

REVIEW: “Radical to Many in the Educational Establishment”: The Writing Process Movement after the Hurricanes

Robert P. Yagelski

Writing without Teachers. Peter Elbow. Twenty-fifth anniversary ed. New York: Oxford UP, 1998. 206 pp.

Pedagogy of the Oppressed. Paulo Freire. Thirtieth anniversary ed. Trans. Myra Bergman Ramos. New York: Continuum, 2001. 183 pp.

A Writer Teaches Writing. Donald M. Murray. Rev. 2nd ed. Boston: Heinle, 2004. 265 pp.

In March 2005 a dubious milestone in the annals of writing instruction in the United States was reached: for the first time, the SAT, the most widely used standardized test for college admissions, included a mandatory writing component. In the new SAT, some 1.4 million test-takers were required to complete a one-hour test of writing skills that included a twenty-five-minute impromptu essay along with multiple-choice questions on usage and grammar. Not surprisingly, the addition of a timed essay to the SAT, which has acquired significant educational import and cultural heft since it was introduced in 1926, generated controversy, some of which involved the release of a report by a special NCTE task force. The task force, of which I was a member, was charged with examining the potential impact of the SAT writing test. (The task force also examined the ACT, but because the writing component is optional on the ACT the report focused on the SAT; see NCTE Task Force.) Among other concerns, the report noted that the SAT writing test would likely send to students, parents, school administrators, and teachers questionable messages about what constitutes “good” writing. For most Americans, I daresay, the conception of good writing implicit in the SAT writing test is commonsensical, as is the idea that students be asked to produce, on demand, “good”

Robert P. Yagelski is associate professor of English education in the Department of Educational Theory and Practice at the State University of New York at Albany, where he also directs the Capital District Writing Project.

prose on a supplied topic. In many respects, *writing* as defined by the new SAT is more or less how writing tends to be understood in mainstream American schools and in the culture at large: organized, formulaic, rule-governed, and relatively straightforward, if not always easy. In this conception of writing, learning to write is largely a matter of learning what a “good” text looks like.

So I shouldn't have been surprised when, during a meeting of National Writing Project teachers a few weeks after the new SAT debuted, a high school colleague described Donald Murray's article “Teach Writing as a Process Not Product” as “radical.” Especially striking to this colleague, who was reading the piece for the first time, was Murray's idea that a writing course should have no assignments, that students should select not only their own topics but also the genres in which to write about those topics. “I can't really imagine proposing such a thing at my high school,” this teacher confided.

In the current climate of education reform—which is characterized by the increasing use of mandatory tests to hold students, teachers, and schools “accountable”; by a narrowing curriculum focused on traditional core subjects as defined by those tests; and by a rejection of progressive pedagogies under the guise of “research-based” approaches to teaching, as defined by the Bush Administration's No Child Left Behind program—this teacher's reaction to Murray's process-oriented pedagogy shouldn't have been surprising. But it *should* be unsettling that, some thirty-four years after Murray helped launch the process movement with that article, a writing pedagogy based on the idea that student writers must write can seem “radical.” After three decades of the process movement and what I consider to be the related emergence of critical pedagogy within composition studies, writing, as defined in schools and sanctioned by tests like the SAT, is as narrow and circumscribed as ever.

It seems an appropriate moment to revisit the ideas that Murray himself described as “radical to many in the educational community” (*A Writer* xii). In 2004, Thomson Publishing released an anniversary edition of Murray's *A Writer Teaches Writing*, which was originally published in 1968 and released in a second edition in 1984. A few years earlier Oxford University Press had released a twenty-fifth anniversary edition of Peter Elbow's still remarkably popular *Writing without Teachers*, whose title states an even more radical proposition than the idea of abandoning writing assignments. Some readers will consider it a stretch to associate these two texts with the publication in 2000 of the thirtieth anniversary edition of Paulo Freire's seminal *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which was originally published in Portuguese in 1968 and in English in 1970. But I suggest that these three books are more intimately connected than most compositionists would acknowledge; moreover, the release of commemorative editions of these influential works within a few years of one another at the start of a new millennium brings into relief the troubling state of writing instruction in the United States.

