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**Class Indifference - A Divided Nation : Finding Common Ground  
Through American Pragmatism and Democratic Principles in the  
Composition Classroom**

Stacey L. Morrison

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CLASS INDIFFERENCE – A DIVIDED NATION: FINDING COMMON GROUND  
THROUGH AMERICAN PRAGMATISM AND DEMOCRATIC PRINCIPLES IN  
THE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

by

(Stacey L. Morrison)

A Master's Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of  
Montclair State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

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CLASS INDIFFERENCE – A DIVIDED NATION: FINDING COMMON GROUND  
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COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

ABSTRACT

Social class plays a significant but often silent part in American politics, lives, and education. As the events of Hurricane Katrina clearly illustrate, the poor and working class often suffer discrimination that leaves them completely powerless. Their position in life shapes not only how they are seen and treated, but also how they see their world. Their cultures differ markedly from middle and upper class cultures, further alienating them from possible greater personal achievement in a system that champions middle-class values. Education, being a microcosm of our society, mirrors our class conflicts, often failing to teach working-class students in an equal and fair manner, particularly in English composition courses. Increasing numbers of working-class students are attending college and with this large influx of often under-prepared students, educators must first understand the nature of class issues in America in order to more fairly address teaching these students.

This paper addresses the undeniable connections between American history, politics, and education. It examines the cultural barriers that played a part in the Katrina disaster, drawing a parallel between the suffering of the New Orleans underprivileged and working-class and the widespread class issues that affect the entire nation. I offer an examination of

class issues: what affects the individual working-class student's ability to learn, teacher superiority based on social class, the need for educators to respect the values of their working-class students, and a call for more democratic and less authoritarian classrooms. I attempt to define the term "working-class" and discuss their distinct use of restricted language codes, which separates them from the middle-class who use elaborated codes, terms first coined by linguist Basil Bernstein. I discuss the difference in values between the classes and why this makes it difficult for working-class students to learn and achieve. A number of experts in the fields of linguistics, anthropology and psychology have studied class in America and I refer to these experts in my arguments.

I further discuss the different methods of teaching, described as "inner-directed" and "outer-directed" language theories by Patricia Bizzell, and discuss the pros and cons of these methods. I argue for the need for democratic inclusion in the classroom, a principle more eloquently described by Paulo Freire, one of the leading educational theorists revered by so many of the other scholars referred to in this paper. To some extent, I discuss practical methods or approaches to be used in the college composition classroom to better educate the working-class, as well as discuss the faults I have seen in some of the current college composition classroom curriculum.

Throughout the paper, I insist that a general philosophy of education must be implemented, rather than a piece-meal attack on social class through hit and miss efforts. American pragmatism, a distinctly American philosophy formed at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, promotes understanding for the purpose of enabling the individual and providing for the betterment of society. John Dewey applied the principles to education then, and a return to the basis of that humanistic, heuristic philosophy could ground our approaches to

education, particularly higher education, so that we might more fairly and democratically teach working-class students in America.

CLASS INDIFFERENCE – A DIVIDED NATION: FINDING COMMON GROUND  
THROUGH AMERICAN PRAGMATISM AND DEMOCRATIC PRINCIPLES IN THE  
COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of the Masters in English,  
Concentration in Writing Studies

By

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Montclair State University

Montclair, NJ

2007

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CONTENTS

Abstract	1-3
Thesis Signature Page	
Title Page: Class Indifference – A Divided Nation: Finding Common Ground Through American Pragmatism and Democratic Principles in the Composition Classroom	4
Copyright Page	5
Thesis Text	6-54
Bibliography/Works Cited	65-69



On August 29<sup>th</sup> 2005, Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast of the United States. The devastation to the area is, of course, well known and well documented. But the catastrophic event caused more than the terrible toll of death and destruction. It swept in a tide of change. It can reasonably be argued that the poor response of the federal government changed the minds of the American public about the Bush administration. George W. Bush's poll ratings never recovered and a Democratic majority took both the House and the Senate for the first time in eight years in the year following the disaster. For many people, including myself, Hurricane Katrina illuminated much more than the poor disaster relief response; it has shed a blinding light on class difference and indifference in America.

New Orleans, Louisiana is a microcosm of some of the worst inequalities in our nation, and particularly in the American education system. Similarly, the individual classroom reflects not only the problems of our educational system, but of the nation. The problems manifesting themselves in teaching are derived from larger social and political inequities, especially in the English classroom, where rhetoric and writing are so obviously tied to our understanding of the world and each other. Class, as a factor in social interaction and cultural attitudes, shapes the reality of the classroom, New Orleans, and the nation. It can no longer be ignored, anymore than we as Americans can ignore the outcome of class-based injustice in the horror that was Katrina or in our very democracy itself. We must take a new holistic view of the silent class problem haunting the nation, especially in regard to literacy and education, a view that incorporates history, philosophy, anthropology, and situates this issue in the political and social context from which it comes.

Class injustice is silently destructive until a catastrophe like Katrina washes away daily social convention to reveal the ugliness of indifference. Class has become a silent accepted prejudice in America, one that must be revealed and studied in order to act upon it. We must find a philosophical foundation, a bedrock, to initiate deep and profound change. One means of implementing change may be revisiting American pragmatism, a wholly American philosophy. William James first defined the philosophy in his 1907 book Pragmatism. His contemporary, John Dewey, embraced it as well as in his prolific writings, championing pragmatism as he acted as an ardent reformer of the early American public education system. An applied philosophy that studies social and political problems in order to bring about change, pragmatism is a uniquely optimistic philosophy whose time has come again.

Historian James Kloppenberg writes: "Pragmatists distrusted all forms of foundationalism...rather than grounding values in...time absolutes, they urged us to evaluate all of our beliefs – philosophical, scientific, religious, ethical, and political – before the test they considered most demanding of all: our experience as social and historical beings"(102). In Pragmatism, William James explains the American philosophy, that pragmatism is "mediator and reconciler...is willing to take anything, to follow either logic or the senses and to count the humblest and most personal experience"(52). This is exactly the point. In a country increasingly divided by class, race, and political divisiveness, we need to take all of our human experience as valid, not just that of some people. Indifference to the realities of the poor and working class in New Orleans brought about the enormous tragedy that followed the breaking of the levees. In pragmatism, reality and human experience is the greatest measurement of what is true. If we are to change the future, especially the education

of our children, we must value the truths of human experience differently. How we affect those we teach must be a result of the understanding of the value of their experience and the validity of differing viewpoints, truth being found in what consistently produces the most good.

As any pragmatist would agree, social and political change is a constant factor in the reality of subsequent generations, including this one. In The Great Deluge, historian Douglas Brinkley describes a city with such a short-sighted view of the future, from the local economy to the schools to the crucial levee system, that it led to the slow decline of a major city and eventually to one of the nation's worst disasters. New Orleans lost over 150,000 people starting in the 1960s as corporations left, service-oriented tourism became a mainstay of the city's economy, and oil interests moved to Texas. Though a small old blue-blood upper-class still continues to exist in what locals call "the sliver by the river", which includes the French Quarter, Uptown and the Garden District, increasingly the pre-Katrina city had become populated by the poor, African-Americans, and the elderly. Douglas states:

New Orleans had a higher proportion of people living below the poverty line (27.9 percent in 1999) than similar-sized cities ....Once whites left for the suburbs, public schools became an abomination....African Americans constituted 67.3 percent of the population, whites 28.1 percent....The core of the city, built geopolitically in concentric circles around the mansion residents, the tourism world, and the shipping industry, rarely took the poverty stricken neighborhoods into account.

Brinkley describes the bleak lives of these under-educated working class and poor citizens, those who would be trapped in New Orleans with no way out once the levees broke.

He writes, "Even outside of the projects, there was an imprisoned quality to life for the poor blacks. Housing was relatively inexpensive in New Orleans...but it tended to be flimsy wood-frame construction that would be considered substandard in other cities (47). Brinkley quotes Eric Dyson's post-Katrina study on race relations, Come Hell or High Water: "New Orleans has a 40 percent literacy rate; over fifty percent of black ninth graders won't graduate in four years "(qtd. in Brinkley 47). With the United States renown for a democratic government and free enterprise economy that encourages ambition, champions the underdog, and propagates the idea that anyone can succeed, how is it that such a large number of citizens in a major American city are so poorly educated and living at subsistence level?

The message of Spike Lee's HBO documentary *When the Levees Broke* and Douglas Brinkley's epic book The Great Deluge is that the magnitude of the disaster, the sheer horrific scope of the human cost in lives and suffering was man-made, a result of greed, short-sighted planning for personal political gain, and above all, indifference: indifference by an African-American former-businessman mayor, indifference from a new and insecure female governor, and indifference from a federal administration and their arm FEMA that was all media manipulation and spin and very little actual help. The print and television media, which have been neutered by the current administration, virtually silent during the war on Iraq, escaped the usual government blocking of information and access, did their jobs and moved a nation; in part, because the indifference of the federal government was so great that the administration didn't see this story coming. They hardly imagined anyone would care. Could it be that the Bush administration actually overestimated American middle-class

disdain for poor and working-class black people, and underestimated the American people's solidarity with their fellow Americans?

It seems to me that we have fundamental social, cultural, and philosophical problems as a result of being a country that worships both democracy and capitalism, as powerful a combination as this form of government and this economic system have proven to be. Our indifference towards respecting our differences, small in comparison to what we hold sacred and in common, threaten to compromise our ability to teach and our students' abilities to learn. These problems manifest themselves socially in the classroom, the workplace, and politically, as the country now sees itself increasingly polarized.

A nation founded on the rights of the individual, we are fascinated by our identity as a nation, constantly creating and re-creating a shifting mythology encompassing both democracy and capitalism. A country that rejected European ruling class hierarchies, the young America modeled itself after the Ancient Greeks, the original democracy. As a nation founded on the idea of religious freedom and a need to escape tyranny, the United States has defined this democracy through written law, law bound inseparately to the documents that define our democracy and our most fundamental beliefs: The Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights, and The Holy Bible. Moreover, the nation is defined by the words of the founding fathers. The foundation of our nation lies in the writing of Thomas Jefferson. Therefore, it cannot be overstated, the importance of the written word in our democratic society, despite a new technological age or even because of it; nor can the importance of education be overstated. In Democracy and Education, John Dewey writes: The devotion of democracy to education is a familiar fact.... Since a democratic society repudiates the

principle of external authority, it must find a substitute in voluntary disposition and interest; these can be created only by education”(87).

