

TINKERING TOWARD WAC UTOPIA

ABSTRACT: Writing Across the Curriculum is growing at a time of perceived crisis in education and perceived strengthening of the forces of globalization. Like composition generally and Basic Writing more specifically, the work WAC does can be influenced for good and ill by these contexts. Faced with a perceived crisis, as Basic Writing was at its birth, WAC could emphasize form in order to prepare students to take their places in the global economy. Instead, WAC should tinker with its existing techniques to promote critical thinking in even the most basic exercises. In doing so, it can help students not only to join the global economy but also to develop into thinkers who might evaluate the world and even consider ways in which they could improve it. In following the lessons of Basic Writing, WAC can offer all involved in the teaching of writing models for more inclusive pedagogies.

Like it or not, the story of American education has been and in all likelihood will continue to be a story of increasing access.

—Mike Rose, “The Language of Exclusion” (541).

In a smoke-filled inn in revolutionary-era Pennsylvania, a Quaker gentleman reminds Thomas Pynchon’s Mason and Dixon where the cakes and sweets that surround them come from. “A sweetness of immorality and corruption,” he calls the sugar that sweetens their food and drink, “bought as it is with the lives of African slaves, untallied black lives broken upon the greedy engines of the Barbadoes” (329). An argument ensues, of the kind that the narrating Wicks Cherrycoke ascribes to the “innocent roasted berry, that has put them all in such a surly humor” (329). Pynchon reminds us of many things in this passage. One is a similar moment in *Candide*, when *Candide* comes across a maimed slave lying at a crossroads, who says of the hand and leg he lost in the cane fields of Surinam, “This is the price of the sugar you eat in Europe” (40). *Candide* breaks into tears and wonders for a moment if maybe this is not, as Pangloss has taught him, the best of all possible worlds. Pynchon’s passage also reminds us that these substances fueled the revolutionary thinkers of the eighteenth century like those in Pynchon’s inn—the coffee, sugar, and tobacco firing their dreams of

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freedom, democracy, and untaxed profits—and that they also fueled empire, as the trading companies were in the New World to trade them. Linking this conversation with Voltaire's, Pynchon implies that the American dream, like Europe's imperial dream, was achieved as part of a global commerce that did not provide the best of all possible worlds for everyone.

Pynchon reminds us of this, and of something else. The Reverend Cherrycoke bears in his name another widely consumed energy-providing substance, the quintessential American beverage. One can now buy a Coke to wash down falafel in the souks of the old city in Jerusalem, frites in the cafes of Paris, and relleños de papa in the roadside stands of Puerto Rico. The anachronism of the narrator's name points out that the globalization that has become a hot topic of late is in fact an old phenomenon. In doing so, it asks us to think about what kind of world today's globalization is bringing to us.

There is a danger, in these discussions, of being like the protestor at the 1999 Seattle World Trade Organization meeting spotted by Anthony Giddens paradoxically carrying a sign that read, "Join the worldwide movement against globalization" (Brockman 5). Being reminded of globalization's long history drives home the idea that globalization is a fact and that it will not go away. There is no turning it back, nor, if it were possible, would it make any sense. As many who have dismissed protests against the WTO and other institutions have pointed out, globalization has had benefits for those in poorer parts of the world. Still, there is much to what has been said by protestors. There may be a considerable economic price to pay for having a world where corporations no longer act within a national framework, where "What's good for General Motors is good for America" is no longer necessarily true (Danaher). The cultural costs are also formidable. One of the questions being asked as part of the current debate over globalization, as expressed by Ian Baucom in the January 2001 special issue of *PMLA* devoted to globalizing literary studies, is "whether globalization does and will entail the liberation or the erasure of difference" (158). It is a good question.

It is also not easily answered. Like most difficult questions, though, it is important. As do other questions about globalization, it provides a way for us to reflect on the things we do as teachers of writing. In short, these questions can help us consider what kind of world we imagine for our students, and whether that world is the best of all possible worlds for them.