It's worth noting here that expressivism (as a "theory" about writing and teaching) and the process movement (as a pedagogical manifestation of that theory) have long been critiqued within composition studies. Critical pedagogy, too, has always been controversial, but it seems to have come under renewed attack in recent years. As William Thelin points out in a recent issue of *CCC*, well-established scholars like Richard Miller and Russel Durst have raised serious questions about the very idea of a pedagogy based on the work of Freire, who is widely considered the theorist from whose writings our contemporary versions of critical pedagogy have emerged (115–16). It is not my intention to take up these critiques here, though I will tip my hand and state that I cannot see how we can justifiably teach writing in ways that reinforce an unjust and unsustainable status quo, nor can I imagine how Freire's message of literacy as a transformative act can be considered irrelevant in the face of deeply troubling developments that raise hard questions about that status quo. As I write this essay, for example, the terrible socioeconomic inequalities of contemporary American society have come into stark relief in the wake of Hurricane Katrina's fury, and the fragility of the oil-based economy that helps fuel those inequalities has been further exposed by Hurricane Rita. Well-intentioned writing teachers have long debated composition's function in relation to the larger sociopolitical arena, but the recent critiques of critical pedagogy suggest that, more than thirty years after the emergence of the process movement and the publication of Freire's influential treatise, we continue to struggle with the question of purpose; that struggle may have more urgency now than at any time in recent memory.

Indeed, *purpose* is at the heart of these three works. Each rests on a clear sense of the purpose of writing. But the scope of that sense of purpose and the extent to which each author acknowledges it differ noticeably. In a certain sense, all three books are about change: changing writing instruction and changing schooling. Of the three, only Freire foregrounds his desire for change, offering a sustained critique of conventional education and an alternative pedagogy that is intended to transform what he sees as an oppressive status quo; Murray and Elbow, by contrast, are content to focus more narrowly on the individual writer working to craft a text that gives voice to his or her ideas. But it would be a mistake to conclude that Murray and Elbow do not advocate change. Reading them three decades after their defining works were originally published reveals, I think, that they are Freire's brethren.

Murray's pedagogy was in fact born of the social unrest of the 1960s, as he notes in the preface to the revised second edition: "The first edition of *A Writer Teaches Writing* was published in 1968 when the protest against the Vietnam War ignited social and political challenges to all our mores and institutions including what was taught and how it was taught in our schools from kindergarten to graduate school" (xi). He wrote more directly about this connection between his pedagogy and the broader social and political context in "Finding Your Own Voice: Teaching Composition in an Age of Dissent," which was published in *CCC* in 1969:

[T]he implications of the student revolt [of the 1960s] for English Departments are clear. We are freed from an obligation to teach etiquette and forced to design a curriculum which trains students to accept the responsibilities of free speech through the experience of writing—the most disciplined form of thinking—and publication—the most revealing act of the intellectual life. (139)

This connection is easy to miss in *A Writer Teaches Writing*, which is at times such a joyful exploration of writing and teaching. To read the first three chapters, in which Murray presents his view of the writing process (Chapters 4 to 13 focus on his approach to teaching), is to spend time with a writer who revels in the written word, whose exuberance is infectious, and who embraces the unruliness of language that poststructuralists have (in much less infectious prose) helped us understand. But Murray's obvious joy in writing and his genuine desire to share his insights about teaching can make it difficult to see the implicit critique of conventional writing instruction that sometimes peeks through his descriptions of his own writing and teaching. For example, here's Murray addressing the matter of invention:

Ideas about writing and teaching writing come to me from my own experience in writing, from studying or reading about the experiences of others, from my teaching, from the reports of others' teaching, from my students, from my reading. All we see or hear connects with something else, passing through our unconscious and conscious until it ripens into a subject that is ready to write. (11)

