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Dear Reader,

In this (our tenth) issue, we offer a comment on a troubling shift in recent work of Paulo Freire—or is it only an apparent shift? Howard Timberg wrote in a letter accompanying his essay that he hoped that "before educators begin to set up lists of privileged texts that 'every American needs to know', they will heed Freire's warning against devising curricula that silence students' voices." Toward carefully considers Freire's attitude toward the relationship of words and actions, thereby reminding us of the importance of problematizing the problematizer. Beth Daniel's comments likewise underline the importance of a continuing audit of what we mean by "collaborative, learning." And we're including the closing paragraphs of Paulo Freire's "Afterword" to his book, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, a kind of meditation on the character of dialogue in pedagogy and theoretical discussion.

On Reading Freire and Macedo's Literacy
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I am inviting my readers to act as subjects and thus to reject the idea of merely accepting my analysis.

---Paulo Freire, *The Politics of Education*

Paulo Freire and Donald Macedo's newly published book, *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World*, is for me both wonderful and troubling. When Freire and Macedo ask that educators respect students' culture and language, I am ready to bolt off to compose new writing and reading sequences and devise new classroom situations that will invite my students to "read" and "write" their world. What is most appealing to me about this book is its insistence that literacy can be achieved only in the context of the people's lives. As I say, this is wonderful stuff, the kind to get me going on a Monday morning. And yet, even as I am drawn to Freire and Macedo's book, I am disturbed by it as well. It is not easy for me to account for this reaction. Perhaps I am, after all, one of that "schooling class" that the authors rail against. I am a product of those very institutions that have attempted to "silence" students with a curriculum that reflects little concern for their language and culture. Or, perhaps, I am suspicious about a view of literacy that purportedly regards the learner as the subject of study but in fact has simply made the learner subordinate to (and the object of) yet another dominant curriculum, that is, the authors' own particular recipe for emancipation.

The book's credo, or more precisely its politics, is conveniently summed up early:

Reading the world always precedes reading the word, and reading the word implies continually reading the world. As I suggested earlier, this movement from the word to the world is always present; even the spoken word flows from our reading of the world. In a way, however, we can go further and say that reading the word is not preceded merely by reading the world, but is a certain form of writing it or reworking it, that is, of transforming it by means of conscious, practical work. For me, this dynamic movement is central to the literacy process. (Literacy 35)

For Freire and Macedo, reading is much more than learning to vocalize mechanically certain discrete sounds, nor is it a matter of regurgitating someone else's text. Reading the word is achieved within the context or frame of one's own world. Thus, in his reading text called "The Second Popular Culture Nonbook," devised to improve the
reading of his students in rural São Tomé, Freire includes a narrative whose characters have to find a way to drive their truck (carrying baskets of cocoa beans) over a mudhole. They think about the problem, discuss it among themselves, and come up with a solution involving laying rocks on the ground to provide the needed traction. Significantly, the narrative is entitled "The Act of Studying." Study is presented as an activity of use in the daily lives of peasant farmers, and not merely an academic classroom pursuit.

I do not teach peasant farmers. For the past two years, I have taught white, middle-class students at an urban university. Despite such vast differences, I am struck by the similarity between my freshman composition students and Freire’s farmers. I would call this shared quality a deep distrust of classroom learning, which is regarded as disconnected to the students’ own language and thought. In such a forbidding environment, students come to doubt their own ability to learn. I think it is a safe bet that most of my students, given the chance to reflect, would express themselves as did one of Freire’s: “Before, we did not know what we knew.” (Literacy 167.) How could they? If I may use Freire and Macdonald’s terminology, rarely have these students been made the "subjects" of their own learning, but instead have been regarded as "objects," empty vessels ready to be filled (or, to use Freire’s favorite metaphor, to receive deposits).

