

## Chapter Two

---

# Paulo Freire's "Multiple Channels of Communication"

*Only those who have power can decide what constitutes intellectualism.*<sup>1</sup>

—Paulo Freire

One way to understand why Composition has promoted *writing* as an almost exclusive way of knowing is to examine Paulo Freire's reception in our field, especially how only select portions of Freire's praxis have been privileged in our discussions of him. In the United States, applications of Paulo Freire's liberatory teaching have, for the most part, emphasized his problematizing approach, his "desocialization" of students. He helps students become critically conscious of their position in the larger socioeconomic condition so that they can become subjects, rather than objects, of their education, and so they have the potential to name and transform the world.

Compositionists seem less aware or less interested in Freire's insistence on what he called "the use of multiple channels of communication" (1993, 49), which took advantage of different people's aural, spatial, visual, and kinesthetic ways of knowing to help them problematize the "codifications" in his culture circles (42–45).

Since the people with whom Freire was working were illiterate, he had to rely at least initially on visual images, oral discussions, and other non-written modes. These alternate pathways, however, invited learner

participation. They allowed people to succeed using a format with which they had confidence. Not only did these techniques develop students' political consciousness, they also explicitly and implicitly acknowledged and supported multiple ways of knowing. He used these in his radical teaching to challenge traditional linguistic-based primers, as well as their conventional assumptions regarding word-based knowledge making.

The "multiple channel" aspect of his praxis has not been foregrounded in Composition perhaps because we are unreflective of our own investment in, and privileging of, the word-based teaching practices discussed in the last chapter, even some that purport to be adaptations of Freire's conscientization. Even as we promote the dialectical problematizing of other socially constructed assumptions, we seem unaware of our own overuse of one channel of communication—writing—as a way of knowing.

Examining Paulo Freire's status in our field will provide a lens through which we can study Composition's focus on social issues as subject, as well as on the over-dependence on written words as heuristics. The story of what we have done with Freire's work parallels the story of what we have done with other people's work (Britton, Martin, Vygotsky, Emig), whose inclusive theories about learning have been appropriated to support a limited view of language, and to discourage alternate symbol systems. By shifting the focus to equally important aspects of Freire's praxis, ones that have not been taken up with the same zeal, I want to argue that an especially important social injustice Freire addressed, which many of his imitators have not, is the socially constructed privileging of writing as a way of knowing.

The following discussion of Freire is not presented in binary opposition to other interpretations, but rather as a supplement to them. In fact, part of my argument is a critique of critiques and false oppositions, and a plea for nuanced "both/and" theorizing, which can tolerate "contradictions." Contradictions, after all, force the dialectical inquiry crucial to the critical theory most of us claim to promote.<sup>2</sup>

Freire not only melded theory and practice in a way that is not done enough even among his most ardent supporters, and hardly at all in the academy. He studied thinking processes and privileged intellectual pathways that went beyond written, even beyond oral-based, ways of knowing. He theorized them and practiced them. And then, because self-reflection was a basic tenet of his praxis, he retheorized his approach, using self-critique in a way that kept him open to change. His interdisciplinary background, also rare in our discipline-strict academy, made him aware of, and curious about, a wide variety of philosophical, epistemological, and linguistic theories that informed, and then reformed, his self-reflective praxis. By revisiting Freire's tapestry of work, by examining different threads, we can ask different questions about the frame of our own assumptions.

## Freire's Reception

*I didn't invent a method, or a theory, or a program, or a system, or a pedagogy, or a philosophy. It is people who put names to things.*

—Paulo Freire<sup>3</sup>

In the last thirty years, Paulo Freire's work with illiterate adults in Brazil and Chile has been praised, modeled, analyzed, and critiqued in books, essays, and articles too numerous to recount, and only a fraction of which appear in the Works Cited section of this book. Following his death in 1997, there were a number of commemorative books and journal volumes: one in *JAC: A Journal of Composition Theory*; two issues of *Convergence* (1998); two 1999 Boynton/Cook collections of essays, edited by Ira Shor and Caroline Pari, on using Freirean principles in teaching (*Education Is Politics: Critical Teaching Across Differences, K-12*, and *Critical Literacy in Action: Writing Words, Changing Worlds*), and a number of websites devoted to Freire and his work. As Rosa-María Torres points out, 30,000 copies of Freire's last book, *Pedagogy of Autonomy* (1997) "sold out in a few days" (111).

Why, in the twenty-first century, should we study Freire's praxis? One reason is that his illiterate students learned very quickly. Freire pointed out that in less than two months, people who previously could not read would be "writing notes and simple letters and discussing problems of local and national interest" (1993, 53). His work has influenced and inspired thousands of teachers all over the world. As Torres writes in the tribute issue of *Convergence*:

Paulo, the great communicator, the great inspirer, helped millions of people discover and bring to the surface the best in themselves: their human, generous, compassionate side; the inner drive to become a volunteer, an inventor, a hero, a revolutionary. (114)

Because of Freire's success, many have attempted to adapt selected aspects of his teaching. And these adaptations have themselves been criticized, as has Freire's work itself. In foregrounding Freire's attention to "multiple channels of communication," I risk the judgment that I am appropriating his ideas, misrepresenting his purposes, or ignoring his critique of what he called "the capitalist production mode" (Torres 1998, 109).<sup>4</sup> Part of our culture's language/thought frame is both a dichotomy and a hierarchy, with an inescapable logic that goes like this: "This is a privileging of Freire's use of multiple channels. It must therefore ignore his overall cultural critique." I am guilty of a similarly dichotomous thought when I critique those who focus on Freire's cultural critique but do not foreground his multisensory teaching. However, Freire's use of multi-modal approaches was *also* a demonstrated cultural critique. Even those who have focused on his "method," or those who have condemned others' focus on "method," have not stressed the

importance of Freire's theorized decision to use these approaches as a concomitant representation of his theory.