Though it could be argued that capitalism creates class distinctions based on money and power rather than birthright, Dewey argues that democracy and capitalistic commerce are a natural marriage, that “the widening of the area of shared concerns, and the liberation of a greater diversity of personal capacities which characterize a democracy...were caused by the development of the modes of manufacture and commerce, travel, migration, and intercommunication which flowed from the command of science over natural energy”(87). He concludes: “Obviously, a society to which stratification into separate classes would be fatal, must see to it that intellectual opportunities are accessible to all on equable and easy terms”(87-8). This is especially true now, as we live in an era where information is an increasingly important source of power, and readily available to the literate and those educated enough to interpret the information and news available from the television to the internet. An educated public strengthens our democracy through their knowledge put to use through the vote, and influences all democratic law and justice.

Though we as Americans tell ourselves that “all men are created equal,” enthusiastically embracing our democratic principles, we are blindly refusing to see that we may have escaped the class systems of Europe, only to have developed more insidious forms of class, in which people are judged by race, ethnicity, education, cultural identity, but most of all, by money or the lack of it. Armed with the mythology of America as a land of equal opportunity for all, we harshly judge those who are not monetarily successful or who choose not to make the pursuit of wealth as their highest priority in our competitive economy, and

we deify those who achieve financial success. In Pedagogy of the Oppressed, innovative educator Paolo Freire writes:

It is necessary for the oppressors to approach the people in order, via subjugation, to keep them passive...It is accomplished by the oppressors' depositing myths indispensable to the preservation of the status quo: for example, the myth that the oppressive order is a "free society"...the myth that anyone industrious can be an entrepreneur...the myth of the industriousness of the oppressors and the laziness and dishonesty of the oppressed, as well as the myth of the inferiority of the latter and the superiority of the former (121).

Americans typically dismiss class as a problem, the reasoning being that anyone can become Donald Trump or Tyra Banks, famous and rich, as long as they work hard – this is the compelling power of the American Dream myth. We want to believe that we live in a society that is fairer than other places, with more opportunity than anywhere else, and this much may be true. However, the myth fails to concede that such financial achievement is thwarted by lack of education, money, family problems, or other misfortune. It fails to recognize that much acquisition of money is a result of greed and accomplished by immoral means. The citizens of New Orleans know all about the roadblocks to the American dream: illiteracy, poverty, vice, drugs, and government graft. And like the city, the people became increasingly accepting of their limitations. New Orleans, a major port but in recent years relying more and more on tourism, seems to have long given up the financial ambitions of larger cities with more diverse commercial interests and educated populations. As Douglas Brinkley writes:

In metaphor, the city was a legendary beauty but one that had refused to look in the mirror for a long, long time. Selling the world on the historic stage set that was so much of picturesque New Orleans, the city seemed not to care about its other decaying side. Citizens enjoyed being dubbed “the Capital of the Caribbean” and the “City that Time Forgot.” But such a laissez-faire attitude toward civic improvement was loaded with unhappy consequences”(33).

And one of the unhappy consequences of this denial, along with local and federal governmental neglect was the New Orleans public school system.

In Come Hell or High Water, Eric Dyson writes about the state of pre-Katrina education in Louisiana:

Louisiana spends \$4,724 per student and has the third-lowest rank for teacher salaries in the nation. The black dropout rates are high and nearly 50,000 students cut class every day. When they are done with school, many young black males end up in Angola prison, a correctional facility located on a former plantation where inmates still perform manual farm labor, and where 90 percent of them eventually die. New Orleans employment picture is equally gloomy, since industry long ago deserted the city, leaving in its place a service economy that caters to tourists and thrives on low-paying, transient, and unstable jobs”(qtd. in Brinkley 47).

By comparison, according to UNESCO’s literacy website, half the world’s illiterates live in South and West Asia. Per the site’s latest statistics, circa 2000, the literacy rate for adults in South and West Asia was 48 percent, 62 percent for youths 15-24 years of age.



Effectively this means that in South and West Asia, one of the world's most poverty-stricken regions, more young people can read and write than in New Orleans, Louisiana, USA.

The aftermath of Katrina was a rude awakening for the country. We were a startled and horrified nation as we watched Anderson Cooper's CNN reports from New Orleans after the levees broke and the water flooded the city. We were seeing for the first time that New Orleans was as poor as any "developing" nation. "Why didn't these people leave?" some of us asked innocently from our comfortable middle-class homes in New Jersey. In the Great Deluge, Brinkley, a history professor at Tulane, writes:

These powerless city poor were what sociologist Michael Harrington once called 'the Other America' – those living in desperate poverty, living on minimum wage or welfare checks, hidden from the view of the mainstream, and often denied basic services like proper sewage, reliable electricity, or decent schools... They didn't hear about Katrina on television because they didn't own a set. Even if they did hear about the storm, they didn't have the money to leave. They had no credit cards with which to rent a car and reserve a motel room in Dallas, Memphis, Little Rock, or Baton Rouge. Poorly educated and often illiterate, they couldn't figure out what all the evacuation commotion was about. With no driver's license or other form of identification, some were afraid the NOPD would arrest them at city-run shelters or handcuff them for hitchhiking on I-10 (53-54).

This is the reality of the under-educated, the poor and working-class in America, racism often intersecting and contributing to the problem of the alienation of the poor. Class, as much as race, contributed to the neglect and abandonment of so many people in New Orleans, as filmmaker Spike Lee said in an interview on Bill Maher's HBO show *Politically Incorrect*,

one year after the hurricane. In his documentary *When the Levees Broke*, Lee filmed a broad spectrum of Katrina victims, including the blue-collar inhabitants of St. Bernard's Parish, traditionally Caucasian neighborhood, an area heavily populated by many of the city's first-responders, police officers and firemen. Like many of the poor homeowners of the mostly African-American Ninth Ward, these people were deeply reluctant to abandon their greatest investment of hard-earned wealth, their homes. In other cases, they were tied to their homes by elderly or infirmed relatives and unable, due to financial and physical constraints, to move them.

My family, living in the heart of New Orleans known as Center-City, was trapped as well during Katrina. With no reliable car, in part due to a working class mistrust of the authorities and the media, they refused to believe that the evacuation was necessary. Like many working-class people, my family waited too long to evacuate, until there was no means, despite the fact that my mother had a credit card and a driver's license, better off than many in the city. After a six-day ordeal that nearly cost my grandmother her life, my brother found a local business owner with a car to drive them out.

A week after their arrival in my home in New Jersey, an old friend who knew my family, a federal agent, contacted me. He later explained that he would have called and tried to help, but he knew my family was middle-class. He was sure they had gotten out. He used that term specifically – "middle-class". I thought about that long and hard. It raises important questions that we must try to answer. What is working-class? What is middle-class? Are these defined purely by income level? What do these labels mean in terms of beliefs and attitudes; how does class identity affect one's understanding of the world? These

are important politically charged questions, especially when it comes to education and literacy.

The U.S. Census Bureau defines working-class as the rung above poverty level in a five-rung system of salary assessment, with middle-class, upper middle-class, and upper-class at the top of the salary ladder, while others have come to base it on lack of personal freedom in the job place (qtd. in Bioarsky 8). The National Center for Education Statistics, in its website's statistical breakdown of college freshman student enrollment and retention, defines the classes very simply, in terms of economic power: lower- class meaning families in the lowest 20% of national income, high-income students referred to families whose income was in the national income level of the upper 20%, and middle-class was anything in between.

In Academic Literacy in the English Classroom: Helping Underprepared and Working-Class Student in the Classroom, Carol Bioarsky and her fellow contributors, Julie Hagemann and Judith Burdan, cite Elizabeth Fay and Michelle Tokarczyk's work on the subject: "Working-class positions are largely differentiated by their lack of autonomy. Clerical workers, factory employees, and other "workers" are all closely supervised; management and professionals do the supervising or work within a peer system"(9). Others define it by lifestyle. Bioarsky refers to a 1983 study by sociologists Jackman and Jackman, which defines the working-class first by cultural factors such as "lifestyles, beliefs, and feelings"(8). As a result of these competing definitions, Bioarsky and her fellow contributors arrive at the following definition for working class in their work with college freshman:

In an effort to take into account the various inconsistencies...we would like to

suggest that the working class is composed of two tiers – those who fall into the traditional category of physical laborers, who earn little money and have minimal decision-making authority; and Rogers and Teixeira's "working middle-class," composed of nonprofessionals who do not have a four-year college education. It is the children of these two subclasses, those who are the first generation to attend college, to whom we refer in our discussions of working-class students.

In his 1995 essay "Complicity in Class Codes: The Exclusionary Function of Education," Irvin Peckham, like Boiarsky, defines working-class college students as being first-generation students. Additionally, Peckham adds a social and cultural aspect, noting that an authoritarian family household is a common element of the group, a strong paternal or maternal figure heads the family household and strict obedience is required of the children. He further separates the working class from the middle-class by the definition that their work is predominantly non-managerial, and instead, labor-oriented.

Ethnographer, linguist, and author Julie Lindquist defines it as decidedly a matter of social structure and culture. And this may be the best context to view the class issues of the classroom, the seeds of class cultural difference affecting communication and learning. She writes:

Yet the idea of social class is no less theoretically problematic than the concept of culture. Generally speaking, however, "class" can be said to refer to the systematic products of a social hierarchy sustained by unequal access to resources. For Marx, these resources are material....Bourdieu (1984) has claimed that the practices of a

given social group are motivated by its place in a larger system of relations in the socioeconomic hierarchy( 6).

Most importantly, for the purpose of studying rhetoric in order to teach college English composition, Lindquist states this: "To do ethnography of working-class rhetoric is to commit to the idea that class is a function of culture, and culture, a function of class"(6).

This last point is well-made in terms of the study of literacy. Income is not a fair assessment in and of itself, since skilled laborers often make more money than college-educated occupations, such as many poorly paid service industry jobs, a mainstay in New Orleans, for example. It is the social and cultural elements of working-class identity that shape class attitudes about authority, learning, the purpose of formal education, and writing. And it was those same class system of beliefs and values that put so many people in harms way during the Katrina crisis, leaving them stranded, literally in the way, like many working-class people consistently being left behind in terms of education.

