



## *English Education*

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When I teach methods courses for students seeking to become secondary school English teachers, my first assignment is always the same: I ask my students to collaborate with a small group of classmates on a statement of purpose for the study of English at the secondary level. I define the assignment as the kind of mission statement they might be asked to write for a department or school. In effect, they are to address the question of why students should be required to study English. The texts my students have produced for this assignment over the years have been predictable. Most of their statements extol the importance of reading and writing and the centrality of literacy in the curriculum; the value of clear and effective communication in "the real world," especially when it comes to applying for jobs; the joys of reading for pleasure and personal enrichment; and the advantages of being familiar with cultural knowledge embodied in great literary works. Once in a while, I receive a statement that mentions the importance of literacy in a democratic society, but such statements are rare. For the most part, my students never address the larger question of purpose: To what end do we help students learn to write and read so that they can succeed in school, find jobs, enjoy reading, or acquire cultural knowledge? What, ultimately, are we educating our students *for*? What do we want students to be and do with the literate knowledge and abilities we hope they develop? Is our purpose exclusively to help students acquire literacy skills so that they can earn good grades and good salaries? When I push the matter in this direction, many of my students resist. Successful in school themselves, few have thought about the purposes of education beyond the vague but

"English Education." In Bruce McComiskey, ed.  
*English Studies: An Introduction to the Discipline(s)*.  
Urbana, IL: NCTE, 2006. 275 - 319.

widely accepted idea that success in school provides opportunities for students to succeed in life. The specific definitions of “success” are often left unarticulated and unexamined. In these discussions, it is usually taken for granted that school is not only important but also a *good*; furthermore, most of my students would never think to question the proposition that English is a vitally important subject in school and therefore also a *good*.

Admittedly, when I question students in this way, I am asking them to engage in an uncomfortable kind of inquiry that calls into question their deepest beliefs about the value of what they seek to do: to teach English. As a young graduate student, flush with the sense of possibility that seemed to characterize my chosen field—a sense of possibility that emerged from the lesson of my own upbringing that education is advancement—I too wholeheartedly embraced the view that English, as an academic subject, is a *good*, and I also resisted critiques of the field that called that view into question. Yet I propose that we *do* question the proposition that the study of English, as we currently understand it, is a *good*. I make such a proposal by way of pursuing the main purpose of this chapter, which is to examine English education as a subdiscipline of English studies. Such an examination is, in my view, pointless without asking the larger question of the purpose of English studies itself. My answer to that question points to a need for a reexamination of English studies as both a practice and a body of knowledge.

I argue in this chapter not only that English education is a crucial component of a vision for a redefined English studies, but also that it is uniquely situated among the other subdisciplines of English studies to take up that challenge, despite its apparently low status as an academic field. At the center of this argument is my sense that English education, with its inevitable focus on the *practice* of teaching, is inherently dialectical in a way that other areas of English studies are not—a characteristic that fits in well with the call for English studies to address matters of broader social importance in its curricula and scholarship. This dialectical character is partly a legacy of the history of public education in the United States and of the evolution of education as an academic profession, which has always been directly concerned with the “training” of classroom teachers; it is also partly a function

of the history of English as an academic discipline in the modern university, which has placed increasing emphasis on research and theory. Perhaps more important, however, the dialectical character of English education arises from the concrete sense of purpose that informs the work of English educators, which tends to be defined in terms of the students who populate English classrooms in schools throughout the country. In other words, the work of English educators is always somehow connected to the lives of those students. My preservice teachers may have difficulty articulating a larger sense of purpose for the teaching of English, but they enter the profession with a strong sense that teaching English matters in concrete ways in the lives of their own students.

As a field grounded in practice, English education can serve a unique and vital function within English studies as a site where theory and practice inevitably converge and where the various subdisciplines of English studies can come together in the service of a project that transcends these separate disciplines. In this regard, English education is not so much a subdiscipline of English studies as a kind of composite of the other subdisciplines, an ongoing project of language practice and professional training that is informed by the other subdisciplines as it addresses various versions of the theory-practice problematic. But my interest here does not lie in defining English education as a discipline.<sup>1</sup> Instead, I am interested in articulating a larger project for English education that is at heart an argument for redefining English studies—and secondary and postsecondary education more generally. I propose that English education should become more proactive in promoting a progressive activist vision for literacy education at the secondary and postsecondary levels. Such a proposition coincides with Bruce McComiskey’s proposed definition of English studies as “the analysis, critique, and production of discourse in social context.” But in my view, this “analysis, critique, and production of discourse in social context” cannot of itself be the goal of English studies; rather, the analysis, critique, and production of discourse must be pursued in the service of some larger social vision; it should be part of a “design for a future social subject” and “a design for a future society,” as Gunther Kress puts it (16). Moreover, the effort to define that

“future social subject” and society should be the framework for English studies as a discipline. In other words, while the subject of English studies might be the analysis, critique, and production of discourse in social context, the purpose of that work should be the larger Utopian project of defining, examining, and fostering that “future social subject” who can contribute to the building of just and sustainable communities.

In short, like Kress and other scholars (e.g. James Berlin), I understand English education—and English studies more generally—as primarily subject-forming enterprises that should be structured around a vision of a certain kind of literate subject. The primary task of English educators should be to work out what that literate subject is and how a redefined “English” might foster that subject.

### Why It Matters

As I write this essay, more than fifty-three million students in grades K–12 attend American schools (U.S. Dept. of Ed.).<sup>2</sup> That figure represents more than 96 percent of the total school-age population (ages five to seventeen) in the United States. With very few exceptions, all of them are required to take English. That means that professionals in English education directly or indirectly participate in the formal education of virtually *every* child in the United States. That fact alone carries with it an enormous responsibility to understand the implications of the research, teaching, and related work that constitute the field. I wish to promote a vision for English education defined by that responsibility.

As I will show momentarily, it is widely accepted among scholars that formal schooling is an ongoing process of indoctrination by which certain beliefs, values, attitudes, knowledge, and social and intellectual practices are encouraged and others discouraged. For all its platitudes about individual responsibility and individual empowerment, the institution of formal education does not foster individuality so much as conformity.<sup>3</sup> And although the purposes and practices of formal education have always been—and will continue to be—the focus of intense debate and conflict, there

is little question but that schooling fosters certain kinds of individuals who conform to a few narrowly defined categories and who share fundamental beliefs and attitudes about such important matters as self, community, knowledge, the physical world, and the relationships among these. In other words, schooling profoundly shapes how we understand ourselves as *beings-in-the-world*. Although this fact is widely acknowledged by theorists, educators—including academics at the postsecondary level—often function as if they are separate from this process. The first step to redefining English studies, then, is to acknowledge the central role that all educators play in the shaping of students as beings-in-the-world.<sup>4</sup>

Once we take that step, we can begin to examine the role of educators in this process and set about changing it in ways that are consistent with the kind of society we hope to create. What that society might be is, of course, an open question, a site of ideological and social struggle (as schools themselves have always been), a social problem to be worked out through the structures and processes of a democratic society. The central problem with English studies—indeed, with education in general—is that it does not understand its function as encompassing the knowledge, skills, and beliefs needed for communities to take up that struggle in a way that might result in a more just and sustainable future. English—and education—are not about any kind of Utopian vision for a better future, or even a *different future*; rather, they are about maintaining a status quo that rests on specious assumptions about the nature of social and individual progress.

The primary reason for this problem lies in the epistemological foundations of modern education. The modern curriculum at all levels of education continues to rest on a positivist understanding of knowledge and reality, with its associated Cartesian self as autonomous and fundamentally intellectual.<sup>5</sup> The resulting fragmentation of knowledge into separate subjects organized hierarchically (with science at the top) has given rise to the familiar academic disciplines and the conventional school curriculum. Formal education thus becomes a matter of disseminating certain kinds of knowledge that are “discovered” through these disciplines. An educated person is someone who possesses the knowledge associated with these disciplines. And a professional

academic is an expert in one of those disciplines. This allegiance to a subject matter shifts the focus of postsecondary academic work away from education as a social project and thus enables professionals in the academic disciplines to sidestep or ignore the central role they play in producing that educated person and in reproducing the status quo—or reshaping it.

In teaching the modern curriculum, then, we are not only delivering bodies of knowledge but also reinforcing this Cartesian self. And in fostering this sense of self, we are reinforcing a fundamental binary between mind and body, between human *being* and everything else. I have argued elsewhere that this Western self is at the root of the serious social and environmental problems we face early in the new millennium (Yagelski, “Computers”). To address these problems, therefore, requires us to re-examine how we understand ourselves as beings-in-the-world and to adjust our educational practices accordingly. Education should be about “the development of the whole person,” one who has “the capacity for clear thought and compassion in the recognition of the interrelatedness of life,” as David Orr has argued (100). To that end, academic disciplines should not be about knowledge but about *knowing*.