Educators in the United States have had only limited success with trying to "import" what Freire did, because as Freire points out, people often do not reinvent his approaches, only copy them. Since copying does not involve the rethinking, dialectic, and self-reflectiveness with which Freire reinvented his own work, Freirean imitators who do not self-critique are not adopting what may be the most crucial aspect of Freire's work. As Freire put it, "In order to follow me, it is essential not to follow me."<sup>5</sup>

What Freire did first was study the students themselves and to listen to them. Such a study would discover that the context for teaching—the students, the teachers, the circumstances, everything—is different from what Freire encountered and would therefore have to be reinvented. Therefore, any pedagogy is doomed that does not look at students anew. Besides failing to reinvent their own practice, "Freirian tourists" [his phrase, 1997, 308] have focused on problem-posing, and even occasionally on oral problem-posing, but that's not enough. They have especially ignored the multi-dimensional nature of Freire's work.

Many educators are familiar with Freire's critique of "the banking model" of education, which exposed the undemocratic assumptions supporting oppressive literacy programs and the societies that produced them. Many also use discussion to promote critical consciousness. They seem less aware of Freire's emphasis on an educational process that "requires multiple techniques to achieve a particular goal" (1997, 304–305). While there are many reasons to keep Freire's work at the center of any serious literacy reform, the one that interests me here is one that has been undertheorized: his use of what he called "the use of multiple channels of communication" (1993, 49).

## **The Multiple Channels**

Freire's praxis depended on these multiple channels and techniques, which may have greatly influenced his students' success in ways that have not been fully realized in thirty years of Freirean adaptations. He used these in his radical teaching to challenge traditional linguistic-based primers as well as their users' tacit assumptions regarding knowledge making. Freire used multi-dimensional representations or "channels of communication" to help students gain perspective on "existential situations": pictures, slides, or large posters; "group debate"; "oral synthesis"; dialogue, songs, or physical objects themselves (1993, 42–54). While Freire's promotion of critical consciousness was radical and liberating, his radical and liberating pedagogy itself demonstrated

critique. His techniques were not add-ons, not situated below theory, as they often are in academia today. Freire's techniques and Freire's social activism were of a piece.

However, Freire's techniques, especially the multi-dimensional nature of them, have been undertheorized. Overall, as Paul Taylor has observed, "little attention has actually been given to the Culture Circles and the content of Freire's method."<sup>6</sup> Taylor asks, "If Freire's method actually works, why does it work?" (1993, 82). And Henry Giroux, in his Introduction to *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World*, argues that "the relevance of the notion of pedagogy as part of a critical theory of education is either undertheorized or merely forgotten" (Freire 1987, 18).

Perhaps because of his varied interests and interdisciplinary background (see Taylor and Elias), Freire had a deep interest in "the way they [the people] construct their thought" (1973, 103). Over and over, Freire emphasized that *how* people made meaning should be respected: "For the notion of literacy to become meaningful it has to be situated within a theory of cultural production and *viewed as an integral part of the way in which people produce, transform, and reproduce meaning*" (my emphasis, 1993, 142).

Freire had a "both/and" view of theory and practice. For example, problem-posing, dialogic approaches foster critical consciousness and provide what Freire called the "active educational method [that] helps a person become consciously aware of his [or her] context and his condition as a human being as Subject . . ." (1993, 56). Not only do the "existential situations" Freire used in his classes develop students' political consciousness, they also explicitly and implicitly acknowledge and support multiple ways of knowing. While Compositionists should continue to privilege the critical consciousness so important to Freire's praxis, we should also problematize our own print-dependent, and possibly oppressive, classroom activities.

## Freire's Response to Critique

In his response to critiques of his work, and to claims that pedagogies purporting to be Freirean-based are not always successful in North America, Freire says that the "written form" has been "bureaucratized" in North American schools:

This is a fundamental way in which schools in North America maintain and expand an antidemocratic system—through distancing students from a frozen written word and therefore discouraging them from thinking of themselves as actors in history. Language is first and

foremost oral. We don't begin with writing. History did not begin in a written form, but in words and actions. (1997, 323)

For Freire, who was both a reformer and a teacher, epistemology was as crucial as literacy. How did people come to know? How could he engage the students? Unlike many theorists today, Freire did focus on teaching itself, especially on how to work with and develop what students could already do: "Thus what challenges me is not so much how to facilitate the reading of various sounds of the language; but *how to develop the capacity that human beings have to know*" (my emphasis, 1997, 305).

Freire believed strongly in the role talk and dialogue play in coming to know. In her tribute to Freire, Ann Berthoff points out that "'the pedagogy of knowing' is Freire's phrase, not mine, and that without that idea, 'the pedagogy of the oppressed' is a sterile slogan" (1997, 308). In a chapter he wrote with Donaldo Macedo, "Adult Literacy and Popular Libraries," Freire called for public libraries to be more than "a silent depository of books . . ." (45). He recommended that older residents of rural areas, as well as artisans and poets, be interviewed on tape, their stories becoming just as much a part of library resources as are books.

