Ira Shor

OUR APARTHEID: WRITING INSTRUCTION & INEQUALITY

The first appointment in rhetoric and composition to the Graduate School and University Center of the City University of New York, Ira Shor is the teacher-scholar chiefly responsible for giving currency and meaning to the term "critical teaching" in such works as Critical Teaching and Everyday Life *(1980),* Empowering Education *(1992), and When* Students Have Power *(1996). Also author of critiques of educational policy and social conditions affecting education, notably the book* Culture Wars *(1986), he brings the two strands of his work together in this discussion of the social contexts of basic writing and freshman composition. His call for an end to remedial placement, first made at the CBW workshop, elaborated on the discussion list CBW-L, led the editors to send him some questions to address, if he chose. Developing from that e-mail exchange, his response eventually became this carefully argued and researched essay.*

Basic writing as a field was born in crisis nearly thirty years ago. It has grown in crisis amid declining conditions for mass education (Berliner and Biddle, 1995). This state of permanent crisis unfortunately shows no sign of letting-up: Conservative lawmakers hungry to lower taxes for the wealthy and for corporations appear eager to cut BW and public college budgets. Perhaps many in authority believe that allegedly illiterate BW students don't belong in college in the first place. The corporate New World Order is generating lots of burger-flipping jobs for $5.50 an hour (a new McDonald's breaks ground every four hours somewhere in the world) so why spend for mass higher education? Oppressed by dollar-politics, BW teachers and students are in a hole discussed by John Kenneth Galbraith in *The New Industrial State* (1967): "It is the vanity of educators that they shape the education system to their preferred image. They may not be without influence but the decisive force is the economic system" (238). Galbraith wrote that statement on the eve of BW's explosion. A brief look backward may help us figure out where we are and where we might go from here.

The collegiate language enterprise of which BW is the junior partner began over a century ago when Harvard instituted freshman composition. As the best historians in our field tell us, Harvard invented comp in the last decades of the 19th century when the American university system was expanding and changing to meet the needs of the new industrial capitalism. Accumulated knowledge and research were fast becoming essential to production and profit-making. New machines and processes were needed as well as new forms of management, accounting, and marketing. Such periods of wild economic ex-

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pansion place great stress on the status quo, threatening the elite which had benefited from the old order. What new arrangements could industrialize society without changing power relations? Sudden demands for labor and knowledge unsettle the status quo. As the Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci argued, when power relations become insecure, questions of language often come to the fore. In colleges a century ago, curriculum for the new insecure order included required writing courses called "composition." As Richard Ohmann wrote in *English in America*, Harvard's restrictive model of freshman comp spread like "kudzu" from coast to coast, becoming a linguistic gatekeeper to upward mobility in the new system being secured then by captains of industry and education. Sharon Crowley has identified the upper-class bias of the new universal comp requirement which began "as an attempt to certify that students who enrolled under the new elective system were suitable 'Harvard men.' In other words, the universal requirement began life as an instrument of exclusion" ("Response" 89). This use of elite language instruction to exclude some and to socialize others, studied by the late Jim Berlin, the late Donald Stewart, Bob Connors, and Susan Miller most notably, helped protect unequal power relations in a time of great change, through subordinating writing to reading, by demoting teaching and composing below research and literature. "English" as a field took literature and literary scholarship as its professional body-of-knowledge, relegating comp to the menial status of curricular cop and sorting machine. For students, performing well in disembodied language classes became the correct usage gate to certification for upper-level courses leading to upper-level jobs. I call this language policy "comp for containment, control, and capital growth," a tool that ironically produced the nation's first literacy crisis, at Harvard in 1894, after a board of overseers had examined the writings of the nation's most privileged collegians. Looking back on 120 years of the lit/comp culture war in language arts, we could say that comp has been the cranky subject of constant reform efforts by dedicated and ingenious teachers, the repository of what Leonard Greenbaum thirty years ago called "the tradition of complaint."

BW is a younger sibling in the comp story. BW has added an extra sorting-out gate in front of the comp gate, a curricula mechanism to secure unequal power relations in yet another age of instability, the protest years of the 1960s and after. To help secure the status quo against democratic change in school and society, a BW language policy producing an extra layer of control was apparently needed to discipline students in an undisciplined age. At the time of BW's explosive birth, the system was under siege by mass demands for equality, access, and cultural democracy. Since then, the economy, short in graduate labor until about 1970, has been unable to absorb the educated workers pro-

duced by higher education in the past 25 years. In this scenario, BW has helped to slow the output of college graduates. BW, in sum, has functioned inside the larger saga of American society; it has been part of the undemocratic tracking system pervading American mass education, an added layer of linguistic control to help manage some disturbing economic and political conditions on campus and off.