As James Berlin famously asserted, “a way of teaching is never innocent” (“Rhetoric and Ideology” 492). English studies has essentially ignored its role as a subject-forming activity as it emerged as an academic discipline in the modern university. To a great extent, English education from its beginnings has been focused on this matter of the literate subject, though I believe in a way that has been more conservative than progressive and not always acknowledged as such. But its dialectical legacy as a discipline directly concerned with the practice of teaching gives it the potential to help redefine English studies in the way that I am advocating here.

### Some History

The emergence of English as a recognized academic discipline coincided with broader social and economic changes in the latter nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (see Berlin; Eagleton;

Ohmann). In the United States, these changes included patterns of immigration that contributed to the emergence of public schooling as a vehicle for assimilation and the creation of an Americanized workforce for the emerging modern capitalist society. The rise of industrial capitalism in turn helped shape the professionalization of English as an academic discipline in the early twentieth century. In this section, I trace some of these developments to show how they contributed to the emergence of the field of English education and helped shape its relationship to English studies in general.

This brief historical overview is not intended to be comprehensive, for it traverses complex but familiar ground that has been well-worn by historians of education and English (e.g., Arthur Applebee, Berlin, and James Squire). I wish to focus instead on two historical strands as a way to help make sense of the field of English education as we know it today: (1) the emergence of English as a modern academic discipline, and (2) the rise of public schooling in the United States. These two strands are closely related, but they are also distinct in several respects, including the focus of the first on postsecondary education and the focus of the second on K–12 education. The evolution of English education has been profoundly influenced by both—in ways that differ from the other subdisciplines of English studies that are identified in this book.

### *The Emergence of English as an Academic Discipline*

Scholars tend to agree that the modern English department emerged in the latter part of the nineteenth century in the midst of profound changes in higher education that were related to immigration patterns and industrialization (Berlin; Ohmann; Connors). These changes coincided with the adoption of the German model of higher education by American institutions, a model that organized knowledge into the main academic disciplines with which we are familiar today, established the scientific model as the standard for scholarly inquiry, and shifted the primary role of postsecondary faculty from teaching to research. Amidst these changes, the modern English department evolved, with its focus on literary study. Ironically, however, it was writ-

ing instruction, not literature, that enabled the modern English department to emerge from the traditional fields of rhetoric and grammar. As Berlin puts it, the initial purpose of the new English department that emerged in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, "was to provide instruction in writing [. . .]. Charles William Eliot, Harvard's president from 1869 to 1909, had in fact considered writing so central to the new elective curriculum he was shaping that in 1874 the Freshman English course at Harvard was established, by 1894 was the only requirement except for modern language, and by 1897 was the only required course in the curriculum" (*Rhetoric and Reality* 20). As Berlin goes on to show, the establishment of the first-year English composition course at Harvard in 1874, along with a written entrance exam, was a watershed moment in the history of modern English studies. Eventually, other institutions followed Harvard's lead, and first-year composition courses became commonplace. These courses were usually required of all students, which gave English departments a central role in the college curriculum. Robert Connors sees these developments at Harvard also as the beginning of what he terms the modern field of "composition-rhetoric," the consolidation of which

came with startling rapidity after 1885, with the advent of written exams at Harvard in 1874 and the general adoption of such exams at most established colleges. The consolidation of composition-rhetoric did not take place because true theory or practice drove out false, but because pressing social problems demanded solutions. (11)

From its beginnings as a recognized academic discipline, then, English was intimately tied to larger societal matters.

But although English departments had responsibility for first-year composition courses, English as a new scholarly discipline almost immediately began to distance itself from the teaching of writing. Many English professors did not want their professional identities to be defined by what was widely considered a skills-based course whose purpose was to enable students to write well enough to do the "real" work of college study. As a result, according to Berlin, "in order to distinguish the new English pro-

fessor from the old rhetoric teacher or the new composition teacher, a new discipline had to be formulated, a discipline based on English as the language of learning and literature as the specialized province of study" (*Rhetoric and Reality* 22). Berlin cites the founding of Johns Hopkins University in 1876 as an important moment in this process. Johns Hopkins was based on the German model, which included the formal study of literature in the vernacular language, heretofore not an established part of the American college curriculum. When Johns Hopkins attempted to hire Francis James Child, the Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory at Harvard, Harvard retained Child by releasing him from teaching first-year composition, which enabled him to focus on literary study. With this move "Harvard had its first specialist in literature who was without responsibility for teaching freshmen [. . . T]he precedent had been established and literature was on its way to becoming the dominant concern for the new English department" (*Rhetoric and Reality* 23).

These largely academic developments might not have made much difference in the long run if the new English department did not serve other important functions within the modern university and the emerging industrial society. As the German model reshaped American higher education and as science became established as the standard of knowledge making, the English department could claim legitimacy not only as the site of new knowledge in the form of rigorous literary scholarship but also as the gatekeeper of the English language, which was both the language of science and the language of industry. Berlin writes that as universities became "committed to the new ideal of scientific research and to the transferal of scientific knowledge in the service of corporate capitalism, English studies was at the center of the new curriculum in both secondary and higher education" (*Rhetorics, Poetics* 22–23). At the secondary level, the spread of compulsory schooling in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries meant that the large numbers of immigrants entering the country learned English as a school language and at the same time could be assimilated into American culture. At the college level, the teaching of writing as a skill fit the needs of industrial capitalism, which required literate, disciplined managers to help run efficient factories (Berlin; Ohmann). Because they were responsible

for writing instruction, then, English departments served an important social role in the new university.

But it was literary study that gave English its legitimacy as an academic discipline. Even as composition became a standard part of the college curriculum, literary study began to develop its own “objective” methodology to fit into the positivist paradigm that increasingly defined knowledge making in higher education. As Terry Eagleton points out, the New Criticism emerged from more traditional ways of reading literary texts in the early twentieth century, a time “when literary criticism in North America was struggling to become ‘professionalized,’ acceptable as a respectable academic discipline. Its battery of critical instruments was a way of competing with the hard sciences on their own terms, in a society where such science was the dominant criterion of knowledge” (49). This professionalizing of English studies increased the distance between the teaching of English at the secondary level and the study of English at the postsecondary level. For the latter, English increasingly became the study of the literary canon. The work of the college English professional was to define and refine this canon and to promote increasingly specialized ways of analyzing it. By contrast, although literature was part of the English curriculum in high schools (see Applebee, *Tradition* Chapter 2), the study of literary texts there was not the specialized kind of analysis that came to characterize English literary scholarship under the influence of New Criticism; rather, literary study in high schools focused on passing on the cultural heritage and supporting basic literacy instruction—as well as communicating certain values and habits of mind. As English faculty at universities became literary specialists, then, high school English teachers remained guardians of the language, keepers of convention, and guides to the Western cultural tradition in literature.

Applebee points out that by the beginning of the twentieth century, the study of literature in high schools had come to be seen as consistent with the value of *all* education, which “lay in mental discipline”:

thus any proposal for the study of English literature had disciplinary value as part of its justification. Another was that the unique value of literary studies was their guarantee of a continu-

ing cultural tradition, an extra-historical perspective encompassing and preserving the values of Western civilization. Third, there was the conviction that all of the varied studies of language, literature, and composition which had previously had to fend for separate places within the curriculum were really only different aspects of the same central study. And finally there was the belief that this study was the one subject within the school curriculum to which all students needed a steady exposure. (*Tradition* 38)

Applebee’s summary of the consolidation of English as a subject by the early twentieth century underscores the differences in the sense of purpose that informed English at the high school level and postsecondary English studies—differences that obtain today. Yet the influence of college English on secondary school English was profound, as seen in the impact of Harvard’s entrance exam. As they developed within the new American university, college English departments continued to pronounce on what the study of high school English should be. For example, as Berlin notes, Harvard’s “establishing the entrance test in composition suggested that the ability to write was something the college student ought to bring with him from his preparatory school, a place which was more and more likely to be one of the new public high schools that were now appearing everywhere” (*Rhetoric and Reality* 23). In addition to these expectations for writing ability, colleges also set expectations for the reading that students should do before entering college. Harvard’s entrance exam stipulated that literature would be the subject about which applicants would write, which led to questions about what literary texts students in high schools should study. For its 1874 entrance exam, Harvard listed the following texts: *The Tempest*, *Julius Caesar*, and *The Merchant of Venice* by Shakespeare; Goldsmith’s *Vicar of Wakefield*; and *Ivanhoe* and *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* by Scott. According to Applebee, “This requirement institutionalized the study of standard authors and set in motion a process which eventually forced English to consolidate its position within schools” (*Tradition* 30). As other colleges followed Harvard’s lead, high schools complained about the lack of agreement among the college reading lists. Those complaints led to efforts to standardize the reading lists, culminating in 1894 in the National Conference on Uniform Entrance Requirements in

English. In effect, colleges were determining what high school students were required to read, despite the fact that only about four percent of students from eighteen to twenty-four years old actually attended college at the time (Berlin, *Rhetoric and Reality* 33). One implication of this dynamic was that college English faculty could ascribe to secondary schools the tasks of introducing students to standard literary texts and providing basic writing instruction, leaving college faculty to focus on the increasingly specialized study of literature. Thus, the distinction between English at the secondary level and how it was coming to be practiced at the postsecondary level became institutionalized.