This respect for the oral was also reflected in the way he chose to present his views. He used talk and dialectic even in his published texts. As Paul Taylor points out (1993, 31), Freire composed three "talked books": *A Pedagogy for Liberation: Dialogues on Transforming Education* (1987); *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World* (1987); and *Learning to Question: A Pedagogy of Liberation* (1989). Taylor says these talked books are an opportunity for Freire "to repeat his view that literacy acquisition should be in the natural language of the people and not in the dominant language of the educator or of the cultural invader" (32).

These transcriptions of dialogue also demonstrate Freire's endorsement of the dialogic. Even in books that are not reproductions of live dialogue, the importance of dialogue is evident. In *Mentoring the Mentor: A Critical Dialogue with Paulo Freire*, Freire responds in the final chapter to issues raised in fifteen previous chapters by a variety of teacher/scholars. He talks about the importance of orality and dialogue as heuristics, as ways of *coming to know*. It is worth quoting at length here because in addressing complaints that his methods do not "work" in the United States, Freire critiques what he sees as an overemphasis on writing as the primary tool used in teaching:

For example, when Donaldo Macedo and I are talking in a dialogue we both become more creative. In part this is because of our background as oral individuals who were not socialized in the written text only. What would be really interesting and important is if a society,

through school, when reaching the graphic moment—the written form—would not turn it so as to bureaucratize it. In other words, when society which is by nature oral, reaches the written stage, it should not freeze orality by bureaucratizing it. Orality requires solidarity with the Other. Orality is dialogical by its very nature to the extent that you cannot do it individualistically. Thus the challenge for schools is not to kill those values of solidarity that lead to democratic space through a process that freezes the required dialogical nature of orality through the individualistic apprehension of reading and writing. This is really fundamental. *Students who are extremely conversant in orality must therefore never be reduced to one form of thinking that is linear and individualistic. Ironically, schools do this all the time, reducing students to a nonoral and linear form of reading and thinking.* (my emphasis, 1997, 322–23)

Freire deliberately worked with dialogue, even in his published texts, in order to foreground the importance of talk and of oral, dynamic, ongoing challenge to ideas. The live dialectic demonstrates Freire's theory: "The text of this conversation is an example of how we think in all of these dimensions" (329).

### **"Tactical, Technical, Methodological Ways"**

Freire experimented with these different dimensions and urged teachers to look beyond conventional pedagogies and to realize that a teacher's language can intimidate and silence students. Teachers should acknowledge this power, Freire says, and should therefore cultivate ways of listening to students' "silenced voices." Then, teachers could "begin to look for ways—*tactical, technical, methodological ways*—that could facilitate the process of reading the silenced word that is in a close relationship with the lived world of the students" (my emphasis, 1997, 306–307 ).

Freire used "tactical, technical, methodological ways" in his teaching. Several accounts of Freire's pedagogy print the ten "codifications" or "visual representations" of life in the peasants' world. These visualizations sparked discussions and dialogue, tapping into and developing students' visual and oral literacies. However, as Deborah Barndt has pointed out, Freire's codifications were not limited to the pictures and slides. They involved "photographs, slides, posters, reading texts, newspapers, recorded interviews, dramatizations, etc." (63). In her teaching in Lima, Peru and Toronto, Canada, Barndt uses sociodramas, cartoons, music, soap operas, photo-novels, and three-dimensional objects (such as tomatoes) as codes most appropriate to the cultural roots of her students.

As Freire explains in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, the codifications could take many forms, or what Freire called "channels"—the visual, tactile, auditive, or they could be combinations of channels, which he called "compound codifications":

Once the breakdown of the thematics is complete, there follows the stage of its "codification": *choosing the best channel of communication* for each theme and its representation. A codification may be simple or compound. The former utilizes *either the visual (pictorial or graphic), the tactile, or the auditive channel; the latter utilizes various channels*. The selection of the pictorial or graphic channel depends not only on the material to be codified, but also on whether or not the individuals with whom one wishes to communicate are literate. (my emphasis, 1973, 114–15)

Always the teacher who uses multiple pathways even to explain the need for multiple pathways, Freire follows the above prose explanation with an outline in footnote 38 at the bottom of the page:

<sup>38</sup> CODIFICATION

a) Simple:

visual channel  
 pictorial  
 graphic  
 tactile channel  
 auditive channel

b) Compound: simultaneity of channels. (115)

Again and again, however, these alternate inroads to thinking are not highlighted in discussions of Freire's work.

## Cultural Work Outside and Inside the Classroom

With some exceptions, those teacher/scholars who cite Freire as an influence emphasize his promotion of critical consciousness. Or they begin by describing his practice, only to imply its secondary position focusing on what they view as the more important cultural work to be done *outside* the classroom. Those who do call for more attention to his practice mostly stress only one aspect of it: the use of the oral discussions in the Culture Circles.

A few teacher/scholars (e.g., Nan Alsasser and Vera John-Steiner, Ira Shor, Nancy Schneidewind, Nina Wallerstein) have seriously addressed the participatory and fully interactive approaches called for in Freire's work. These "multiple channels" tap into the aural, spatial, visual, and kinesthetic ways of knowing used by different people.<sup>7</sup>

In their adaptation of Freirean codification, Nina Wallerstein and Edward Bernstein have their students conduct on-site interviews with



hospital patients and jail residents. Then the students produce other multisensory codes—songs, slides, collages, and videos—to promote dialogue about the social issues the patients and inmates must contend with: alcoholism, substance abuse, and low wages (60). In their summary of what they call Freire's "three-stage methodology," however, Wallerstein and Bernstein emphasize "listening," "participatory dialogue," and "action or positive change." They do not draw attention to the multi-dimensional nature of the students' work.