In terms of undemocratic tracking, mass schooling sorts each student cohort by race, class, and gender, so that each new generation of eager schoolkids becomes shaped into the existing inequities of our society. America has never invested equally in all its children, not from the moment Horace Mann in Massachusetts in the 1840s boldly declared schooling as "the great equalizer." The open secret of undemocratic life in America is that children of poor and working families get far fewer resources at school and at home than do rich kids (something criticized 80 years ago by John Dewey in *Democracy and Education* and more recently by Jonathan Kozol in *Savage Inequalities*). Just compare community colleges to the top 100 selective campuses. Economically, if schools and colleges were in fact great equalizers, what might we expect by now? More equality? Well, despite the immense expansion of education credentials in the general population since 1970, the wealth and income gap between rich and working families is actually increasing (see Mantsios; Henwood; Holmes). People of color still have twice the unemployment rate of whites (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 160-163). White kids are twice as likely as black kids to graduate college (*Postsecondary Education Opportunity*, 3). Women are still over-represented in college majors and doctoral fields that pay the least; only 25% of tenured faculties are female (*Digest of Education Statistics*, Tables 221, 235).

Mass education and its language policies have not equalized the genders, the races, or the classes. Instead, formal education offers a top-down, business-oriented agenda: basic skills, vocationalism, work discipline, and citizenship. These objectives aim to fit students into the unequal way things are, to ease them into a hostile job market and unequal power relations organized by and for the few. But all has not gone smoothly. A crisis in this story of language for containment emerged when mass higher education became a near-entitlement in the egalitarian 1960s, when social movements disturbed the smug post-War status quo; BW emerged soon after as a new "identity," a new field of control to manage the time, thought, aspirations, composing, and credentials of the millions of non-elite students marching through the gates of academe.

About maintaining inequality in a time of disruption, I'm reminded of an incident recorded by historian David Tyack in *Turning Points in American Educational History* (1967). Tyack tells the story of an idealistic Northern schoolmarm who went South after the Civil

War to teach freed slaves. She is scorned by local respectables for teaching "social equality" instead of sticking to the ABC's. Before the War, it was a crime to teach slaves to read and write; white teachers were fined and literate slaves beaten or worse (for some dramatization of this, see the recent film *Nightjohn*). Then, after the War, the defeat of the slavocracy created a democratic opening. History moved forward to new possibilities that could disturb white supremacy. To contain the threat to white domination, the old elite favored a language policy of basic skills, that is, the ABC's are as far as instruction should go for former slaves. It seems that basic skills approaches (which dominate BW according to a number of reports) have a friendly fit with an unequal status quo.

Another example that comes to mind is Gunnar Myrdal's 1944 classic *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem*, published after some delay because its anti-racist content might cause problems for a racist nation at war, especially when white and black American soldiers were in segregated units in Europe and the Pacific. Myrdal, examining Southern schools, noticed that black students were being tracked into agricultural jobs (boys) and domestic service (girls) even though these labor markets were declining. Myrdal noted that the curriculum for black students was very basic in their segregated schools. Some forty years later, John Goodlad's 8-year study *A Place Called School* reported a similar racial division. Black and Latino students were over-represented in the lowest-paying vocational programs. One of Goodlad's brilliant co-researchers, Jeannie Oakes, focused specifically on tracking. Her book *Keeping Track* described in some detail the basic skills/vocational sorting out of students; she noted the absence of research data showing that tracking/ability grouping improves the learning of students. Research on ability grouping may not support tracking (see Welner and Oakes, 1996), but tracking remains a pervasive practice in education for political reasons to help maintain inequality in society, I am arguing.

Politically, then, BW is a containment track below freshman comp, a gate below the gate. Sociologist Burton Clark described this sorting mechanism as a remedial "subcollege" in his famous 1960 essay "The Cooling-Out Function in Higher Education." Clark examined how entry-testing, assessment practices, counseling, and remedial writing courses help the institution (in this case, the community college) lower the aspirations of students defined as "latent terminals." This cooling-out function through testing and remediation has continued in the decades since Clark first identified it in mass higher education. I examined "cooling-out" in terms of three major conservative campaigns in the 1970s and 1980s: career education, the (fake) literacy crisis/back-to-basics movement, and education-for-excellence (see my *Culture Wars*). I saw these three nominally educational programs as actually

political campaigns against the egalitarian opening of the 1960s, reiterating how the Southern plantocracy tried to close the opening represented by the Civil War. In what I've called "the conservative restoration" that followed the activist 1960s, these regressive campaigns reflected a theme in school and society of "settling for less." Part-time jobs are less than full-time jobs; non-union labor is paid less than union work. In education, BW is less than freshman comp, below comp, often non-credit bearing, so its rise since the 1960s into an empire of segregated remediation fits an age when the status quo urgently needed to divide and conquer and depress young people aroused for social change and for economic success.