To read the word, in the Freirean sense, is to lay claim to the world and make it one’s own. To read the world is to position oneself, and to act, in. Since we come to know the world only through language and come to use language only through using it in the world, "reading the world" continually implies reading the world and, I would argue, vice-versa: to know the world we need to find the right words, words that allow us to reflect on the world. Freire and Macdonald suggest as one way to bring student, world, and world together that the class engage in researching and compiling an ethnography of the community through taped interviews. The authors recommend such a project for rural areas, especially where an oral tradition still thrives. In fact, the multicultural, urban classroom of the "First World" can also benefit from this rich, reflective world whereby students actively research and writes about the ways of her own community.

But, for Freire and Macdonald, reading the world/world is not enough; it must be preceded by writing and rewriting the world. The world must yield to "work" or action. Some years ago, in Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Freire expressed the following view of the relationship of word to work:

Within the word we find two dimensions, reflection and action, in such radical interaction that it one is sacrificed—ever in part—the other immediately suffers. There is no true word thus not at the same time a praxis. Thus, to speak a word is to transform the world.

...When a word is deprived of its dimension of action, reflection automatically suffers as well; and the word is changed into idle chatter, into verballab... On the other hand, if action is emphasized exclusively, to the detriment of reflection, the word is converted into activism. The latter—action for action’s sake—negates the true praxis and makes dialogue impossible. (Pedagogy 75-76).

This earlier view held that "to say the true word—which is work, which is praxis—is to transform the world." (Pedagogy 76). The relationship between action and reflection, or work and the word, was for Freire symbiotic, each contributing to the other and in the process sustaining the delicate organism. The outcome or praxis was dialogue, which Freire defined as "the encounter between men, mediated by the world, in order to name the world." (Pedagogy 76). Authentic dialogue allows each of us to attain "significance" as well as such an "existential necessity" (Pedagogy 77). In dialogue no one dominates or silences another.

In this latest book, Freire and Macdonald begin to isolate work from the word and in so doing make us very nervous. In the earlier book, change is said to take place by virtue of the subtle interaction of reflection and work; here, the two are compartmentalized and clear precedence is given to the latter, which alone is "practical." But another way, where once the "true words" made a real difference and had transformative power, now words yield to the world. As I read the situation, dialogue yields to silence. And what we are offered approaches what Freire earlier had called "activism," action without reflection.

Freire of course is the first to admit that his is a committed pedagogy, and he rightly asserts no curriculum can be used should be "neutral." Once we deny the politics of education we begin to silence our students. But my point is that a passionately held pedagogy must still be dialogic—that is, it must still encounter and negotiate with other pedagogies as fervently held and expressed; otherwise, one becomes mere voice. When, in a letter to Mario Cabral included in the appendix, Freire challenges the leadership of the African nations of Guinea Bissau and Cape Verde to insist Portuguese, the language of science, instruction is favor of the native Creole, he is the militant rather than the dialogist. Is it possible to be both? I think not. Militancy precludes dialogue, and the rest is silence.

Works Cited

Pedagogy in Process
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At recent conferences, I've heard two papers offering theoretical justification for collaborative learning techniques in the writing class. One accounted for the success of group strategies with basic writers in terms of Walker's oral-literacy dichotomy; the other used Paulo Freire's philosophy and pedagogy to argue for Ken Bruffee's collaborative learning techniques. I'm not concerned here with the wrongheadedness of the first paper. Anne Ruggles-Gere has already made that argument in her recent Writing Groups: History, Theory, and Implications. Her last chapter explains why the view of literacy espoused by Ong and others is inconsistent with descriptions of successful writing groups. Nor is my essay really about collaborative learning methods. My aim here is to explore some of the questions raised by the paper on the relation of the pedagogies of Bruffee and Freire.