Freire's attention to demonstrated theory, his respect for practice, especially multi-dimensional practice, exceeds that of some of his most ardent supporters. In spite of Freire's "both/and" philosophy of *praxis*, a word that fuses theory and practice, some of Freire's promoters seem to reveal an "either/or" conception of them. They privilege his theory, foregrounding the non-traditional subject matter and beyond-the-classroom social activism inherent in Freire's *praxis*. Even those who begin by pointing to Freire's blending of theory and practice soon complain that Freire's work has been "reduced" to discussions of practice, technique, and method. Like the same poles of a magnet, theory and practice cannot seem to be placed next to each other for long as equals in academic writing. They repel and realign every time, into a hierarchy, with theory always on top.

### The Theory/Practice Hierarchy

This troublesome separation of theory and practice in the academy, especially the reverence for theory and dismissal of practice, shows itself in the most unexpected places. More than most teacher/scholars, Ira Shor has stressed the importance of Freire's classroom practice. In an essay called "Education Is Politics," Shor argues that a crucial part of "a Freirean class" involves attention to "the learning process itself" (in McLaren and Leonard 1993, 25). He reminds us that "Freire insists on consistency between the democratic values of this critical pedagogy and its classroom practices" (27). In fact, says Shor, "*the whole activity of education is political in nature*" (Shor's emphasis, 27). Inseparable from classroom practice, and inseparable from politics, as Shor points out, is "the punitive attitude of the curriculum towards everyday speech and non-standard English spoken by students" (27).

I agree with Shor, as he argues in *Freire for the Classroom*, that a "both/and" approach to solving inequalities is needed:

Teacher burnout and student resistance are social problems of an unequal system and cannot be *fully* addressed by teacher-education reforms or by classroom remedies *alone*. Participatory and critical

pedagogy coupled with egalitarian policies in school and society can *holistically* address the education crisis. (his emphases, 1987, 13)

Social inequalities outside the classroom do impact, in fact, *cause* many social inequalities within the classroom (for example, the resources available in rich school districts versus the lack of sufficient resources in poor ones; access to technology in some schools and not in others; high expectations of students in some schools and not in others, etc.).

Even Shor, however, who more than most scholars promotes attention to practice-as-politics, especially in his earlier work, seems in his more recent writing to view practice as less important, after all, than other social inequalities. In his early *Critical Teaching and Everyday Life* (1980), Shor writes,

We have little choice but to situate liberatory teaching in the anti-liberatory field conditioning of the classroom. This kind of project is no different from other exercises in social change, which begin from the concrete reality they are destined to negate. (269)

In his teaching, Shor uses concrete objects and a variety of multi-sensory strategies to problematize social conditions. In his early work on Freire, Shor describes a number of approaches that use drama, mime, "visual puzzles," grids, concentric circles, and of course his most famous concrete object—a real hamburger—to help students conceptualize abstract ideas. In his later work, however, although Shor continues to say that pedagogy is important, more and more he emphasizes the theorizing of external social issues. Even as he celebrates pedagogy in this early work, he seems to see it on a lower, or separate, rung, than social concerns: "I have characterized learning as a broad social problem rather than as a narrow pedagogical or personal one" (269).

However, pedagogical problems are not always "narrow" and are always already social. As I think Shor would agree, from the moment a teacher walks into a classroom, her "practical method" already reveals itself as accepting or challenging conventional notions regarding ways of knowing. The explicit or implicit belief that facility with *written* language is the most important indicator of sophisticated thinking is itself a hegemonic assumption that results in unequal treatment of people, especially in classrooms, where that belief dictates conventional text-based practices. *At the same time* we problematize issues external to the classroom, we should problematize issues *within* the classroom regarding who is being oppressed—and whose interests are being served—by unproblematized practical methods that are almost completely print-based.

Another example of this subtle separation of intention and method appears in Shor's Preface to *Education Is Politics* ("The River of Reform"). Here he recommends a "bottom-up" reform that "contains multicul-

tural voices speaking for social justice and alternative methods" (vii). Many issues of social justice, of course, reside outside the immediate classroom environment, as Shor seems to imply by separating the phrases "social justice" and "alternative methods." However, using radically alternative methods in the class does more than speak for social justice. Using all ways of knowing, not just written-language-based ones, promotes and enacts a challenge to social injustices in the schoolroom so ingrained that even the best intentioned teacher/scholars may not see them.

In his later writings, when Shor discusses Freire's participatory classroom, he emphasizes student talk and student writing, not the other channels of communication Freire and his students used. Nor does he emphasize the harm done by written-word-based pedagogies to students whose primary ways of knowing are spatial, aural, or kinesthetic. In Shor's description of critical consciousness, he argues that Freirean desocialization would challenge society's myths that promote "racism, sexism, class bias, homophobia, a fascination with the rich and powerful, hero-worship, excess consumerism, runaway individualism, militarism, and national chauvinism" (McLaren and Leonard 1993, 32-33). Not mentioned are those who make knowledge in ways unfamiliar to their English or writing teachers. In Shor's list of Freirean pedagogical values, he says that a multicultural pedagogy would recognize "the various racial, ethnic, regional, age-based, and sexual cultures in society." Such teaching would be "balanced for gender, race, and class" (34). Not mentioned even in this otherwise comprehensive view of society's prejudices is the bias society has regarding ways of knowing. Word-based teaching is the dominant one in school cultures. Further, it may be that graphic, spatial, aural, kinesthetic, or other ways of knowing are especially under-used in writing classes because of the ways of knowing preferred by those who teach those classes.