Typically, Murray acknowledges his own “pathological self-absorption” (11) as a source of ideas for his writing (a self-absorption that no doubt has frustrated many a reader). But this passage also reveals an awareness of what James Moffett called “the universe of discourse,” an inherently social milieu that serves as a writer's ever-replenishing well of ideas. Murray goes on to discuss “ideas that come entirely from outside the writer,” for example in the form of an assignment from an editor. And then he adds,

In school this is unfortunately normal. Most ideas come from outside the student—children are given story starters, old [sic] students have topics given to them, and assignments made for them. (11–12)

This tidbit offers a glimpse of Murray's concerns about the rigidity—and, in his view, the misguidedness—of conventional writing instruction, which positions the student as passive direction-follower, as disengaged from the world around him or her, as un-self-reflective. Writing in conventional schooling is not the active, curious engagement with the world that characterizes Murray's writer; rather, it is a rule-governed activity in which information or knowledge is communicated rather than discovered or made. Murray's writer may be a Romantic (and I mean that expansively), one who is “exceptionally aware of the world around [her]” (11), but she is also an agent. In this sense, it is misleading to accuse Murray simply of valorizing

the individual to the exclusion of the social, for his sense of the individual is more complex than the go-your-own-way, Marlboro-man individualism so deeply ingrained in American culture (a point that Sherrie Gradin pursues in her analysis of expressivism).

Many critiques of expressivism and process-oriented pedagogies seem to side-step this nuance. Joseph Harris, for example, has described the process approach as a "new formalism,"

one centered no longer on textual structures but instead on various algorithms, heuristics, and guidelines for composing. This new formalism has proven little different from the old, as those versions of process teaching that don't work toward a very familiar set of therapeutic and expressionist goals instead work toward an equally familiar set of technocratic ones. Both versions tend to move backward, as it were, from an ideal vision of the composition student: either the mature individual of one kind of humanist teaching or the expert practitioner of another more technical sort. The aim of teaching thus becomes to coach students toward either an emotional and intellectual maturity or an expert-level performance. (56)

Harris may be right that in some versions of process-oriented instruction the aim is to coach students to a kind of maturity or expertise (which may not necessarily be a bad thing, given some of the more insidious and unacknowledged aims of conventional schooling, as described by critics like Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis or Jean Anyon). But it seems to me that criticisms such as Harris's do not refer to the aims Murray articulates in *A Writer Teaches Writing* (or Elbow in *Writing Without Teachers*) so much as to the ways in which process-oriented ideas like Murray's have been put into practice. These ideas have easily been co-opted by conventional schooling, because they can be interpreted (wrongly, in my view) as resting on a conception of writing as a step-by-step process, compartmentalized and turned into a canned procedure for students to follow. As a result, the radical potential of these ideas has rarely been realized in conventional educational practice. If process has indeed become a "new formalism," as Harris charges, it isn't because Murray and others who advocated a student-centered, process-oriented pedagogy imagined an uncomplicated student writer, promoted a rigid procedure for writing, or capitulated to the forces of mainstream education in a capitalist system; rather, it is because that system was able to normalize their ideas and use them in the service of the curricular and pedagogical status quo. Indeed, my writing project colleague can find Murray's ideas "radical" because when she looks at writing in the schools where she has taught, she can't see anything like Murray's pedagogy or the curious, active, engaged writer that he imagines at the center of that pedagogy.

If Murray's critique of conventional writing instruction is implicit in *A Writer Teaches Writing*, the title of Elbow's book more overtly signals his view that, as he wrote in his original preface, "teachers learn to be more *useful* when it is clear that

they are not *necessary*” (vii). Many people, including many of Elbow’s critics, seem to have read *Writing Without Teachers* as a how-to book, and it’s easy to read it that way. But its title notwithstanding, *Writing Without Teachers* is also a book about how to *teach* writing—and about how *not* to teach. In that sense, it shares with Murray’s work an implicit critique of conventional education as rigid, conformist, and compromising of individual agency.