One area of teaching that provides a good place to think about these questions is the loose collection of movements, curricular innovations, and pedagogical strategies and techniques known as Writing Across the Curriculum. Because it is attempting to lengthen the presence of writing instruction down the course of students' careers, it has

the potential to change postsecondary writing instruction as a whole. Steeped in the same ideas and practices as first-year composition, however, it also provides the opportunity not just to apply them by extension but also to think again about them. As it grows, WAC can be of special importance to the readers of this journal, who stand at the head of the lengthening road of writing instruction. This road will be marked by the crossroads of familiar writing issues—issues of form, expression, academic discourse, and critical thinking. The issues those who work in Basic Writing have confronted and the lessons they have learned can be of increasing use to those working in WAC. Likewise, the issues faced by WAC programs and practitioners can provide opportunities for those in Basic Writing to reexamine these same lessons.

A good place to begin to look at WAC is the theme of the Sixth National Writing across the Curriculum Conference, as articulated on the Web site. It reads, in part,

A Conference to Place WAC in the Context of National and International Goals. In an era of international electronic networks, a global economy, and hemispheric trading partnerships, communication skill affects the success of individuals, companies, and countries. Mathematical or scientific literacy is vital, but without communication skills workers may be relegated to lower technical tasks.

This statement is a good place to start because implicit in it are assumptions about the purpose of WAC. Some of these assumptions: individual success is being a worker with a nontechnical job; WAC's job is to provide communication skills; the individual's goals, if not commensurate with the company's, can be met within them. These assumptions are important because they can be traced forward to the ways in which WAC is to be implemented in the classroom. They are also important because they can be traced backward to reveal the beliefs from which they come and, so, the connection between beliefs and daily practice. This last connection is important because it reveals the relation between our visions of the world, as it is and as we'd like it to be, and the way we think of and act in higher education.

Forward, then, from assumptions to practice: if the assumption is that individual success is a white-collar job and that the sole purpose of WAC is to teach students the communication skills they'll need to achieve this success, then WAC will be implemented as writing in the disciplines with a focus on the conventions of disciplinary discourse and formal correctness. Now, backward, from assumptions to beliefs: these assumptions are often held by those who believe that the world is in fact a place where there is no difference between the goals of the individual and the goals of the company and the country. I think it is

becoming clear in our time that this is demonstrably not the case. As recent corporate scandals have made clear, not only can the interests of individuals and large corporations diverge but, in these days of stock market driven corporate strategy, the interests of shareholders may even differ from those of corporate management. It can also be argued that multinational corporations, in cutting their ties to one country, have shed the last of their responsibility to individuals as enforced by the nations of which they were part. Now, what's good for General Motors might be good only for General Motors—or not even for all that used to be thought part of General Motors (such as its workers). These questions should lead us to ask whether, if the interests of our students may not coincide with those of the corporations for which they wish to work, preparing them for that future by simply teaching them the communication skills they'll need to succeed in the corporate world might not be in their best interests.

While it apparently is not fashionable to use the word utopia now that history has ended and we've won the Cold War and all that, utopia—a vision of a perfect place—is what is at stake here. Educational reform, like social reform generally, is based on utopian thinking. It looks at education as it is, asks how it ought to be, and tries to figure out how to make it more like that. Utopian thinking asks what the world would look like if it were perfect. If we think of WAC as a reform movement, as Basic Writing was thought to be at its inception and is still seen to be by many of its current teachers, then when we implement it, we ought to think about our vision of utopia.

I work as a Writing Fellow in The City University of New York's new Writing Across the Curriculum initiative. It is now in its fourth year, and on many campuses, including Lehman College, where I work, this initiative is taking the form of establishing soon-to-be-required writing intensive courses. Part of my job as a Fellow (aside from taking advantage of the funding and time the fellowship provides to finish my dissertation) is to help determine what these courses will look like and to push for adoption of these characteristics into the syllabi of courses across the curriculum.