English education did not exist as an academic discipline at the turn of the twentieth century, but these developments help explain how it eventually emerged as such, for it was in part the continuing disputes about the relationship between high school and college English and about the place of writing instruction in college English departments that led to another watershed event, the founding of the National Council of Teachers of English in 1911, which can justifiably be seen as the birth of English education. Berlin writes that “the National Council of Teachers of English was founded in protest against college domination of the high school English curriculum exercised through the agency of the Uniform Reading Lists” (*Rhetoric and Reality* 33). The lists had become extremely controversial in the years after the National Conference on Uniform Entrance Requirements, and the founders of NCTE, who were almost exclusively high school teachers, used the growing opposition to the lists to assert their conception of English in secondary schools as something more than preparation for college. As a professional organization, NCTE “was from the start an agency for improving the teaching of English at all educational levels, even if its main focus initially was secondary school instruction” (35). But the founding of NCTE underscored the growing rift between literature and composition within English departments; it also reflected the distance between high school English, with its concerns for basic literacy instruction, and college English, with its focus on specialized literary study. English education as an academic discipline concerned with the teaching of English emerged amidst these tensions.

### *English Education and the Rise of Public Schooling*

If the founding of NCTE might be seen as the birth of English education, the rise of public schooling in the United States in the twentieth century might be seen as what nurtured the nascent field. Without this fertile ground in which to take root, English education might not have had what eventually came to be its central project: understanding, delivering, and (ostensibly) improving the teaching of English, largely through its role in preparing secondary teachers. As much as English education has been shaped by English studies at the postsecondary level, it is in many ways more closely connected to the ideologies and practices of public schooling. In this regard, the development of English education is inextricably linked to the rise of public schooling in the United States, which exacerbates the tensions between it and English studies.

As I have already suggested, public schooling was shaped by a number of social and economic factors in the latter nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and it evolved into an important vehicle for the assimilation of immigrants, as well as already established social groups within American society, into the American mainstream. That mainstream can be characterized at that time as reflecting Protestant values and a civic vision based loosely on liberal ideals and cultural values (see Macedo, Chapters 2 and 3). According to Stephen Macedo,

The public schools were thought to be an appropriate public instrument for promoting the reasonableness and cooperation among citizens that a healthy liberal political order depends upon [. . .]. Even if the religious content of the public school curriculum was low—and even if it had been *nonexistent*—its mission with respect to religion and other “private” normative domains was crucial: to promote tolerant and “charitable” forms of religious and ethical belief. (85; emphasis in original)

In addition, public schooling seems to have evolved in close concert with the needs of the industrial state. The curriculum and social practices of schooling imparted values and emphasized certain kinds of knowledge and skills that coincided with the values, knowledge, and skills needed for an industrialized labor

force. In this regard, public schools were not only producing (or trying to produce) the kind of citizen that Macedo refers to as necessary for a democratic society, but they were also preparing a certain kind of worker for the modern industrial state. Berlin sees these developments “as part of a reformation of class relations. The new credentialing process created a meritocracy, with the professional middle class at its apex” (*Rhetorics, Poetics* 20). In this new meritocracy, “high schools provided the training for lower-level skilled labor, while colleges provided the expertise needed to succeed in the upper levels of the meritocracy” (21). To put it in slightly different terms, secondary schooling was about the management of “human capital” in the emerging industrial state; it was engaged in a certain kind of subject-formation consistent with the needs of modern American society.

But these dual projects—producing citizens for a democratic state and producing workers for an industrialized society—were not necessarily compatible. Linda McNeil argues that industrialization in effect turned the Jeffersonian ideal of educating all citizens for participation in democracy “on its head as industrialists around the turn of the century looked to schools to supply them with labor for their expanding factories”; the industrialists’ “desire to control schooling went beyond wanting to socialize students into a particular set of values. These industrialists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries wanted to help control the labor supply” (4). According to McNeil, controlling the labor supply meant dealing with growing enrollments in public schools as well as increasing numbers of immigrants to the United States (which of course contributed to the rising school enrollments). In this sense, the industrialists’ concerns about immigrant labor coincided with reformers’ desires to address various social problems. McNeil concludes that “during this period, industrialists and social reformers alike turned to the school as the only universal institution, as the best organization for breaking down the home culture and replacing it with American values. In addition, the schools could train, sort, select and certify able and willing workers” (5).

In short, as the United States evolved into a modern industrial state, public schools came to serve a variety of social and economic purposes in a vast norming and sorting of the popula-

tion. Proponents of the early common school recognized that “convergence on liberal democratic civic norms does not come about automatically, that in fact the health of our regime depends on its ability to turn people’s deepest convictions—including their religious beliefs—in directions that are congruent with the ways of a liberal republic” (Macedo 42–43). In McNeil’s less sanguine view, these social and cultural values are inextricably linked to economic production (12): “Our present high schools were organized, and their reward structures set, at a time when schools were being overtly and deliberately used as agents of economic and social control” (15).

Whether characterized as essential and proper for a healthy democracy or as a form of indoctrination serving the corporate state (or both), schools teach, reinforce, and perpetuate values, beliefs, and habits of mind to an extent that other institutions, even religious ones, cannot. To take one example that is sometimes cited in critiques of schools, the valorizing of individualism that characterizes American culture is woven into the fabric of formal schooling, not only in the form of institutional practices (such as grading, which is inherently competitive and which rests on a set of assumptions about individuals as autonomous configurations of abilities and characteristics), but also in terms of curricular content, such as the study of “great” historical figures and literary works by certain “great” authors. In addition, extracurricular activities such as competitive sports or debating can reinforce ideas about individual ability and merit. These ideas pervade all aspects of the school culture. In this way, schools become powerful institutional vehicles for producing and reproducing American culture—an idea that is by now familiar through the work of Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, Henry Giroux, and others. As C. A. Bowers puts it, “It is at the level of public school education that the most basic schemata of the culture are presented and reinforced” (*Educating* 8).

It should not be surprising, then, that since their beginning public schools have been the focus of ambitious reform efforts intended to address a variety of social problems or to further various social agendas. The marquee example of such movements is the Progressive Movement of the 1920s and 1930s, driven largely by the ideas of John Dewey and his adherents. If the schools

could foster conformity, the thinking went, they could also promote positive social change, addressing society's ills in ways that government programs or private philanthropy could not. In addition, for Dewey and those influenced by his ideas, the central task of education was the preparation of thinking, productive citizens who were ethically and politically aware. In other words, the schools were the places where democracy was nourished, for they could foster in students the civic ideals necessary for effective citizenship; to produce such citizens was ultimately to improve society.<sup>6</sup> Applebee has identified the idea of a social mission for education as one distinction between the secondary and postsecondary levels, arguing that through the initiatives of progressive reformers like Jane Addams "the public elementary and secondary schools were gradually enlisted as agents of progressive social change. It was a major step in the separation of school and college functions" (*Tradition* 47). This separation still exists today in various guises, perhaps most importantly because schooling is compulsory until about the age of sixteen in most states, whereas postsecondary schooling is not. However, whatever the progressive impulses of social activists and school reformers in the early twentieth century (and later), public education at the elementary and secondary levels has increasingly served the same conservative function that many scholars have associated with higher education (e.g., Berlin, Eagleton, and Ohmann). For the most part, reform efforts have left schools fundamentally unchanged. Perhaps the most revealing evidence of this lack of change is the fact that the organizational structure of schools, the conventional curriculum, and basic teaching practices have remained essentially intact since the rise of public schooling at the turn of the twentieth century. Classrooms today are, except for relatively minor details, fundamentally the same as the classrooms our forebears might have entered 100 or 120 years ago.

