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WHEN WORKING CLASS STUDENTS "DO" THE ACADEMY: HOW WE NEGOTIATE WITH ALTERNATIVE LITERACIES

ABSTRACT: Narratives concerning working class students are constructed to highlight the difficulties of negotiating academic codes and the necessity for writing teachers to strive to provide the space for working class students to "speak differently." Although the narratives of working class students open up sites of conflict and allow students to negotiate the borders between work and classroom, this negotiation carries the expectation for the student to learn the codes of the institution and the values of the academy. The knowledge and work that is valued by the university doesn't change; instead, the narratives of the working class are subtly shaped to fit a set of representations of cultural knowledge that serve to reproduce the academy intact. However, the negotiation must flow in two directions: the academy cannot take over a text without being uncomfortably altered by it.

In 1981 I began to work for a man named Mike Cirincioni. My job was to bring him supplies when he needed them. You see, we did tile work. We were working at the Ledbetter's house at the Landings. The job cost these people over thirty thousand dollars. Most of the house was set in white and green marble. When you set marble in place you must take great care in lining up the joints and making sure the pieces are all level. To get the pieces just perfect takes great patience.

Chris Brist

Work is the means by which people construct and change their material and imaginative worlds.

Maggie Humm

If you don't show up on a Saturday or Sunday,
You've already been fired when it's Monday.

Chris Llewellyn

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In the last several years, more than a few compelling personal narratives have been presented by both graduate students and teachers that concern the position of working class students within the academy. Most of these narratives were constructed to highlight the difficulties of negotiating academic codes (on the part of the student) and the necessity for writing teachers to strive to provide the space for working class students to “speak differently” (Giroux BC 32). In many of the narratives Mary Louise Pratt’s notion of a “contact zone” becomes the metaphor for this negotiation as the classroom often becomes the territory where the colonizing academy and the colonized student clash (34). The classroom as a site of contest and control “needs to create new forms of knowledge through its emphasis on . . . new spheres in which knowledge can be produced” (Giroux BC 72). The definition of the writing classroom as a political space constructs the mission of critical pedagogies as self-consciously political, focusing composition courses on a study of the social workings of language.

This politicized classroom space *should* provide the disorienting effects that allow the imposed boundaries to be questioned and academic authority (knowledge) to be challenged. Although the personal narratives of working class students open up the site of conflict and allow the students to negotiate the borders between home, work, and classroom, this negotiation most often carries the expectation for the students to learn the codes of the institution and the language and way of thinking of particular disciplines: “The student has to learn to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community” (Bartholomae 134). The basic writing class effectively becomes an introduction to academic discourse, an introduction to what a scholarly conversation is about and looks/sounds like. The university doesn’t change; the knowledge and work that is most valued by the university doesn’t change because there is no equally valued place for working class experience within the public domain of the academy. Instead, the narratives of the working class, rather than acting as a transgressive collective, are subtly shaped to fit representations of cultural knowledge that serve to reproduce the academy intact. The academy effectively shields itself from the transformation it would realize if it recognized that when students learn, they create meaning from past experiences, making connections with rather than merely assimilating new knowledge.

Adult learners bring a wealth of life learning and knowledge to academic encounters, but their knowledge and experience is not only largely undervalued by the academy, but hasn’t been named and claimed by the learners themselves. When students are also labeled “basic writers” or “remedial” students, writing instructors are forced

to wonder just what “basic” means, in whose eyes do they need remediation and for what purpose? The academic labeling of inadequacies is so pervasive that adult students labeled as “basic writers” are often unaware of the richness of their lives in domains that the academy hasn’t labeled. When asked to look at literacies learned outside of the university as social constructs that can be compared to the construct of a literate self that is valued by the university, adult students can reintegrate themselves as learners and knowers, building upon what they know and do best in order to *critique* the learning conditions in the university. Integrating outside literacies with academic literacy means the shape of academic knowledge changes; rather than indoctrinating students into academic ways of knowing and defining those ways of knowing as having the highest value, the academy must then work within a larger nexus of literacy and knowledge.