Doing this job at Lehman means dealing with a particular set of circumstances and a particular history, contexts which do not isolate our experience but rather connect it to the experiences of those working in colleges and universities across the country that are dealing with similar contexts. The particular circumstances include those affecting CUNY as whole, such as its serving a New York City population of which 65% are paradoxically labeled "minority" and of which four out of ten speak a language other than English at home (with two of these four reporting not speaking English well) ("Globalist."). Circumstances also include those specific to our campus, which serves a largely Latino, largely immigrant and first-generation college student population in

the Bronx. An obvious ramification of these circumstances is the widespread sense among faculty that there needs to be an increased emphasis on language correctness and the forms of academic discourse.

The special history we have to face includes CUNY's place in public higher education, bearing the legacy of a number of its constituent schools that were once perceived to be of high quality yet were also inclusive of students barred from admission at the finest private universities. This is the legacy of Hunter College and Brooklyn College and Baruch College, of the City College of James Traub's *City on a Hill* and the documentary film *Arguing the World*.

This history also includes CUNY's place in the perceived crisis in education that prompted *Newsweek's* 1975 cover article, "Why Johnny Can't Write." The article expressed a widespread anxiety that, in its words, "the U.S. educational system is spawning a generation of semi-literates." This crisis was seen as due in part to the opening of admissions at schools like CUNY in the late sixties and early seventies under student pressure for racial inclusiveness applied, at City College, by the occupation of the admissions building and the burning of the student center in 1969. One administrator's description of his reaction to the fire could stand for that of the College's administration as a whole: "The only question in my mind was, How can we save City College? And the only answer was, Hell, let everybody in" (qtd. in Lavin 13). A less ambiguously positive reaction was that of Mina Shaughnessy, who seized the opportunity presented by an influx of new kinds of students to rethink the way writing was taught and in the process founded the field now known as Basic Writing. This reaction could stand for that of many in the College and the University who welcomed not just inclusion but the kind of institutional and pedagogical change already initiated in the 1965 birth of SEEK, a program whose aim was to assist underprepared New York high school seniors for college.

A third part of CUNY's history is what might be called the closing of open admissions, which occurred in the mid-nineties under Mayor Rudolph Giuliani and the chairman of CUNY's Board of Trustees, Herman Badillo. This closing was effected through a number of changes to admissions policy limiting the entrance of students judged unable to pass remedial exams, the capping of the number of remedial classes that students at the system's four-year colleges could take, and the eventual elimination of such classes from these campuses. The effect was to make open admissions much less open, and it was the desired effect; the goal was to raise standards, and to raise standards required exclusion. A new wave of students flooding into the university's classrooms, largely of Latino origin or descent, was felt to be dragging the university down. Badillo got specific about this wave when, at a Center for Educational Innovation luncheon, he described the Mexican and Dominican immigrants he believed to be causing a

crisis in New York City education as “pure Indians – Incas and Mayans who are about 5 feet tall with straight hair” (Vann). Putting aside the problem of claiming Incan descent for Mexicans and Dominicans, we can see that Badillo’s remarks made plain the exclusionary effects of (if not motivation for) the turn away from the university’s proud legacy of inclusion. Subsequent calls for Badillo’s removal were made by critics who saw not only the disproportionately negative effect of his policies on Blacks and Latinos but also what they claimed was the motivation for the policies, as revealed in these remarks (Arenson, “Officials”).

Reviewing these circumstances and this history should lead us to consider carefully the effects of the ways in which we implement WAC at Lehman and other CUNY campuses and, as we do so, to note the parallels between the issues raised in this effort and those raised in Basic Writing. While the specific needs of student populations like CUNY’s do dictate that formal correctness be addressed in some way, as with Basic Writing, we also need to think about how what we do will fit into CUNY’s history of inclusion and exclusion.

Inspired in the forties and again in the late sixties and early seventies by a vision of inclusion – a utopian vision – CUNY has also been shaped by another vision, equally utopian, one of exclusion. From the Puritans onward, American history has been marked by utopian visions. The New World was ripe, in the European imagination, for cultivation as a new garden, a new Eden of innocence and plenty and moral rectitude. Many of our finest civic ideals come from this vision.