Professor Peckham illustrates this point in describing his own childhood. His working-class upbringing in Wisconsin included a strict but close family whose language use was limited primarily to imparting information and implied unspoken understanding. Argument and questioning within the family were not commonplace in his upbringing, and indeed, this too seems to be consistent with working-class language use. Where obedience to *outside* authority is not necessarily a value of the working class, obedience *within* the family, and humility, ranked high in his household. Unfortunately, the price of his "border-crossing," his entry into the middle-class as a professional, was/is a denial of his past and a recreation of his identity. "I erased my incorrectness by infrequently going home. In time, I more or less forgot who my parents and siblings were...that's called erasure"(Peckham 274).

And this may well be one of our leading issues in the classroom and indeed in society itself, a working-class suspicion of authority and education due to a fear of gaining increased economic and social status at the cost of class values and the loss of both family and identity.

The working-class social values often lean toward the conservative. One of these values is family cohesion, family values, which blue staters (as the country's east and west coasts are being referred to in political circles these days) are frequently accused of undermining and not understanding – blue staters, often Democrats, representing a highly-educated, upwardly mobile, often more liberal middle-class, while red staters (most of the states in between the coasts including the south and mid-west), often voting Republican in recent elections, represent the working man and his family, even if they themselves consider themselves to be middle –class.

Peckham's recollections of his mid-west childhood also suggest a deeply affecting fundamental difference in language usage between the classes, long established before formal schooling. His personal anecdotal evidence about daily language use in his family, in fact, supports British researcher Basil Bernstein's revolutionary 1972 essay, "Social Class, Language, and Socialization." In studying working-class rhetoric in Britain, Bernstein determined that language use in working-class homes was substantially different from those of middle-class homes. In regard to the working-class, Bernstein argues: "forms of socialization orient the child towards [restricted]speech codes which control access to relatively context-tied or relatively context-independent meanings"(165). Elaborated codes, on the other hand, enable their users by providing universalistic meanings, while restricted codes are tied to a given or local structure and thus contain a limited range of meaning. Bernstein refers to previous work by Sapir, Malinowski, Firth, Vygotsky and Luria, to justify

his claim that the language of speakers becomes very specific in form among closely-knit groups of people. Bernstein's exhaustive research validates Peckham's assertion that the language of the university is middle-class and that the middle-class excel in part due to their socialization which involves early use elaborated codes. The language of the working-class is different, with limited restricted codes of expression, which puts poor and working-class students at a fundamental disadvantage.

Further, in this iconic essay, Bernstein cites linguistic researcher Geoffrey Turner's conclusions from his examination of the language use of five-year-old British working class and middle-class children. Turner also found an important difference in their use of language, summarized by Bernstein as follows: "Working-class children have access to a wide range of syntactic choices which involve the use of logical operators, 'because', 'but', 'either', 'or', 'only'. The constraints exist on the conditions for their *use*"(168). The working-class children demonstrated in storytelling exercises, a reluctance to find "alternative meaning and so there is a reduction in the linguistic expressions of uncertainty", while middle-class children exhibited a tendency to be "dominated by what they took to be the *form* of a narrative and the content was secondary"(169). Even at the young age of five, the children of Turner's research demonstrated the divergence of language use based upon class socialization (168-9). From this evidence, Bernstein concludes "that restricted codes draw upon metaphor whereas elaborated codes draw upon rationality. That the codes constrain the contextual use of language in critical social contents...change in habitual speech codes involves change in the means by which object and person relationships are realized" ( 164-5). This conclusion has enormous significance. It suggests that learned speech codes, determined by class, shape the type of rhetoric an individual uses; for instance,

dictating a preference for personal story-telling narrative over persuasive formal logic-based written argument. And the individual's use of class-based rhetoric, in turn, impacts his/her writing because it may be so fundamental, so ingrained, that it affects the thinking of the participants, potentially limiting critical thinking in the working-class student and possibly inhibiting story-driven narrative and creativity in the rhetoric and composition of the middle-class student, with his prioritizing of form over content.

It may be helpful to situate this problem with language in a philosophical framework. The concept that the symbols we use to communicate, language, changes and shifts like culture itself and that therefore meaning is also not fixed, is a foundation of the hermeneutics movement in the study of language. Bernstein's research, to an extent, demonstrates these theories. The post-modern movement includes such writers as Foucault, Derrida, and Habermas (Kloppenber 109). However, there were earlier thinkers, influential and controversial at the very outset of public education in America, the early American pragmatists. William James and John Dewey, both first published in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. According to historian James Kloppenberg in his 1996 article "Pragmatism: An Old Name for Some New Ways of Thinking" published in *The Journal of American History*:

They conceived of individuals as always enmeshed in social conditions...they conceived of experience as intrinsically and irreducibly meaningful...they argued that meanings emerge as cultures test their values in practice and that we encounter expressions of those meanings in the historical record" (104).

If this is true that "meanings emerge as cultures test their values in practice" what was the meaning of the aftermath of Katrina? What is the meaning of our failing public schools and



the remedial skills of many students, particularly in English, fundamental literacy? What does this say about our culture's values?

Similar findings to Bernstein and Turner's research are echoed in Paul Tough's recent *New York Times* article, "What It Takes To Make a Student." In an attempt to examine the enormity of defeating illiteracy in America and the obstacles facing the "No Child Left Behind" program of the Bush administration, Tough describes the 1995 study by child psychologists Betty Hart and Todd R. Risley of the University of Kansas. Hart and Risley created a language acquisition research project involving forty-two families with newborn children, families that they carefully monitored over a three-year period. Tough writes:

By age 3, children whose parents were professionals had vocabularies of about 1,100 words, and children whose parents were on welfare had vocabularies of about 525 words. The children's I.Q.s correlated closely to their vocabularies. The average I.Q. among the professional children was 117, and the welfare children had an average I.Q. of 79.

The researchers concluded that the reason for this was "one simple factor: the number of words the parents spoke to the child...and again, it varied by class. In the professional homes, parents directed an average of 487 "utterances" – anything from a one-word command to a full soliloquy – to their children each hour. In welfare homes, the children heard 178 utterances per hour." On the most basic level, this supports Basil Bernstein's English studies of three decades earlier. However, Bernstein's research not only finds less language use among the working-class but also that the speech codes themselves are different than the middle-class, with the elaborated speech codes of the middle-class preferred over those of the working-class. Middle-class speech codes are rewarded socially and culturally.

Tough further investigates the discrepancies in academic achievement, by drawing on the work of anthropologist Annette Lareau. In her 2003 book Unequal Childhoods, Lareau studies parental nurturance in American families of different classes and determines that middle-class families encourage their children through activities, conversation, and approval of questioning behaviors. She names this “concerted cultivation.” Per her findings, lower class families allow more free play, but insist on child obedience and respect towards the parents. Middle-class children were encouraged to participate in a variety of planned activities, engage adults in conversation, and received positive reinforcement for asking questions. Working-class children enjoyed unstructured play but were less encouraged to ask questions, a high premium put on being respectful to family authority figures.

To her credit, Lareau takes an unbiased approach to her research, seeing the value in each method. She labels the working-class parenting as “accomplishment of natural growth.” She concludes that the working-class, “learn how to be members of informal peer groups. They learn how to manage their own time. They learn how to strategize”(Lareau qtd in Tough). But Tough, paraphrasing Lareau, concludes that “in public life, the qualities that middle-class children develop are consistently valued over the ones that poor and working-class children develop. Middle-class children become used to adults taking them seriously, and so they grow up with a sense of entitlement, which gives them a confidence, in the classroom and elsewhere.” What troubles me most about this is that independent bright poor and working-class students fail to excel because of social expectations that they either never learned or fail to see the value in. At what point do we question our measurement of them by our values? For instance, how much of middle-class rhetoric and writing convention are truly superior?

This brings us to the pedagogy that attempts to empower the student within the context of the dominant ideology. It requires “code-switching”(Gilyard 31). “Code-switching” is a common language adaptation, among ethnic and racial groups that do not speak Standard English at home. In Voices of the Self, Keith Gilyard explains how his mother spoke one way to the doctor (Standard English) and one way at home (Black English dialect). He describes himself as bi-dialectal and contends that though most African-Americans are bi-dialectal, one dialect is usually favored over the other (31). In America, in business and in education, the dialect of the white middle-class is favored over language use that is a result of ethnic, racial, or class identity; in other words, colloquial speech. Therefore, poor and working-class students, many of whom come from minorities in our culture, struggle with a basically new “language” that they may have had little exposure to in their own communities.

I recently tutored a young friend of mine, a bright twenty-five-year-old African-American woman. It was obvious to me that her writing, despite voracious romance novel reading on her part, suffers from a lack of understanding the basic rules of composition, such as: sentence structure, declaration of intent, the building of an argument. She was educated in the urban Hudson County New Jersey public schools. It was also clear that she was terrified of writing because it was apparently a foreign means of communication for her, despite years of schooling, despite the fact that she was a senior in St. Peter’s College. Somehow, she had never learned the language of composition and had gotten by on a version of “pigeon” writing.

On the other hand, before Hurricane Katrina, my brother, living in New Orleans at the time, noted the rhetorical capital of his co-workers at the Jazz and Heritage Fest offices

where he worked. Most of his co-workers were New Orleans natives and African-American, most of them brought up in working-class homes. He used to remark on how his co-workers would go to lunch and come back with these incredible stories about what happened at lunch; he envied their ability to spin a tale, for when he wrote, it was a struggle. It was clearly a function of their culture. We talked about it many times. It seemed to us that we had been trained in school to write eloquent non-fiction and persuasive argument well-enough, but that we no longer feel comfortable with the language of metaphor and simile and description. He and I could do well in school or write a report for work, but hadn't we also lost something due to our culture and social class?

If we accept that working-class students (a large group inclusive of diverse social, cultural, and racial difference but markedly different from the middle-class) bring diverse rhetorical and cultural heritage to the classroom, how do we teach them? How do we teach working-class students to write well without being pedantic, condescending, or adopting false assumptions about their capabilities or limitations? And how do we do this with a clear sense of our *own* motives as instruments of a power structure?

After careful consideration of Basil Bernstein's research and his own personal experience, Irvin Peckham reaches this bleak conclusion about formal education:

Working-class children learn that their usage of language is incorrect, while the language usage of middle-class children, replete with its own particular limitations, is supported, thus "the unacknowledged purpose {is} ...the exclusionary function of writing instruction...by screening out students of the working-class and consequently reserving for the children of the professional and managerial classes the privileges that attend academic success(263).