I focus here on Shor because it is he who says the most about challenging conventional assumptions. He says the most about Freire's pedagogy emphasizing student writing and student talk. However, even Shor's comprehensive description of Freire's pedagogical values does not stress Freire's respect for learning in ways other than using words. If even Shor can leave that bias off his lists, what does that suggest about the teaching practices of those less sensitive to the power of deep-seated, unconscious cultural myths?

Oddly enough, even Henry Giroux may be inadvertently revealing an internalized dichotomy between theory and practice, and a privileging of theory over practice when he writes that Freire's work has been "appropriated by academic, adult educators, and others who inhabit the ideology of the West in ways that often reduce it to a pedagogical technique or method" (1993, 177). Given Giroux's promotion of the role of teaching in other writings, it is perhaps unfair to overly critique

this decontextualized quotation. And he is no doubt correct that many people claim to be using a Freirean-influenced pedagogy simply because they pose questions to their students and allow discussions in their class. However, Giroux's use of the phrase "reduce it to a pedagogical technique or method," reveals that even one of pedagogy's most ardent supporters may harbor an estimation of method/technique that places it distinctly below "theory."

In "Paulo Freire's Radical Democratic Humanism," also in the McLaren and Leonard collection, Stanley Aronowitz also seems to at once separate theory and pedagogy, privileging the former and disrespecting the latter. He criticizes those who use and speak of Freire's work "as a 'teaching' method rather than a philosophical or social theory" (8). Granted, part of Aronowitz's point is that Freire's pedagogy was driven by his philosophy and social theory. However, the way "teaching method" is juxtaposed to "philosophical or social theory" suggests a disdain for "method," as do the scare quotes surrounding *teaching* but not *theory*.

In her Afterword to *Academic Discourse and Critical Consciousness*, Patricia Bizzell has commented on Composition's recent turn toward research and scholarship: "Now our professionalization has legitimated much research that has no immediate classroom application, . . ." (281). And Greg Myers candidly admits in "Reality, Consensus, and Reform, . . ." that even as he critiques the practices of Kenneth Bruffee, Peter Elbow, and Ken Macrorie, "I find I have no suggestions for assignments that are as innovative as those of the authors I am criticizing. But that is partly because what I have to suggest is not a method but a stance toward one's teaching" (169). While I agree with Myers that stance determines all else, it is disappointing that he does not consider "method" important enough to take a stab at putting his insightful critique into practice, of trying to design theoretically informed assignments or to describe what students actually do in his classes.

## The Need for Confidence in Writing

Related to Freire's use of multiple, alternate routes to learning, is his sense that if people are to learn, if they are to connect with what is going on in the classroom, they must have confidence in themselves. Freire credits his first wife, Elza, whom Taylor says was a nursery school teacher who inspired Freire to become a teacher in the first place (19), with pointing out to him the role confidence plays in learning. In *Education for Critical Consciousness*, Freire relates how people who were illiterate one day were writing "words with complex phonemes" several days later. In a footnote explaining why this happened, Freire writes,

Interestingly enough, as a rule the illiterates wrote confidently and legibly, largely overcoming the natural indecisiveness of beginners. Elza Freire thinks this may be due to the fact that these persons, beginning with the discussion of the anthropological concept of culture, *discovered themselves to be more fully human, thereby acquiring an increasing emotional confidence in their learning which was reflected in their motor activity.* (my emphasis, 1993, 55)

While Elza Freire may have been right that the preceding discussion of culture may have helped the peasants see themselves as more “fully human,” it may also be that by tapping into a variety of intellectual pathways—the visual, the aural, the kinesthetic—Freire was able to make all the people feel confident at least some of the time because at least some of the time each person’s individual way of knowing was foregrounded. When the culture circle group worked with discovery cards, “the group (*not* the coordinator) begins to carry out oral synthesis” (Freire’s emphasis, *Education for Critical Consciousness*, 55). No doubt those with good speaking skills shone during the frequent discussions. In a footnote describing his use of oral synthesis, Freire cites Gilson Amado’s comment that “there is no such thing as oral illiteracy” (54). By using the oral debates to tap into what the students already knew, Freire helped them find confidence: “Many participants during these debates affirm happily and self-confidently that they are not being shown ‘anything new, just remembering’” (47).

When the codification slides were projected, others may have been gifted at noticing things up on the screen. As Paul Taylor observes, there was a high level of “pictorial literacy” required to read some of the codifications (96). In her account of Freire’s use of the pictures, Cynthia Brown points out that “By the time the group had reached this tenth picture, participants had regained enormous confidence in themselves, pride in their culture, and desire to learn to read” (225).

Early in my teaching career, I learned the importance confidence plays in student learning. My first teaching position was in a high school, where I taught both English and Driver Education. Instructing people to drive taught me a lot about teaching. Many of the students I taught were very hesitant, very scared beginners. They drove very, very slowly, and they took an excruciatingly long time sitting at stop signs, peering up and down the street for oncoming cars, and then peering up and down again just to make sure. By the time they actually moved their foot off the brake and placed it on the gas pedal, they—or usually I—would have to brake again because in the time they took to step on the gas, cars were now approaching.

