went homeless for three months and was forced to farm her kids out to friends as she searched for a place. She asked to practice my social language because she was aware of linguistic, racial, and social biases she faced in dealing with landlords. Yes, of course, the onus to change these biases rests on all of our shoulders, not just the individual facing eviction: but practicing sounding white was her only viable option for challenging these power structures at that time. I'm telling this story because I want to show how much Alkidas missed when she said I simply reproduced a power structure. This type of loose critique of power happens so often that we can lose a sense of what power really means, especially to a person staring down the throat of an eviction notice.

When multicultural classrooms grow out of imprecise definitions of power, we can see a vapid free-to-be-you, free-to-be-me multiculturalism that can have very serious shortcomings. For instance, when the 75-year-old woman came to Alkidas' composition class, students asked this visitor—by Alkidas' own admission—presumptuous questions. Alkidas never says if this guest asked questions of the students, or if she was compensated for her time in any way, or if any lasting, meaningful relations were built from this classroom exercise. Instead, we see a woman who looks to be on display as an exotic other. From Alkidas' description, it seems to be put on the spot to expose her life's intimate details. Where's the mutuality here? The reciprocity? The dialogue? As a field, we need to define power in ways that allow us to produce more careful and rich interactions with community members both inside and outside our classroom.

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**Review**

*Gordon M. Pradl*

Teaching and Learning As Part of Whose Conversation?


Students often complain vigorously about my reading of their papers. The diligence of other instructors has led them to expect margins filled with perspicacious responses. Such regular correspondence to and fro seems to satisfy their demand for attention. Indeed, on occasion, I have written back, extensively detailing my judgments, carefully pointing out both gaps and achievements, offering encouragement. I must confess, however, that this has never been a routine I've been able to sustain. Usually, I write few comments in the margins; instead of words, I offer back a peculiar assortment of checks, squiggles, and underlines—marks intended to locate ideas or discrepancies that might later provoke some conversation between us.

Out of step with the current teaching practice of writing long and personal comments in the margins of student papers, and seemingly unable to change my ways, I naturally search for some justification. Why do I feel more useful and engaged with students when talking directly with them about what they've written, rather than merely setting down my thoughts as they occur when reading? Is this a matter of personal style or a lack of discipline? Or is my being at a loss for written words when faced with student writing harboring some hidden complaint about the conditions of

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*Gordon Pradl* is a professor of English Education at New York University, where he has taught since 1971. From 1986-92, he served as director of staff development for NYU's Expository Writing Program. He has co-authored *Learning to Write/Writing to Learn* and edited *Practicing and Assessing Discourses*. His most recent book, *Literature for Democracy*, explores how classroom practices in English can foster democratic approaches to social living.
teaching? What I would like to understand are the obstructions that often work against my entering productive conversations both inside and outside the classroom. What conversations am I afraid of entering?

Talk surrounds us endlessly, but it gets little respect. In the official wisdom of our pragmatic, competitive culture, which rewards efficiency and ever greater rates of productivity, words are suspect. Simply "hanging out" and exchanging them conjures up a vague sense of irresponsible, loose living. Haunting the street corner, chewing the fat, a person has to be up to no good. Indeed, two of our more common aphorisms—"Talk is cheap" and "Actions speak louder than words"—suggest how nervous we are when it comes to honoring what lies at the heart of our social being: the mutual exchange of language. Yet talk is what has given our species its unique survival advantage. The foundation of all reflection, talk has the potential for freeing us from the chains of our immediate perspective, even as it answers our profound need for association and solidarity.

Through talk we become members of groups, which in turn nurture and support our beliefs in the world. Why then have our educational practices so often revered its opposite, silence?

Given our current understanding of language and learning, we would be hard pressed to find educational proposals that do not in some way see the active use of language as crucial to learning. In the last 30 years especially there has been an emphasis on process: the writing and language across the curriculum movement imagines students as animated and involved learners, reading response criticism empowers the interpretations of students, and portfolio assessment involves students in judging their own accomplishments. This ought to be an encouraging state of affairs, the effort at supplanting "transmission" teaching all but successful. Surely, we've reached a new era where learning entails an open dialogue with the sources of authority, where education finally enacts the "uncommon-sense" approaches outlined by John Mayhew among others. Unfortunately, the reality is less inspiring. For social conditions exist that continue to impede the democratic vision that has inspired these educational reforms that would free students from the cell of silence.