I am not claiming that the academy hasn’t changed structurally, bureaucratically, logistically. Since the early 70s, more access to a university education has been given to those who have been previously excluded. Besides the changes in admissions standards, colleges have restructured degree programs, added degree programs, provided evening and weekend classes and services such as child care in order to accommodate the growing numbers of adult, working class students who make up their populations. Although these structural changes have certainly made the educational *process* easier for working class students, they have not necessarily created a parallel ideological change in the public activity of academic knowledge and writing. The university’s role as a change agent is incomplete and unspectacular. Rather than reconstructing the culture of the academy so that it is more enriched, academic literacy as a gatekeeper to education only gives access to standard rhetorical conventions and thought which may empower students while minimizing negotiation between the academy and other facets of their lives. Change is not enacted on notions of academic excellence or epistemologies, but on those students labeled “remedial” or “basic.” As Bruce Horner notes in “Discoursing Basic Writing,”

Paradoxically, defining the “practice” of Basic Writing in “academic” – that is, nonmaterial and nonpolitical terms, is eminently *impractical*, leaving undeterred the ways in which material constraints, rather than academic theories, come to determine the how and what as well as the why of teaching. (219)

Although the academy’s movement toward cultural democracy, the advent of open admissions, and the introduction of basic writing programs has been admirable, I believe the goal of democratized educa-

tion, what John Trimbur sees as the rejection of “the traditional academy, calling instead for a ‘community of scholars’” (89) and Bruce Herzberg as a “move from demystification to critical consciousness, to a more general awareness for students that knowledge is made by groups for their own purposes” (115) is still largely unrealized. While bureaucratic or system changes may be prompted by the changes in educational philosophy which radicalized university campuses in the late 60s and early 70s, these logistical changes do not necessarily change the ways of thinking that the academy sees as culturally valuable.

During Augusto Boal’s keynote address at the Pedagogy of the Oppressed Conference in Omaha, Nebraska in February 1995, he defined one of the challenges of liberatory pedagogy as getting students “talking about things *they already know* in other forms.” These “other forms” or alternative ways of seeing put into question the concept of literacy as a mere transference of skills and knowledge. However, no one—neither students nor teachers—questions the assumption that a college education *as defined by the academy* encompasses the knowledge that is most valued by society. The knowledge of the working class—the knowledge working class students bring to the academy—really isn’t given much credence in this academic movement toward cultural democracy.

My sister Irene is attending a graduate program in nursing at a large research university in the Northeast. She calls me regularly to discuss her classes and ideas for her thesis. Recently she was told that the topic she wanted to explore for her thesis—relationships of power within the hierarchical structures of long term care facilities—wasn’t academic enough. For the past five years, my sister has been a nursing supervisor at a long term care facility. One of the problems she encounters at work concerns the attitudes of RNs toward health aides (who have considerably less formal education and make considerably less money), which in turn has been causing increased tension between the staff and the clients they serve. Irene had initiated a series of workshops aimed at increasing the health aides’ knowledge of caregiving and thereby enhancing their sense of professionalism. She hoped that she could raise the health aides self-respect and help them achieve the respect of the RNs. At the same time she was initiating these workshops, Irene’s political consciousness was on fire from reading Foucault and Friere for her graduate class. For her thesis, she proposed to study these power inequities in depth and propose a solution. Irene has been guided toward another topic, but at this point she feels that all she has learned in graduate school is that what she does every day for a living isn’t intellectually valuable. Unfortunately, my sister’s story isn’t unique.

Rather than teachers placing value on and working with the

knowledge of “lived relations” that students bring to the classroom, they often ask students to remove themselves from their more practical experiences and theorize about work, to recognize that a particular kind of “knowledge” exists within a structure that benefits some and oppresses others, that the ways in which students acquire knowledge operate within an ideological structure that indelibly imprints what they learn. Althusser describes this structure as a “system of ideas and representations which dominate the mind . . . of a social group” (158). It is this system of ideas and representations under which students learn to reproduce the divisions and the rules of a rigid class system, rules hidden behind the absorption by “good manners” and “moral” codes. These divisions in the class structure reinforce their identities as workers and students by controlling the material conditions of their relationships to institutions. For Irene, the codes of the academy reproduced the worker/knowledge giver dichotomy that she had been aware of all her working life.