Like Murray, Elbow is intensely curious about the writing process and he devotes much of his book to his almost homey analyses of why that process can go awry and how to make it work better, complete with his now-famous metaphors of *growing* and *cooking* a piece of writing in Chapters 2 and 3. These analyses, like Murray’s, arise from Elbow’s detailed study of his own experiences as a writer. But whereas Murray came to teaching from journalism—he was a professional writer first—Elbow was the quintessential conventional student, whose frustrations as a student writer, which he describes in the introduction to the second edition, eventually led him to his unconventional understanding of writing—and, ultimately, of teaching. He devotes two of his five original chapters to his ideas about a teacherless classroom, offering in those chapters what amounts to a description of a progressive, student-centered, democratic writing pedagogy. Significantly, Elbow offers no requirements about content (“The main thing is that it doesn’t matter so long as you write something” [79]), but devotes attention to matters of authority and decision-making: “A chairman or leader can make things run more smoothly, [. . .] but it’s possible to get along without a chairman too. It puts more of a burden on everyone, but it can also encourage everyone to take more responsibility for how the class goes” (84–85). In what amounts to guidance for how to maintain a truly democratic writing group, he writes, “Devote the last five minutes of the class to the class itself as though it were a piece of writing. [. . .] The same learning principles apply here as to writing: what is valuable is shared perception and experience, not advice about how to fix things. Problems will be solved gradually this way, but better” (85).

Elbow’s concerns about how writing is taught extend to teaching in general. In his chapter on “The Teacherless Writing Class,” he advocates an alternative to the agonistic style of traditional academic inquiry: “[I]nstead of being expended toward arguing and settling—toward closure—energy [in the teacherless class] must be directed in the opposite direction of keeping oneself open, listening, trying to have other people’s experiences—in a sense trying to *agree* with everyone at once” (112). This is a class based on empathy and compassion, not unlike Nel Noddings’s pedagogy of caring, very different from conventional classrooms, in which, Elbow writes, “[w]e habitually feel frustrated if we have a discussion with great difference of opinion but no final agreement” (110). Paradoxically, he argues, in most classrooms there is actually “a *poverty* of difference, a poverty of disagreement”:

A whole host of interesting points of view have never been raised because there is such an atmosphere of needing to settle things. It's only by tolerating *a lot* of ambiguity for a long time, by living with *a lot* of contradiction, and inhibiting the need to settle things too soon that you can get your hands on a decent array of data. (111)

I sometimes find myself uneasy with such generalizations. But to enact Elbow's sense of empathy and compassion as a teacher, to apply his tolerance for ambiguity and contradiction in a classroom, is no easy task and, at least in my own experience, is rarely achieved. Indeed, Elbow's sense of the need for this empathetic approach to teaching and learning arose from his own experiences as a teacher at M.I.T. and at an alternative college that he helped establish in 1963. These experiences led him to "sense something deeply wrong with an educational system that made people who were smart think they were stupid" (xiv). Much of *Writing without Teachers* can thus be read as a description of how to teach writing as if individual writers mattered. It is also an argument against academic convention, an argument he pursues most directly in his essay "The Doubting Game and the Believing Game," which originally appeared as an appendix to *Writing without Teachers*. In the anniversary edition, Elbow takes up the criticisms of that essay, explaining that he initially pursued the ideas in that essay because he was struck by "the *limitations* of argument, doubt, debate, and criticism. I was trying to show the power of a disciplined and methodological use of believing, listening, affirming, entering in, attending to one's experience, and trying to share one's experience with others" (xxi). Like Murray's writer, Elbow's learner is held to high standards of intellectual engagement.

Although Elbow sees value in "argument, doubt, debate, and criticism," it becomes apparent in this book and elsewhere in his writings (especially in his famous exchanges with David Bartholomae) not only that Elbow has grave concerns about the effects of conventional schooling on individual students but also that he is advocating a kind of epistemology in which knowledge is a function of reflection on one's own experiences. Unlike Freire, Elbow does not work out this epistemology in detail, but it rests, like Freire's, on active inquiry into one's experience of the world, on the idea of the knower as agent. We see these ideas playing out in his discussions of concrete matters, such as grading student papers. In explaining why he rejected the conventional way of responding to student writing, for example, he writes that "there is a terrific pressure for the English teacher to minimize his experience of a set of words and maximize his construction of a model (perhaps implicit) in order to check off a piece of writing against it. And so, bit by bit, one *has* less and less experience of a set of words that one could transmit to a student" (121). The problem with conventional teaching methods, as Elbow sees it, is that they remove the experiential—and therefore the epistemic—component from school-based writing (much as the eighteenth-century Scottish rhetoricians removed invention from rhetoric); con-