The many insights offered by Miles Myers in Changing Our Minds and Arthur Applebee in Curriculum as Conversation allow us to reflect on how good talk is central to democratic education. And this in turn helps us uncover the social demons that continue to haunt educational practice in the United States. Both books, while specifically focused on the teaching of English, engage issues within the larger educational arena, and so it is appropriate to consider how their guiding metaphor would influence what happens in classrooms across the disciplines. For what we are trying to grasp is why our schools for the most part lack the confidence to insist that talk is the medium where much crucial, if unanticipated, learning occurs. What secrets do we fear that talk might uncover?

In his typical free-wheeling and eclectic manner, Miles Myers presents a comprehensive and encyclopedic portrait of the competing versions of literacy that our culture, and thus our educational institutions, provides for its citizens. In the first third of his book, Myers sketches out his history of literacy, which he divides into five periods. The literacy characteristic of each period is related to the prevailing economic and social conditions and is shown to define a particular role for the student and a dominant metaphor for the mind. The history that Myers constructs is grounded in a sense of progress, committed to the idea that each period represents a gain over what came before, because each stage of literacy marks in some way the increasing freedom of the individual. Of course, these gains in autonomy are also related to losses in the sense of community connectedness.

First, 1600-1776, "Oracy or Face-to-Face Literacy" dominated in an agricultural economy built on a network of close community relationships. The student listened and absorbed oral traditions, and the mind was viewed as a memory container. Next, 1776-1864, "Signature and Recording Literacy" held sway as the economy and the population became more mobile. Written records were now important to commerce, so the student became a copier and the mind a muscle to be exercised. Third, 1864-1916, came "Recitation and Report Literacy." In this period, urbanization led to increased social fragmentation and immigrants needed to be "Americanized." With more secular writing appearing in the schools, the student was a reactor and the mind a tabula rasa waiting to be filled by the teacher's inscriptions. Fourth, 1916-1983, a literacy of "Decoding, Defining, and Analyzing" was the standard, as the means of production became completely rationalized and information increasingly centralized. Here we find the student as analyzer and the mind a product of conditioned behavior.

By constructing these four periods with their evident limitations, Myers prepares us for a final development, which he labels "Translation/Critical Literacy" and locates from 1983 to the present. 1983 marks the publication of A Nation at Risk, which focused a national debate on the "fact" that schools were supposedly failing to teach "higher level thinking skills"— whatever they might be. Still, because of the computer and other technological phenomena and a changing world economy, our sense of the complexities of information have been transformed in ways we could not previously have imagined. With text and perspective now pluralistic and radically indeterminate, it is at last time to acknowledge the anticipatory role of the student as contributing interpretation to the text, while viewing the mind as an amalgam of multiple intelligences. Myers uses the term "translation" to emphasize how important it is for citizens to discern
translate the hidden intentions behind all messages, which is another way
of saying success depends on being able to contextualize acts of language
use within the culture. Unfortunately, this label "Translation/Critical Liter-
acy" is not as revealing for his purposes as something like "Context Liter-
acy" might have been, but that's an inherent problem of any label.
Regardless, Myers's point is that the literacies of the previous four periods
ill-prepare students for the present age. Yet, clinging to past certainties, too
many teachers have resisted uniting behind his postmodern approach to
education.

In the remaining two-thirds of Changing Our Minds, Myers enumerates
the distinctive features of "translation/critical literacy." Offering many
examples, along with pointed teaching suggestions, he outlines a literacy
practice that emphasizes individual agency. Yet it is an agency caught in the
endless possibilities and constraints of context. With information now the
result of a complex network of connections and mediations, the student is
an active decision maker and social constructionist. Thus, as Myers argues:

It is the essential task of schools to make students aware of their choices of
speech events and the results of the speech events they choose. The key
point here is that each way of speaking is a way of thinking, and each way of
thinking makes a contribution to our awareness of the world and our ability
to liberate ourselves from some of our own perceptions. (218)

In rich detail, Myers discusses the various elements that contribute to the
speech events that citizens must negotiate if they are not to remain at the
margins of today's dominant social conversations. We must handle alter-
nate sign systems, for instance, so literacy can no longer be confined to just
reading and writing. Further, attention must be paid to how our commu-
nications are influenced by style, mode, and stance. Reading a Jane Austen
novel will be endlessly distinguished from designing a computer manual or
speaking up at a public meeting in favor of a drug-free zone
surrounding the local elementary school. Myers' comprehensive picture of
the ways contemporary culture represents and transforms experience is an
impressive synthetic effort of categorization: his book offers no fewer than
eleven schematic tables and diagrams to illustrate the full results of his tax-
onomie enthusiasms.