This already constructed identity includes the socially acceptable modes of behavior connected to particular social classes. These class structures are reflected in and reinforced by the knowledge making processes within the university. Althusser writes in “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” that, besides “techniques and knowledges,” school children learn “the attitude that should be observed by every agent in the division of labor . . . which actually means rules of respect for the socio-technical division of labor and ultimately the rules of order established by class domination” (132). Some of these rules so carefully establish the lines between workers and the owners who need their services that the laborers are rendered virtually invisible. The products of their work, paid for and owned by someone else, cause the workers themselves to fade into the background. One of my students is a carpenter, an exceptionally skilled and artistic craftsman. Mike enjoys talking about his work, and late one afternoon, he told me about the job he had just finished: shingling a house at the Landings, a golf course community on Skidaway Island. Caught up in Mike’s enthusiasm, I suggested that the class take a drive out to this house so that we could look at the wood shingles he had cut and shaped by hand, carefully molded to fit the architect’s specifications and the owners’ taste. The concept of going to look at the house presented a real dilemma for Mike: on the one hand he wanted to show off his work, but on the other hand, he had firmly bought into a particular mode of thinking about ownership and work. The work was his; the house, however, was not. And, his invisibility was an inevitable part of this construction process because, according to Mike, “once the job is done, the owners don’t want us coming around anymore.” Once he had been paid for the job, he lost the privilege of visiting the work site.

In parallel fashion, working class students don’t see knowledge

as something they own or can own, but rather view a college education as a particular point on the continuum of apprenticeship. Paradoxically, working class students are not unskilled; however, their entrance into the college classroom effectively de-skills them. Indeed, the very notion of working class becomes problematic when one attempts to enclose these students within an academic definition. The usual identifiers only make class identity more complex; “blue collar workers” – auto mechanics, health professionals, dental hygienists, radiologists – often have two to four years of specialized training, knowledge of computers and other technology, and command fairly high salaries. For the university, this politically crucial term posits the working class students’ knowledge as different from academic knowledge. Within the educational system sanctioned by the university, this binary difference governs the codes of academic excellence, as those students who cannot write in academic English or discuss university sanctioned knowledge are labeled “basic” or “remedial” regardless of the skills or knowledge they hold in the work force. Buying into the myth of social and economic ascendancy that their difference from the academy perpetuates, working class students go to college to get better jobs, to become professionals; the work of education must have a practical end. The stories they tell often reify existing class structures:

My grandfather didn’t go to a fancy university but he owns his own charter business. I just don’t want to spend my life working outside.

And, from another student,

Thinking about the idea that I had the knowledge and ability to put up drywall made me very proud. But I knew I would never want to do it for a living. This type of work wears your body down too fast for my liking.

Unlike narratives of race and gender, class status works against difference; the lower classes can not afford not to be mainstreamed. Because their educational goals include a move upward in status, working class students are not comfortable questioning the system that creates those spaces they are working so hard to occupy. As Monique wrote in her final reflection, “When I entered the job market, I knew little about how our system worked or the shortcuts that one could take, such as college.”

But since the students’ stories are so often the site of conflict, personal narratives give us the unique opportunity to help students negotiate the borders between work and school, past and present, self and other. Talking and writing about class status, however, is difficult and

messy as is recognizing how the stories in/of our lives inform our definitions of work. In *The Violence of Literacy* Elspeth Stuckey writes that it is how we desire to define ourselves as Americans, our belief that “citizens get what they achieve” that makes it difficult, if not impossible, for the working class to perceive their marginality (3). When students are encouraged to narrate their own educational and work histories and then deconstruct their own stories, this not only broadens the parameters of the lives of working class students, but at the same time raises questions about academic knowledge.