If this is true, then it is certainly troubling given the democracy on which this country was founded, given the American Dream of equal opportunity for all. It has been argued that not unlike Great Britain's elite boarding schools and universities, with their long history of class separation, the elitism of the American private higher education system, especially of the Ivy League, was and is designed to reinforce the network of social and political contacts of the upper classes. With a certain degree of liberal fatalism, Peckham seems to be saying that this grooming of students to know their place may be starting as early as grade school, with only the students who have internalized middle-class values being encouraged and nurtured to attain a college education, with poor and working-class students being steered to vocational schools or being neglected altogether by middle-class instructors who undervalue their abilities. Working-class students who openly challenge the teacher's methods or belief system may, in fact, be fighting the class bias without being able to articulate where their anger and frustration is rooted. Ironically, it may be these students who have the most to contribute.

In an effort to combat this "exclusionary function of writing instruction," clearly recognizing the power of the dominant ideology and the education system that comes from it, Lisa Delpit, author of "The Silenced Dialogue: Power and Pedagogy in Educating Other People's Children," not only sympathizes with working-class parents and students, but she sees it as her responsibility to educate her students in the language of the dominant culture, thereby enabling them from a practical standpoint. Though Delpit has not defined herself as a pragmatist, her approach is nonetheless indicative of the philosophy. In what is essentially an understanding of the problem based on study and useful action based on that knowledge, a basic premise of the philosophy of pragmatism, Delpit argues the following:

Many liberal educators hold that the primary goal for education is for children to become autonomous, to develop fully who they are in the classroom setting without having arbitrary, outside standards forced upon them. This is a very reasonable goal for people whose children are already participants in the culture of power and who have already internalize its codes. But parents who don't function within that culture often want something else. They want to ensure that the school provides their children with discourse patterns, interactional styles, and spoken and written language codes that will allow them success in the larger society (571).

Essentially, Delpit believes that most teachers are well-meaning, seeking to educate students to reach their potential, not realizing the class bias, whereas Peckham sees it as more intentional and systemic. Delpit acknowledges that the dominant ideology, middle-class language codes, are preferred, and sees it as her responsibility not to try to challenge the ingrained bias but to equip her students with the language skills that have already been established as preferred by the established educational system. In this regard, Delpit's optimistic and pragmatic view is that the class bias can be surmounted but only through speaking the language of the dominant ideology, attacking the system from within.

An English professor recently said to me that the choice to enter college is the choice to leave the working-class and enter the middle-class. I agree that this is certainly the reason that higher education has become so important in America. It is the pushing of their children into higher education that has caused the influx of college students from the working-class. In Academic Literacy in the English Classroom: Helping Underprepared and Working-class Students in the Classroom, the historical journey of the working-class into the college classroom is clearly explained. Prior to the Civil War, college was only attainable for the

wealthy or those seeking to enter the ministry. Post Civil War, more state and federal funding became available, but only a small percentage of working-class were able to take advantage of these advances in funding until post-war conditions affected the nation.

“Worried about employment problems caused by the huge influx of returning GIs, the federal government encouraged them to use their benefits to attend local colleges” (Boiarsky 5). As a result, of the passing of the GI Bill in 1944, the war veterans had access and reason to attend college or to send their children (Boiarsky 6). This occurred again, following the Vietnam era, along with civil rights reform:

The Civil Rights movement propelled many universities to initiate a policy of open admission [and] the federal government passed a series of bills providing for student loans and scholarships based on need. Many colleges switched from scholarships based mainly on merit to those based mainly on financial status. In addition, colleges increased the number of students they hired to work while attending classes. The number of working-class students, especially minorities and women, skyrocketed (Boiarsky et al 6).

Thus, those of lower economic status, became a large body of never-before-attending students in institutions of higher education in the post-Vietnam, post Civil Rights era. The increase in federal spending for higher education grants and federal education loans, as well as increases in private banking loans for the purpose of education, opened the doors of education in a way not seen since primary education became a public institution.

Naturally, as higher education became more available, the definition of an educated adult became more tied to certifications, degrees, and licenses than ever before. This did not escape the American working public who saw upward mobility, a better life, and financial

rewards as attainable through higher education. Due to financial access via state and federal grant and loan programs, and the accurate public perception that education results in financial success, education at all levels will continue to become increasingly important to the parents of working-class children. The U.S. Census Bureau confirms the generally-held wisdom of the American public with the following information:

That college graduates with a bachelor's degree earned an average of \$51,554 in 2004....Adults with advanced college degrees earned an average of \$78,093....High school graduates with a diploma earned \$28,645 on average. Those without a high school diploma earned an average of \$19,169.

Per projections based on the 23% increase from 1989 to 2002, the IES site projects a minimum enrollment increase of 15% in degree-granting higher education institutions by 2014 and a possible increase of up to 20% by 2014. The mid-range projection would mean that 19.5 million students would be enrolled in degree-granting institutions by 2014.

Obviously, a large portion of these students will not be middle-class students. In the near future, we may be facing the largest influx of working-class students at the college level in the history of higher education.

In 1970, with the first wave of government money available to working-class and underprivileged youth seeking higher education, universities like City University of New York, with its then new open admissions policy, found itself struggling with a large group of working-class under-prepared students, students who would never have entered a college classroom only ten years earlier. For the first time, many of the college freshmen in



freshman composition classrooms, like Mina Shaughnessy's classroom, were unable to write at the level, or in the manner, previously expected of college level work

Mina Shaughnessy, a professor at CCNY, became one of the pioneers of teaching basic writing. The Open Admissions policy of City College of New York, which started in the spring of 1970, enabled any willing student with a high school diploma to attend college. Enrollment at CCNY "jumped from 174,000 to 266,000 between 1970 and 1975 (Shaughnessy 1). The teachers were faced with a huge number of students whose scholastic preparation and traditional academic knowledge were limited. Yet, as Shaughnessy explains it, these students were eager to achieve, so "that their lives might be better than their parents', that the lives of their children might be better than theirs so far had been"(3).

It became the goal of Mina Shaughnessy and her fellow instructors at CCNY to "even the playing field" for these students. Shaughnessy's appreciation of her students shines through the text when she describes them as: "the sons and daughters of New Yorkers, reflecting the city's intense, troubled version of America" (6). The basis for the book was simple: "that BW (basic writing) students write the way they do, not because they are slow or non-verbal, indifferent to or incapable of academic excellence, but because they are beginners, and must, like all beginners, learn by making mistakes"(5). Interestingly, she recognized components of working-class culture, without ever framing them as class issues, problems that were hindering her students from learning the traditional codes of academic writing. She writes:

For the BW student, academic writing is a trap, not a way of saying something to someone. The spoken language, looping back and forth between speakers, offering

chances for groping and backing up and even hiding, leaving room for language of hands and faces, of pitch and pauses, is generous and inviting. Next to this rich orchestration, writing is but a line that moves haltingly across the page, exposing as it goes all that the writer doesn't know, then passing into the hands of a stranger who reads it with a lawyer's eyes, searching for flaws. (7)

Despite the controversies regarding this book since its publication, Errors and Expectations is a good manual on how to improve student academic writing through the use of basic style and grammar precepts and attention to common difficulties that working-class writers have with standard academic, read "middle-class" writing, particularly persuasive writing.

There has been considerable argument over this type of pedagogy, vehement proponents of Shaughnessy's techniques and motives (see Graff) and vicious critiques of her teaching as a form of colonialism (see Rouse). This is a result of two diametrically-opposed camps in the battle to teach working-class students, particularly at the college level. This is not to say that there is no compromise or that there are no teachers embracing methods that incorporate ideas from both sides. However, a clear distinct separation has emerged and widened since the late 60s and continues today, particularly in publicly-funded state universities like City University of New York or Montclair State University, where I taught as a graduate assistant.

In "Cognition, Convention, and Certainty: What We Need to Know About Writing," Patricia Bizzell refers to the different sides as inner-directed theorists versus outer-directed theorists (366-70). The two sides are these: the inner-directed theory of language use which includes essay modeling, grammar correction, thesis writing, instruction in formal language, writing as an authority; while outer-directed theory stems from the political questioning of

the established hegemony, its language and agenda. "Inner-directed theorists seek to discover writing processes that are so fundamental as to be universal....the universal fundamental structures of thought and language can be taught....ask the students to practice until they internalize the patterns"(366-7). She defines outer-directed theorists as believing that "thinking and language use can never occur free of a social context that conditions them...what we do is teach students that there are such things as discourse convention (367). Models and sentence-combining exercises are inner-directed theory in practice. A dialogic approach to writing and literature, that includes questioning of the discourse, why the argument is being made, and the social and political context of the work is outer-directed theory. According to Bizzell's binary, Mina Shaughnessy would be a clear example of inner-directed language theory.

In an essay published in *College English* "The Politics of Composition: A Reply to John Rouse", Gerald Graff supports Shaughnessy's methods and echoes Delpit:

Students and parents complain that they are being patronized, that the more relaxed, more personal pedagogy fails to teach anybody how to write. After all, from another vantage point, these practices [teaching of grammar, syntax, traditional English composition teaching techniques]...appear as merely an attempt to prepare these young people to get a decent job and thus have a chance at a decent life in American society...In a society in which we necessarily make our peace with capitalism or are relegated to the vocational scrap-heap, we have little choice but to play by the rules of the system (852).

Like both Delpit and Shaughnessy, Graff's focus is to empower his students in the language of the dominant ideology as the first priority.

David Bartholomae addresses these same concerns in "In Inventing the University"(1985). Like Shaughnessy, Graff, and Delpit, Bartholomae agrees with Shaughnessy's assessments that basic writing students suffer most from their lack of experience with the forms and conventions of writing, with academic discourse in general, and with the commonplace cultural references and even vocabulary, that the more privileged classes take for granted (610).

Like Shaughnessy, Bartholomae admires the fortitude of the students, pressed into trying to appropriate skills and language that are not their own. He refers to David Olson's work, a linguistic researcher, who like Turner, argues that the "key difference between oral language and written language is that written language separates both the producer and the receiver from the text." Says Bartholomae, "For my student writers, this means that they had to learn that what they said (the code) was more important than what they meant (intention)"(609).

Though Bartholomae acknowledges the politics of class-oriented issues facing the working-class writer, he postulates that "all writers, in order to write, must imagine for themselves the privilege of being "insiders" – that is, the privilege both of being inside an established and powerful discourse and of being granted a special right to speak"(598), and yet, "the student, in effect, has to assume privilege without having any"(599). However, despite his insistence that there are power/class issues in composition, that writing "is an act of aggression disguised as an act of charity", Bartholomae believes that academic standards measure something important (595). He writes: "The act of writing takes the student away from where he is and what he knows and allows him to imagine something else. The approximate discourse, therefore, is evidence of a change, a change that, because we are

teachers, we call ‘development’”(600). The attainment of the insider status, mastery of the dominant discourse empowers the student, enabling the act of aggression.