However, many of our least proud moments come from the same source, and have from the beginning. James Traub’s image of the old City College as city on a hill alludes to John Winthrop’s vision for the Puritan settlement of the New World. His vision was of a place that could serve as a shining example for the rest of the world to follow; with this allusion, however, comes another side of the story of America’s early European settlement, the negative aspect of which it was probably not Traub’s intention to invoke. Whether by conversion or killing, the Puritans made plain to the Wampanoag, Narraganset, and Nipmuc that the new American Eden had no room for their cultures. Giuliani and Badillo’s vision for CUNY is often represented in terms of an Eden lost when its gates were forced open. On the occasion in 1999 of the thirtieth anniversary of the City College protests that effectively opened admissions, Badillo commented, “They lowered the standards and lowered the value of a City University diploma.” He characterized the response by Mayor John Lindsay and the CUNY officials to these protests – moving up the opening of admissions five years ahead of schedule – in similar terms: “It was the days of the riots, and they caved in” (Arenson, “Returning”). Badillo’s comments demonstrate that his understanding of the opening of admissions is like the understanding

many have of the social change of the sixties as a loss of Eden; the hoped-for goal, in his vision, is a recreation of a lost place destroyed by the regrettable, radical ideas violently asserted then.

One of Pynchon's themes in *Mason & Dixon* is the recurrence of a pattern of reform and reaction throughout American history. The promise of the New World, of the new nation, of Emancipation, and of the social movements of the sixties, all inspired by the vision of a new Eden, of a perfectible world, were disappointed upon the reassertion, in the name of this same vision, of exclusion, racial, cultural, and otherwise. Pynchon asks us to consider whether the danger of trying to build utopia on earth is that people will always interpret perfection as necessitating exclusion. In our small corner of the world, I would argue, it does not have to. WAC at Lehman has the chance to avoid this pitfall, and other schools facing these same demographic and institutional issues across the country have the same chance. The history of CUNY and of America can serve as reminders not just of how things can go wrong but also of the promise of their going right.

Crucial to that promise is the manner in which we try to achieve it. As David Tyack and Larry Cuban argue in their history of public school reform, *Tinkering Toward Utopia*, educational reform must take place within what they call a basic grammar of schooling – within the systems of administration and practice that make radical reform impossible. Richard Miller, in *As if Learning Mattered*, takes their lesson and applies it to higher education, arguing that the perfect university, as imagined by Paolo Freire or Peter Elbow or whomever, will not suddenly appear, and that actual reform can happen only if we slowly work toward those ideals, within the restrictions of the bureaucracy of which the university is part. Our job at Lehman can be seen in this light. We are working toward institutionalizing particular kinds of classroom practice, based on assumptions about higher education that are themselves founded on beliefs about how the world is and how it should and maybe even could be. Remembering that we are doing this in the not-so-new global economy can help us think about how the shape of our vision influences the shape classroom practice takes. Thinking about the ways Basic Writing has already and continues to deal with similar issues can help us avoid the pitfalls that we might fail to see if we assume that these issues are being confronted for the first time.

The raising of standards at CUNY is designed to make it a university that will provide workers to fill the corporate offices of Wall Street and midtown. This effort, based on its own vision of a perfect university, reflects the danger of exclusion inherent in so much utopian thinking. If we want simply to produce white-collar workers who can take their place in the global economy, we will choose practices that teach students the discourse of whatever discipline is appropriate

to that place. And if we are successful at that, we will have really done something. Helping first generation college students achieve financial security is nothing to sneeze at. But if we stop there, we are excluding students from something.