ventional methods also eliminate the student as meaning-maker, emphasizing conformity to procedure and adherence to predetermined ways of knowing. In short, conventional pedagogy replaces the human agent with a procedure.

Critics have voiced concerns about the way expressivists like Elbow seem to valorize individual experience. Most famously, James Berlin noted that “expressionistic rhetoric is easily co-opted by the very capitalist forces it opposes” and “can be used to reinforce the entrepreneurial virtues capitalism most values” (487). No doubt that’s true. But it is easy to miss the deeply social, dialogic (in Freire’s widely misunderstood sense of that term) character of the process Elbow advocates in his teacherless classroom—the way in which the individual writer’s experience is used as *data*, as Elbow calls it, subject to the scrutiny of other individuals, who examine and assess the data as they try to make sense of and convey their own experiences. Elbow acknowledges the criticisms of such an approach as “subjective” and easy, and he responds “to orthodoxy-bound teachers and intellectuals who call this class subjective and think they are tough and rigorous” by suggesting that “really they are soft as soap because they don’t dare think carefully about the nature of rigor and language”; he argues that placing one’s own experience of the world at the center of inquiry is far more challenging and intellectually honest than orthodox methods of academic inquiry and instruction. Elbow’s approach places an ethical onus on the individual in a way that conventional schooling does not. And it requires that we confront divergent and conflicting understandings of the world in a way that conventional schooling often avoids.

In this sense, Elbow’s approach is not apolitical, as some critics have charged; it is overtly political, as Berlin himself acknowledged, and especially so in the current climate of systemic education, in which *knowledge* supersedes *knowing*, in which authority for knowledge is increasingly centralized in the form of federal and state mandates, and in which learning is defined as possessing an authorized body of knowledge distilled into a growing number of required standardized tests. (It’s only fair to note here that Harris makes a similar point in *A Teaching Subject*, describing expressivist approaches like Elbow’s as a “defense of the student in her struggles to assert herself against what was seen as a dehumanizing corporate and university system” [27].) Berlin advocated a “social-epistemic rhetoric” that “attempts to put the question of ideology at the center of the teaching of writing” (697), but the challenge of such a rhetoric is resisting the tendency to make ideology, rather than a dialogic engagement with the world through writing, the focus of the writing class. Indeed, social-epistemic approaches have also been co-opted by the mainstream educational status quo. All too often, writing classes claiming to foreground ideology or pursue cultural critique end up replacing one circumscribed and sanctioned kind of intellectual work (critiquing model texts) with another (critiquing cultural texts), and student writing continues to be implicitly devalued or assigned value only in relation to

sanctioned texts. In this way, the radical potential of social-epistemic approaches is held in check, and students remain in positions of passivity. In many ways, both Murray and Elbow display much greater trust in student writers to engage the world around them than do advocates of Berlin's social-epistemic approach (of which I count myself one). To have such trust is an increasingly difficult challenge for progressive-minded writing teachers, for it may be that neither expressivist nor social-epistemic approaches to teaching writing can realize their liberatory potential within the ossified but overwhelmingly potent structures of conventional systemic education.