I claim that as educators in the United States, we cannot use Freire to support Bruffee—or any other classroom strategy, for that matter—unless and until we are willing to talk in Freire's terms about our society and our place, our students' and our own, in that society. Until we are ready to use such terms as economic, political, ideological oppression, poverty, power, and capitalism in more than the superficial, academically sterile ways they are currently being handled about, we may not claim that what we do is Freirean pedagogy. Freire's philosophy evolves from a view of knowledge, social relationships, and language that is antithetical to most institutionalized education in this country. School in the U.S. is structured on the assumption that knowledge is a measurable entity; that students enjoy equal access to it; that superficial ties to groups of origin; and that the value of language as a transparent window on cognition is measured in degrees of objective correctness. Despite the dominance of this ideology, writing groups are not a new invention in America, Gere tells us. Her research indicates that the kind of writing group a teacher sets up depends on that teacher's conception of knowledge and of literacy. Conferring Gere's insight, Mara Holt has found that during the 1950s some composition teachers who employed group pedagogy argued that it allowed them to handle large numbers of students, while others claimed that it served to augment students' reliance on the teacher and the textbook as ultimate authorities. One article, revealing a decidedly McCarthyesque bent consistent with its publication date of 1956, claimed that group pedagogy prevented plagiarism because, to be blunt, it taught students to eat on each other. Holt warns us not to conclude that all group work accomplishes the same things. It doesn't.

Is it possible, then, that collaborative learning is not, as some apparently think, an automatic cure for all the ills of teaching writing in American schools and colleges? Is it a new technology? Raymond Williams has argued compellingly that no technology is ever neutral. Any given technological advance is already embedded in a social situation, serving the interests of those who invent or introduce it. The structure of the society determines both the uses and the users of technology. The voluntary writing groups Gere describes may attain to the human impulse to share and to learn; in order to increase literacy and make the latter make the students' experience a useful technique that takes time away from the teacher's main task: filling the empty receptacles with the official story. Clearly, they won't be tempted to experiment with Bruffee's pedagogy. Since knowledge is for Bruffee a social construct, he attempts to create a classroom which shifts power from the teacher to the community of students, but the real authority remains removed from students; final authority is located in the discourse, or 'interpretative,' community. According to this view, students in a composition class are apprentices who learn the normal discourses in order to get into the interpretive community. Once there, if they are persuasive enough, they might be able to effect some change. (See Fish, Rorty, and Bruffee for explanation and Prag, Ennenricht, and Meyers for criticism.)

What Bruffee appears to be aiming for is an 'anti-foundationalist' education. The 'foundations' of the social order and of academic thought, according to this post-structural perspective, are neither inherently right nor inevitable nor natural. Rather, the 'foundations' are constituted by agreement—and the power to modify these is granted to the classroom teacher. At this point, it is important to remember that Bruffee's pedagogy began in the Open Admissions program and is designed to prevent the devalorization of students' own backgrounds, language, identity, and perceptions. He is telling students that their ways of thinking and using language aren't 'wrong.' Bruffee is trying, I think, to give students a way to preserve their own cultural, ethnic, and personal identities and at the same time a way to survive in the academy. It seems to me that Bruffee is also trying to have it both ways—to modify the present structures of the academy but not change them in any substantial way to help students negotiate these structures but not touch at all the core identities. Bruffee forgets that these matters will be changed, in any case.

One problem with anti-foundationalism is that we cannot usually be anti-foundationalists. Realizing that there are no foundations, no transcendental sources of wisdom, doesn't change what we do in our classrooms; Fish says that we still
teach what we believe. We cannot not stand on some foundation. Formed and surrounded by social and thus political forces, we cannot escape our own historicity to stand on neutral ground. Bruffee's attempt to make the writing classroom a site of how knowledge is made to serve to cut the composition class off from the historical, social, and political facts of students' lives. This more accurately populates the student.