English as a school subject claimed a central role in both the reformist and the normative projects of public education in the United States. No other subject has been so widely required in modern secondary schools. Today, in most states, students must take English for all four years of high school and for the three years of middle school; language arts is a central component of the elementary school curriculum as well. In effect, all secondary

school students are exposed to and potentially shaped by the English language arts curriculum. As a result, its content and practices constitute an extremely powerful site for the inculcation of values and the shaping of young minds. The oft-heard platitude that teachers have the power to touch young lives becomes a description of the potentially profound importance of—and perhaps a cause for deep concern about—the work of individual English teachers when that work is placed in the context of this vast collective project of teaching English to virtually all American school-age children.

The focus of English on reading and writing has given it special importance as a set of fundamental skills that all students must acquire. Standardized and mandated tests almost always include reading, and increasingly in recent years they are including writing as well. Indeed, the original standardized test in the United States, the Harvard entrance exam discussed earlier, was a writing exam. If standardized testing has been a political battleground in the United States for the past 130-plus years, English has been in the middle of that battle. But it has also evolved in a way that coincides with and even reinforces the growing tendency toward standardized testing. That is, English as a school subject, in terms of its pedagogy and curriculum in secondary schools, has adapted to testing and in some cases has even focused its attention on "testable" skills (such as spelling or correctness in form). One response of English educators to the inevitable public education "crises," such as the one sparked by the publication of the famous *Newsweek* article "Why Johnny Can't Read" in 1974, has been to develop pedagogies that ostensibly address the perceived crisis. The "back-to-basics" movement that grew out of the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (U.S. Natl. Comm.) in the 1980s included a rejection of Whole Language and other "progressive" language arts pedagogies and a return to phonics-based reading instruction in the early grades and skills-based approaches to teaching writing at the secondary level. While such efforts have been resisted by many professionals in English education (often with great vigor), the conventional English curriculum in schools—over which English educators themselves usually have little control and to which they must adjust—always seems to adapt to the latest reform efforts, which

is to say that, as studies like Applebee's *Literature in the Secondary School* indicate, it remains largely unchanged. In this regard, English as a school subject has been a crucial component of the norming project of schools.

Reading various histories of English and composition studies (e.g., Connors, Berlin, Applebee), one easily comes away with a sense of how widespread certain beliefs and practices have been. As Applebee has shown, for example, the selection of works of literature that tend to be taught in high schools has been remarkably stable over the years (*Literature*), with the implication that students in schools across the country are exposed to more or less the same literary works. Applebee's study of writing in high schools in the early 1980s revealed a similar dynamic: most students were asked to do the same kinds of writing with similar frequencies, and pedagogies were strikingly similar from one school to another (*Writing*). No study on the scale of Applebee's has been conducted in recent years, but the research we do have suggests that while some students may be writing more often and that more "progressive" writing process pedagogies have become standard in many classrooms, for the majority of students writing instruction still tends to be characterized by the same practices and attitudes as when Applebee conducted his study more than twenty years ago.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, in many states mandated standardized writing exams have encouraged teachers to focus on specific kinds of writing tasks in order to prepare students for these exams. Whatever one thinks of these exams, the implication of this trend is that students in schools are exposed to more or less the same basic (and narrowly defined) kinds of writing instruction and thus emerge from their secondary education with similar attitudes about writing. The same can be said of reading and literary study.

We in English expend a great deal of energy discussing what should and should not be taught and why, and a review of scholarship in the field over the past half-century reveals how dramatic a change we have seen in the kinds of issues that we consider most important in our work. (To take just one example, consider the ways in which we discuss "difference" in literacy instruction today, as seen in the work of scholars like Lisa Delpit and Keith Gilyard.) But the disconnection between so much of our scholar-

ship with its focus on theory and what actually happens in English classrooms seems as large as ever. A close look at how English is taught in schools indicates that despite the apparent impact of movements like Whole Language, the National Writing Project, and the writing process movement, which have certainly influenced how many teachers approached their work, the teaching of English has remained fundamentally unchanged since it became a mainstay of the curriculum of the modern public school. My own sense is that the size and inflexibility of the education bureaucracy that has been constructed around formal schooling is the central reason for that lack of change. It is no coincidence that major reform efforts in the past fifty years or so have all been prompted or driven by government initiatives: the National Defense Education Act of 1958 (which was amended in 1962 to include English as one of the essential subjects to be supported); the back-to-basics reforms that grew out of the report of the U.S. National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk*, in 1983; and the recent move toward "accountability" in the George W. Bush administration's No Child Left Behind program, which intensifies the already strong push toward a focus on skills measured by standardized tests. All of these efforts have the effect of solidifying the normative role that the teaching of English plays in formal education.<sup>8</sup>

Berlin has asserted, "Every pedagogy is imbricated in ideology, in a set of tacit assumptions about what is real, what is good, what is possible, and how power ought to be distributed" ("Rhetoric and Ideology" 492). If literacy is a way of making sense of the world, of "reading the world," in Paulo Freire's memorable phrase, then English as a school subject has been the most potent of the normative forces in the school curriculum. It is no wonder, then, that English has been the focus of much controversy as well as the vehicle for many reform efforts over the years.

### English Education and Academe Today

I have traced the way that English education as an academic discipline has emerged along with English as a school subject and along with formal schooling, which accounts in large measure

for its dual and contradictory legacy of being both a normative and a reformist project. But English education has always occupied an uncomfortable position with respect to the schools. For one thing, it has sought to understand the teaching and learning of English (of writing, reading, grammar, and literature) that for the most part happens in schools. Not surprisingly, then, the focus of much of its attention has always been on conventional English instruction in conventional school settings. For another thing, it has come to be charged with the training of secondary school English teachers. Programs such as the one I teach in at SUNY Albany are authorized by states to prepare teachers for certification to teach in public schools. In this sense, English educators (like other teacher educators) act as an arm of the state when it comes to institutionalized education. That role carries with it a responsibility to serve the needs of schools, such as they are. Those of us in English education routinely share the frustration of hearing teachers or administrators in secondary schools complain that our university programs don't adequately prepare teachers-in-training for the real and very pressing "practical" challenges of teaching English in those secondary schools. The widespread expectation is that English educators (and indeed *all* teacher educators) will prepare student teachers to function effectively in those schools as they are currently structured and operated; the expectation is generally *not* that student teachers will be trained as "change agents" or reformers except to the extent that they can help improve schools according to conventional criteria for "improvement" (e.g., higher standardized test scores, higher rates of graduation or college attendance, and so on). The job of English educators is thus not usually considered to be to foster social change but rather to help to maintain the institutional status quo.

At the same time, as university or college faculty, English educators are expected to contribute to knowledge making as it is defined in institutions of higher education; they are expected to be researchers and to "do theory." They are expected to be scholars who do not simply prepare teachers for the classroom but who also study current practices. Thus, they face many of the same pressures as scholars in other disciplines, and they have struggled for legitimacy in the modern university, like their coun-

terparts in disciplines such as rhetoric and composition. Unlike those counterparts, however, English educators are often directly affected by the vagaries of public funding for research and struggle to claim legitimacy as researchers outside the walls of academe as well. A good example of this struggle is the aforementioned No Child Left Behind initiative, which includes rigid requirements governing the kinds of education research that will be funded and used in education reform initiatives. As Nancy Mellin McCracken has recently pointed out, No Child Left Behind amounts to a systematic attempt to exclude colleges of education from full participation in federally funded education research and reform projects. The Department of Education's demand that research be "scientific" (which means studies using randomized experimental designs or similar methodologies) and that curriculum reform efforts be based on such research can be seen as the latest (and an especially virulent) challenge to the legitimacy of scholars in education. McCracken quotes the strategic plan of the Department of Education to highlight the low status assigned to education as compared to other disciplines:

Unlike medicine, agriculture and industrial production, the field of education operates largely on the basis of ideology and professional consensus. As such, it is subject to fads and is incapable of the cumulative progress that follows from the application of the scientific method and from the systematic collection and use of objective information in policy making. (Dept. of Education 48; qtd. in McCracken 111)

Leaving aside the specious assumption, which is implicit in this statement, that fields such as medicine or agriculture are immune to ideology and do not operate on the basis of "professional consensus," this passage underscores some of the pressures facing English educators in the public arena, where they struggle to claim a professional identity as researchers and scholars in much the same way that they do in academe. But English educators must function in the public arena in a way that, for example, literary scholars do not. If a particular kind of theoretical movement in literary scholarship is dismissed (or, more likely, ignored) by practitioners in K-12 schools, there is no significant impact on scholars advocating such theory. (In this way, the disconnection between

theory and practice at the postsecondary level actually insulates scholars from the kinds of pressures that English educators face.) By contrast, if a theory and its associated pedagogies advocated by English education scholars are dismissed, resisted, or even actively opposed by teachers, administrators, or bureaucrats (as in the case of Whole Language Theory, for example), the consequences for English educators can be significant. They can be excluded from funding, their work can be excluded from school reform efforts, and their participation in teacher training can be compromised. Such pressures complicate the role of English educators as academics and as professionals involved in the preparation of secondary school teachers, and they help give rise to the tensions that characterize the field today.