The broad picture that Myers describes allows us to see the whole pan-
orama of literacy from invented spelling (another matter, of course, before
the writing system was conventionalized) to the problem of voice and
identity (who we will choose to be in our role as writer or reader). Myers'
lesson focuses on the idea that literacy as a concept is not some static en-
tity of mind and behavior; rather, it is mutually constructed and thus must
be viewed in terms of each group's world beliefs and corresponding educa-
tional agenda. Often public communication breaks down precisely because
literacy is seen as an absolute instead of a particular way of understanding
language use as it bears on one's economic and social needs. Myers' fluid,
contextualist view stands in marked contrast to those who dogmatically
compartmentalize literacy definitions while raging away in the culture
war debates about America's educational future.

Given earlier, less complicated definitions of literacy, the schools have
indeed performed admirably, as Myers amply demonstrates. In each peri-
od, the literacy that predominates is that which proves adequate for an
average person to gain a modicum of economic and social success. Current
conditions, however, demand more advanced skills and attitudes, and thus
Myers is prodding the educational establishment to champion a more
complex definition of literacy, and in the process persuade citizens to allo-
cate the necessary resources and commitments to make this shift possible.
Out-of-date anthologies and desks all-in-a-row will no longer suffice. Sub-
stantive inquiry needs to hallmark each course of study. Administrators
must act on the researched fact that learning does significantly improve
when class size is decreased. Not only will the new literacy require the
wiring of every classroom so all students might have access to the informa-
tion superhighway, it will also entail any number of innovative connec-
tions between the classroom and the surrounding community. In this way
reading and writing competence will be intimately related to the meaning-
making and power conversations of the working adult world.

Yet none of this will ever be realized, it seems, because from the begin-
ning particular groups were already commanding the fifth plateau of criti-
cal literacy, even if they had yet to attain the postmodernist world view that
in some circles currently accompanies it. This means that privileged indi-
viduals in society always had the power of "conversation" and the preroga-
tives that accompanied it—and they have seldom been in a sharing mood.
Given the obvious advantages such "translation/critical literacy" holds, es-
pecially in passing on education and financial resources to the next genera-
tion, the critical American question faced by members of the governing
class grows out of the tension between consolidating their power and
wealth or distributing it more widely and in some equitable, democratic
fashion. The American story of economic and political progress has gener-
ally leaned in the latter direction. Wisely, this "official" narrative leaves the
contradictions of upward distribution shrouded in secrecy—for instance, in
school, the story of labor's fortunes remains untold, because the perspec-
tive of history continues to be dominated by the captains of industry.

In Curriculum as Conversation, Arthur Applebee's story also depends on
the idea of progress as he traces a history of educational thinking that be-
gins with the deadly traditions of a frozen, hierarchical curriculum. In his
concise, lucid tract, Applebee offers a valuable synthesis of the extensive project of instructional inquiry he has been carrying out with Judith Langer since the late 1970s. By demonstrating how schools emphasize “knowing” at the expense of “doing,” Applebee argues that, in remaining tied to structures tightly organized around the “orderly” development of subskills, we miss the larger picture of implication and meaning. Everywhere teaching and learning is filled with boundaries—possibility is continually dampened by exclusion.

As Applebee notes, students “begin school with considerable interest and enthusiasm, but they grow increasingly disillusioned with all subjects as they progress” (33). When the materials of learning are rendered out-of-context, there is little opportunity for students “to enter on their own into our vital academic traditions of knowing and doing” (33). The all too prevalent thinking that has dominated our approaches to curriculum organization find their parallel in the divisive community zoning laws which, as James Kunstler notes, have wreaked havoc on the positive ways we would normally juxtapose and integrate our public/private living spaces. The tragedy is that our grand intellectual taxonomies often end by promoting fragmentation, as they mark out competing visions of how to zone the curriculum. Concepts and categories, it seems, can murder to dissect.

In place of this outmoded tradition, Applebee encourages us to acknowledge that in fact what we know about the world is never static, and how we know it requires us to enter the ongoing conversations that constitute any genuine inquiry:

The kinds of learning that matter for our schools and colleges represent traditions of knowledge-in-action. These traditions are dynamic and changing acquired through participation, and oriented toward present and future rather than past. In learning to participate in these traditions, an individual is taking on a dynamic set of tools for being in and making sense of the world. Any conception of education that strips these tools of their contexts or focuses on their past rather than their present relevance and future potential, will be debilitating for the individual and for society as well (270).