Which points to the main difference between Bruffee and Freire: Freire never forgot that all of us—teachers and learners alike—are historical beings; that we are we are in a situation which cannot but bring our life experiences to learning. Teachers must give survival students tools like rhetorical forms and the standard language (Short and Freire 71), but it is not the survival of human beings that Freire aims at; it is the transformation of the "intercultural community." Freire intends for pedagogy to contribute to a revolution in societies which teach human beings that they are less than human. Through the "I-thou" dialogic inquiry of Freire's pedagogy, both teacher and student question the official story, reiterate and transform it. In turn, as people-in-a-situation, they question, reiterate, and transform themselves. The teacher here does not change the students; they change themselves. In the words of participants in Freire's literacy program: "They used to say we were unproductive because we were lazy and drunkards. All lies. Now that we are respected as men, we're going to tell everyone that we were never drunkards or lazy. We were exploited. . . . "I work and working I transform the world." ... Before this, words mean nothing to me; now they speak to me and I can make them speak."

Freire's pedagogy is not the ability of human beings to use language in order to express and explore their world, to make meaning for themselves and for others; to articulate relationships; to achieve through dialogue a critical consciousness. Freire's belief in the heuristic power of language is the key to his seemingly miraculous pedagogy, which can alpha-beta adult literates in 30 hours. Freire's effectiveness comes from the learner's daily lives, are from the politically oppressed; that is, they are discovered at the juncture of personal and social. A historical identity is central to the Freirean's subjectivity. Freire's students are literacy as a way to voice their needs and purposes, and their understanding.

In the United States, the structure of education rarely permits the classroom recognition of personal and political facts of students' actual lives. As Freire puts it in A Pedagogy for Liberation, the culture of North America dichotomizes reading the word and reading the world (135). Society demands that we teach students to write the word. And then the question becomes which world do we teach them to write? The world according to William Bennett? A world where knowledge is already defined, language prescribed, and the lives of learners separated from body? A world where the interpretive community supports injustice by pretending that it doesn't exist? Or a world where change is possible when human beings join together to examine it critically, where people-in-a-situation are allowed to name the world themselves? Bruffee and Freire are closer to the latter.

They agree that knowledge is socially constructed, but they appear to disagree about whether we can actually bring about changes in how it is constructed socially. In other words, their differences seem political. I use the words now and appear because Bruffee's last article in College English indicates a growing awareness of the political implications of his perspective. Freire is closer to what I want to do in my classroom than any other pedagogy, but Freire is closer still.

Freire's pedagogy does not require self-conscious collaborative methods, for it is rooted in the social nature of language and human beings. Iris Shor says that Freirean pedagogy does not preclude lecture—but as the lecture does not make its content into deposits of Truth and so long as it originates in students' felt needs. I find Bruffee's collaborative techniques helpful in discovering those needs. For the most part, I was educated in traditional ways. The teacher lectured and I took notes. I memorized the notes and assumed that if they made no sense, I wasn't smart enough to understand. And for most of my career, I taught the same way I had been taught. Bruffee gives me the practical hints about how to get my students talking to one another, not just to me, and about how to help them articulate their own questions, not what others tell them. It is in Freire that gives me a reason to make these changes.

In composition, practice without theory is the nature of the beast. Literacy, and learning at its best a series of lucky hunches, at worst a repetition of the sins of the fathers. This is not to say that we should search for The One Right Way To Teach, but that critical, theoretical debate can reveal finer and finer distinctions so that choices about practice become clearer. At the same time, our theories must be grounded in practice and in purpose. Unquestioned theories in our classrooms can damage; for all, our theories are tested on word corn or pigeons. We can no longer grab a theory, any theory, to support a strategy that appears to work. We must question each theoretical explanation by analyzing the assumptions and procedures that lie behind our work and by studying its implications. Then we must question whether the theory is in fact consistent with what we say we want to teach.

Stephen North has recently written that composition is "an awkward awkward subject... with inquiry and practice bound together in an academically traditional way."
(1974). But this very awkwardness calls for a dialectic between theory and practice, between academic concepts and pedagogical practice, one that is frustrated, informs and restrains us. Only such a seemingly awkward subject could reveal the inconsistencies in my own practice, theory, and purpose and at the same time strengthen my belief that I am a teacher in process.