That something has been described in different ways by different educational critics, including critics of WAC as it is currently practiced. As has been pointed out many times, WAC in practice has often amounted to what C. H. Knoblauch and Lil Brannon have called “grammar across the curriculum” or, when attention is paid to the particular forms of disciplinary writing, “packaging of information across the curriculum” (465). They argue for write-to-learn approaches that will engage students intellectually with their course material. Both write-to-learn and writing-in-the-disciplines approaches to WAC have been criticized for contributing to what Daniel Mahala calls the “formal closure of the intellectual possibilities accessible to the student,” in part because the actual practice of both write-to-learn and also writing-in-the-disciplines approaches are believed to yield to “prevailing institutional divisions, faculty interests, and dominant forms of knowledge making” (782, 781). Susan McLeod and Elaine Maimon have defended existing WAC practice against criticisms that it does not work toward WAC’s stated goals, saying that there are many programs whose approach to WAC is not formalist but epistemological, teaching students not just to be technically competent, to absorb course content more effectively, or to reproduce discourses but rather also to think through them (“Clearing” 580). In this and other arguments against Knoblauch, Brannon, Mahala, and others who criticize the movement with whose birth they are associated, Maimon and McLeod dismiss the criticisms as unsupported empirically and based on “myths” about WAC (“Clearing,” Letters).

Rather than dismiss critiques such as these in defense of the reputation of WAC as a movement, champions of WAC should take note of them. Critics believe that WAC is falling short of its proper goals because, by focusing too narrowly on form, it is failing to encourage critical thinking. By failing to do this, they believe, WAC is falling into the trap of being satisfied with superficial correctness, content-delivery, and mimicry. It is important, in thinking about WAC, composition, and higher education at CUNY and elsewhere, to decide whether the decision to focus on form is simply a pedagogical choice or also a social choice. When our responses to error-ridden writing by underprepared students, in any context, take the form of approaches that fail to address thinking, we need to consider whether in responding in these ways, we exclude students from the world of intellectual inquiry, the world that allows students not just to enter their desired fields to but also to try to reform them if they so wish.

The paradox inherent in the idea of teaching students to think independently is, like many paradoxes, potentially productive. It is a commonplace of the classroom practices sometimes gathered under the rubric of critical teaching, derived from the philosophies of Freire and others, that student empowerment cannot be delivered by the teacher to the student, as knowledge cannot be, but must come out of a devolution of authority from the teacher to the student. The decentered classroom, in which authority over the syllabus, classroom management, and learning itself is shifted largely or in part to students, is commonly thought to construct an environment in which students can empower themselves. Attempting instead to actively teach students to think critically would seem to fly in the face of this now common wisdom and practice; it seems not just self-contradictory but counterintuitive. These two senses of paradox – internal contradiction and opposition to common wisdom – are of course related: if two terms seem to contradict each other when joined it is because of *doxa*, because of commonly held understandings of the world to which the terms, joined, run counter. If it is not a contradiction to teach students to think independently, then perhaps intellectual empowerment can come from others. In fact, maybe it has to.

How, then? One valuable strategy that has been found to help students use their time writing to develop their critical faculties has involved the rethinking of thinking itself. As many in composition have incorporated into their understanding of writing the ideas of poststructuralism, in particular the idea that the individual can be seen not simply as an independent, sovereign consciousness but also as a socially constructed subject, they have changed the way they teach writing. They have tried to apply the idea of the construction of knowledge, of the inheritance of ideas and language that are socially freighted, to the teaching of writing. Seeing students as more written upon than writing, in David Bartholomae's Barthes-inspired formulation (143), has helped composition broaden its understanding of student writing from the picture of individuals creating prose work *de novo* to one that includes the social webs in which they compose their ideas and their expressions of them (Bartholomae, Berlin, Faigley, Susan Miller). Counter to the practice of expressivist and process pedagogies, this pedagogy has focused not on strategies that allowed student writers to free their inner voices but rather on ways that they could engage in and negotiate with preexisting discourses. There is of course a paradox in the idea that students can learn to think outside their inherited, socially constructed worldviews by learning how their worldviews are socially constructed. How can learning how your ideas are determined help you determine your ideas? The poststructuralist *doxa* this paradox runs counter to is the belief that social construction is total and

inescapable. It is an idea that anyone who actually teaches cannot believe. Hidden behind the common wisdom is the realization that recognizing the social construction of discourse is the first step toward critical thought about it, and that this recognition can be shared by teachers with students. Critical thought, then, not only is possible to teach: it must be taught, precisely because the recognition that enables it is inherently so difficult to come by.