In Teachers, Discourses, and Authority in the Postmodern Composition Classroom, Xin Liu Gale argues that Peter Elbow’s greater concern is that students learn the sophistication of learning and critical thought using their own discourse first. She quotes Elbow from his article “Reflections on Academic Discourse: How It Relates to Freshman and Colleagues,” that the conventions of traditional composition writing “voice, register, tone, diction, syntax, and mannerisms – are ‘various aids to authority,’ used either to ‘impress those who have authority over us’ or to ‘distinguish ourselves from our peers’ and argues that Elbow believes students need to reach a ‘kind of polyphony – an awareness of and pleasure in the various competing discourses that make up their own’”(qtd in Gale 74). Social and political context are never far from Elbow’s mind, placing him in Bizzell’s outer-theorist camp of language theory. In “Being a Writer vs. Being an Academic: A Conflict in Goals,” Elbow writes:

In contrast to students, the basic subtext in a writer’s text is likely to be, ‘Listen to me, I have something to tell you,’ for writers can usually write with more authority than their readers. Therefore, unless we can set things up so that our first year students are often telling us about things that they know better than we do, we are sabotaging the essential dynamic of writers. We are transforming the process of “writing” into the process of “being tested”. Many of the odd writing behaviors of students make perfect sense once we see that they are behaving as test-takers rather than writers (498).

Gale writes about a need for collaborative learning in the classroom, strongly referencing the neopragmatism of Richard Rorty's Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature (1979). Rorty lumps together "Goethe, Kierkegaard, Santayana, William James, and John Dewey"(67) as great pragmatic thinkers. These thinkers "have kept alive the historicist sense that this century's 'superstition' was the last century's triumph of reason"(Rorty qtd in Gale 67).

Gale sees teaching of the dominant discourse as reinforcing dominant ideas, and agrees with the idea of pragmatic skepticism. She sees merit in Rorty's opposing forms of discourse as a means of arriving at critical understanding for both student and teacher "not only to ensure that the conversation is not stopped and students' sense of wonder is not suppressed, but to reveal how the knowledge of normal discourse can be used for democratic goals in teaching and how the dominant ideology and culture can be effectively resisted with words"(91).

Once again, pragmatism is invoked in "Untested Feasibility: Imagining the Pragmatic Possibility of Paulo Freire" by Kate Ronald and Hephzibah Roskelly. A contemporary of Delpit, Graff, Bartholomae, and Elbow, Paulo Freire, the revolutionary education scholar, similarly wrote about education from a social and political context. Making the connection between pragmatism and Freire, Ronald and Roskelly draw the comparison:

In his realization of the connection between past, present, and future, Freire carries on the mediating, and hopeful, work of the developers of pragmatism – C. S. Pierce, William James, and John Dewey. A continuing dialectic between participation and reflection characterizes both Freire's position as philosopher/activist and the pragmatic insistence that meaning derives from consequence, or action...central to both the pragmatic agenda and Freire's praxis is the necessary connection between

action and reflection; this connection leads both Freire and the pragmatists to a sense of hopefulness...belief means a willingness to act and the assurance that reflection on action will lead to better, more hopeful acts. Freire calls this kind of hope “untested feasibility”(614).

First writing on the issue of class in the classroom over thirty-five years ago, Freire himself writes:

The pedagogy of the oppressed (is), a pedagogy that must be forged with, not for, the oppressed (whether individuals or peoples) in the incessant struggle to regain their humanity...The central problem is this: How can the oppressed as divided, unauthentic beings, participate in developing the pedagogy of their liberation? Only as they discover themselves to be “hosts” of their oppressors can they contribute to the midwifery of their liberating pedagogy(30).

Freire’s point seems simple enough: that you cannot infantilize the poor or working class; you must respect them and they must learn to respect themselves. The temptation is for the mentor or teacher to see himself as superior to those he is intent on helping, or teaching, leading to dehumanization of the oppressed. Equally, it is commonplace for the oppressed to overvalue the oppressor as better, superior. Freire admonishes the well-meaning oppressor (which could be any authority figure, especially an educator):

The same is true of the individual oppressor as a person. Discovering himself to be an oppressor may cause considerable anguish, but it does not necessarily lead to solidarity with the oppressed. Rationalizing his guilt through paternalistic treatment of the oppressed, all the while holding them fast in a position of dependence, will not

do. Solidarity requires that one enters into the situation of those with whom one is in solidarity; it is a radical posture(31).

Solidarity with the oppressed, what does that mean exactly? Does it mean, as Elbow would have it, that students should write only about what they feel passionately about, what they know or think they know or at least want to investigate, or does solidarity with the oppressed mean making them fluent in the form, codes, and content of the dominant and preferred language and composition? Gale argues that “the tendency to view the teachers’ discourse as the ally of the students’ discourse is often found in radical educationists influenced by Marxist theories”(Gale 75-77). This may be the case in Freire’s call to solidarity. Gale argues that it cannot be achieved due to the educator’s own history. However, I believe it can be argued that intention does count, and that the educator’s self-aware attempts to act as ally against dominant ideology, while educating the student in the form of prevailing discourse, serves the student. Most importantly, we must not silence our students.

In Teaching to Transgress, bell hooks writes:

During my college years it was tacitly assumed that we all agreed that class should not be talked about, that there would be no critique of the bourgeois class biases shaping and informing pedagogical process (as well as social etiquette) in the classroom. Although no one ever stated the rules that would govern our conduct, it was taught by example and reinforced by a system of rewards. As silence and obedience were most rewarded, student learned that this was the appropriate demeanor in the classroom...Even though student enter the “democratic” classroom



believing they have the right to free speech, most students are not comfortable exercising that right....This censoring process is one way bourgeois values overdetermine social behavior in the classroom and undermine the democratic exchange of ideas (178-9).

If this is true, and typical of teaching in general, then we have begun the silencing at an early age. Obedience, internalized early by those who hope to achieve academically, was actually a pattern of behavior for the middle-class of New Orleans, not the frequently more rebellious lower classes. It was the middle-class who left the city once ordered. It was not just that they had the means but also their trust of authority: of the police, of the military, of the government, of the media. The authorities did not represent a threat to *them* and so they followed the rules. It was only under extreme duress that the poor of New Orleans followed the advice of the authorities, only to have their worst fears realized, abandoned at the Superdome and the Convention Center. Ironically, the class that is more likely to think critically in an academic setting, albeit in standard form, is often more likely to obediently follow rules of conduct both in life and in school, and arguably less likely to challenge the status quo, in part because the system rewards their obedience.

Coming from a background of forced and rewarded obedience, bell hooks saw it as her imperative as a teacher to “create strategies for what he [Freire] called “conscientization” in the classroom. Translating that term to critical awareness and engagement, I entered the classrooms with the conviction that it was crucial for me and every other student to be an active participant” (14).

Sharing hooks concerns about dominance in the classroom, John Rouse attacks Mina Shaughnessy's methods in Errors and Expectations. He refers to her instruction of basic writing students with its emphasis on grammar, syntax, sentence structure, and paragraph construction as the Analytic method, what we have discussed here as Bizzell's inner-theorist language theory approach:

Whatever its shortcomings, the Analytic method is useful as a form of control. Here are students whose language and loyalties are different from those of teachers trained in the belletristic achievements of the centuries...They are, in short, difficult. The Analytic method is an assertion of authority in the face of this threat, it demands that students show themselves willing to learn the rules and patterns of behavior set for them...Shaughnessy speaks of these students as "egocentric"...but Bernstein has shown that speakers of a restricted code are not egocentric but rather sociocentric and context-dependent...If they are to learn an elaborated code they must become, in fact, more "egocentric" – they must move from what *we* know to what *I* know (8).

Paolo Freire argues that obedience to authority in the classroom, responding to the dominant ideology as though it is truth, reinforces that ideology, and I think, it can easily be argued, often rewards the individual. In A Pedagogy for Liberation, which is a series of conversations with Ira Shor, Freire writes, "When we separate *producing* knowledge from knowing the existing knowledge, schools become easily spaces for selling knowledge which corresponds to capitalist ideology"(8). In other words, traditional methods of teaching fail to address the philosophical nature of teaching itself, our purpose. Freire fervently believes the answer is dialogue. He sees dialogue in the classroom as a means of remaking society. In

Pedagogy of the Oppressed, he writes about the banking system of knowledge, the traditional attempt to “pour” knowledge, or “deposit” it, into students as though knowledge is a fixed thing.

The banking method of education, still seems to be stubbornly influential in classrooms today. A Bloomfield public high school student, my seventeen-year-old son, has been at war with more than one dominant-minded teacher trying to “deposit” ideas into his head; in particular, his sophomore Honors English teacher whom he insisted on battling himself, without my help. At first, as most parents would, I doubted him, thinking my son’s healthy ego was getting him in trouble, but I watched as he struggled to keep his voice in his writing while adhering to his teacher’s ideas of writing: grammar, punctuation, style, and her assessment of his actual thoughts. He was determined to show her, and spent many hours trying to write better: clearer, more concise, better sentence structure. However, he wrote what he felt, refusing to water down his sometimes controversial ideas. I read his papers. I would have been pleased to get them in the college freshman composition class I was teaching at the time. Something else was going on here. Though my son couldn’t articulate it, it was a struggle for domination. He got a C in the course. And he dropped out of Honors English for the remainder of his high school work. Though my son is not working-class by any of the conventional definitions (His language acquisition is elaborated codes. We are financially middle-class.), he was raised in a blue-collar New Jersey town, a member of a close knit group of friends, most of whom are the first generation to enter college. I cannot help but think that some of his resistance to authority started in his peer-interaction, in working-class socialization.

Paolo Freire wrote about the Hegelian paradigm of master/slave, domination and submission, routinely finding its way into the classroom in the form of the authoritarian teacher and passive student. He argues this:

Dialogue cannot be reduced to the act of one person's "depositing" ideas in another, nor can it become a simple exchange of ideas to be "consumed" by the discussants. Nor yet is it a hostile, polemical argument between those who are committed neither to the naming of the world, nor to the search for truth, but rather to the imposition of their own truth. It must not be a situation where some name on behalf of others. It is an act of creation; it must not serve as a crafty instrument for the domination of one person by another (70).