While BW enables colleges to divide incoming students into regular and remedial groups, economically speaking, BW helps slow down the students' progress towards the college degree which could enable them to expect higher wages in the job market. The BW empire also depresses the wage package for teachers because so many remedial courses are taught by underpaid, overworked (female) adjuncts. Students pay rising tuition for courses lowered in stature and credit, taught by unprotected, unorganized teachers getting depressed wages and few benefits. This arrangement lowers the output of college grads and of PhDs (because overworked, underpaid BW/comp teachers have too little time and money to work steadily on their dissertations). These two outcomes of BW help ease the shortage of good jobs, especially now that several hundred thousand jobs have been lost to cheap-labor Mexico since NAFTA, according to the Economic Policy Institute in Washington. Remember that teenage girls in Mexico work for a dollar or two an hour, doing jobs for which North Americans were paid $8-12/hour. Workers in Haiti make about $2.40/day, in China $2/day, in Vietnam less. Well-educated, male, English-speaking, university-trained, computer scientists in India get $10,000/year, a quarter the salary paid here for similar graduates. With corporate America downsizing and globalizing, with CEOs now earning about 145 times the average pay of their employees, with the top 1% now controlling 42% of the nation's wealth, mass higher education can threaten the stability or legitimacy of the status quo if it graduates too many deserving students into an American economy unwilling to pay them what they are worth as it sends jobs abroad. As I see it, these immoral conditions cry out for critical teaching in our writing courses. Critical classrooms would invite students to focus on their everyday life in the system causing our problems (see my *Empowering Education* and *When Students Have Power*). Overall, then, I view BW as one mechanism that functions to ease the growing conflict between corporate economic policy and a mass of aspiring students who are being deterred from

democracy and from the American Dream. That Dream is being denied to us and our students. The consequences of denying the American Dream were urgently on the mind of some top policy planners 25 years ago, as recorded in *Career Education* (1974) by Nixon's Commissioner of Education Sidney Marland (known as "the father of career education"), especially Marland's conversations with HEW boss Elliot Richardson, where they discussed their fears that underemployed college grads would cause political unrest, a worry also expressed at that time by economist Richard Freeman in *The Overeducated American* (1976).

I expect that some in our field are uncomfortable with these economic and political implications of our profession. When it comes to writing instruction, few of us are likely to claim that it's easy or transparent work, but many probably find it safer to stick to technical issues. Some colleagues defend BW by arguing that it provides a sanctuary to protect students who would be thrown out of college even sooner if not for a sheltered program. Is this true? So many gifted and dedicated writing teachers devote themselves to their students' success. Is their devotion being mistaken for BW itself saving students? I think here of Mike Rose's brilliant and patient tutoring of his students at UCLA (*Lives on the Boundary*). Mike's tutorial labors meant a lot for those students' development, but Mike is not a special advocate for BW, being rather critical of "remediation." Yet others in the field, like Karen Greenberg have advocated the benefits of BW for students. I want to see hard evidence that BW courses shelter more than they shunt. It's not helpful for BW advocates like Greenberg to argue that "36% of the students who graduated from Hunter within the last five years were students who completed basic writing courses. Moreover, approximately 55% of the students who graduated from Hunter within eight years are basic writing 'graduates'" (69). These figures mean very little. What must be proved is that these students could not have graduated without BW. Was BW a shelter essential to their progress or was BW a delay in their progress towards a degree they could have gained sooner without BW? And how many students were discouraged from going on because of the tuition-charging non-credit remedial courses taught by underpaid adjuncts? How many were discouraged by bogus entry and exit exams like the infamous Writing Assessment Test (WAT) at Hunter and other campuses of the City University of New York? These, it seems to me, are the hard questions BW advocates must answer to justify the maintenance of BW beneath freshman comp, along with the maintenance of expensive testing/placement bureaucracies that centralize administrative control. Testing regimes transfer power from classrooms, teachers, and students at the bottom to administrators at the top, not a healthy outcome if we want education for democracy.