I knew that if I didn’t want to spend the rest of my life sitting at an intersection, I needed to find a way to help new drivers speed up their process of checking for traffic and accelerating. Stepping on the gas and

moving into traffic requires a certain amount of confidence. Drivers need to make careful but quick decisions and then act on them. Beginning drivers do not respond well to picky criticism (as much as they might need it). And simply telling them to hurry up and pull out is not advice to give if one values one's own life. So I'd take raw beginners to safe areas where they could gradually build their skills and confidence. Wide, deserted streets in the suburbs. Big empty parking lots. Cemeteries. I let them get used to the feel of the gas pedal and the brake until they could start and stop smoothly, without giving the rest of us whiplash.

Instead of harping on what they were doing wrong ("Don't screech the brakes each time you stop. Don't keep alternating your right and left foot on the brake. Don't turn on the windshield wipers when you mean to signal right"), I'd try to find one small thing for which to praise them: "You're holding the steering wheel very nicely now." "You're looking up and down the street very thoroughly." "It's good you stopped completely for that stop sign." Gradually, I found I could validate more substantial progress: "You signaled that turn at a good spot." "Nice smooth stop this time." "Good recovery on that right turn." It was only by slowly gaining confidence in themselves as drivers that the most timid beginners were able to make informed but quick decisions pulling out of intersections, making left turns, or changing lanes. They gained confidence for the more complex maneuvers by building on the simple ones they could already do.

The social dimension of writing theory and practice is a given. But one aspect of that social dimension that is not taken seriously enough is respect for what learners already know and can already do. We may be so intent on problematizing social dimensions outside the classroom that we cannot see the social dimension of our own epistemological assumptions. In Freire's classes, which tapped into "multiple channels of communication," students saw themselves as already knowing something, as already capable of learning. Freire tapped into so many ways of knowing that everyone at some point must have felt validated and confident. This is no small thing. How much of our success in our career today is due to our confidence as learners? to the validation we received as makers of knowledge? Composition specialists today were most likely yesterday's linguistically talented students moving up in a linguistocentric school system that privileged our way of knowing. But what if schools used only math or only drawing or only dance as a way of knowing? How would our word-loving brains have reacted? Would we have had the success in school and the confidence in ourselves we needed to seek higher degrees? to pour our energies into this language-loving discipline?

Many professors today proudly announce their own "rigor" and lament a "lowering of standards" on the part of their colleagues. In this atmosphere, it may be risky for professors, especially untenured ones,

to broach the subject of student confidence in departmental discussions of teaching (in the unlikely event such discussions take place) because in our eager-to-essentialize culture, talking about confidence can quickly be constructed as “patronizing” students. Perhaps women need to use even more care than do men in articulating the importance confidence plays in learning because of the facile construction—and ultimate dismissal—of them as “nurturers.” (See Eileen E. Schell’s *Gypsy Academics and Mother-Teachers*.) Therefore, even professors who might see the importance confidence plays in knowledge making are constrained from promoting it publicly by deep-seated institutional prejudices against practice, against talk about practice, and perhaps even against promotion of student success.<sup>8</sup>

Paul Taylor is correct in his assertion that this concept, the importance of confidence in learning, is neither new nor original with Freire, who may have picked it up from John Dewey. But confidence may have had special meaning for Freire. Taylor cites O’Neill and Jarez and Hernandez Pico as suggesting that as a boy, Freire “was considered by some of his teachers to be mentally retarded” (14). If that is even partly true, Freire as a student must have known firsthand what it was like to have teachers hold insultingly low expectations. He may have known about the importance of confidence in ways not available to those used to having their linguistic talents privileged in traditional school methodologies. In *Talking Back*, bell hooks has also pointed to confidence as one of the “less obvious” obstacles students need to overcome if they are to invest the time and effort needed to write and revise their work. The opposite is also true: If students lack confidence and become completely discouraged, they will not engage.

The importance of confidence to learning, writing, and revising is also consistent with Robert Parker’s and Vera Goodkin’s argument that writers need some modicum of confidence that they will succeed if they are to embark on the process of reading, thinking, revising, and editing that good writing demands:

To a considerable extent, far more than most teachers tend to believe, the quality of students’ performance in various areas of the curriculum is directly tied to their views of themselves as learner/performers in that activity or discipline. (1987, 19)

Elza Freire’s view of confidence, Parker and Goodkin’s endorsement of it as necessary for student success, and bell hooks’ view of confidence as a crucial element in the revising process, are all related to a point Freire makes in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* regarding what he calls “self-depreciation”:

Self-depreciation is another characteristic of the oppressed, which derives from their internalization of the opinion the oppressors hold of them. So often do they hear that they are good for nothing, know

nothing, and are incapable of learning anything—that they are sick, lazy, and unproductive—that in the end they become convinced of their own unfitness. (49)

If students receive the spoken or unspoken message that their way of knowing is less than adequate, they may not have the heart to continue their education. Mina Shaughnessy knew that lack of confidence could fuel students' "fears that writing will not only expose but magnify [their] inadequacies." She also knew that writing "is, above all, an act of confidence, an assertion of the importance of what has gone on inside the writer . . ." (1977, 85). Amidst all the grandstanding that goes on today regarding "rigor" and "standards," it may be difficult to remember the role confidence plays in learning. Those who insist on thinking of everything in binary terms may say, "But we must have tough standards. We shouldn't patronize students by praising them for below standard work. We must keep expectations high." As this book will demonstrate, I have much to say about expectations, and keeping them high is one of the most important elements of teaching. And we can still have "tough standards," though that phrase by itself is meaningless without specific comparisons and examples of what those "tough standards" entail.