I think it is entirely possible that while being unable to name it, working-class and unprivileged students already know that they are oppressed, that authority wants to shove its "knowledge" down their throats and they resent. They walk into our classrooms resentfully because they question what we have to teach them, not only in its practicality, but in its truthfulness. They don't trust our values or instead, they think the cards are stacked against them, that school is designed for other kids, middle-class kids, and not for them. They may think we are corporate cogs, mouthpieces for the dominant ideology, or worse, radicals who seek our own liberal political agendas while claiming that we are helping them.

As in New Orleans, during and post-Katrina, especially now in the rebuilding of the city, educators as well as politicians, historians or charity organizers must work with the people they are trying to help, because logically, no one knows the problems and issues that surround the problems, better than the local people affected. It is and must be a collaborative

effort because there are social and cultural realities that outsiders cannot readily recognize. Outsiders often judge. Outsiders take a paternalistic and imperialistic view that often does not address the needs of the people. In the individual classroom, educators or students often enter with a level of judgment based on the values of our own backgrounds. Of course, good teachers, as well as earnest students, try to suspend that judgment towards others but it creeps in easily. Paolo Freire recognizes and addresses this frequent weakness in human communication. He writes:

On the other hand, dialogue cannot exist without humility. The naming of the world, through which people constantly re-create that world, cannot be an act of arrogance. Dialogue, as the encounter of those addressed to the common task of learning and acting, is broken if the parties (or one of them) lack humility. How can I dialogue if I always project ignorance onto others and never perceive my own (71)?

It seems to me that an educator should act as an ally and a co-worker to the student, regardless of preferred theory. In a writing composition classroom, a writing instructor might work with a student as an editor might work with a journalist, acting in a cooperative but clearly professional capacity. And a journalist approach may be also a logical means of developing a pedagogy that fosters critical thinking. In Democracy and Education, John Dewey insists "thinking which is not connected with increase in efficiency in action, and with learning more about ourselves and the world in which we live, has something the matter with it just as thought. And skill obtained apart from thinking is not connected with any sense of the purposes for which it is to be used"(152). What better source of relevant

discussion that affects our students than the news? And what better way to learn close examination of issues than to act as a journalist?

Ann Berthoff's methods, detailed in the article "Is Teaching Still Possible: Writing, Meaning, and Higher Order Reasoning," tries to address how to get students to really think about what they are reading and writing. She contends that: "discourse grows from inner dialogue...[and] because they make interpretation central... the two I consider most useful are perception and dialogue (317). She uses a journalistic heuristic approach, HDWDWW (How does who do what and why?) in order to elicit thought and generate meaning from her students. "Lead them to discover that scientists and lawyers and poets look and look again...our job is to devise sequences of assignments which encourage *conscientization* [the term is borrowed here from Freire], the discovery of the mind in action "(319-20).

If we can resist the temptation to proselytize, examination of current events and writing from a journalistic perspective has merit as way of teaching students to organize their thoughts and examine closely. It is also lends itself to sustained dialogue and discussion in the classroom. Given that the struggles in the classroom are political, that social status is inescapably political as well as social and cultural, drawing comparisons to business and government politics seems a reasonable, thought-provoking place to start.

Berthoff, as a disciple of Paolo Freire, seems to be primarily an outer-directed theorist. One of the pitfalls of this form of composition pedagogy is a lack of attention to mechanics. A student can go from a professor like Berthoff one semester to a teacher inclined toward inner-directed theory, with its increased emphasis on grammar and structure. The differences in teaching methods can be the cause of great confusion and frustration for students, experiencing one method and then the other, causing student resentment and further

increasing the divide between students and teachers. This is particularly true of adult students who may find the lack of continuity especially distressing.

Every day that I tutored as a graduate assistant at the Writing Center, I was faced with these theories. The Writing Center heroically attempts to straddle the two camps, focusing more on critical thinking than on correct grammar or style. We were instructed, above all else, not to write the papers for the often overwhelmed and even needy students who saw us as their last hope. We asked them questions -- lots of questions. And we strove to get them to come up with their own ideas. All well and good, I think. But when they asked, even pleaded with us, to show them how to write the sentence better, or explain to them what the grammar was, our hands were tied. We were not supposed to instruct them on this, or at least, not focus on it. Though overall paragraph and formal structure were permissible instruction, we were to avoid too much grammar or sentence styling. The concern was that we would end up writing it for them, committing plagiarism. This baffled our students, most of whom were working-class, who were used to their high school teachers correcting grammar and sentence structure. These students expected and relished such help, feeling abandoned when we told them that we couldn't help too much. It particularly frustrated the students for whom English was a recent second language. I found that they were often like sponges, more confident in their abilities than their American counterparts, and did benefit from repeated corrections in appropriate language usage.

I was accused once of over-helping a student, whose first language was Spanish. An older student in her late 20s, eager and bright, she came weekly to the writing center, desperately wanting help with grammar and sentence structure and I complied, only to hear

from her in a tearful session in the writing center, that she had been accused by her professor of having me write the paper for her. The language usage was beyond her; it was too good. Though I had assisted with the grammar, showing and explaining each grammar correction, her conservative and pro-American ideas were entirely her own and I had, of course, taken pains not to write the paper for the student. However, the tenure-track professor was indignant because in her experience, in her graduate work, no correction of grammar was ever allowed. She was taught, and her continued belief was, that a tutor's pencil should never touch the student's paper. But per the student, the professor's greatest concern was that the ideas were not her own, though the professor had no basis other than the grammar corrections to make such an assumption.

Did I help or hurt the student with grammar instruction? This has been debated since Mina Shaughnessy. If I as a tutor was practicing too much traditional grammar instruction and that was not appropriate, then where was the opposite of this binary? Where was dialogic discussion and Freirian pedagogy? Where were democratic principles? There was no free dialogue between student and teacher, only accusation and a conclusion by an authoritarian professor that resulted in a lesser grade, and there was certainly no discussion between the three of us. The professor summarily dismissed the matter. The professor's authority was in her position, above us, that of a tenure-track superior. I was in no position to argue, as a student myself, though I was fortunate enough to have the moral support of more than one mentor in the program. But what did this teach the student? Did she learn the middle-class value of accepting the authority of the teacher? Worst of all, did she learn that to ask for help and to accept it, to work cooperatively with a mentor, is unacceptable and puts a second-language user, a member of a lower class, under suspicion of complicity



and dishonesty? I never saw the student again in the writing center, after the incident, and I often wondered.

In Chomsky on Mis-Education, Noam Chomsky writes:

Far from creating independent thinkers, schools have always, throughout history, played an institutional role in a system of control and coercion. And once you are well-educated, you have already been socialized in ways that support the power structure, which in turn, rewards you immensely”(16).

Is this what my tutee was suffering through, a lesson in obedience?

In the essay, “Considerations for American Freireistas,” Victor Villaneuva, Jr. argues that not only is the role of higher education exclusionary but that is all designed to promote the “common” wisdom of the ruling class, a political point of view directly influenced by Paulo Friere’s work: “Hegemony can operate by promoting the ruling classes’ ideologies as universal... They have given rise to cognitive explanations of writing, the cognitive sciences also given to universality. Cognitive explanations rendered basic writers, most often members of minority groups, cognitively dysfunctional (630). If Villaneuva is right, was my tutee being punished for a non-ruling class ideology not shared by the liberal educator? Being an immigrant and seemingly working-class, was she being ostracized for writing in a social, collaborative context? This might well seem natural to her as a result of class orientation (given Basil Bernstein’s research, Turner’s research, and other theories we’ve discussed here). Perhaps the professor’s problem with my tutee’s essay was the pro-American slant of her writing. Perhaps the professor found it surprising and unlikely to come from a recent struggling immigrant. In a university atmosphere steeped in liberalism, such a viewpoint might be seen as stunted thinking, not critical thinking. And though both the Bush

administration and the Congress have been Republican and neo-conservative in recent years, the ruling class of higher education is largely politically liberal, regardless of how the classrooms are conducted.

If we are to form an opinion about how to change our political system, and in particular, American education, to better serve all Americans regardless of social status, we must first understand the history of “mis-education.” In Chomsky on Mis-Education, Noam Chomsky writes about the long history of working-class American values as an important part of the American political and economic system, established in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century labor activism, which included the labor press. The labor press was free speech in action, free of gender bias, written mostly by working-class women. Long before any influence of Marxism, the labor press “condemned what they called the ‘bought priesthood’ referring to the media and the universities and the intellectual class, that is, the apologists who sought to justify the absolute despotism that was the new spirit of the age and to instill its sordid and demeaning values”(42). He writes further that:

All this would have been completely intelligible to the founders of classical liberalism, [who] considered creative work freely undertaken in association with others as the core value of human life....[John]Dewey and [Bertrand]Russell are two of the leading twentieth-century inheritors of this tradition, with its roots in the Enlightenment and classical liberalism (42-43).

Chomsky further states:

John Dewey understood clearly that ‘politics is the shadow cast on society by big business’ ...Education, he hoped, of the kind he was talking about, the production

of free human beings, would be one of the means of undermining this absolutist monstrosity”(47).

What happened to this tradition? Where was it lost? It seems to me that we may have lost our way philosophically when we began to see dissent as bad or rather only certain kinds of dissent as valid. This is not appropriate in a democratic society or classroom. In one of my English graduate classes, we had a student who was vehemently conservative. His rhetoric was combative and sometimes rude. Eventually, surrounded by a classroom of liberals, he was silenced. He was reprimanded by the professor, who was trying to maintain decorum and civility in the classroom; the student was consistently and heatedly attacked by the group, who found him condescending and arrogant. He stopped coming to class. The class was relieved. But I couldn't help feeling that we had lost the one dissenting voice, the foil to argue against, another distinct viewpoint. What might we have learned from him? What might he have learned from us? It seems to me that part of useful dialogue is dissent, less than polite, genuine and heated argument.