In short, Applebee is rightly concerned with turning the typical educational monologue into a continuing dialogue, one which acknowledges that the categories we invent to stabilize our understanding are useful only to the extent they are open to new evidence and experience. Like Myers, Applebee would take us beyond the catechism approach to learning by supporting strategies that trigger a student’s own initiatives. And to illustrate this conversational vision, Applebee offers several classroom portraits gathered from demographic work carried out by the National Research Center on Literature Teaching and Learning, which he directs.

The teaching/learning challenge set by Applebee and Myers obliges us to consider what constitutes a productive conversation. A good conversation is the original virtual reality. Talk that imagines and evolves in improvisational playfulness, like jazz, has its determining coordinates, but it is not controlling. It provides an important space that propels our intellectual/emotional connections forward—a definition of learning itself. The back-and-forth quality of talk links us and our ideas with others—even the impersonal Internet developed chat rooms to reconcile the faceless digits of modern technology with our deep need for human contact. The written analogue to a conversation is the rambling essay proper, not the tightly constructed evidentiary argument. This means that inclusion, with its resultant cacophony, must be a central value, if classrooms are to enact a democratic perspective on conversation.

The kind of talk that interests us in the classroom blends equal parts engagement and disturbance. Conversation is like riding the crowded subway cars of New York City in contrast to isolating oneself in an automobile, even when it is caught in some never ending traffic jam. Because conversations are inherently unstable, continually inviting us, as Myers underscores, to change our minds, they threaten the security we’ve already worked diligently to accumulate. Thus, if we have not from the beginning been acculturated to unpredictable shifting and moments of self-doubt and self-exposure, we will resist entering the uncertainty of the conversational space, believing such resistance the result of our “natural” opposition to change and confrontation.

Conversation is difficult to promote because of its provocative nature. We may not choose to be irritated or agitated, but if our talk is to be productive there must be innovation and chaos, vibrant manifestations of our spirit of drama and desire. Still, some order and coherence are also necessary if participants are not to give up in utter confusion and frustration. Finding a proper balance, without absolute rules or prescribed procedures, can exhaust the most committed teacher. Thus, significantly, in outlining his approach to curriculum, Applebee strategically draws on the work of H. P. Grice, the philosopher of language, who weighs in on the side of order and coherence.

Grice’s “cooperative principle” (all parties should be sincere in their participation, genuinely intending to mean what they say), governs this model of conversation, and it is followed by four conversational maxims. First is quantity: contributions should not include more information than is required. Applebee places this second in his list, telling us that in the curriculum there should not “be too much material to cover” or dialogue will be “supplanted by monologue” (56). Second, which Applebee places first, is quality: “contributions to the conversion must be clear and accurate, sup-
ported where appropriate by relevant argument and evidence (53). Third, the translation (relatedness) suggests that participants “be relevant.” In Applebee’s view, the curriculum needs to be organized around themes that establish “a unified topic of conversation that is then explored through a variety of interrelated activities” (60). Finally, comes manner. Avoid obscurity and ambiguity—be brief, orderly, perspicuous. This Applebee takes as suggesting that instruction be “geared to helping students enter into the curricular conversation” (62). The contributions made by teachers and students alike are “linked to an anticipation of the [other’s] reaction” (63).

While Grice’s congruent structure of conversation is difficult to argue against, it is not exactly a script calculated to foster change, however gradual. Instead what needs emphasizing is the mess—mixed motives, unrealized intentions, crafted manipulations, irony, playfulness. How, for instance, can we always mean what we say if we don’t yet know what we mean? Grice would avoid any grammar of surprise or whimsy. Sticking to the transparent, ping-pong-ball model of communication, what he recommends only serves as a foil for the real thing, unless the real thing is presumed to be the well-ordered teacher-led discussion.

