athens, Ohio with a woman who I would marry later in the year. I was thirty years old, and getting ready to receive my Master of Arts degree in English. I considered myself something of an intellectual and financial underperformer. I had just recently got a driver’s license, and had my own car. I quit drinking around three years earlier, and I think I saw my recent change of fortune as a deserved consequence of my virtue and perseverance. I still hoped that I would be able to find some sort of full-time college teaching position.

I believe one of the requirements for enrollment in the college prison program was that the individual had to be up for parole within the next five years. Most of my students were in prison on drug charges, and many of them felt comfortable talking and writing about these experiences. I remember one earnest young black man telling me that he wanted to study hard so that he could make the same amount of money he used to make in the drug trade with his college degree. He suggested that I must be such a
person, and the pathos of the situation seemed like the material for a modern day Chekhov story. The amount of space, trust, and time necessary to explain to this young student who I was and what I had to offer him was simply not there. I would like to think that I cautioned him that I did not make as much as he might think, and that learning to write can produce benefits beyond the monetary, but it is quite possible that I said nothing at all.

A teacher standing in front of a classroom inside of a prison is surrounded by different types of associations in the eyes of the students than a teacher in a more typical college classroom. A teacher in front of a prison classroom can appear to represent much more than an authority on correct usage, grammar, and writing conventions. Such a teacher can also seem to represent what is legal and fair in civil society, and when such a teacher has white skin and a male body, the conglomeration of associations can begin to feel uncomfortably metaphoric. Perhaps some of my behavior in the Maya Angelou story can be attributed to a resistance on my part of the iconographic implications of being a white male who appears to represent all that this correct, fair, authorized, and powerful in lawful society. To be so uncomfortably placed into such a role must have created emotional anxiety, and my need to work against such a position might have led me down a path where I felt a need to prove to my students that I understood the young Angelou’s anger, where in a different location I would have been more content to focus on the students’ understanding.

*How to Return Sales Merchandise without a Sales Receipt*

I remember teaching a version of the “How To” essay in a classroom located in a different prison than the one in the previous story. It occurred to me that pranks and
scams might be good topics to explore while brainstorming for possible paper topics. At first, several students explained to me that they were not permitted to write about any illegal activities. I quickly argued for the benefits of writing about topics that contain a deep personal resonance and assured my students that I wouldn’t tell if they didn’t. The “How To” assignment then proceeded to produce the most lively classroom debate of the year. I remember students explaining various ways to fill up a car with gas without paying, and how to walk into a large hardware store with nothing in your pocket and walk out with around 150 dollars. The most memorable essay came from a curly-haired young white man who had written rather unremarkable work up to that point. His essay was entitled, “How to Return Sales Merchandise without a Sales Receipt.”

I remember this essay being more than seven pages of neatly hand written script. The student explained a large number of examples and contingency situations. He gave legal advice and advice on the meaning of the actions of store detectives. The essay was apparently written with a tremendous amount of care and emotional energy, but what I remember most clearly was how the writer defended his actions against other students in class who argued that one could not make much money following his recommendations. The author was not a particularly muscular young man, but he argued with great emotion that his crew could make over five thousand dollars a week. As I observed this discussion, it began to dawn on me that this student was arguing for his place within the hierarchy of prison society. His unstated claim seemed to be that he was no common thug, drug dealer, or burglar; he was a leader of men. The competition between him and the other students seemed to revolve around a hierarchy that I did not fully understand.
When I examine this story through the pedagogic lens of Ira Shor, I feel an unsettling reverberation between my teacher authority within the classroom and the authority I carry as a law abiding citizen within the larger society. As a teacher I am still proud of emotional engagement all of the students brought to the “How To” essay in this classroom, and yet I realize that I am not in deep sympathy with the kind of attack upon the status quo that these students were enthusiastic about making. In many ways this story forces me to confront the inherent amorality of my sophistic teacher persona. On the one hand, I sometimes feel the desire to criticize Shor, and hooks for the earnestness, and directness of their left wing allegiances. It is not the allegiance itself that I object to; I believe I share the same allegiance. Shor, and hooks at times, argue as if genuine sincerity and open earnestness contain an unassailable persuasive magic, and this is a stylistic issue, a communication issue, a writing issue that I find myself arguing against. I simply do not share this point of view, and yet I also realize that irony, parody, and sarcasm are nuances that are difficult to control in the classroom or in pedagogic writing. Did my students read my enthusiasm for their written assignments and their classroom conversation as an endorsement of their behavior? Undoubtedly many of them did. Is this a situation that I should worry about as a teacher of rhetoric and composition? Should I have encouraged my students to stick to descriptions of legal activities in their essays? I am sure other teachers did.