The struggle of English educators for legitimacy in the public arena mirrors their struggle for legitimacy in academe. The very effort to define the field can highlight that struggle. Consider, for example, McCracken's recent definition of the field: "The work of English educators in the twenty-first century is to conduct and provide ready access to research that can provide knowledge and insight to those who choose to devote their lives to teaching the diverse students who populate the United States and its schools" (110). Such a definition, which would likely be acceptable to most professionals in the field, underscores the close ties that English education has to the schools in terms of both its work and its identity as a field; at the same time, it reminds us that English education is also a university discipline that claims a specific area of scholarly inquiry. In other words, as a university discipline, English education is about a certain kind of research and inquiry—not about preparing teachers. To have legitimacy in the university, English education must emphasize its research and scholarly inquiry and in effect downplay its role in preparing teachers; in most research institutions (and I daresay in other kinds of postsecondary institutions as well), a faculty member is not likely to earn tenure on the basis of his or her work in preparing teachers alone. Yet English educators can never completely deny or discard that role, since it is that preparation and its implications—that is, the way English teachers teach English in schools—that provide the field's research focus and its economic viability in the modern university.

This tension between the need to produce scholarship and the responsibility for training public school English teachers also characterizes the field's relationship to English studies. Although many university and college English departments participate in the education of secondary school English teachers, the field of English studies has no formal scholarly concern with that project. For the most part, the role of English studies in the preparation of English teachers is limited to program requirements stipulating that students must complete so many credits in English or hold an undergraduate degree in English. Such requirements help populate university English courses and can bring university funding to English department coffers; they also can help increase enrollments in other English department programs. In this way, like first-year composition, English education programs can be fiscally beneficial to English departments and help fund more esoteric but fiscally less viable areas of study within the English curriculum. Nevertheless, as a scholarly field, English studies has no real interest in either the secondary school English curriculum or the preparation of those who will teach that curriculum. Articles about reflective practice in the teaching of literature, for example, or the application of feminist theory to the literate development of young adults do not appear in the pages of *PMLA* or even in *College English*. To put it somewhat differently, English studies as an academic discipline is not about *teaching* English in any substantive way.

These circumstances can make it difficult for professionals in English education to amass the requisite scholarly credentials for tenure in colleges and universities while they also establish themselves as legitimate colleagues and effective mentors for preservice and inservice teachers in secondary schools. All of us can tell stories about the difficulties that an acquaintance or colleague (or we ourselves) had in making a case for tenure that convinced review committees that our work was indeed legitimate scholarly inquiry. I have no interest in complaining about this state of affairs. Rather, I wish to describe what I see as the status quo of English studies today. The rather vexed position of English education within the field of English studies and within the university can indeed be frustrating for those of us in the field. But despite its seemingly undesirable status within English studies,

the dialectical nature of English education, with its inevitable focus on practice, is paradoxically much better positioned than other disciplines within English studies (perhaps with the exception of rhetoric and composition) not only to remain a viable part of higher education as the new modern university emerges in the early decades of the twenty-first century but also to be at the forefront of a much larger effort to redefine education more generally and claim an important role for English within it.

### English Education as Praxis

I have suggested that English education has become something of a conservative discipline in the sense that much of its work tends to reflect and reinforce the status quo of institutionalized K–12 education, which serves a broad norming function within American society. But I have also suggested that English education, because of that same close relationship to K–12 education, possesses the potential for playing a central role in shaping American culture that goes well beyond other subdisciplines in English studies and the other academic disciplines represented in current secondary and postsecondary curricula. To understand this potential and the seemingly paradoxical normative-transformative character of English education requires a closer look at how the field currently understands itself and engages in its primary work of (to paraphrase McCracken’s definition) conducting and providing ready access to research that offers knowledge and insight to those who teach English in American schools. My analysis here relies on Freire’s notion of *praxis* as “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 51). Freire offers an epistemological framework for understanding what I have been calling the dialectical nature of English education. Furthermore, Freire sees education in overtly teleological terms, something that I think is essential if English is to be a viable part of the shaping of a just and sustainable future.

Freire explains in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* that praxis rests on an understanding of dialectical thought in which “world and action are intimately interdependent” (53). Dialectic is thus at the heart of Freire’s ideas in two respects: (1) it is fundamental to

knowledge making—that is, knowledge is a function of a dialectical interaction between humans and the world; and (2) it characterizes his “dialogic” pedagogy, which involves dialectical interchange between teacher and student. For Freire, “knowledge emerges only 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).<sup>9</sup> This is an active process in which the world is made and remade and which therefore holds out the possibility of transformation. But Freire’s interest here is not just epistemological; it is also ontological, for he is concerned with how persons are conceived—and how they conceive themselves—as beings-in-the-world. In his formulation, knowing and being are fundamentally interrelated; knowledge as a function of dialectical engagement with the world is at the center of what it means to be human: “For apart from inquiry, apart from praxis, individuals cannot be truly human” (72). Conventional education works against this process of becoming “truly human” by defining knowledge as objective and external to the knower and by describing reality as static. Freire’s “problem-posing” pedagogy rejects those definitions of knowers and instead defines teachers and students as “critical co-investigators in dialogue” with each other in the service of a “critical intervention in reality” (81). This amounts to a reconceptualizing of the student-as-subject (really, of *all* people):

Education as the practice of freedom—as opposed to education as the practice of domination—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. Authentic reflection considers neither abstract man nor the world without people, but people in their relations with the world. In these relations, consciousness and world are simultaneous: consciousness neither precedes the world nor follows it. (81)

This passage dramatically summarizes Freire’s ontological and epistemological assumptions. It also implicitly rejects the positivist epistemology that still serves as the foundation for modern schooling as well as for the academic disciplines. In short, Freire offers a critical pedagogy based on a radically different epistemology from that which informs modern education.<sup>10</sup>

As I have already noted, English studies implicitly embraced a positivist epistemology and developed knowledge making practices consistent with it as it evolved into a modern discipline. The New Criticism, for example, which became the main theoretical paradigm within English in the mid-twentieth century, essentially applied principles of objectivity to the study of literary texts. More recent theoretical trends in English studies are, I would argue, consistent with this epistemology, appearances to the contrary. This is so because the central project of English studies has been to define and preserve a certain kind of knowledge within academe (though what that knowledge should be has been a matter of intense debate in the field); that project is only incidentally concerned with ontology—that is, with the formation of a certain kind of student subject. And despite the apparent existence of leftists and other radicals in university English departments, a charge heard so often in the corporate media, English studies as an academic discipline is not concerned in any direct way with the transformation of the world, in Freirean terms; rather, its practices are consistent with what Freire has famously called “the banking concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits” of knowledge as defined by the teacher (or the discipline) (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 72).<sup>11</sup> In this sense, English studies has itself become a conservative force that contributes to the maintenance of the institutional status quo, a point to which I will return momentarily.

Such a statement may seem fantastic given the concerns of scholars in English studies today, many of whom promote theoretical views that diverge radically from positivism and who often write about issues of social injustice, racial inequality, the marginalized status of various “nonmainstream” groups, and the silencing of members of those groups, among other genuinely important concerns. But scholarship and teaching in English studies remain decidedly conventional and disciplinary (in both senses of that term); in that sense, scholarship and teaching in English studies are about *English studies*, not about any significant kind of social or individual transformation through the study of English, notwithstanding the work of provocative scholars, such as bell hooks, whose voices have reached beyond academe. Signifi-

cantly, the broader impact of these scholars outside academe seems to be a function of the extent to which they transcend their academic disciplines and become “public intellectuals.” The majority of scholars in English studies have no such impact. Instead, we maintain the discipline and its place within the university, which itself is concerned with maintaining its status within the society at large. (As many observers have noted, the “corporatization” of the university in the past few decades can be seen as an effort to adjust to a new world economic order and thus maintain a role for higher education in that new order. See Noble; White and Hauck.)