In an effort to recognize the impossibility of maintaining the opposition between the academic and the personal, give credence to the knowledge of workers and the knowledge of work, and question the relationship of knowledge written about and legitimized by the academy and the texts of students’ lives, I decided to make work and working lives the focus of a basic writing course which met two evenings a week. My purpose for this course was to move students’ knowledge and ways of knowing and academic knowledge and ways of knowing into the same space so that questions of their contradictory epistemologies could be raised. During the ten-week quarter, we read, discussed, and wrote about how literature, essays, and films shape our thinking about work and our identity as workers. We read selections from *Working Classics* and Havel’s *The Memorandum*, viewed Michael Moore’s *Roger and Me*, and with the then immediate and extremely emotional closing of Union Camp-Savannah’s Paper Bag Plant (389 workers were laid off), watched and discussed videos of the news coverage, read newspaper accounts and related personal experiences of lay-offs.

Most of the students in this particular class were non-traditional, working class students (with full-time jobs) and their own experiences became a part of the classroom experience. One student’s first journal responses to *Roger and Me* begin with a note of disapproval towards the laid-off workers in the film: “I don’t understand. If they get laid-off so often couldn’t they see the handwriting on the wall? Why didn’t they move, or look for other jobs? That’s not the company’s responsibility.” The class discussed the inequalities in the film, who was powerless and who was not (i.e., Roger Smith has enough power to avoid Moore’s camera and questions). Tom Kay, GM’s lobbyist, claims in the film that “Roger Smith has as much social conscience as anyone.” We discussed Tom Kay’s statement along with his later statement that “GM has no obligation to Flint.” Are corporations responsible to/for workers? Must stockholders’ profits always come before community obligations? Later in the quarter, after the student who felt that laid-off workers are responsible for themselves experienced her husband’s lay-off off from Union Camp, she began comparing the actions of the Union Camp management with the corporate face of General Motors: “We don’t want to move so my husband is getting tuition money from

UC to go back to school. This is very different from the problems in Flint. Did GM offer the workers any educational or relocation help I wonder?"

My experiences with encouraging students to write personal narratives as a method of opening texts to different and socially useful interpretations doesn't ask for a privileged and particular understanding of texts or an acceptance of how students "relate" to texts and tell parallel stories, but rather asks for an expansion of the parameters of historical memoir as critical discourse. Stories are not only a set of representations that impart knowledge. Widening their definition to include a revision of the writer's argument and circumstances allows personal narratives to be culturally productive. And, to be culturally productive, students' critical writing must unsettle our definitions of work in all its forms. Accepting the experience of work as the basis for critical discourse means one must first recognize that students' responses to texts do not reflect meaning; they constitute meaning. Working with students' personal narratives involves an ongoing definition of what constitutes a "public working self" — the self that one student wrote of as having "no certainty . . . because of social class ladders which by the way still exist" and another student defined the self as one who "either takes orders and executes decisions or makes the decisions himself." Students can be encouraged to see through their class descriptions that serve the status quo by depicting students as free and sovereign individuals. As Todd wrote, "When I work hard at something, I only need to see an end product I can be proud of. I don't care what others think." Most of the students when pressed admitted that they did care how others view the quality of their work, especially as this evaluation impacts on the material conditions of their lives. Recognizing the power in locating their place in the class hierarchy allows students to restructure their roles in such a way that they can then question the system that perpetuates that hierarchy.

As an integral part of the system, the classroom experience, education as work and its place in the social hierarchy, and the students' particular and immediate relations on the college campus should become part of the questioning process. Ira Shor writes, "by identifying, abstracting and problematizing the most important themes of student experience, the teacher detaches students from their reality and then represents the material for their systematic scrutiny" (100). For Shor, the classroom becomes a place where the "familiar" is presented as "unfamiliar," a transformation crucial to teaching in liberatory classrooms. But even though the classroom and the teaching practice are structured in "unfamiliar" ways, the classroom may not be critiqued as a part of the students' social reality, and students may attempt to transcend that reality, to provide a secure space and a sterile, abstracted distance from which to "solve" social inequities. I believe it is very important for the