When I examine this story through the lens of bell hooks the theme of transgression leaps out at me. All of the students in class were there because of perceived legal transgressions. For hooks and for Shor, the willingness to transgress against the status quo is a mark of a developing critical consciousness. But when teaching in a
prison, the meaning of transgression cannot possibly be so simple, hip, and positive. One of the first things the students always asked me early in the semester was whether or not I had ever been in jail. I have not, and every time I exposed this fact I felt a certain lack. I felt as if it would be easier to identify with my students if I had been jailed before. The ability to make connections between myself and the students has always been very important for me and my view of myself as a teacher of rhetoric and composition.

In many ways teaching rhetoric and composition in prison forced me to view up close the distinction between Borczon the person, the self, the citizen, and Borczon the teacher. When you teach in prison it is impossible to imagine that the students live in the same society that you live in. In many structural ways the position of the teacher standing in front of a prison classroom demonstrates a worldview that places a high divide between the world of the teacher and other law-abiding citizens, and the world of the students, and other people in need of rehabilitation. For the teacher, simply arriving in the classroom required a profound amount of physical and psychological repositioning. When the teacher in such a position encourages students to write about what they know, this decision can be very transgressive for a number of reasons. Perhaps the main argument against such a decision revolves around the perceived link between education and rehabilitation. The purpose for having college classes in prison was to provide the students with societal opportunities other than crime. Many people argued that the college program was successful precisely because the recidivism rate of prison students was much lower than the general prison population. And yet my students used a few weeks of class to discuss the best, the most elegant, ways to defraud various businesses.
On the one hand, education is perceived to encourage students to become better, more hopeful, more productive members of society. On the other hand, the willingness to explore the power of writing, language, and argument seems to require a certain amount of willingness to start the exploration from where we are now and not from some ideal other location. The story of this “How To” assignment places me inside the tension between these two goals. This story has never resolved into some neat moral for me. If anything, this story underlines for me the tension between our moral ideals about the value of learning and education and the amoral nature of language and persuasion.

When I look at this story through the lens of Lad Tobin I see the outline of my favorite teacher-hero-literacy-narrative. Borczon the anti-hero adjunct working in the prison classroom because he can not make his way in the mainstream college setting, nevertheless proves himself equal to, if not in some ways superior to, his more accomplished colleagues who have received their doctorate degrees and have moved onto full-time academic careers. The allure of this beautiful loser story is one manifestation of a generational world view best expressed to my mind by the The Replacements, a punk band who sang:

We are the sons of no one
Bastards of the young
The daughters and the sons
Of no one

I was most likely under the spell of this view of myself as anti-hero adjunct and used it as a way to identify with my prison students. The thought must have been that I, just like they, did not follow the most direct path toward societal success, but that neither of us
was out of the game just yet. This view of myself is also what must have struck me dumb when my student claimed to want to study hard so that he could become a rich and legal success like me. One reason I resisted this repositioning of me is because it seemed to destroy my ability to connect with my students.