Linguist and English professor Julie Lindquist found such real argument and lively thought-provoking rhetoric in what would seem like an unlikely place, a working-class bar. In “The Smokehousers,” an article first appearing in *College English*, which she would later develop into the book A Place to Stand, Julie Lindquist investigates working-class culture by studying the patrons at the blue-collar neighborhood bar. She took a decidedly anthropological means of identifying specific working-class values and cultural beliefs and biases in her work. This is inherently pragmatic, using scientific means to study the reality of a situation in order to take the information for further use and action. William James writes: “The pragmatist clings to facts and concreteness, observes truth at its work in

particular cases, and generalizes. Truth, for him, becomes a class-name for all sorts of definite working-values in experience”(48). Lindquist collected her data and builds a body of evidence from her experience among these people, arriving at surprising conclusions regarding education. In describing what she learned from her job as a bartender in the Chicago working class bar, The Smokehouse, a job she held while completing her PhD, she explains the purpose of her work:

My hope is that teachers of composition will be encouraged not only to examine their assumptions about what this rhetoric is worth and why, but to consider how their authority to teach it is a function of the ethos they create by their own claims of rhetorical capital. Such considerations will, I believe, better equip teachers not only to understand the nature (and consequences!) of their own resistance to working-class agendas (229).

It was through the rhetoric of the bar that Lindquist came to understand the conflicts she was having in the classroom. She writes, “I have come to recognize as fundamental parallels between the barroom and the classroom as institutional sites of rhetorical practice”(225-6). She elaborates further:

(The smokehouser’s behavior) bespeaks a deeply ambivalent attitude toward the capital higher education has to offer. Smokehousers privately approve of those who strive to join the middle-class, but publicly disapprove of those who embrace the rhetoric of its institutions: earning a degree is seen as a route to upward mobility even as identification with the university is perceived as a kind of cultural abandonment (234).

In the collection, This Fine Place So Far From Home, academics like Irvin Peckham, educators whose origins were working-class, write about their estrangement from their families and old friends – their retreat from these origins, and their personal conflicts over the abandonment of their pasts for middle-class professional stature. Lindquist learns from the Smokehousers that this kind of class denial is perceived as class treachery and a play for individual power, and held in suspicion that it is also a repudiation of working-class values that include honesty, humility, and respect for others, especially those who work in positions of little or no authority. Lindquist comments on her working-class subjects perception of her, as an outsider, as a middle-class academic: “My rhetorical habit of speculating and raising questions, a strategy that is so richly rewarded within the academic institution, was apparently seen by Walter and the others at the Smokehouse as both unproductive and manipulative”(232). She adds that “performing and philosophizing at the same time – is {seen as} essentially dishonest, is a play for status motivated by personal vanity, and not necessarily a concern for truth or for the public good (236).” If they think, as Lindquist writes, that we are using our language skills, both written and oral, as a “claim of position of privilege” or “cultural capital”, is it any wonder that they hold the middle class educator in contempt? They may have seen her arguments as trickery and I suspect that this is often how our working-class students see us, as more invested in our positions of privilege, of superior education, than in a quest to teach or genuinely discuss items with an open mind. They probably see us as the Smokehousers saw Lindquist, as having our own political and social agenda.

Even so, in conversations with the “regulars” of the working-class bar, the Smokehouse, Lindquist learned that several of the men bitterly regretted giving up their education. In A Place To Stand, she writes:

These Smokehousers narrate their histories of struggle with and alienation from institutions of formal education; these narratives of alienation bespeak the suspicion that schools are really intended to represent middle-class, not working-class, needs and interests. In talking of their own experiences with schooling, Smokehousers recount stories of class barriers – both social and economic...(96)

The working-class harbor extremely mixed feelings about higher education, which leads to mistrust, mixed messages from both their parents and peers that result in student hostility and resistance. This is particularly evident in the English composition classroom where argument and persuasion are the rewarded cultural capital, but may be seen by the working-class as false, as vanity and sophistry. Before we can teach critical thinking and writing composition that includes questioning and argument, we must invest in understanding the objections of our constituency, the students. As we might address objections in a paper arguing a point, we must acknowledge their political and cultural views, often conservative, and encourage their expression of the concerns and questions that they harbor. We must resist the impulse to judge their thinking by our own, often liberal, viewpoints. Essentially, we must aim for a classroom that is democratic.

If the Smokehousers could pick a spokesperson to explain their distrust of the educational system, they might choose David Borkowski. In “Not Too Late to Take the Sanitation Test: Notes of a Non-Gifted Academic from the Working Class,” David

Borkowski writes about his recollections of his unspectacular early education. Borkowski concurs with the Smokehousers' stories told to Lindquist when he writes:

As a giftless-student I had seen how books were often used against me and others, ...I saw how teachers sometimes deployed books to maintain distance or used the curriculum to erect boundaries...to establish the condition of us (teachers and a handful of bright students) versus them (the rest of the mediocre and the dull ones) (114-115).

Whether or not it is or was true that books were used to "erect boundaries" as Borkowski describes it, the importance is in the working-class perception that this is true. Borkowski is believable in his claim of being an ordinary working-class kid, a kid who never excelled in school in his younger years. His memories of his childhood are candid and genuinely explain working-class values as an insider. He comments on the typical teacher: "Another, less obvious way teachers maintain distance is by taking themselves way too seriously...in class, they looked so glum teaching I thought that if the material they considered essential to our educational survival brought them so little joy, then maybe I'd actually be better off dying cheerfully ignorant than depressingly intelligent"(118).

Yes, that's funny, but it also reflects the working-class belief that learning and academia is for "the other", those humorless elite people from another class, the authorities. He goes on to express a very typical working-class attitude, "I never felt loyal to authority, and I think this pointed me towards a democratic pedagogy" (117). He explains his teaching technique:

I don't teach academic discourse, plain and simple, even in my literature-based courses, and I'm determinedly inclusive. That I was practicing this method

intuitively, in my own rudimentary way, before I knew to call it dialogic or a Freireian pedagogy has a lot, I think, to do with my gift-less background (116).

His estimation of most teachers echoes Paolo Freire's observations regarding the "banking method" of teaching. "Humorless teachers were also the worst listeners....They were typically so full of themselves and so eager to pump their agenda into our heads that we might as well not even have been there"(119).

Borkowski uses his wit and exalts his former status as a mediocre student to make a clear point to his academic readers of *College English*, that elitism has no place in the classroom. On a more personal level, he seems to use his past as a means of finding common ground with his students. His teaching style is simple and direct. Using an Aristotelian method, he asks his students what they believe and turns statements into questions and then involves the rest of the class in a discussion of the statements and questions. He relies heavily on peer interaction, initiated by his questioning. An assistant professor at William Patterson University, a relatively affordable New Jersey state four-year college and a commuter school, his classroom is most certainly, to a large degree, working-class students. His pedagogy is rooted in his desire that "my students be reflective, to think about who they are, what they do, and what decisions they make, believing in the importance of those things in the construction of self and society"(115).

So there is a tradition forming here, a common thread found in educators and pedagogy theorists from John Dewey to Paolo Freire to Noam Chomsky. The connection is pragmatic democracy in the classroom. In practice, this might include dialogue in the classroom (which might be classified as part of Bizzell's outer-directed theory), the voicing



of unpopular viewpoints, argument in the form of debate, role playing, peer interaction, the application of Bizzell's inner-directed theory through word and sentence problems that foster practice and experience, use of media and news events to establish an atmosphere of larger social and political relevance for students, questioning and examination of standard composition forms and ideas, with attention to what "works" and why. In Pragmatism, William James explains the point of pragmatism, while mocking the standard of truth in modern philosophy:

This pragmatist talk about truths in the plural, about their utility and satisfactoriness, about the success with which they "work" etc. suggests to the typical intellectualist mind a sort of coarse lame second-rate makeshift article of truth...as against this, objective truth must be something non-utilitarian, haughty, refined, remote, august, exalted(48).

This is exactly why pragmatism can succeed where other philosophies have failed to reach or prove useful to the teaching of working-class students. Pragmatism is open-minded but anchored in the concrete, in what "makes sense." Working-class students overwhelming desire seems to be practical application. They ask the question: "How will learning this help me?" They want to know how knowledge, any knowledge, has relevance and meaning in their lives. The working-class are already overwhelmingly pragmatic.

James explains that the term pragmatism comes from the Greek word for action and was originally coined by C.S. Pierce who argues "beliefs are really rules for action"(qtd in James 39). James explains further: "There can be no difference anywhere...no difference in abstract truth that doesn't express itself in a difference in concrete fact"(40). Like democracy, pragmatism seeks to favor no single group or belief system. As James

explains: "Mediator and reconciler...she has in fact no prejudices whatever, no obstructive dogmas, no rigid canons of what shall count as proof. She is completely genial. She will entertain any hypothesis, she will consider any evidence"(53). What could be more democratic than that?

Democracy is the founding principle of America. It is an idea, though sometimes misused, that every American school child regardless of station knows and is taught to revere. The "Pledge of Allegiance," the songs "The Star-Spangled Banner" and "America the Beautiful" are all still taught in every American elementary school. The idea of "liberty and justice for all" is more than a catch phrase; it is a part of the American soul. The quest for freedom through a democratic state is compelling and very real to the immigrants still finding their home here, and many of these students now attending our two and four-year colleges and universities are either immigrants themselves or second generation. We are jaded; they are not.

In our attempt to be inclusive and recognize the variety and diversity of our growing working-class student body, one avenue that higher education has used is the celebration of ethnic culture. In my teaching of a remedial college freshman writing class that consisted of fifteen or so students, literally from all over the world, I used a popular book, Crossing Cultures. I believe the intention of the book was to engage the students through sharing ethnic and cultural background as an accepted and natural part of the mosaic that is the American public. The idea was to encourage a sense of pride in self, of respect for the diversity that is America, and promote understanding through discussion of culture. It was a nice idea, an attempt at inclusion, but it was from an outsider's point of view. Their hostility was masked as boredom and passive aggressive resistance. They were not

interested in discussing their culture or that of others because they were much more concerned with what they had in common with each other and with me. They resented the discussion of culture because it focused on what was different about them. More than once, when I attempted to find out about their heritage in the context of discussing the text, they bristled and said, "I'm American," regardless of whether they had been born in Korea or Columbia. They probably saw my attempts to point out their difference from me, a white native-born American, as a way of separating myself from them, as better. The idea of celebrating the individual and respecting other cultures, an integral part of tolerance in a democratic society, is the focus of a liberal agenda, however well intentioned. Right or wrong, from their more conservative viewpoint, inclusion results from equality based on shared values and beliefs, sameness, in the American identity.