Works Cited


From Paulo Freire's "Afterword" to Ira Shor's forthcoming classroom: A Sourcebook for Literacy Teaching

For progressive teachers, pedagogy implies, then, that the learners participate or enter into the discourse of the teachers, appropriating for themselves the deepest ambiguity of the subject being taught. The indispensable responsibility of the teacher to teach is thus shared by the partners through their own act of intimately knowing what is taught.

And the progressive teacher only truly teaches to the degree that he or she has also appropriated the concept of what is being taught, learning it critically for herself or himself. In this way, the act of teaching is an act of re-knowing an already known object. In other words, the teacher re-experiences his or her own capacity to know through the similar capacity to know that exists in the learners. To teach, then, is the form that knowing takes as the teacher seeks for the particular way of teaching that will challenge and call forth in students their own act of knowing. Thus, teaching is both creative and critical. It requires inventiveness and curiosity by both teacher and learner in the process.

To reach content in a way that will make subject matter appropriated by students implies the creation and exercise of serious intellectual discipline. Such discipline begins forming long before schooling begins. To believe that placing students in a learning milieu automatically creates a situation for critical knowing without this kind of discipline is a vain hope. Just as it is impossible to teach someone how to learn without teaching something content, it is also impossible to teach intellectual discipline except through a practice of knowing that enables learners to become active and critical subjects, continuously increasing their critical abilities.

In the formation of this necessary discipline, the progressive teacher cannot identify the act of reading, learning, knowing with exercising the game-playing that has very relaxed or nonexistent rules. Neither can it be identified with a learning milieu that is boring or unpleasant. The act of studying, learning, knowing is difficult and above all, demanding. But, it is necessary for learners to discover and feel the inherent joy and satisfaction that comes from knowing as they are ready to take hold of those who give themselves to the process of learning.

The teacher's role in nurturing this discipline and joy is enormous. Authority and competence both play a part. A teacher who does not teach, who does not struggle to obtain the material conditions indispensable to education, that teacher is actively inhabiting the formation of intellectual discipline so
Response to Zebroski-Mack
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Our profession organizes the relations between speech and writing in a paradoxical way: we teach writing, but much of our professional discourse is conversational, work in rhetoric and composition retains the genres and reflections of teacher talk. This is empirically true—teachers of composition gather and chat. We go to conferences; we meet with staff; our daily activities in writing programs require a fair amount of coordinating and checking in with one another. It is also formally true that our scholarly writing is relatively close to conversation: while ordinary talk about literature is removed from the necessarily written quality of, say, Paul de Man’s essays, there is less distance between ordinary talk about the teaching of writing and the current issue of College English. Like it or not. For better or worse.

The “Dialogue on Composition” written by James Zebroski and Nancy Mack gives us a chance to think through this paradox. What does it mean to write and reflect on composition, using the genre of the dialogue? Why do these reflections recommend that students practice a certain style of ethnography?

A dialogue is, of course, a work of fiction, written in one of the oldest genres we have. The “Dialogue on Composition,” like Utopia and The Republic, tells the story of the creation of a community—a small community, both of whose members are critical theorists teaching writing. N and J, like members of any small community, are occupied with the question of social reproduction: how can the community of critical theorists grow by inducing students? N and J face this question with a certain ambivalence: their understanding of teaching is deeply emancipatory, and so they are alive to the paradox of students being maneuvered into accepting a critical viewpoint from the hands of the teacher. Writing—a dialogue on this question allows them to put their ambivalence to use, to introduce into the body of the discourse those “yes, but” moves, so central to the teaching of writing, but like silly wafting in a powerful essay. By working out a representation of a dialogic performance, the authors of this essay have mediated between the demands of written reflection and the demands of good conversation; they keep faith with both the conversational customs of the discipline and with its commitment to the written, the revised, the selected, the labored.