*Malcolm X and Middle Class White Students*

The excerpt from *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* describing how Malcolm X read the dictionary in prison and learned some truths about racial inequality in the process is an often reprinted passage in textbooks used in college Rhetoric and Composition classes. I remember attempting to lead a class discussion on this passage in a junior composition classroom in Ohio University around 2004. First one student then another started describing how the tone of Malcolm X upset them and made them resist his arguments. His militancy and what he wrote about white people made them angry. The students more or less pleaded with me that they had a right to ignore someone speaking with this tone. Sensing that this was an argument that I did not want to explore at the moment, I found myself confused and unsure of how to proceed before an idea of how to redirect the entire conversation occurred to me. After a deep breath and a deep pause, I asked the students to take out a piece of paper for a timed writing experiment. I then asked the students to write about a time when they were unable to make someone understand a thought, feeling, or position they felt or were in. I had recently read an article claiming that feminism really begins with any rhetor who must speak or write from a position where what has to be said is so outside the range of what the audience is used to hearing that the rhetor is worried that her abilities are probably not sufficient to
make her point understood. I did not really expect that this impromptu writing assignment might focus on issues of race, class, or gender.

The students wrote, and then read the freewrites out loud. The first student to read, the same student who complained about hostile tone of the Malcolm X passage, read an essay describing how his grandmother wanted him to quit his job at an audio warehouse because his boss was a black man. The student was unable to make his grandmother understand that he had a good job he liked. The grandmother felt that if a black man was the boss, the job had to be undesirable. The student grew up in the Appalachian area surrounding Athens, Ohio, unlike most of his classmates. His grandmother’s view of how the world worked completely erased the writer’s perspective on his job. The class was full of middle-class whites from big-city suburbs. After the student read this essay out loud, the class did not go into dynamic and fruitful conversation. There was a strange silence that seemed to drift over the class, and, after a while, it became my job to break the mood and continue. I made some comments about family members and how sometimes irreconcilable points of view simply go on existing side by side despite our best efforts. But what I remember most about this class was how this student’s essay said so much more than a teacher could possibly say when that teacher was locked within a scenario pitting his earnest moral vision against a perceived blindness of the students. The student’s story demonstrated the persistent existence of racism in our country, but it also demonstrated the persistent pain that racism can cause even a white person. I felt that by repositioning this student’s desire to not listen to Malcolm X rather than directly confronting this emotion, something else was permitted to happen. I knew I did not want to play the particular script where the teacher confronts the
students in a high moral tone, and somehow the pressure of the moment pushed me and
the class somewhere else. I decided not to tell my students how they should feel when
approaching an icon of American culture and attempted to redirect how they did feel, and
somehow several of the themes that Malcolm X pointed to in his writing resurfaced in the
writing of my students.

The students read the rest of their freewrites and everyone listened under a spell
of what appeared to me to be a productive and attentive silence. We never had an official
class discussion of Malcolm’s piece, but students throughout the quarter referred back to
the essay. Somehow this essay and the student’s grandmother reverberated throughout the
quarter, and I believe this occurred because this student demonstrated an awe-inspiring
willingness to share a personal moment from his family life with his classmates. His
writing forged a way outside of either justifying his initial emotional response or insisting
on a perspective that diminished that emotion.

When I look at this story from the perspective of bell hooks, I feel compelled to
comment upon the spiritual dimension of her thought and writing. For a long time it was
easy for me to read bell hooks and focus solely on the political dimension of her project,
but her fight against domination and her use of the term liberation both contain a deeply
spiritual resonance. I now feel that it is a mistake to interact with her work on a material
and political plane and to dismiss the spiritual, Buddhist, inspired dimension of her work.
I remember feeling a deep contradiction between hooks’ fierce emotional energy
surrounding her call to eradicate domination because I could not yet conceive that this
battle was a personal one that existed within the individual as much as it was a political
one occurring in the material world. When one is unable to see this connection, hooks
arguments feel very much like a call for the forces of rhetorical good to slay the forces of rhetorical evil on the battlefield of the classroom. Somehow the repositioning of my students in their freewrites allowed them to search for moments where they thought, spoke, and lived in a position that had some emotional connections to Malcolm X when he wrote about his experiences in prison. Connecting on this emotional plane can sometimes place one in a position that feels beyond words.