teacher to recognize her own place and power in the social hierarchy; no matter how well intentioned, no matter what the mission, the teacher is part of "the company," and teaching is manipulative.¹ Rather than a rigorous questioning of problematic social formations, there is the danger of reproducing the teacher's political concerns and merely replacing one static world view with another. For example, my students had no difficulty perceiving gender oppression in abstract, global terms. They could even all agree that women should be paid the same salaries as men for the same work, and that although the gap had narrowed, this inequality still existed and hurt women in material ways. But, when one female student questioned the fact that, even though she and a male student were in the same work study program, he was paid two dollars more an hour, he responded that his job was more difficult, more "technical" than hers. Her duties in Financial Aid demanded interpersonal skills, and he was a "lab rat" for the Academic Computing Lab. The class accepted this explanation and refused a discussion of a work study program that fostered a definition of interpersonal skills as "feminine" and, therefore, less valuable because after all male students "have those jobs, too." The teacher needs to recognize that, during class discussion, she is neither a spectator nor an unbiased facilitator. Students, like workers, may choose to resist her "management."

When asked to think critically about their roles at work, students' identities can become part of the reading of their social context. "My Dad is a construction worker," writes one female student in a journal entry about divisions of labor, "but I have a receptionist job. I am able to see both sides of the story. Most construction workers feel cheated because they have to work physically hard and don't get to sit in an air conditioned office. Most of the office workers look down on laborers." The class discussion that emerged when she read this entry aloud concerned both perceived difference and real economic differences between workers. The construction workers were often paid far more than the office staff, even when the office staff saw their roles as managerial. And yet an air-conditioned office, like multiple windows and a new computer, spelled status and garnered more respect for office workers. The construction workers' resistance to this social hierarchy often took the form of speaking in ways that marginalized the office worker; one of the students complained, "They are always speaking 'cabinet language.'"

Refiguring the problem of the nature of the self within the hierarchical context of the workplace allows for the possibility of formulating personal narratives as a dialogue with the "real" world. As part of this dialogue, I ask students not only what their response is to a particular text, but where they think that response comes from, what in their work experience formed their responses to texts.

This questioning of their own work experiences in relation to the larger culture and its institutions did not happen easily. After our first reading assignment—Sandra Ciserno’s “My First Job” from *The House on Mango Street*—I asked the students to narrate their first job experience and then to see if there was a connection between that experience and their present attitudes towards work: “After reflecting on what your first job meant to you back then, write about how your first job affects your present employment and the way you define yourself as a worker.” The students were very much invested in the work ethic that places all of the responsibility for work conditions on individuals rather than the institution’s relationship with individuals and certain groups of individuals (i.e. women, those whose formal education ended with secondary school, single parents). One student wrote about her experiences in the army that “[i]nstead of getting wrapped up in the vicious circle of daily tasks, I think it is wise to understand the big picture Regardless of what job you hold, every workplace has goals and players in their particular game.” None of the writers found a tension or contradiction between the work ethic they mimed on paper and their daily experiences at work and home: “I think that this job taught me persistence and perseverance. After a few months, I hated that job but I was too stubborn to quit Sometimes you have to endure unpleasantness to achieve your goals.” However, if you have been a hard-working waitress for fifteen years it is “your own fault for not getting educated and acquiring other skills.” The promise of a better life after college was an unquestioned myth in most of the students’ papers. One student summed up this general attitude by stating “[w]hat I learned from my first job is that I should go to school and get a better job.”

But in order to understand how their selves are determined by various institutions, including those educational systems that offer the hope of economic “rescue” to the lower classes, students need to first explore the events in their working lives as operating within the boundaries of a socio-economic context and to question their beliefs about work, especially when those beliefs come up against their or others’ lived reality. Their assignment after reading and discussing Havel’s *The Memorandum* asked them to explore the shifts of power and the differences in power between the characters: “Your essay should question whether or not power inherently resides in one’s role at work or whether gender or class define the effectiveness of one’s power struggles.” The same student who summed up her experiences in the army as learning to understand her position on the team revised those same experiences in her paper on *The Memorandum*:

When I was in the army I always felt that there was too much paper-pushing and that no one really knew what to do with

the paperwork once it was generated. I also felt that the wrong people were in the wrong positions. This seemed to be the case in the play. Gross didn't seem to be the executive type and had to be taken through a paper chase to have his memo translated You need to be able to see the whole picture to understand where you fit in the scheme.