What is the American identity and as hopelessly old-fashioned and nationalistic as it may seem, could this be the common ground we have with our students? Cornell West, currently Professor of Religion and Director of Afro-American Studies at Princeton, is a proponent of resurrecting pragmatism as a social force. In American Pragmatism: Evasion of Philosophy, West makes the argument that John Dewey, as an American pragmatist, saw the philosophy's usefulness as a starting point for democratic political and social action, rather than an excuse for cynicism and inaction. From Dewey's writing and lecturing, West concludes the following:

More pointedly, pragmatism conceives of truth as a species of the good; the procedures that produce warranted assertions are themselves value-laden and of exemplary human beings working in solidarity for the common good. In this way

Dewey's metaphilosophy and his accentuation of the role of critical intelligence are inseparable from his promotion of creative democracy (100).

You might well ask: why does education need a philosophy to promote or enhance it? John Dewey answered this question in a statement he issued in 1940: "Any theory of activity in social and moral matters, liberal or otherwise, which is not grounded in a comprehensive philosophy, seems to me to be only a projection of arbitrary personal preferences"(qtd in Kloppenberg 125). If we do not have a framework to promote and develop meaning then our conclusions are indiscriminate and haphazard. In Experience and Nature, Dewey's early and important work on pragmatism (published in 1926), Dewey writes: Philosophic discourse partakes both of scientific and literary discourse. Like literature, it is a comment on nature and life in the interest of a more intense and just appreciation of the meanings present in experience"(407). A philosophy, one that the students can explore and hopefully relate to, provides order and reasons for a system of teaching. It addresses the need for greater, larger understanding while making individual decisions about learning and teaching relevant. Philosophy gives meaning to action and experience; and I believe this is especially true of pragmatism.

To answer another reasonable, and very pragmatic, question, one that attempts to put theory into action: "What can be done on a practical level in the classroom to overcome class issues?" Do working class students need help with grammar, sentence structure, and organization of ideas? Having tutored students from all walks of life, I think that is a given. However, the preoccupation with a fear of plagiarism has stagnated universities. Working-class students are culturally more accustomed to group dynamics and peer interaction. Peer

work is, in my opinion, a valuable tool. Detailed teacher or tutor criticism is helpful and not a form of "writing the paper." These are ideas that the working-class do not have trouble understanding. It is the academy that has trouble with writing as a group effort. Having published as a journalist, I find this ludicrous. When one writes an article for publication, it is subject to extreme suggestions, and radical editorial changes that are worked out between writer and editor. It is a false notion that writing is an entirely solitary achievement. The act of writing is a craft that benefits from constructive criticism and suggestion.

I agree with Peter Elbow, that good writing is a result of interest, passion. Some of my most successful assignments were when the students wrote about personal issues that troubled them. It is a mistake to think this generation has nothing serious on its mind. Over the course of the semester, I received many bad papers. But I also received a harrowing self-aware paper on self-mutilation, a passionate documented essay on the poisonous chemicals in the food supply by a young budding scientist, and several moving papers on family members, after a prolonged classroom discussion about what it means to be invisible to someone else. Perhaps our assignments should be geared directly toward student concerns and subjects of personal interest, topics of relevance for students.

In terms of teaching a student to write well about something he cares little about, such as a novel he doesn't even like, something he will have to do throughout his academic career, I think the key may be to teach the student to find relevance between the assigned text and his/her life. This involves discussion, and questions and more questions, without providing answers, which as academics, we usually think we have, even if we aren't handing out that information.

But in my estimation, this is jumping the gun. Solutions, like dialogic teaching techniques or peer interaction, are only as good as the understanding of the problem: a deeply ingrained class bias on the part of the most well-meaning educators, and a working-class student hostility, resistance to authority, and class restricted speech codes which result in student prejudice and fearfulness toward middle and upper-class teachers. These class differences, that we want to ignore because they offend our ideas of an egalitarian democratic America, are instrumental in the upbringing of American children and deeply political in nature. We must first understand the widespread implications of class and realize that bridging the gaps between the classes is a matter of finding democratic unity in a concrete pedagogy that includes both outer-directed theory and inner-directed theory: to teach students to think critically, enable them to express their thoughts in writing, and exercise their right of dissent and free speech.

The solutions for teaching improvement in the New Orleans public schools and institutes of higher education will be the most complex and widespread than any overhaul of any American educational system to date. New Orleans today, is still a devastated city, with most of its once severely substandard public school system literally swept away. The rebuilding is slow, but one of the most promising changes is the ongoing unprecedented historic experiment that is the new the public education system. As reported in the September 21<sup>st</sup> 2006 edition of the city's newspaper *The Times-Picayune*: "In November 2005, the state legislature voted to place 107 of the city's 128 public schools in a state-run Recovery District. Today, that district has opened 17 schools, among 53 total public schools now open in the city. The other schools include 31 charters and five operated by a vastly

downsized local district, run by the Orleans Parish School Board”(Ritea). In her article *Reading, Writing and Resurrection* in the January/February 2006 *The Atlantic Monthly*, Amy Waldman reports that this is a “higher proportion of charter schools than any other American city.” These schools function without a teacher union and are stocked with many inexperienced but enthusiastic young teachers from outside the city, looking for opportunity (Waldman). There has been no conclusive evidence, thus far, that charter schools can or will improve student test scores. On a national basis, charter school student test scores are no better, and sometimes worse, than public school test scores (Tough).

However, there is no dispute that the New Orleans public schools were very poor prior to Katrina. Exactly how or why charter schools took over since the hurricane is unclear, but given the disorder following the disaster, many aspects of the experimental schools clearly must have made it easier to get them up and running. Only 75% of the teachers must be certified. Teachers work on a yearly contract with no tenure and performance-based salaries can be established. Funding is paid through either the local or state board. Charter schools are established and run by a variety of local groups from businesses to communities to parent groups, teachers or non-profit organizations, allowing for great local input. This may be the single most appealing aspect of the charter schools, their deep ties to the communities they serve. The charters are designed to deal with “at-risk” students. Each charter has its own mission statement and parents from anywhere in the district can choose to send their child to any charter regardless of neighborhood ([www.louisianaschools.net](http://www.louisianaschools.net)).

Some public school proponents argue that charter schools drain the public schools of their best students, creating separate but unequal publicly-funded schools, but in New

Orleans, where so few public schools remain, we may actually see what the charter schools can achieve with a wider range of students. In theory, charter schools allow for more local and parental input, less bureaucracy and more democracy.

In the past, Louisiana suffered from conditions that Goodwin Liu, a University of California at Berkeley law professor, calls "education apartheid." Federal funding is established according to matching state funds. "In states with more poor children, spending per pupil is lower. In Mississippi, for instance, it is \$5,391 a year; in Connecticut, it is \$9,588. Most education financing comes from state and local government, but the federal supplement for poor children, Title I, is 'regressive' Liu points out, because it is tied to the amount each state spends. So the federal government gives Arkansas \$964 to help educate each poor child in the state, and it gives Massachusetts \$2,048 for each poor child there"(Tough).

However, due to post-Katrina funding, huge sums of federal and state money are slated for the New Orleans Recovery District, including the charters. According to a March 15<sup>th</sup> 2007 article in the *Times-Picayune*, Governor Kathleen Blanco, who has chosen not to seek re-election, has proposed \$600 million in additional money for Louisiana schools and colleges. In his March 2<sup>nd</sup> 2007 visit to New Orleans, his eleventh visit to the region since the disaster, President Bush visited the charter schools and was quoted by the *Times-Picayune* as saying:

I like a system that is willing to challenge the status quo when the status quo is failing... And one of the reasons I've come to this school is that it represents a group of citizens, including your parents and the teachers and the citizens, who said,



“We’re tired of mediocrity in the school system.” It is not acceptable to have children trapped in schools that will not teach and will not change.

Bush promised that more of the \$110 billion federal funding would soon reach the region. The Democratic Congress, on the eve of this visit, was preparing to propose legislation that would pour an additional \$250 million into the city’s public schools over the next five years, and as much as \$500 million in grants for the region’s universities and colleges that were closed due to the flooding. We could speculate on why so much federal money is now pouring into the area like never before. Certainly the need was always there, but New Orleans, in particular, has gone from being a political liability and embarrassment for the administration to a goodwill political opportunity for both the president and the new Congress. If a state’s educational system can be saved by money, usually thought to be the biggest problem for most struggling schools, then Louisiana could end up with one of the finest educational systems in the country.

The rest of the city has a long way to go as well. Many of the inhabitants of New Orleans have not returned due to inadequate housing. Those that have returned have come back to rents that have increased by a 30% or more, if they can find housing at all. Many working-class homeowners received insufficient insurance money or had inadequate coverage and cannot rebuild. Many of those families that have returned are living with relatives whose homes survived, several families to one small house. For many, their living conditions are far worse now than the projects they originally came from. Because of the housing shortage, the number of students in the school system will undoubtedly remain well below pre-Katrina numbers. With huge sums of money, low teacher to student ratios, and the controversial untested charter schools at the forefront, the

urban New Orleans public schools will be a significant source of educational research, a huge educational Petry dish. We will have to see what grows. It remains to be seen whether the new system will adequately take into account local culture, resident priorities as opposed to outside agendas, and whether the new system will thrive without an educational philosophy like pragmatism to guide its formation.

In his autobiographical book, The Audacity of Hope, Barack Obama writes: "It is the language of values that people use to map their world. It is what can inspire them to take action... (52-53). Again, that pragmatic word, action, is invoked. We are a nation that believes in action. And now, the values of the American people are finally being felt in New Orleans. Amazing volunteers, and millions in charitable contributions from fellow Americans, poured into the region two years ago, in response to the devastating need and poor government response. Now, those contributions are finally being matched by federal funds. How this money will be spent and whether the local people, those who know the trials of the returned students to the crippled city, will be have autonomy, or whether outside sources will try to impose change is unclear. Many of the citizens suffer post-traumatic distress syndrome. Depression is rampant. Crime is on the rise. As a result of this glaring attention that the disaster has drawn on the schools of New Orleans, the working-class students of this devastated urban area may get some of the most motivated teachers from all over the country (the city is actively recruiting nationwide), experience the best teacher/student ratios in years, and have better facilities than ever before. Will the working-class of New Orleans appreciate their essentially expensive, much more middle-class education system or will they balk, forever distrustful of those in authority? What values will win out – a belief in upward mobility through education or will suspicion, resentment and the

pressures of surviving in ravaged communities barely recognizable from before the storm take their toll on the young people of the city? Katrina could not sweep away the class system in New Orleans completely, but it has altered it considerably, and the city will be a study in how social status affects and overcomes disaster and may well be either a model or bad example of what can and cannot be done regarding social class and education in America.

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