When I look at this story through the lens of Ira Shor, I see a connection between his inspiration surrounding Student Protest Rights and my topic for the in-class freewrite in that both of these ideas sprang from a classroom tension that the teacher was deeply aware of but resisted bringing to a quick resolution. The ability to play the role of the teacher and to stand in front of a class at moments of genuine confusion and allow this moment to shine through rather than quickly hide behind gestures of authority and power is a rare event. It is not something that I do often, or do willingly. It is an event that can not really be planned. Such behavior is also pointed to by Lad Tobin in his description of specific moments during the student teacher writing conference. I believe that this willingness to confront confusion is something that we teachers often ask of our students but less often demonstrate ourselves in front of them. When we are able to undergo this fear and confusion in front of our students and model a constructive way to confront it, we reposition ourselves as students, as learners, and argue in a dramatic fashion to do as I do, not just as I say.

Questions surrounding how teachers present rhetorical challenges to students and how teachers react to rhetorical challenges from students are important to me because my own experiences while learning how to improve my writing abilities have been so
personally and emotionally charged. My writing abilities have developed while my political and social views have been challenged and transformed. The personal and the political have been bound together while I have explored and continue to explore my writing process and the writing activities of my students. The connection between the personal and the political has also been a longstanding theme within the process movement of rhetoric and composition studies. In “Radical to Many in the Educational Establishment: The Writing Process Movement after the Hurricanes,” Robert Yagelski reviews the reissue of three well known books in the field of rhetoric and composition: Peter Elbow’s *Writing Without Teachers*, Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and Donald Murray’s *A Writer Teaches Writing*. In this article, Yagelski argues that there is an implicit connection between the goals of the early writers of the process movement and the pedagogy of Paulo Freire. Where Hairston sees the focus on student issues and texts as a pedagogic technique in opposition to pedagogic approaches that promote specific social agendas, Yagelski argues that a focus on student issues and texts was and remains part of a pedagogic approach that has a specific social agenda. For Yagelski, focusing on student issues and texts is part of a political agenda that promotes an exploration of the connections between the personal and the political.

In “Politicizing the Personal: Frederick Douglass, Richard Wright, and Some Thoughts on the Limits of Critical Literacy,” Timothy Barnett provides an in depth look into his classroom, his goals, and his students’ reaction to his pedagogy. Barnett positions himself as a critical pedagogue interested in the full range of associations between the personal and the political:
For the viewpoint of critical pedagogy, then, personal writing can help students understand personal lives as linked to and reflective of social and political norms. However, for its part, critical pedagogy often does not fully acknowledge compositionists’ concern that examining the personal as a political, social artifact can be risky for students and instructors. Critical pedagogues do address the links between the personal and social critique but fail to fully explore a critical pedagogy tied to personal experience. (356)

Barnett explains how he introduces the literacy narratives of Frederick Douglass and Richard Wright in order to make a case for how learning to write can deeply transform one’s life. He acknowledges that the transformations that Douglass and Wright describe are very intense and come with great risks. Douglass writes of considering suicide; Wright describes wondering whether or not numbing his emotions with sex and alcohol might have been preferable to confronting the facts that his education brought to him. Barnett describes students making revelations about their personal lives to the class that made him personally uncomfortable and ended his essay asking for advice on how to proceed with his project. In his comment on “Politicizing the Personal: Frederick Douglass, Richard Wright, and Some Thoughts on the Limits of Critical Literacy,” Donald C. Jones wrote an encouraging appraisal of Barnett’s article and provided five suggestions to teachers interested in his project. His second suggestion feels very much like an endorsement of my oblique rhetorical strategy:

However, in required courses, like FYC, most students do not have this
option, so they should not be forced to study one sensitive issue for fifteen weeks. Students instead can be encouraged to approach these issues indirectly through such broader topics as family, education, and literacy itself. With this indirect approach, a broad topic, such as family, can lead students to sensitive issues, but they will have more of an individual choice if (and to what degree) they want to pursue these concerns. (402)

Jones’ advice and Burnett’s article seem to indicate that there are teachers, researchers, and practitioners in the field thinking about oblique rhetorical challenges and how to use them to effectively help students in the writing classroom. My analysis of Tobin, Shor, and hooks as well as how I attempt to present their ideas into my classroom is part of this exploration. More research will be necessary in order to develop a fuller understanding of the opportunities and limitations such an approach offers.
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