English education, by contrast, is directly concerned with something other than its disciplinary identity and status, or, to put it conversely, its professional identity is a function of something outside academe: it is concerned with the practice of teaching English and, inevitably, with the purpose(s) of that practice. In other words, the question of the role of the teaching of English within the society at large is always implicit in the issues that English educators address, whether those issues are various writing pedagogies, assessments, the literary training of English teachers, teacher-research, or any number of related concerns. All these concerns are shaped—indeed, to a great extent defined—by the fact that English is a required school subject for virtually all American school-age children. Thus, English educators are always but a step away from questions of purpose: To what end do English educators help prepare secondary school English teachers? To what end do English educators develop and encourage specific literacy pedagogies? To what end do English educators engage in specific kinds of research? In other words, English education is not only an epistemological enterprise, one involved in producing certain kinds of knowledge; it is not only an ontological enterprise, involved in fostering a certain kind of literate student subject. It is also a *teleological* enterprise, involved in pursuing some larger goal, explicitly defined or not. And that goal is intimately connected to the stated and unstated purposes of public education within an ostensibly democratic and capitalist society.

Given its nature as a teleological enterprise, English education, with its dialectical knowledge-making practices, has a unique

capacity for transformation in Freirean terms. Because it is directly concerned with the teaching of English, English education is always engaged in a kind of knowledge making that is characterized by an engagement with the world, in Freirean terms; its knowledge making is situated within the “reality” of classroom practice. And because of its concern with literacy, English education has claim to something that lies at the center of Freire’s conception of the dialectical process of knowledge making: language, which is “the essence of dialogue itself” (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 87). For Freire,

the word is more than just an instrument which makes dialogue possible; accordingly, we must seek its constitutive elements. Within the word we find two dimensions, reflection and action, in such radical interaction that if one is sacrificed—even in part—the other immediately suffers. There is no true word that is not at the same time a praxis. Thus, to speak a true word is to transform the world. (87)

Freire goes on to explain the importance of *naming*: “To exist, humanly, is to *name* the world, to transform it”; humans are “not built in silence, but in word, in work, in action-reflection” (88; emphasis in original). From this perspective, the very subject of English education, which can be described as educating literacy teachers, gives it unique transformative possibilities.

The problem, of course, is that English education is so centrally defined by its relationship to formal education that it can be a powerful tool for reinforcing conventional practices and ideologies, as I have already suggested. To realize its transformative potential, in Freirean terms, English education as a professional field must confront its complicated relationship with formal schooling and fully embrace its inherently dialectical character. The difficulty of this task is not trivial, nor is the task itself straightforward.

For one thing, formal schooling, such as it is, has become so deeply entrenched in American culture that it is seen as a normal part of growing up. Despite never-ending controversies about funding, testing, curriculum, and related aspects of formal education, most Americans seem to accept and support the central role that schools play in the upbringing and indeed in the social-

ization of their children. In general, Americans do not seem much concerned about the extent to which conventional schooling is tantamount to a long-term project of indoctrination into certain ways of thinking about knowledge, the world, the self, and matters of central importance to American political and economic life, including the production and consumption of goods, work, individual rights, and the value of private property. Indeed, polls show that while Americans have concerns about public education in general, they believe the schools that their own children attend are generally doing a good job; these polls suggest a public that is very comfortable with conventional education.<sup>12</sup> And for better or worse, most Americans seem to accept the central role of English in that process; not surprisingly, they tend to hold the utilitarian conception of literacy as a basic skill that characterizes English instruction in schools (see Yagelski, *Literacy* 28–43). To tinker with the teaching of English, then, is to challenge deeply held beliefs about writing, reading, and schooling.

The influence of recent theoretical developments—especially postmodern theory—on higher education has further complicated these challenges facing English educators. Perhaps more than most disciplines in the social sciences and humanities, English education has had difficulty distancing itself from the great modernist project that has been called into question by postmodernism, whereas English studies embraced postmodern thinking and began to redefine itself as a scholarly field in opposition to modernism. Like many other academic disciplines that have been influenced by postmodern thought, English studies seems to have found it easy to jettison the modernist scientific and objectivist principles that informed the New Criticism and shift its focus to the language play and epistemological relativism of postmodernism. In doing so, it has concerned itself with such projects as recovering previously marginalized or ignored literatures, promoting certain kinds of cultural critique, and challenging the literary canon. The stakes for English studies in these developments were relatively low: to preserve its status within the academy. I do not mean to diminish the potential effects of theoretical movements like postmodernism on individual programs and lives in the field; for example, as new areas of inquiry within English studies have gained currency, “old” ones have diminished in im-

portance, resulting in the elimination of some programs and faculty positions in those areas. But as a whole, English studies has maintained its place within the modern university in large measure by maintaining its institutional practices, even though its scholarly concerns have diverged from the ostensibly objective methodology of New Criticism. In other words, while the content of its scholarship has changed to adjust to the rise of postmodern thought, its institutional practices have not changed. English studies thus remains a viable part of the modern university, which, paradoxically, continues to be defined by modernist ideas about knowledge.

English education, by contrast, has faced a more complicated challenge with the rise of postmodern thinking. Defined as it is in relation to formal schooling, English education could not so easily embrace postmodern ideas about language, knowledge, and discourse, because the schools are structured around modernist assumptions about the autonomous self and the Enlightenment ideals of social and material “progress.” The focus of postmodern theory on the contingency of knowledge making, the instability of the subject, and the connections between power and discourse has in a sense forced English educators to confront their complicity in the process by which schools, as social institutions, can contribute to injustice and marginalization. Unlike scholars in other subdisciplines of English studies, then, English education scholars cannot simply adjust the focus of their scholarship while maintaining conventional institutional practices. To put it rather more concretely, how could English educators educate teachers-in-training about the functions of power through discourse and the specific ways in which schools manage behavior and maintain institutional power through certain discourse practices, and at the same time prepare those same teachers-in-training to effectively engage in and reinforce those same discourse practices? How could they teach English teachers that common language practices in schools, such as the emphasis on “standard English,” can be oppressive and then train them to participate in that same oppression? If postmodern thought helped English educators understand the complex dynamics of language, knowledge, discourse, and power, it also helped reveal their vexed role in the normative process that is formal schooling.

Karen Smith and Patricia Lambert Stock have recently argued that in the past decade or so English educators have embraced the postmodern skepticism of the Enlightenment project and adopted a “praxis-oriented” approach to their work, concerning themselves “with what counts as knowledge, with how that knowledge is produced, with who produces it, and with how it does and doesn’t benefit students and the larger society in which we live” (116). They cite the increasingly complex research methodologies and studies that “draw attention to the situation-specific nature of teaching and learning and to multiple views of what counts as effective teaching and learning,” and they discuss “the problematics of representation” (116) as related to the work of English educators, describing some of the “poly-vocal inquiries that incorporate multiple perspectives to address the problem” (119) that researchers in English education have devised. Smith and Stock’s take on English educators’ embrace of postmodernism is no doubt a valid description of trends in the field. But although English education researchers might design studies reflecting the multiple and shifting subjectivities of participants in ways that are consistent with postmodern theory, the secondary English teachers and students with whom they work function in a modernist institutional context that has resisted postmodern ideas and some of the pedagogies and curricular reform efforts that have been informed by postmodernism. In other words, as scholars in the field draw on postmodern theory to understand better what they do, many of their school-based colleagues often remain mired in modernist understandings of language, teaching, and learning. This situation underscores the difficulties that English education professionals face in occupying a professional space that is at once part of the schools and of the intellectual landscape of academe.

Yet this ostensibly tricky position is also ripe with possibilities for a Freirean *praxis* that is genuinely grounded in the concrete realities of language use and social interaction. Acknowledging “the tension between university-initiated inquiries into teaching and learning and the realities of school-life” (121), Smith and Stock quote Ruth Ray to point to the teacher-researcher movement as evidence that English education might be characterized as “postdisciplinary”: “Free of the constraints of disci-

plinary practices and ideologies which make university researchers blind to alternative explanations for phenomena, teacher-researchers are 'postdisciplinary' in their ability to admit contradictions and deal with 'overdetermined' situations in which complex phenomena are typically reduced to a single, cause-effect relationship" (71; qtd. in Smith and Stock 121). Teacher-research is one manifestation of what Smith and Stock call a "praxis-oriented" discipline. It is one visible way in which English education engages in a Freirean praxis: knowledge emerges from a dialectical inquiry by teachers and students. As Berlin pointed out a number of years ago, teacher research is "revolutionary" in the way it challenges existing hierarchies and knowledge-making practices: as researchers, "teachers are engaged in challenging the hierarchical power structures of the schools, as they make their own decisions about instruction and use their own expertise to analyze their own situations" ("Teacher" 10).