Grice’s model of conversation would validate the doctrine of the center where we’re all supposed to work openly in tolerance of differing opinions. This may work well enough in small scale, homogeneous settings—a local suburb deciding where to locate its recycling facility can negotiate the resistance “not in my neighborhood, you don’t,” or a small group of students can decide on a project to complete together. At larger, more heterogeneous levels of human organization, however, the logic of the center masks the real winners and losers in a series of what are labeled euphemistically democratic “compromises.” The system is supposed to be workable when we rally round the middle in our deliberations. Unfortunately, this strategy prevents us from asking, whose center? It blocks us from acknowledging which groups the center is silencing. In contrast, the conversational problem in the realm of education is how to support a culture of raucous confrontation. No one gets to leave the room just because there are deep disagreements or irreconcilable differences. Such a struggle entails finding ways to move beyond the etiquette of courtesy and gentility in order that such disturbances, so necessary for the furtherance of democracy, may be articulated. Without this kind of conversation the power and privilege behind our decision processes will never be exposed.

But perhaps first seeing conversation as order cases the psychological and emotional transition to disorder, which in turn begins a new cycle of consolidation. A conversation of provocation in many subtle ways enacts a calculus of change. It allows for an evolving “goodness of fit” to suit the circumstances. By not pre-selecting answers, participants learn to modify their expectations based on emerging consequences. The uncertainty entailed does not mean evidence or reasoning are irrelevant; it just means no position is privileged in advance. The art of conversation knows no particular beginning—we wait until a moment of association allows us to enter the flow. Nor is there any particular ending, and it is this characteristic of conversation that can completely disorient the routines of schooling. Terry Eagleton, for instance, in proposing that our supposedly ideology-free approaches to English studies be replaced by a comprehensive theory of discourse, points to the dislocating possibilities of conversation:

If you allow a lot of young people to do nothing for a few years but read books and talk to each other then it is possible that, given certain wider historical circumstances, they will not only begin to question some of the values transmitted to them but begin to interrogate the authority by which they are transmitted (200).

Is this why silence is preferable to letting students actually talk back to the curriculum?

The vision put forth by Myers and Applebee—education as an extended conversation—is certainly one that progressive educators can rally behind. While technology and our academic categories have dramatically changed since Dewey’s day, this educational program of critical involvement continues in his conversational spirit. Nor will anyone aware of the recent “deconstructions” of language, culture, and communication be surprised at this defense of active and responsible teaching and learning. Still, until we talk honestly about our conflicting social/political philosophies, we will make little progress in opening up the conversation for all students.

Two things seem clear. First, the progressive project in education is driven by a deep-seated belief in democratic equity and justice. Despite imperfect conditions, the desire is to institute practices that will unmask privilege that is unearned and unwarranted and thereby contribute to the wider participation of all citizens in the bounty of our society. Such a mission, however, continues to be thwarted by special interests, who would prefer to maintain their hegemony cloaked in silence. Which raises the second point. The intellectual and interpersonal skills and strategies championed by the progressives (their conversational vision) are also seen by the managerial class as indispensable to the running of our economy. The danger from their point of view, is keeping these skills and strategies in check, so they might be used to stoke the economic engine, not to criticize the macro-structures that ensure less than full access to all citizens.

While it is never the intention of progressives to have their programs compromised in this fashion, by remaining silent about social realities in the classroom, the benefits of a progressive education in turn become
unequally distributed. Accordingly, Myers’ notion of a complex, multi-faceted literacy and Applebee’s dynamic model of the curriculum can be seen as an argument for efficiency or instrumentalism in education. A more technologically advanced workplace and fierce world-wide competition for markets requires more highly skilled workers who are comfortable solving problems and adapting to ever changing situations. Higher-level educational goals cannot be achieved without some commitment to “translation/critical literacy” or “knowledge-in-action.” But all this is in the service of those controlling the economy; it’s not building a more equitable society capable of benefiting all citizens. What’s a radical educator to do? For certainly, few communities (residential, political, professional) want to suffer the pain that would be stirred up were teachers to insist that learning be integrated with an ongoing critique of special interest economies.

In quoting Ortega y Gasset, “Each people leaves some things unsaid in order to say others” (191). Myers shows he is aware of the philosophical bind that occurs when “translation/critical literacy” confronts the fairness doctrine. Grounded in his own labor experience, Myers acknowledges our dilemma, that the issue of education and democratic access is finally a matter of economic distribution. But as usual, he remains optimistic, believing that “in the 1990s, a new legal theory of equity is beginning to emerge—one based on learning opportunity” (116). Such a movement, for instance, involves taking on the issue of local school funding, exposing the inherent unfairness of the long standing system of basing per-pupil expenditures on what local property taxes are able to generate. For shouldn’t this be a genuine entitlement, that all students are due an equal education, one that allows each to become a functional worker and citizen? Surely, despite our overwhelming social difficulties, the United States continues to be blessed with more than adequate economic, cultural, and intellectual resources to guarantee such an entitlement. The problem is how to overcome the gross inequities, the poverty, that our social myths have come to “naturalize.” For, as Garry Wills notes:

If there were any kind of left in this country, we would not put up with a situation in which CEOs make 225 times the compensation given to average employees under them, or in which the top 1 percent of the population owns 48 percent of the nation’s financial wealth, while the bottom 80 percent owns only 6 percent (16).