Given how widely Elbow has been associated with practical techniques like freewriting, it is also easy to forget that *Writing without Teachers*, like Murray's book, was born of the social and political unrest of the 1960s. In the first line of the preface to the first edition, Elbow writes, "Many people are now trying to become less helpless, both personally and politically: trying to claim more control over their own lives. One of the ways people most lack control over their own lives is through lacking control over words. Especially written words" (v). With this opening statement, Elbow implicitly defines writing as a political act in a way that is consistent with more recent conceptions of the personal as political (for example, as bell hooks conceives this connection). In the introduction to the second edition, Elbow develops this connection more fully. He tells us, for example, that the phrase "without teachers" in his title arose from his own experiences with the turbulent politics of the 1960s:

When I started teaching the second time at M.I.T., in 1968, "the sixties" had finally arrived. I became a conscientious objector. The first thing I ever published was an analysis in the *Christian Century* of the legal complexities of the conscientious objection law. The issue had captured my attention since I had failed, both in speaking and writing, to persuade my draft board that I was eligible. (xix)

Referring to the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy, Elbow goes on to tell us that he "volunteered in Boston's black community—first taking care of children, then teaching evening adult writing courses" (xix). It was then that he began experimenting with teacherless writing groups. In this sense, Elbow's teacherless classroom was a subversive act emerging from his desire to make the world a better place, to help others become less powerless. That impulse seems especially compelling in our time of educational conformity and intellectual rigidity.

It's too bad Paulo Freire wasn't around to see the publication of the thirtieth anniversary edition of his seminal work in 2000 (he died in 1997). I can't help thinking he would have felt at least a momentary sense of vindication to see on its cover "750,000 copies sold worldwide," which is some indication of how far his ideas have traveled beyond the walls of the cell he briefly occupied as a prisoner of the military

dictatorship that ruled his native Brazil in the 1960s. But he likely would also have felt ambivalent about the extent to which those ideas, which have energized an international community of educators and activists, resulted in the kind of educational and political reform he envisioned. If it has been difficult in the past to implement Freire's liberatory pedagogy in Western classrooms, it seems especially challenging today, as the march of global capitalism and consumer culture seems to overwhelm the progressive ideas that Freire championed. And it often seems that Freire's central message is overlooked in the longstanding debates about whether his problem-posing pedagogy is relevant in the context of American education.

The intensity of those debates comes through in Donaldo Macedo's introduction to the thirtieth anniversary edition of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which often feels more defensive than celebratory. Macedo takes up what have come to be the standard critiques of Freire: that Freire's class-based analysis is outdated; that his language is abstract, overly difficult, riddled with jargon, and thus inaccessible to the very people he hopes to empower; that his method is authoritarian, giving radical educators *a priori* authority for determining who is oppressed and when and how to intervene in their oppression. (Indeed, Freire's discussion of the role of the revolutionary teacher, which takes up much of Chapter 3, can seem almost tautological at times as he struggles to address this problem, which he returned to in later writings, especially *A Pedagogy of Hope*). For the most part, Macedo offers familiar rejoinders to such charges. But he begins to get to the heart of Freire's work when he writes of "the immeasurable hope that Paulo represented for those of us who are committed to imagine a world, in his own words, that is less ugly, more beautiful, less discriminatory, more democratic, less dehumanizing, and more humane" (25). *Humane* is the operative word here. Yet even here Macedo's "us" focuses our attention on the intellectuals who have been inspired by Freire's ideas and who continue to debate them. Richard Shaull, in his appropriately spare foreword to the original English edition (which is retained in the anniversary edition), puts the focus where Freire would have wanted it, on the disenfranchised:

At the precise moment when the disinherited masses in Latin America are awakening from their traditional lethargy and are anxious to participate, as Subjects, in the development of their countries, Paulo Freire has perfected a method for teaching illiterates that has contributed, in extraordinary ways, to that process. In fact, those who, in learning to read and write, come to a new awareness of selfhood and begin to look critically at the social situation in which they find themselves, often take the initiative in acting to transform the society that has denied them this opportunity of participation. (29)

Shaull's somewhat dated perspective on Latin America notwithstanding, he gets quickly to the fundamental message of Freire's work: that human beings exist in a state of becoming within a reality which is not fixed but which they themselves have

the capacity to transform through language. As Shaull correctly points out, this is an ontological message: that "man's [sic] ontological vocation (as he [Freire] calls it) is to be a Subject who acts on and transforms the world, and in doing so moves toward ever new possibilities of fuller and richer life individually and collectively" (32). Shaull recognized that this message is as relevant for people in the industrialized West as for those in Freire's native Latin America, for the struggles of the dispossessed with whom Freire is concerned are "similar, in many ways, to the struggle not only of blacks and Mexican-Americans but also of middle-class young people in this country" (29).