But English education can do more than involve practitioners in knowledge making. If scholars like Ray, Smith, and Stock foster genuine inquiry among their school-based colleagues only for the purpose of enhancing teachers' understanding of literacy teaching and learning in the context of formal schooling, they have certainly served an important function. But if English educators go no further than that, they leave the status quo effectively unchanged because they focus only on the interaction between teachers and learners within the context of the classroom as it currently exists. Berlin raised this very concern about the teacher-research movement, worrying that it was "not emphasizing and problematizing its own political agenda" and was not confronting "the inescapably value-laden quality of all schooling" ("Teacher" 10). In this sense, to deepen our understanding of practice within schools, even for the purpose of improving that practice, without acknowledging and confronting the political and ideological nature of schooling, paradoxically reinforces the institutional status quo and thus allows that status quo to continue the process of indoctrination that formal schooling is; it allows schools to continue to shape students as modernist subjects.<sup>13</sup>

Given its dialectical character, English education has the potential to challenge that process. But it can realize that potential

only if English educators see themselves as directly engaged in a much larger social project. We should fully embrace our central role in the shaping of student subjects as beings-in-the-world, acknowledging that this process of subject formation can be oppressive or transformative and emancipatory. We must, I believe, see ourselves as part of a Utopian project. And in doing so, we can help define a new English studies.

### English as a Utopian Project

In Chapter 3 of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire describes his dialogic "problem-posing" pedagogy, which begins in "the present, existential, concrete situation" (95). It is a teleological pedagogy whose purpose, literally, is to change the world by fostering in students a sense of agency founded on the epistemological connection between "the word" and "the world": "The object of the investigation is not persons (as if they were anatomical fragments), but rather the thought-language with which men and women refer to reality, the levels at which they perceive that reality, and their view of the world" (97). To put it simply, Freire proposes to teach in a way that encourages students to see themselves and the world differently, and the vehicle for such a project is language.

As many critics have pointed out in the nearly four decades since the publication of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, the concrete, existential situations of Freire's students were dramatically different from those of most students today in the United States. Freire was teaching nonliterate, disenfranchised, rural peasants in a military dictatorship and in a specific South American cultural context. The "limit-situations" he encouraged those peasants to explore—that is, the concrete circumstances in which they existed that set "limits" to their freedom (99)—might seem almost exotic to most American students (notwithstanding that some of those students live in similar material conditions today): they inhabited tiny shacks, were essentially living in economic servitude, had limited or no access to formal education, and were subject to overt abuse by landowners and government bureaucrats. Critics are right to point out the differences between such

situations and the circumstances within which educators in the United States work and within which their students learn. But the concept of a “limit-situation” can be applied across cultural contexts, and it can help us understand—and potentially change—what we do. More important, it reveals that what Freire was doing and what we do are essentially the same thing: fostering a certain kind of subjectivity and encouraging a certain kind of being-in-the-world. What we have to decide is what that subjectivity and being-in-the-world should be.

It is obvious from the foregoing that I advocate an understanding of English education as a broad, progressive social project, one that ultimately contributes to the creation of just and sustainable communities. I have suggested above that English education is uniquely positioned to define itself in such terms, and I have elsewhere begun to articulate what this understanding of the field might mean in terms of the work of English educators (Yagelski, “Stasis”). I want to propose that English studies should do the same: it should pursue a Utopian vision in which the content of the discipline is subordinate to that larger social project of contributing to the formation of such communities. The task of English studies, then, is to inquire into the nature of that project and define its scholarship and related activities accordingly. This is an inherently social project that cannot be conceived in terms of *individual* betterment and the “progress” of society, which is at heart a justification for education based on a modernist view of the world. Rather, the Utopian project I advocate is one that challenges the Cartesian self and explores the possibilities for fostering a different sense of self as inextricably *of* the world.

I accept the label of idealist in making such a proposal. But I see no viable alternative. There seems to be little question that we are witnessing in the early years of the twenty-first century the evolution of a new kind of global culture, emerging as a result of what we have come to call “globalization,” which David Harvey has defined as “a process of uneven temporal and geographical production” (60) that “implies widespread [. . .] acceptance of certain bourgeois notions of law, of rights, of freedoms, and even of moral claims about goodness and virtue” (85) arising from modernist ideals. English studies as an academic discipline has the opportunity to confront that process and to

participate directly in the reshaping of American society in the context of the emerging global culture. If it rejects that opportunity, it will remain little more than a minor (and perhaps unwilling or even unwitting) part of the process of globalization and an integral, if lesser, component of the new status quo.

I would argue that the “limit-situations” facing American students today are much more complex, challenging, and potentially dire than even those facing Freire’s peasant students, because the extent to which American students participate in the maintenance of their own limit-situations is largely driven by a global, technologically sophisticated, and pervasive culture whose power makes Orwell’s Big Brother seem almost amateurish by comparison. I do not apologize for hyperbole here because I don’t think such an assertion is hyperbolic. The reach and influence of Western consumer culture and its associated capitalistic economic practices and structures are dramatically illustrated by the no longer startling sight of a New York Yankees T-shirt on a youngster in the remote Himalayan region of India called Ladakh (Norberg-Hodge) or by the privatization by multinational corporations of traditionally communal wells in rural Indian villages a few hundred miles to the south (Shiva). The power of this consumer culture lies in its capacity to construct a reality that is taken to be as “natural” by Americans as the landowning practices and policies in Brazil were taken to be by Freire’s peasant students in the 1960s. How else might one explain the fact that freedom of choice is extolled in the almost obscene number of models of cars and SUVs available to American buyers, while the fuel efficiency of automobiles on American roads has actually decreased in recent years even as warnings about disappearing fossil fuels proliferate and a scientific consensus about global climate change emerges?<sup>14</sup> How else might one explain the fact that standard practices of American banks can make approval of a mortgage for the construction of a solar-heated home difficult or impossible even as the environmental and economic costs of conventional methods of heating homes (such as oil) mount? How else does one explain the expanding U.S. prison population and the eagerness of many small communities to build prisons for their “economic benefit”?<sup>15</sup> There is nothing natural about the attitudes and desires that inform such practices or about the in-

stitutional structures that maintain them. And the fact that they seem so natural to so many people is testimony to the power of mainstream culture to shape reality (without the need for clerks like Orwell's Winston Smith to rewrite history books). Schools—and institutionalized education generally—help create and maintain that culture; they have the capacity to change it as well.

English as a discipline is ultimately about language, which is the vehicle by which we understand ourselves and act in the world. As professionals in English, we share a history in which we have both embraced and rejected the power that attaches to the work we do. We have argued for course requirements on the basis of the notion that language and literacy can empower individual lives and combat social problems. At the same time, we ignore that same power as it reinforces a status quo that many of us believe is in desperate need of change, a status quo that gives rise to many of those same social problems. I don't think we can have it both ways. We should not ignore the power we do possess—either to maintain a status quo or to imagine and realize a different future. If we acknowledge that power, we can then begin to explore its possibilities for reshaping the reality we have helped to create. But to do so requires that we *can* imagine alternatives. As Harvey has written, “Without a vision of Utopia there is no way to define that port to which we might want to sail” (189). A central part of the task of redefining English studies is to begin to articulate that vision.

I must admit to some ambivalence about the Utopian call I am making because I have long felt that those of us in English studies (whatever our specific scholarly focus) spend far too much time engaged in the very kind of analysis and argumentation in which I am now engaged. We produce a great deal of scholarship focused on defining our field; we argue about whether we are a discipline or something else. Meanwhile, the powerful institutions we work within remain fundamentally unchanged. My cynical side attributes this to understandable self-interest: scholarship focused on defining our discipline “counts” within the small community of academics in English studies, and indeed it can make a career. I don't fault scholars for producing it, since they (like me at the moment) are doing what they are in effect required to do to keep their jobs. And understanding who we are is an impor-

tant part of defining what we want to be. But it does seem an enormous waste of talent and energy, especially given the great challenges facing us today. If English studies is to be anything more than an academic discipline, if it is to participate in the remaking of society, if it is to embrace a Utopian project, however that project might be defined, we in the field should spend less time talking about ourselves and focus more energy on talking to everyone else. If we do so, we may find that we share a hope for a different future with others, and that we can bring our substantial expertise in language and literacy to bear on a collective effort to realize such a future.