In the form of the dialogue, then, we find a powerful recognition of the work of writing, of the plurality of voices, of the unequal distribution of discursive power in classrooms. But, while the speakers acknowledge that “dialogue is a lot more involved with power than most of us at first believe,” this text locates power securely outside the bounds of emancipated classroom discourse. Power is something from outside that operates on students and teachers as a compilation. False consciousness “makes” the teacher believe something; individuals are “socialized into” world views, and authoritarian voices make us do things that “we really do not want to do.” How does an external consciousness compel a teacher, and who are we to say that it is false? Who were these individuals before they were socialized? What is this desire that is not really wanting? And again, who is to say? The issue of power is indeed on the table, and not only in the teacher’s mission of exposure and enlightenment. Teachers engage in the powerful act of forming students, of calling out certain possibilities in their writing; these teachers have organized that act around a powerful essay. By working out a representation of a critique of classroom ethics of the teaching of writing, the authors of this text allow us to work through a powerful essay.

D.H. Lawrence told this story best, when he showed us Utrillo planning to teach. “She would be the gloriating nun of the school, the children would blow like load knots, the teachers like tall, hard plants would burst into red flowers” (The Rainbow, 367).

It may make us all crazy, seeing that hope rise up again and again, knowing that no story is enough to sustain it for long, that no critique is powerful enough to deliver us from it. Let me juxtapose against this hope another story, a story of ethnographic practice. This passage opens my note on a teaching observation at Temple, where we have been experimenting with ethnographic observation of teaching:

“Ye13. Teacher assumes role. Says good morning to each student by name as they come in. Students return greeting. Teacher smiles. Why?”

This note reflects a certain teaching practice: a scrap of classroom dialogue stolen from the teacher’s memory, repeating an opening ritual in Quaker schools. My notation of it also reflects a practice of surveillance. It was just this ritual greeting that had identified the teacher as “weird” to her peer counselor and that had provoked me to visit her
class. I was curious; when I saw the classroom greeting, I
also formed a working hypothesis. Like many new teachers,
this one, I speculated, was worried about her relationship to
her students and was handling her problems by building very
controlled interactions into the class. I wondered how
students responded to their own roles in this ritual, which
did not seem to be optional. This issue—control of student
voice—organized my observation and my talk with the
teacher.

Ethnography, critical or conventional, can also be an
exercise of power, perhaps the most effective because it
works close to the bone, noticing gaze and movement and
perceiving, all those bodily signs that ordinary observation
leaves untouched. It puts into play its own story, a story
whose potential endings include, provocatively, mutual
embarrassment, and methodologically, social marginaliza-
tion and unemployment. This ethnographic moment, then,
represents my hope that a certain tall, hard plant could be
provoked into rare flowers, and like all such hopes, it is an
innocent of a desire for power, a willingness to use the
power that brought me into the classroom as observer and
this teacher to the classroom as observed.

Because this moment is also an intersection: it admits
another voice into the ritual dialogue between teacher and
student. Noting the teacher’s ritual takes her performances
and turns it into a story. I value this instrumentation, this
writing to consciousness; I see in it some possibilities for the
creation of new discursive forms. On another day, though, I
see it as a particularly pushy and obnoxious form of
surveillance. But such observations, whether performed by
teachers or students, whether presented as essays to be
graded or as reports to be hierarchically processed, will,
like dialogue itself, turn out to be a bit more involved with
power than most of us at first believe. Recognizing that
involvement, we might turn to one of the more somber
pages of Gramsci, the titular spirit of this dialogue. Can we
make room for this stern ghost at our feast of discourse?

The work has to be done particularly in written form,
just as it is in written form that criticisms have to be
made—in the form of terse, succinct notes... the
writing down of notes and criticisms is a didactic
principle rendered necessary by the need to combat the
habits formed in public speaking—prolific, demagogic,
and pastoral. (Gramsci, Primo Carnera)