The classroom that incorporates these ideas in both reading and writing, encouraging students to see how the work they read, their own work, and even their selves are created in social contexts, is a classroom that encourages critical thinking. This classroom can be even more successful, I would argue, if the teacher spends time revealing his or her own social construction. If the teacher can discuss the limitations and possibilities inherent in his or her own position within a social, institutional, and intellectual context, he or she can help students to think critically by modeling the two-stage process of the recognition and critique of social construction. This is not a move many teachers wish to make, preferring to stay behind the lectern, above the class, demonstrating expertise. Particularly in the disciplines, and especially in disciplines in which ideas about the social dimension of knowledge have not had much impact, this just may not happen much. But when it does, when teachers delve into the history of their disciplines and show the shifts in "truths" and in modes of claiming these truths, teachers can perhaps get students thinking about where their authority and so the authority of other kinds of expertise and power come from. In doing so, they can also demonstrate how these kinds of poststructuralist ideas do not have to be seen as antihumanist (without necessarily having to use the terms). I do not give up my agency and my imagination because I admit that I am not the first to use the words I speak and write. If I let my students see how I am both restricted and enabled by the rhetorical dimensions of the discourses in which I work and even the social position I inhabit, they can begin to consider the same things about their own use of language.

An example from my own teaching experience is a class with a large number of Modern Orthodox Jewish Russian immigrants I taught a few years ago at Baruch College (CUNY). In the course of discussing an assignment which asked them to consider the ways fundamental beliefs can shape perception and action, we took up the issue of the Palestinian/Israeli conflict, and the class found itself frustrated by the views of the Russian students, one of whom repeatedly offered, as justification for Israeli settlements in occupied territory, "It's in the bible." What the class was encountering was the difficulty of stepping back from our own opinions in order to grasp the notion that other people have their own beliefs, which cause them to see the world in ways different from ours. Without asking anyone to question their own fun-

damental beliefs (a request that assuredly would have had no effect), I asked all of us to think about the connections between identity and ideas, between where people come from and how they see what is before them. By putting myself forward as an atheist American Jew, in distinction to this group of students, Russian-American Jews citing Torah in heavy metal t-shirts and skateboard sneakers, I tried to illustrate these ideas, and encourage students to take a step back not so much from their own ideas but more from ideas themselves, to think critically about how we receive ideas and how they affect our worldviews. While many did not, as would be expected, many of them engaged in critical thinking about fundamental things (Cohen).

The benefit of this kind of teaching to writing intensive courses in the disciplines should be evident. Learning the rhetoric of disciplines not as if they were written on high but rather as historically evolved, socially implicated constructions enables students to engage with them on a more sophisticated level. Once on that level, students can think critically not just through the discourses of disciplines but about them. We can think of many common WAC practices in this light, and, rather than trying to radically alter WAC, can tinker with them to push them in this direction. The paradoxical notion of tinkering toward utopia, like the other paradoxes under discussion here, can be productive. That grand ideas require grand plans—that radical social goals necessitate massive social experiments—has been a commonly held notion. That the grand social experiments of the previous century ended in failure has been taken by many to reinforce their belief in the inevitable failure of utopian thinking. That incremental social progress has been made in the direction of utopian goals is not a contradiction but an indication that the world is not an all-or-nothing proposition. You can tinker toward utopia. Some of many possibilities for WAC, but not just for WAC:

Journals: Often used to encourage what Peter Elbow has called low-stakes writing (“High”), they are also sometimes used in more directed ways to respond to or reflect on reading or writing, and can be further directed to encourage critical thinking.