## Notes

1. It is worth noting here that the very conception and structure of this book implicitly define English education as a subdiscipline of English studies; however, many English educators would resist this definition. In May, 2005, leaders in the field of English education convened in Atlanta for a Leadership Summit, whose theme was “Reconstructing English Education for the Twenty-first Century.” Sponsored by the Conference on English Education, the summit was intended to begin to identify a direction for the future of the field. (For a description of the summit, see <http://www.ncte.org/groups/cee/featuredinfo/122844.htm>.) Summit participants addressed several key questions, including “What is English education?” The participants' answer to that question, which is available at <http://www.ncte.org/groups/cee/positions/122898.htm>, challenges the view of English education as a subdiscipline of English studies. Instead, English education is understood as a field of interdisciplinary inquiry intimately related to but separate from English studies; the summit statement asserts that in their work, which focuses on the teaching and learning of English, the preparation of English teachers, and the study of teaching and learning, “English educators conduct interdisciplinary inquiry by drawing on English studies, education, the scientific study of human behavior, and related fields.” In this formulation, English studies is understood to be a part of English education, rather than the other way around. Whichever formulation scholars espouse, it is clear that the two fields overlap significantly.

2. According to the U.S. National Center for Education Statistics, about 11 percent of these students attend private or parochial schools; the rest attend public schools.

3. In making this assertion, I am relying on the analyses of schooling and culture by such scholars as Bourdieu and Passeron, Basil Bernstein, and Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis; I am also drawing on empirical studies such as that of Jean Anyon. See Chapter 2 in Patrick Finn's *Literacy with an Attitude* for a brief overview of this literature.

4. This "shaping" is neither deterministic nor monolithic; rather, it is dialectical, as pointed out by many theorists (e.g., Paul Smith) and as argued by Paulo Freire, whose ideas I will discuss later in this essay. The question of agency is paramount here, but it is too complex to explain in detail. Suffice it to say that schooling does not determine the kind of subject students become, but its role in shaping that subject is extremely powerful, as Giroux, Bourdieu and Passeron, and others have shown.

5. The questions of the nature of the self as knower and of the nature of *being* are, of course, as old as philosophy itself and have been examined exhaustively by such influential twentieth-century theorists as Jacques Derrida, Edmund Husserl, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. I have elsewhere explained my idea that the Western sense of self gives rise to a way of knowing and being that ultimately contributes to social and environmental degradation (see Yagelski, "Computers"). One of the best-known critiques of the positivist foundation of formal schooling is the first chapter of Giroux's *Ideology, Culture, and the Process of Schooling*. For a related critique, see Chapters 1 and 2 of C. A. Bowers's *Educating for an Ecologically Sustainable Culture* as well as Chapters 2 and 3 of Bowers's *The Culture of Denial*. For an alternative to the Western philosophical view of the self, see David Loy.

6. It should also be noted that Dewey's theories were in many ways consistent with the rise of science and the modernist ideal of social progress. In this regard, despite his progressive notions about experiential learning, which challenged the passivity of learners encouraged by conventional pedagogies, his theories could also reinforce the fundamental Cartesian dualisms I mentioned earlier.

7. In 2000, Applebee summed up trends in writing instruction since the publication of his large-scale study in 1981:

Although no more-recent comprehensive survey is available, the responses to background items that have been included as part of the periodic writing assessments given by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) suggest that there have been some changes in recent years. In particular, the NAEP results at grades 4, 8, and 12 indicate that teachers are spending more time on writing instruction than they have in the past, with perhaps somewhat more attention to a wider variety of genres. On the 1992 assessment

(Applebee et al., 1994), for example, twelfth grade students reported some regular (at least monthly) attention to persuasive writing, analysis or interpretation, report or summary writing, and story or narrative writing. Grade 4 students were asked fewer questions in the assessment, but reported regular journal writing and story or report writing. ("Alternative" par. 5)

Applebee goes on to say that by 1992, about half of teachers reported using process-oriented approaches to writing instruction, which represents an increase from what he found in his 1981 study. Although these figures do represent some changes in the way writing is taught, the most fundamental beliefs about writing and practices related to writing instruction remain in place in schools, including the focus on form and the importance of learning the conventions of "standard" English.

8. It is some indication of the power of institutionalized education to resist reform and serve this normative function that some of the most influential scholars in English education have consistently advocated various progressive reforms in literacy education over the years with seemingly little significant impact on the actual practice of teaching English in K-12 schools. John Mayher's *Uncommon Sense*, an influential work published in 1990, articulates a vision for English that builds on the perspectives of many important scholars in the field in the past four decades, including James Britton, James Squire, Janet Emig, and John Dixon; despite differences among these scholars, all shared a general sense of a need for change in the way English is taught in schools and a belief that English instruction should be tied to a broader social purpose. That progressive vision continues to be promoted in more recent scholarship, including work by such figures as Cathy Fleischer and Todd DeStigter. However, the teaching of English in schools has remained largely unaffected by this tradition as well as by more conservative reform efforts such as E. D. Hirsch, Jr.'s "Core Knowledge" movement.

9. I am quoting from the revised thirtieth anniversary edition of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which eliminates the sexist language in the original text (or, more accurately, the language of the original translation). In subsequent writing, Freire has acknowledged this sexism and repudiated it (see *Pedagogy of Hope* 65-68).

10. Freire's epistemology is consistent in many respects with other more recent alternative theories of knowing. See, for example, Barbara Couture's *Toward a Phenomenological Rhetoric* and Loy's *Nonduality*. It is also consistent with recent calls for education reform that include challenges to the epistemological foundations of modern education: see especially Bowers's *Educating for an Ecologically Sustainable Culture* and *Culture of Denial* and Orr's *Ecological Literacy*.

11. My evidence for this claim comes from three main sources: (1) the major journals in the field, whose contents tend to reflect the field's concerns and preoccupations; (2) published testimonials and critiques of the profession by English scholars; and (3) my own experiences as a teacher in four universities along with the experiences of colleagues at other institutions. One need make only a cursory review of the field's major journals over the past decade or two to conclude that while the questions that preoccupy scholars in English studies may have changed, the nature of scholarship in the field has not. In other words, scholars in the field continue primarily to publish analyses of texts and arguments about how to interpret texts, and they disseminate those analyses and arguments more or less as they have always done. Thus, a New Critical analysis of, say, a Wordsworth poem has the same fundamental status as knowledge as a feminist critique of contemporary poetry or a cultural analysis of hip-hop: all are concerned with interpreting texts that have been deemed worth interpreting. As Michael Bérubé has put it, "English has become an intellectual locus where people can study the text of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* from a Christian perspective, the text of the O. J. trial from a Foucauldian perspective, and the text of the Treaty of Versailles from a Marxist perspective" (qtd. in Delbanco). The point is that the focus of the field remains on the interpretation of sanctioned texts. Many scholars have examined the discipline, including James Sosnoski, Gerald Graff, and Robert Scholes, while others, such as James Phelan, have shared their own experiences of the field. None of these examinations suggests that English as an academic discipline has had anything like a transformative mission within the modern university. As Sosnoski puts it in describing what he calls the "compulsion to be orthodox" in literary studies, "orthodoxy is built into the university system as a self-regulating mechanism" (95), of which the academic field of English is a part. My own experience and those that colleagues have shared with me reinforce the sense that despite some obvious changes in the postsecondary English curriculum in the past two decades (mostly reflecting the rise of "theory"), English as an academic subject remains a decidedly conventional enterprise that is not overtly concerned with redefining either the institution of higher education or the larger society.

12. For example, see Lowell C. Rose and Alec Gallup, "The Thirty-fifth Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes toward the Public Schools." Rose and Gallup report that 48 percent of Americans polled assigned the public schools a grade of A or B; only 21 percent give the schools a D or F. The same poll showed that 68 percent of parents give an A or B to the school attended by their oldest child. Seventy-three percent of those polled believe that any education reform should happen through existing public schools; only 25 percent believed that alternatives to public schooling should be found.

13. I would argue that the ideological power of the institutional status quo of schooling is the primary reason that reform movements like Whole Language and the writing process movement have either failed or, more commonly, have been co-opted by schools. For a further discussion of the ways in which the revolutionary potential of the "process" approach to writing instruction has been co-opted by schools, see Yagelski, "Radical."

14. The standard for measuring the fuel efficiency of automobiles is the Corporate Average Fuel Efficiency (CAFE), which was set in 1985 at 27.5 miles per gallon (mpg). Since 1996, the CAFE for all passenger cars and light trucks on American roads has been about 20.7 mpg. (See "Automotive Fuel Economy Program Twenty-third Annual Report to Congress Calendar Year 2000" at <http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov/cars/problems/studies/fuelecon/index.html>.) However, the best-selling automobiles in the last few years have been SUVs, which are much less fuel-efficient than passenger cars and which have slightly reduced overall fuel efficiency. The sustained increases in oil prices since the hurricanes in 2005 will likely slow the demand for gas-guzzling SUVs, but it is telling that in the recent debates about energy policy, increased fuel efficiency and alternative fuels are often extolled while developing new modes of mass transit or restructuring towns are rarely offered as serious proposals.

15. See King, Mauer, and Huling.

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