It has always seemed to me that the means of Freire's problem-posing pedagogy, which is intended "to introduce women and men to a critical form of thinking about their world" (104)—to foster *conscientizacao*, or *critical consciousness*—and which is described at length in Chapter 3 of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, are less important than his fundamental ontological message. Problem-posing education, he writes,

affirms men and women as beings in the process of *becoming*—as unfinished, uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality. Indeed, [. . .] people know themselves to be unfinished; they are aware of their incompleteness. In this incompleteness and this awareness lie the very roots of education as an exclusively human manifestation. (84)

(Note that the sexist language of the original has been edited out. Freire addressed the charges of sexism in his writing in *A Pedagogy of Hope*, acknowledging that the issue "is not a grammatical one but an ideological one" and asserting that "the rejection of sexist ideology, which necessarily involves the re-creation of language, is part of the possible dream of a change of the world" [67].) For Freire, to be fully human is to be aware of this state of becoming and to participate in the ongoing construction of reality. Accordingly, knowledge, for Freire, emerges from an interaction with the world "through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other" (72). Reality is not static and therefore cannot simply be described, in a positivist sense; rather, it must be constructed collaboratively. And this active construction of reality is essential, "for apart from inquiry [. . .] individuals cannot be truly human" (72). Freire's liberatory education, therefore, "denies that man is abstract, isolated, independent, and unattached to the world; it also denies that the world exists as a reality apart from people" (81).

These assumptions about reality, knowing, and being give Freire's critique of conventional education, which he famously described as "banking education," its power. His critique is not about method so much as it is about purpose: conventional education serves to maintain the status quo, because it rests on epistemological and ontological assumptions that deny the possibility of genuine change; to

challenge the status quo, therefore, means to reject the problematic assumptions on which it rests, a process essential to transforming the status quo. In my experience, this is the most difficult aspect of Freire's work for students and teachers to grasp and, if grasped, to accept, for Freire's devastating critique of conventional education profoundly challenges the accepted belief among many Western students and teachers that formal education is a good. Most teachers I have worked with do not readily embrace the notion that the education system they are part of—and to which they have committed themselves in good faith—is inherently flawed in the ways Freire describes or that it works against the goal of helping students becoming “fully human,” in Freire's sense of that term. Even teachers made cynical by the mismanagement, inadequate funding, obstructionism, myopia, and misguided policies they encounter daily in schools seem rarely to look to the problematic epistemological and ontological assumptions that Freire sees as the foundation of formal education. And for many teachers who do see schooling in this way, it is a short step to resignation from the conclusion that such a system is virtually irredeemable. Its sheer size and complexity make the kinds of reforms Freire envisioned seem outlandish and almost laughable.

I have shared that sense of resignation. But another hallmark of Freire's work is his deep sense of hope. “I do not understand human existence, and the struggle needed to improve it, apart from hope and dream,” he writes in *A Pedagogy of Hope*. “Hope is an ontological need” (8). And as Macedo notes, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* “has its roots in Paulo Freire's lived experiences” (13). Those experiences, which are described in much more detail in subsequent works like *A Pedagogy of Hope* and *Letters to Christina*, were often startling: imprisonment, hunger, poverty. When I have encountered the kind of student resistance that has been widely described in the professional literature on critical pedagogy (for example, see Ellsworth; Tassoni and Thelin), or when teachers have confided similar frustrations arising from their experiences within a restrictive and often less-than-humane system, I sometimes wonder how such struggles compare to sitting in a prison cell for the crime of teaching peasants to read. It may be unfair to compare such experiences, but it seems to me that Freire's sense of hope is so compelling precisely because his experience of oppression was so real. Indeed, his hope amounts to a kind of faith, a faith that may have its roots in his Roman Catholic upbringing but surely also arises from his sense of women and men as beings in the process of becoming, with all the possibility that implies.