By organizing his book around competing versions of literacy, Myers has indirectly uncovered the crucial binary dimension of literacy, regardless of what state of economic and political development a society has reached. Literacy at every period can be seen as working in one of two directions, yielding either a literacy of control or a literacy of transformation. In the first case, literacy provides a skill for people to carry out their assigned tasks within a social system already in motion. These skills may be very high level, but there is no sense in which the system itself is ever scrutinized. A literacy of transformation, in contrast, exercises an awareness of language to question existing hierarchical arrangements. For, as Robert Pattison explains in his book On Literacy (perhaps the most generative of all the books written on the subject, but curiously ignored by Myers), “literacy is a potent form of consciousness” (x). Its potency derives from its reflexive quality, David Bartholomae has described this as a state “in which the text continually refers to its own language and to the language of others” (153). Through such recursive awareness, we come to leverage our consciousness of discrepancy between the world and the languages we’ve constructed to represent it. In this way, a literacy of transformation unites critical analysis with ethical practice and thus continually examines issues of social justice so individuals might continue to transform their current conditions.

From a transformational perspective, Myers’ educational proposals are neither value neutral nor descriptively “natural.” For Myers wants us to recognize that “our notions of writing fluency are not just matters of cognition; they depend quite deeply on who gets the appropriate tools to engage in the practice” (48). He is deeply concerned about social conditions and wants to make it clear he is not suggesting that literacy policies alone solve problems of family support. About one-third of our students at every age level come to school without both parents living in the home, and when both parents do live in the home, it’s often the case that they both must work to support the household. Neither will these policies alone give everyone a job. (284)

Literacy policy, in other words, cannot be separated from the larger social struggle. This leads Myers to acknowledge undemocratic conditions like the obscene income gap:

The huge changes in distribution of wealth, with the rich getting richer, the poor getting poorer, and the large middle disappearing, is a scandal that no literacy program alone can correct. Furthermore, as long as most citizens do not understand what is happening, economic disparities are also not likely to be corrected with tax policies and programs for redistributing wealth. (284)

Myers’ position suggests that educational action must be tied to re-thinking the distribution metaphors that dominate much of the conceptual apparatus in our culture. For here we are faced with yet another paradox. When it comes to exploiting their natural resources, Americans
historically have seldom been concerned about limits or "scarcity." Once one forest was cut down or "harvested," you moved on to the next. Further, the myth of equality and opportunity grounded in individual initiative conveniently masked the reality of who was accumulating what as a result of all this harvesting. And besides a panorama of seemingly endless growth muzzled any skeptics who realized the eventual reality of limits.

Yet even while all this wealth was being produced a contrasting version of scarcity developed, one which caused us to accept as "natural" the existence of gross human disparities. Despite there being enough goods and services to go around, a notion of scarcity determined who had earned the right to these goods and services. In a "classless" society, the distinctions of status that those of privilege required could be drawn only if "scarcity" confirmed that not everyone can belong. With such thinking in place, those in the governing class had an ideal cover for not sharing the wealth. Protected from having to scrutinize the philosophical basis for access to goods and services, they could continue to play their zero-sum games, embracing a winner-take-all politics and a one-way conversation.

To be sure, this version of the "scarcity" myth, and the distribution disparities it sanctions, is deeply ingrained in our social consciousness. If we believe everyone must first prove deserving before they reap any economic benefits (which in an age of limits becomes converted into "there's simply not enough to go around"), those in control are justified in dampening expectations in order to keep social unrest at a minimum and preserve the "moral" order. Myers, for instance, refers to several British leaders in the early nineteenth century who "opposed print literacy for the mass population because" they concluded that "ignorance was the only opiate capable of making the poor accept the 'miseries' and 'drudgeries' of their lives." Today, perhaps, few would voice openly such an opinion; however, the reality of employment conditions lead some to argue that the "higher-order skills...are so rare in the U.S. workplace that teaching them to students could flood the job market with overqualified workers." Instead we should be satisfied with the fact that "more jobs are expected to be available in eating and drinking establishments than in high-tech industries." (112.)