Reading journals are often little more than formalized note-taking and unfocused response. However, they can be assigned in ways that ask students to reflect on their reading in terms of disciplinary rhetoric and intellectual rhetoric generally. What claims are made? With what kind of authority? In what social context?

Writing journals can ask students to perform the same kind of operation on their own writing and the writing of oth

ers. Rather than ask students simply to verbalize their thoughts and feelings in order to free their authentic voices, in the expressivist mode, or to reflect on the progress of their paper-writing, in the process mode, these journals can serve as places in which students consider the claims and contexts of their own writing and that of their peers. From where do they assume their own authority? In what contexts are they making their own claims?

Workshops often become exercises in proofreading and spell checking; alone or in peer groups, students go over their work and end up simply polishing surfaces. Directed exercises can encourage deeper engagement with prewriting and with revision. Students can be asked to consider the ways in which their theses are situated in larger intellectual contexts. They can be prodded to consider the unwritten rules of claim-making, of disagreement, of what is valid support and what is not (e.g., textual versus experiential, academic vs. popular). They can learn to untangle what they know about their subject from direct observation and individual deduction from what they have received from common wisdom, and they can learn to consider the same distinction when they write about others' conclusions. They can learn, in short, to think not just about filling formulas more perfectly but also about the formulas themselves.

These are only a few of the ways in which existing vehicles for writing instruction can be customized. Benefits similar to those of reading journals can be had from short response papers and even short written questions. Both can be assigned in ways that make them little more than demonstrations that students have done the reading, and relative to the pop quiz they are not so bad. They can also serve to reinforce students' grasp of content, also a worthwhile goal. But if assigned in ways that ask for critical response—examination of the assumptions behind readings, of writers' motivations, of generic conventions—these exercises can ask more of students. There are many simple, low-stakes writing techniques that, with a little reworking, can evoke high-stakes thinking. More than simple detailing, this tinkering can turn writing exercises into vehicles that can drive thinking in new directions.

I will offer one example of this kind of pedagogy from my own experience in WAC. For a course in the Lehman College Department of Latin American and Puerto Rican Studies entitled "Latinos in the United States," I ran workshops designed to help students arrive at topics, fine-tune theses, and develop and integrate support for their

term papers. They were to write about any subject concerning the Latino experience in this country, with the requirement that they make an argument about an aspect of that experience that they could back up with data. Their professor had already begun to make the point in class discussion that there was a difference between the anything-goes rule of everyday opinion and the more stringent requirements of intellectual argument. It was clear to me that, even at the start of the semester-long process of putting together these research essays, this point was going to need to be made a number of times. These students needed to become more familiar with the conventions of academic argumentation—thesis, support, citation—and with the finer points involved in situating an argument in a larger intellectual conversation.

The trick, however, was that any subject these students chose would be something they knew a lot about, or thought they did. This preexisting connection with the material—every single student was of Latino descent, and of course lived in the United States—posed a problem, but it also presented an opportunity. The problem was that they might not be able to separate easily the opinions formed over a lifetime spent gaining personal experience, received wisdom, and unexamined stereotypes about these subjects—about their lives—from what is accepted in academic discourse, particularly the scientific discourse of the social sciences. A problem adjunct to this was the danger common to academic socialization in general: that their own experience would be invalidated, that they would feel that their own senses of things would have to be jettisoned if their work were to be accepted. The opportunity was that in negotiating these difficulties, they would be learning the construction of academic discourse, the rules for making and supporting truth claims, against the ever-present counterexample of simple opinion. As a result, they also gained the chance to think critically about this very distinction.

From the first elements of the first workshop, a number of sequenced free writing exercises designed to get them thinking about what they knew and how these different phenomena and concepts were related, the students were confronted with this distinction. When reviewing their clusters, for example, I asked them to think about the lines drawn between circled elements. What was the nature of the connection these lines represented? Were they causal? What were the cause-effect relationships? Were they proven or merely assumed? Over the course of our writing workshops, they engaged with what it means to use authoritative sources, what it means to argue counterintuitively, what it means to argue against received wisdom.