In an institution where I used to teach, one professor routinely pointed with pride to his place on the computerized grade rankings published by the institution each year. He gave the lowest grades in the college, so he was always at the bottom of the list, which he construed as *prima facie* evidence that he had the "highest standards." As far as I know, he did not discuss "standards" other than to announce that he had the highest ones. Never on the table for discussion were his specific expectations, assignments, exams, assessment criteria, or assumptions about what constituted knowledge or intellectual growth. I suspect that any mention of the role confidence plays in learning would have been dismissed as a capitulation to a "lowering of standards," without the fuss and bother of trying to define what they might be.

### **"Co-intentional" Learning**

Teachers cannot simply *tell* students to be confident. Unless education is what Freire describes in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* as "co-intentional," (56), with teachers learning from students and vice versa, students will rightly see empty praise as mere patronizing. The confidence students need must come from seeing themselves and their teachers as contributors and learners. Coming to know is an active, challenging process



that requires self-awareness and metacognition. Anne E. Berthoff points out in her foreword to *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World*: "Peasants and teacher are engaged in dialogic action, an active exchange from which meanings emerge and *are seen to emerge*: it is central to Paulo Freire's pedagogy that learners are empowered by the knowledge that they are learners" (her emphasis, xiv). However, meanings cannot be "seen to emerge" without a live process: a dialogic atmosphere that cannot be faked. As Freire said, "It is not only a matter of teaching them, but also of learning from them" (1993, 123). Students and teachers must be "co-intentional" (1973, 56) learners, with problems posed to both groups: "The flow is in both directions" (1993, 125).

This co-intentional relationship is similar to the "horizontal relationship between persons," Freire discusses in *Education for Critical Consciousness* (45). Learning, dialectic, and challenge are all necessary for students *and* teachers, which is more likely to happen when teachers respect and use *all* language practices *and* all ways of knowing represented in the class, not simply the language practices and ways of knowing with which the English/writing teacher is most comfortable. Beth Daniell credits Berthoff for leading her to the following insight regarding what Daniell now sees as Freire's primary contribution to North American teachers: "an attitude of profound love for the human beings we teach. Being treated as if one is worth, as if one's life is important, as if what one has to say is significant and deserving attention" (1999, 402). In his essay in the *JAC* tribute issue, Henry Giroux wrote that Freire often quoted Che Guevara on the importance of love: "Let me tell you, at the risk of appearing ridiculous, the genuine revolutionary is animated by feelings of love. It is impossible to imagine an authentic revolutionary without this quality" (1997, 312).<sup>9</sup>

Twenty-five years ago, Mina Shaughnessy recognized the need for teachers to be learners. She said that teachers must "remediate" themselves and study the "students themselves in order to perceive both their difficulties and their incipient excellence" (238). In a class that encourages all ways of knowing available in that community of learners, all members of that community, including the teacher, would be challenged to work outside their comfort zone, and all would gain confidence in themselves as both learners and knowers. Unless teachers respect student knowledge and language practices, students will not have the confidence they need to take intellectual and political risks, to question the status quo, to reimagine a better world and work to achieve it. Unless teachers *believe* they can learn from their students, they'll end up *telling* students about oppression, and co-intentional education will become just another theoretical goal that is, in the end, separated from practice.

## Commitment to, and Ongoing Critique of, Taking Action

Perhaps because of Freire's faith in people and in the possibility of change, Freire was able to *both* critique social conditions as he saw them *and* to do something to change them. This taking of action, this committing to a pedagogy, is a courageous leap of faith. This commitment makes Freire's action, and his bold detailed articulation of it, vulnerable. It puts theorized practice on the table, under a bright light—where it is easy for others to examine it, dissect it, or knock it to the floor.

Freire knew, more than most educators even today, that what goes on *inside* a classroom is just as socially constructed and potentially oppressive as what goes on *beyond* a classroom. Unlike most academics past or present, Freire theorized the epistemological assumptions informing word-based pedagogies and found them potentially harmful. He therefore used a praxis that allowed for, and took advantage of, multiple ways of knowing, so that Freire himself would learn from his students, so that learning would be co-intentional and bi-directional, so that students would have confidence in what they already knew, so they would have the courage to challenge received cultural myths. He designed a practice consistent with his theory. But because clearly articulated, theorized pedagogies are so vulnerable to critique, it is rare to find them. Perhaps if it were not for Freire's "naïve" faith in his students and in the possibility of change, we would not have the many writings and class descriptions that have done so much throughout the world to challenge banking-model methods, to promote critical literacy, and to inspire education reformers.

If Freire did speak occasionally of "truth" or "reality" in ways too unapologetically for the sensibilities of strict social constructivists of the twenty-first century, he would have no doubt welcomed any "contradictions" inherent in his worldview. Freire did not shrink from contradictory epistemologies. Contradictions regarding reality or truth or knowing were themselves consistent with his dialogically based praxis: that it is only through constant questioning and problematizing, even, perhaps especially, of our own theories/practices, that our work remains renewed and retheorized.