For some reason, we're not supposed to use our "translation/critical literacy" to examine closely the conditions that allow billionaires to escape the tax collector by fleeing to offshore islands. We're not to question how it is that the rich can continue to blithely deny the social fabric that contributed significantly to their wealth in the first place. Nor are we to distinguish between those who invest and those who work for a living. Harping on such divisions might cause us to rethink our "interests" with respect to such features of their economy as what is a tolerable rate of inflation. For instance, as Robert Pollin points out:

Creditors, who tend to be wealthy people, lose in inflation, as the purchasing power of the dollars they are owed declines. Debtors, who are disproportionately non-wealthy people, correspondingly benefit. This explains the adamant opposition of Wall Street today to falling unemployment rates that might then produce an uptick in the inflation rate. (22)

Accordingly, we're to avoid the reality that "full employment" is probably much less than 85%, and thus we remain stuck with the idea that the five-day, forty-hour work week is somehow sacred (conveniently forgetting how dramatically we've already modified such conventions since the nineteenth century). We're not allowed to propose a social contract that guarantees meaningful work for everyone because conventional ruling wisdom tells us that such a contract would place too much upward pressure on wages and lead to an inappropriate downward distribution of wealth into the hands of those who do not spend wisely. But in each case whose interests are being served?

In short, we're forbidden to use literacy to reveal the secret of how excess profits continue to be concentrated in ways that undemocratically influence the exercise of political power. As former senator Bill Bradley intones,

Money is distorting democracy now. Money not only determines who wins, but often who runs. If you've got a good idea and $10,000 and I've got a terrible idea and $1 million, I can convince people that the terrible idea is a good one. (tqtd. in NY Times 8 Sept. 1996: 26)

The classroom, we are warned, is just not the appropriate forum for considering such corruptions, because it is feared that making an issue of the gross economic and class distinctions that currently characterize our society could potentially divide us, especially when nothing is to be done about such a "natural" phenomenon. And so when a distinction is to be identified and confronted (for how better to encourage the practice of "translation/critical literacy"), we mostly settle on other identity markers from race to gender. As important as these markers are in denoting prejudice and discrimination, they also serve conveniently to deflect attention away from how money and influence have come to be concentrated in capitalist economies. Afraid of what critical conversation might stir up, the schools have generally resisted engaging in conversation to the extent that such talk throws light on existing hierarchies and challenges the way power is currently distributed—including the teacher's power. Will any of us dare ask the question: Who gets to speak to whom about what?

In thinking about pluralism and the value of tolerance, I have often concluded that to encourage democracy in my classroom I need to keep a
strong focus on understanding the "other's" perspective so that together we might negotiate our differences and live in some semblance of harmony. This approach breaks down, however, when out of "politeness" I let the realities of economic class go unnoted—despite its long tradition as a sociological category. Any mention of inequity and I risk being branded as a "class baiter" and "unAmerican." In this light it is crucial to reflect on the consequences of not having "had an acceptable rhetoric for expressing social discontent against the rich since President Roosevelt's mild, meliorist language about "economic realists" in the depths of the Depression" (Wills 16). Are not all the slogans of opportunity, hard work, upward mobility and a big tent that can bridge racial or ethnic barriers, even gender or sexual orientation or age—not all these irrelevant when faced with the reality that the governing class has deliberately turned literacy toward their own ends? Should one not conclude that the transformational potential of "translation/critical literacy" has become dissipated when pluralism is only an excuse for following the invisible dictates of the dominant economic class? We're supposed to change our minds, they get to keep theirs.

How decisive a tactic Persuade us that their interests are everyone's interests because someday we might share in their privilege if only we would be patient. In addition, continue to fuel anti-government attitudes at all levels. For roundly attacking the existence of the IRS or the Regulatory Agencies or the Public Schools, instead of vigilantly keeping these governing processes under constructive scrutiny, weakens the one institution that might produce more fairness and justice in our society. However, gradually. Certainly don't rock the boat. Keep the dangerous rhetoric of folks like Susan Ohanian sadly mugled at the margins.

I think it is dishonest to imply that we haven't had standards before now: it is dishonest to imply that twelve language arts teachers will lift students out of poverty; it is morally bankrupt to cooperate with politicians and industrial CFOs in preaching "world class standards" without addressing the real problems of greed and poverty. (40)

Wait your turn to run on their carefully leveled playing field, the great leveller supposedly being education, which in turn will provide all students with "translation/critical literacy."