Another student noted that "just as in *Roger and Me* paperwork was more important than people . . . years of service don't mean anything in a big corporation. Maria was easily fired because she was a secretary, she wasn't part of the management. Mr. Ballas forgot that people are not machines."

Group research on the connections among labor unions, the women's movement, labor strikes, the International Ladies Garment Workers' Union, and the strike in Flint, Michigan that led to the formation of the United Auto Workers' Union encouraged the students to move from a recognition of "everyone's humanity" that posits workers as victims of factory owners—"If these people would have spent some time with the workers, they would have realized that not only were they human, they were also intelligent"—to the concept that workers can band together and revise their working conditions. The research groups gave their reports the same week we read *Fragments From the Fire* by Chris Llewellyn. The students were as angered and saddened by the poetry and photographs as I had been; however, their recognition that what divided the workers from the owners of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory involved more than salaries. The difference in material conditions reflected in the class structure caused safety and health conditions that were intolerable and eventually led to 146 deaths: "Greed and the bad attitude towards the rights of women on the part of the owners led to poor working conditions, the lack of safety procedures, and fire codes." Perhaps more importantly, the historical perspective they had gained from the group reports encouraged the students to recognize that "victim" was just another social identity, a social identity that could be paralyzing and, in effect, still feed the status quo, or could be a starting place for social action. Wrote one student:

The day of the Triangle fire was a day of rebirth for the labor movement. According to Llewellyn, "Every Little Movement Has a Meaning of Its Own" (148), the movement that was born from the Triangle fire had the purpose of improving working conditions in the garment industry.

Perhaps more importantly, as the students compared their own work experience with the experience of garment workers at the turn of the century, they were able to see that poor working conditions and in-

equalities were not all part of the past (something they tend to do when the class discusses women's issues) as many of the students had stories of accidents and unhealthy conditions at their own work places.

Our public selves contain various roles that continually merge, conflict with and contradict each other. Teaching working class students does not need to involve the construction of a strict victim/oppressor model, and in fact, that model needs to be problematized, for any worker can be both victim and oppressor depending on the circumstances. More importantly, that model can only ask for an unveiling of the system that promises the happy-ever-after life of a college degree and middle-class status: "I usually failed because of external factors in which I had no control over. Perhaps it was because I lacked education."

Toward the end of *The Wizard of Oz* Dorothy demands of the unveiled Wizard, "You must keep your promises to us!" Teaching writing cannot just involve using the instructor's particular power and authority to engage the positionality of the students she teaches. Connecting the classroom with "real life" means teaching students to take uncomfortable risks, to develop a critical perspective toward all institutional structures, to recognize the power relations that allow them to speak in particular ways, "to address their role as critical citizens who can animate a democratic culture" (Giroux *PFC* 255). James Berlin writes that "literacy enables the individual to understand that the conditions of human experience are made by human agents and thus can be remade by human agents" (101). In order to construct a particular political identity — one that can take action in the world — it is important for students to reflect on their own lives and negotiate their connections to the lives of others. This remaking is part of our mission as well for the negotiation must flow in two directions: the university cannot absorb working class texts without being altered by them.

Note

Ira Shor positions the teacher's knowledge under the role of "resource person." He writes in *Critical Teaching and Everyday Life* that "eventually there develops in class a desire for me to raise my profile, focus the debate on some questions, and share with them my starting points for appreciating Utopia. I propose to the class that we can study

Utopia as a literary tradition, as a history of various counter-communities, and as a form of critical consciousness" (157). He never explores or questions his impulse behind this desire but states that his knowledge stands as an "appealing invitation" to students that "naturally" leads into his conceptual analysis (157-8).

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