I suppose the alternatives to such hope are simply too hard for many to bear: not only resignation and cynicism, but also capitulation, and even despair or nihilism. Or perhaps that's overstating the matter. Perhaps accommodation is a more feasible path. We teachers of writing can draw on Freire—as well as Murray and Elbow—to address the ills we see in the education system. We can use their mes-

sages to argue for more substantive and humane writing pedagogies that serve students' needs more fully than the test-driven pedagogies that seem to be retaking control of classrooms, especially in K–12 schools. Indeed, it can be easy to overlook how blessed many students and teachers are in the United States—just as, I suspect, it can be easy to overlook the poverty and racism that have long existed right around the corner from the Mardi Gras celebrations in New Orleans's once-trendy French Quarter. There, it seems to me, lies Freire's value. He not only enables us to see under the party masks and around that corner, but he also insists that we not avert our gaze. And in some ways, the deeply humane insistence of Murray and Elbow on the value of the individual writer has that same force: they refuse to accept excuses for ignoring the struggling student writer who they so completely believe has something more to say than "How long should this paper be?"—who wants to give voice to experience, who wants to become less powerless.

If the social and economic crises that emerged from Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005 have taught us anything, it is that business as usual isn't working to solve the serious inequalities we face as a society in an emerging global culture. To the extent that they continue business as usual, mainstream writing instruction and schooling cannot but contribute to those inequalities in the long term. Murray, Elbow, and Freire have been offering us viable alternatives to business as usual for more than three decades. Maybe it's time we stopped dismissing them as radical.

WORKS CITED

- Anyon, Jean. "Social Class and the Hidden Curriculum of Work." *Journal of Education* 162 (1980): 67–92.
- Bowles, Samuel, and Herbert Gintis. *Schooling in Capitalist America: Education Reform and the Contradictions of Economic Life*. New York: Basic, 1976.
- Bartholomae, David. "Writing with Teachers: A Conversation with Peter Elbow." *CCC* 46 (1995): 62–71.
- Berlin, James A. "Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class." *College English* 50 (1988): 477–94.
- Elbow, Peter. "Being a Writer vs. Being an Academic: A Conflict in Goals." *CCC* 46 (1995): 72–83.
- Ellsworth, Elizabeth. "Why Doesn't This Feel Empowering? Working through the Repressive Myths of Critical Pedagogy." *Harvard Educational Review* 59 (1989): 297–324.
- Freire, Paulo. *Letters to Christina: Reflections on My Life and Work*. New York: Routledge, 1996.
- . *A Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Trans. Robert R. Barr. New York: Continuum, 1994.
- Gradin, Sherric L. *Romancing Rhetorics: Social Expressivist Perspectives on the Teaching of Writing*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton, 1995.
- Harris, Joseph. *A Teaching Subject: Composition since 1966*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice, 1966.
- Moffett, James. *Teaching the Universe of Discourse*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton, 1968.
- Murray, Donald M. "Finding Your Own Voice: Teaching Composition in an Age of Dissent." *CCC* 20 (May 1969): 118–23. Rpt. in *Learning by Teaching: Selected Articles on Writing and Teaching*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton, 1982. 139–45.
- . "Teach Writing as a Process Not Product." *Leaflet* 71 (Fall 1972): 11–14. Rpt. in *Learning by Teaching: Selected Articles on Writing and Teaching*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton, 1982. 14–17.

- NCTE Task Force on the Impact of SAT and ACT Writing Tests. *The Impact of the SAT and ACT Timed Writing Tests*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 2005. 22 Nov. 2005 http://www.ncte.org/library/files/About_NCTE/Press_Center/SAT/SAT-ACT-tf-report.pdf.
- Noddings, Nel. *Caring, a Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1984.
- Tassoni, John Paul, and William H. Thelin. *Blundering for a Change: Errors and Expectations in Critical Pedagogy*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton, 2000.
- Thelin, William H. "Understanding Problems in Critical Classrooms." *CCC* 57 (2005): 114-41.