In his influential essay on how "basic writers" might become members of professional discourse communities, "Inventing the University," David Bartholomae writes that "to argue that writing problems are also social and political problems is not to break faith with the enterprise of cognitive science" (143). From one perspective, Bartholomae's analysis can be seen as devaluing the cultures expressed in the voices and concerns of the very students he is seeking to help—acquiring an academic register can be one powerful strategy for rendering class interest silent. I would, however, read Bartholomae from another direction, using him to clarify why the current academic conversation is generally closed to these students. The key is privilege:

The writer who can successfully manipulate an audience... is a writer who can both imagine and write from a position of privilege. She must, that is, see herself within a privileged discourse, one that already includes and excludes groups of readers. She must be equal to or more powerful than those she would address. The writing then, must somehow transform the political and social relationships between students and teachers... The problem of audience awareness, then, is a problem of power and linesse. (40)

Construing the educational problem in this manner immediately signals its economic dimension—full student access will never be the product of pure educational thinking. For, as I have been arguing, any proposal for educating students that does not entertain their material circumstances fails to pass the privilege test, and thus leaves the conversational mission defeated in advance. Providing "translation/critical literacy" in a curriculum of conversation for students who have already had the experience of privilege is something we've accomplished quite well so far and we'll continue to do so. Creating conditions of privilege for those who have been excluded from the American dream—well that's a different matter. Unfortunately, we've become conditioned to believe these students require some as-yet-undiscovered teaching method if we are to be successful. Accordingly, it's easy to admonish ourselves for the compounded failures of schooling. Getting us to view these failures solely as some form of literacy problem is therefore yet another brilliant reversal that serves entrenched ruling interests.

Certainly these issues are not simple. For every argument I'd like to make on the economic/political front, I can immediately imagine any number of objections that we are not qualified to venture outside the safe confines of the education arena. Still, as Keith Gilyard recognizes, we should not "adopt a politically neutral posture, which, by now we understand is not an apolitical stance at all, merely one that reflects an unwillingness to articulate political persuasion." Teachers, he argues, "should embrace the honesty that comes with delineating their political views. The point is truly to model mature literacy, to show that literacy always means something in particular." (42). Is it possible to imagine what would happen if teachers helped students understand their own interests? Can we provide more for our students than the isolating conversations of a literacy of control?
Conversations finally are about relationships, which we need to keep comprehensive and reciprocal if democracy is to work. Literacy in the classroom, unfortunately, does not always support this dynamic. It frequently advances distinctions that marginalize people, that limit their access. To see education otherwise perhaps requires too dramatic a shift. But without such a shift, Applebee’s conversation curriculum will remain a form without substance, and Myers’ literacy proposals will merely provide the latest checklist to strengthen how we already go about educating the privileged. Are any of us willing to face the social implications of providing all students with a literacy of transformation, where questions are asked for answers not known in advance? When no one requires having the last word?

Works Cited


Recent Books


This is not simply another of the many multicultural readers for composition courses now flooding the textbook market, but is rather an exceptional attempt to realize the pedagogical implications of current cultural theory. Its apparatus is organized around the assumption that in order to communicate in the “overlapping discourse communities” that comprise a society, language users must learn the rhetorical strategies that constitute what Mary Louise Pratt calls “the arts of the contact zone,” the arts of negotiating the unequal distribution of power that is inherent in cultural conflict and interaction. Negotiating Difference contains six sections of readings that offer different perspectives on issues associated with moments of cultural conflict and interaction. Negotiating Difference contains six sections of readings that offer different perspectives on issues associated with moments of cultural conflict and interaction in American history—those experienced by puritan settlers, those associated with the anti-slavery movement and the woman’s movement, and those concerning the distribution of wealth and class in the industrial age, the internment of Japanese citizens during World War II, and the responses to the Viet Nam war. Each section includes sample assignment sequences and a “research kit” designed to assist students in learning to research each of the respective topics. Negotiating Difference can serve not only as a useful text for college writing courses but also as a reader for courses in American Studies.


Written as an introduction for undergraduates to the conventions and practices of research, this latest in the series on Chicago Guides to Writing, Reviewers for this issue included Gary Calpas, Jack Hart, Amy Murray, Kurt Simonds, Anne Storr, and Matt Wilkin.