Further, if Freire's view of the world and of the constructedness of oppression was in conflict with his belief in a God or "truth" or "reality," he would have welcomed that contradiction as a way of keeping his praxis in flux, in dialogue with itself. In fact, in *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World*, Freire and Macedo talk of "social transformation" as "a historic process in which subjectivity and objectivity are united dialectically. There is no longer a way to make either objectivity or subjectivity absolute" (1987, 43).

This constant rethinking of one's praxis was a basic Freirean tenet: a process, a friction similar to what C. H. Knoblauch has described as "dialogue and commitment" (1988). Too much dialogue—without commitment to some kind of plan or approach—prevents any action *except* dialogue about practice/commitment. Too much fixed commitment/practice—without dialogue and constant self-reflection—prevents a commitment/practice from being ever changed or renewed. In addressing critiques that his practices did not "work" in the United States, Freire reminded the interviewer that his pedagogy is not portable, that a praxis can only grow out of educators remaking it each time and place in which they find themselves. He stressed that educators should be humble, should continue to learn, and should subject their own praxis to continuing inquiry. Being too certain—even of inevitable uncertainty—contradicts the spirit of Freire's praxis.

Freire's praxis demonstrates a stance toward culture that is at once critical and hopeful, assertive of its own view of the world but inviting of other views, committed to specific theories and practices, but subjecting them always to inquiry. In Composition today we need both skepticism and hope. We're too steeped in critique, too sure that it is others who are naive, too certain that other people's research is epistemologically flawed and therefore has nothing to add to our own. We're being too easy on ourselves.

### ***Both/And Theories of Life and Knowing***

It was perhaps Freire's varied intellectual interests that allowed him to not only tolerate but to work productively with contradictory epistemologies. As many have pointed out, different disciplines not only employ different discourses, but the discourses themselves are informed by different epistemological and evidentiary assumptions. As did other visionary reformers such as James Britton, Lev Vygotsky, and James Moffett, Paulo Freire had a broad interdisciplinary background. Taylor says Freire studied linguistics, law, philology, and communication theories (21). John L. Elias says that Freire was "an education philosopher, a philosopher of knowledge, a social critic, a sociologist of knowledge, an adult educator, a theologian of liberation, a theorist of revolution, . . . a phenomenologist, an existentialist, a Christian, and a Marxist" (31). This shows Freire comfortable with many views of the world and unafraid of contradictions or overlapping, even conflicting philosophies. He did not avoid binaries but welcomed them. He also called for interdisciplinarity. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, when he is discussing how the theme of development might be used in the culture circles, Freire points out that this theme is not exclusive to one field:

The theme of development, for example, is especially appropriate to the field of economics, but not exclusively so. This theme would also be focalized by sociology, anthropology, and social psychology (fields concerned with cultural change and with the modification of attitudes and values—questions which are equally relevant to a philosophy of development). It would be focalized by political science (a field concerned with the decisions which involve development), by education, and so forth. (113)

Freire had a *both/and* epistemology (God and social construction); a *both/and* view of theory and practice (praxis); and a *both/and* view of commitment, coupled with ongoing inquiry regarding that commitment. These contradictory views, however, constantly in dialectic, are what kept his praxis fresh, always in renewal. These contradictory views of life, truth, knowledge, for which Freire has been criticized or dismissed as "naive," are ironically the very contradictions that forced his ongoing self-reflection and inquiry. These contradictions should be "embraced" (Elbow's term) for the dialectic we need to keep our own praxis less certain, to engage Freire's use of "multiple channels of communication," even if we do not understand them—in fact, *because* we do not understand them.

## Notes

1. From *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World*, 1987, page 122.
2. See Elbow's *Embracing Contraries*; Berthoff's "Killer Dichotomies," in Ronald and Roskelly's *Farther Along*, as well as Zebroski's essay in the same volume, "Rewriting Composition as a Postmodern Discipline: Transforming the Research/Teaching Dichotomy."
3. See page 108 in Torres.
4. Quoted by Torres, her page 109. The reference appears to be from Freire's *The Politics of Education*, but no page number is given.
5. Quoted by Ira Shor p. 316 in "Education Is Politics: A Farewell to Paulo." *JAC* 17.3 (1997): 314–18. Shor cites p. 30 of *Learning to Question*.
6. Taylor raises the question regarding Freire's Culture Circles essentially to argue that they involved more indoctrination than most Freireans would like to believe. Others (Elias and Miller) have also suggested that the conclusions of the Culture Circle discussions were more foregone than accounts of Freire's work would have us believe. I do not address this critique here. I agree with Taylor, however, that Freire's classroom work has not been examined in depth.
7. In her contribution to *JAC's* tribute issue to Freire (17.3, 1997), Ann Berthoff argues that for the most part, Freire's insistence on theorizing teaching has not been understood. However, she says in a footnote that a group of people working in ESL and in Composition *do* understand Freire, and she

names those she says do: Elsa Auerbach, Nina Wallerstein, Patricia Laurence, Ann Raimés, Vivian Zamel, Beth Daniell, Louise Dunlap, Virginia Perdue, Kate Ronald, Hephzibah Roskelly, Dixie Goswami, Linda Shaw Finlay, and Valerie Faith. Berthoff also points out that all these people are women (309–10, “Remembering Paulo Freire”).

8. Within the past year (2000), there was a WPA listserv discussion of a professor who thought a student must have plagiarized her paper because it was so well written. This was in spite of her having previously produced an entire portfolio of good writing, including drafts.

9. In “Remembering Paulo Freire” (*JAC* 17.3), Giroux cites Freire, p. 43 in *Pedagogy of Hope*, New York: Routledge, 1994.