In the course of all this reconsidering, which was the avenue by which they improved the formal structure of their essays and which was also the form taken by their learning the discourse of their discipline, the opportunity arose to question that discourse. Why was per-

sonal experience often seen as not valid? Why, when it was accepted, did it need to be held up by stout buttresses of empirical data? Why did the kinds of knowledge available in literature and popular culture seem to garner so little respect? Questions specific to course content also arose. Who got to speak about the Latino experience in the U.S.? Who among various players in Latino life in New York City – city councilmen and women or former members of the Young Lords, political scientists or poets – could make statements that would be received as authoritative? What kinds of explanations were given the most weight – ones that focused on the state, on political models, or those that focused on economics, or those that focused on ideology? Why?

Many students, of course, declined to seize this opportunity, probably for the reasons that students usually fail to seize such opportunities – time, energy, interest, sophistication. A few may have begun to see the outlines of the conversation emerge. Fewer still, but, still, a few, seemed to be thinking about these questions. If their writing did not always reflect this thinking (though it did reflect attempts at incorporating a variety of sources, or weaving personal experience into more traditionally academic argumentation, or questioning the motivation behind ways of thinking about these things), the thinking was still happening. Even though entire classes could have been devoted to their problems with verb endings, or argument, or to gaps in their knowledge about particular countries or political systems, these students were not steered toward the production of polished work at the perhaps unintended expense of the opportunity of critical engagement with their field.

We are said to value critical thinking very highly these days. We should not, then, treat it as a luxury for students with good English. The current perceived crisis in higher education is no different from that in the seventies or those at the turn of the last century, in the thirties, and after World War II, which were all, as David Russell has pointed out, the result of the influx of new kinds of students, and which also were all impetus for new incarnations of writing in the disciplines (271). This latest incarnation, at CUNY, has the chance to respond to the current perceived crisis in a way that fully addresses its students' needs. That many other institutions in similar situations have this same chance makes our work at this highly visible place potentially valuable. It is valuable to recognize that just as it is exclusionary to institute admission policies that label students remedial and keep them out of CUNY's senior colleges, so it is exclusionary to adopt pedagogies whose only aim is to ensure that students can attain a degree of technical competence sufficient to allow them to achieve a certain level of professional employment. These students, coming, in this global age, from around the globe to get an American education and an American job, deserve more than just that. They deserve admission, and education in

communication skills, but they also deserve an education in critical thinking, in taking apart the rhetorical conventions of discourses, in seeing how received truths and accepted forms are social constructions. They deserve the right to receive this education in WAC, in all writing instruction, in all of their courses. They deserve the chance to ask if the world in which they live is the best of all possible worlds and whether there are ways they might change it.

This is a utopian goal worth tinkering toward. As a once optimistic young man from Westphalia who had given up looking for such a world is supposed to have said, we must cultivate our garden. Some readers interpret *Candide's* final words to represent Voltaire's advice that we give up all thought of utopia, accepting the world as it is, seeing it not as the *best* of all possible worlds, perhaps, but as the best of all *possible* worlds. Others insist that *Candide's* garden is an earthly utopia, and that, while we should be wary of the distraction of empty philosophizing and the futility of grand experiments, we must still work on improving our garden. We cannot create another El Dorado, where the streets are paved with gold and knowledge is the highest pursuit, but we can keep one in mind as a perfection to be slowly, incrementally approached. If we want to reform writing instruction, in whatever forms we practice it, we can tinker toward a more inclusive pedagogy, one that gives students the tools to tinker toward their own utopias in whatever fields in which we try to prepare them to practice. We can encourage students to see how things are made in order to allow them the possibility of remaking them. To do otherwise — to forget the lessons of Basic Writing — is to exclude students from the right to reform on which we insist for ourselves. It is to let them into the garden but make them check their spades at the gate. If we do want to improve our garden, we should want everyone to be a gardener.

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