My questions here also connect to Peter Dow Adams's suggestive local research at his community college about students who evaded BW and succeeded in freshman comp at a higher rate than those who took the remedial course. On the other hand, we have Joe Trimmer and even BW-advocate Greenberg telling us that BW is still mired in skill-and-drill methods and workbooks, a point made also by Sharon Crowley vis-a-vis the "repressive formalism" and traditional grammar instruction still dominating half the comp enterprise ("A Personal Essay"). Further, we have to wonder about BW/comp when testing advocate Ed White ("An Apologia") joined Brian Huot to tell us that a shocking 49% of colleges apparently use SAT, ACT, or some other NON-WRITING short-answer test to place students in WRITING classes (see also Glau, 82, for another case of ACT/SAT used for placement). Another 48% use the notorious timed, impromptu essay famously graded on the 1-6 scale (like the CUNY WAT), which Peter Elbow and the late Alan Purves described as an invalid test of writing ability.

I'm reminded of what Mina Shaughnessy wrote about the kind of anti-writing context offered in the timed impromptu: "Without strategies for generating real thought, without an audience he cares to write for, the writer must eke out his first sentence by means of redundancy and digression, strategies that inevitably disengage him from his grammatical intuition as well as his thought" (82). Lastly, I also think about the 1994 CCCC "Writing Assessment: A Position Statement" which opposed the isolated conditions of impromptu exams and which pointed to the racial implications of short-answer instruments: "...standardized tests, usually designed by large testing organizations, tend to be for accountability purposes, and when used to make statements about student learning, misrepresent disproportionately the skills and abilities of students of color" (433).

Given this disturbing picture of placement testing in BW's operation, how can we continue to support it? In my imagination, I see a vast burial ground called "Field of BW/Comp" where love of knowledge and critical writing too often go to die. I was on the run from this grammar-graveyard when I first proposed social literacy in 1980 in my book *Critical Teaching And Everyday Life*, and which Lee Odell has argued for wonderfully in "Basic Writing in Context: Rethinking Academic Literacy."

Tracking and testing are the Twin Towers of Unequal City wherein BW resides. These towers rose from an American foundation of low-spending and hostile-management directed to non-elite students. Can there be BW without bogus placement and tracking mechanisms? Can BW withstand a democratic gaze? Tom Hilgers has answered: "It is my belief that bad assessment is what gets most students

labeled as 'basic writers.' Bad assessment drives the curriculum and the evaluation of most basic writing courses..." (69). BW requires punitive placement regimes to feed and justify it. How do some students get designated for the remedial subcollege known as BW if not for a placement process now grossly dominated by short-answer exams or the infamous, one-shot, timed, impromptu essay? This bogus assessment of writing is the cheapest way to get the greatest control of teachers, students, curriculum, and costs, not a surprising choice for a system that always spent the least on the majority of students, a system on the defensive after the activist 60s saw comp requirements erode in the face of student protests, only to reappear with a vengeance during the manufactured literacy crisis of the 1970s (which Sharon Crowley has discussed in several places and which I wrote about as "the conservative restoration in school and society" in *Culture Wars*, previously mentioned.)

Top-down testing has little to do with bottom-up learning and a lot to do with institutional control. To sum up, top-down assessment and required BW/comp are linguistic policy for containing three things: the costs of mass higher education (while lavish funds are spent on elite campuses), the potential of critically "writing and reading the world" as the late Paulo Freire put it, and the output of college grads whose aspiring numbers are already overwhelming a job market seeking cheap labor. Thus, I see the BW/comp story as part of a long history of curricula for containment and control, part of the system of school tracking to divide and deter non-elite students in school and college. The students themselves are tested and declared deficient by the system, which blames the apparently illiterate and cultureless victim, stigmatizing the individual as the problem while requiring BW/comp as the remedy. The structure now in place helps maintain the inequality built over the last century or two, tilting resources to elite students and lush campuses, rewarding those who speak and look like those already in power. This arrangement is undemocratic and immoral.

Still, I must say here that writing teachers in the trenches do heroic labor against great odds. I know about the dedication of BW teachers because I taught BW at the City University of New York for 15 years. I still teach freshman comp in the working-class district of the academy at Staten Island College. My criticism of the history and politics of BW/comp is not a criticism of my colleagues, who more often than not are wonderful teachers. To make better use of our professional talents and dedication, we could begin with Peter Elbow's ideas for restructuring writing courses (see *Composition for the Twenty-First Century*). Basically, Peter recommends that portfolio assessment replace the bogus timed impromptu writing test. He also suggests that all students be enrolled into an extended writing class that would graduate

students as they complete their course projects, not on a semester timetable. Peter endorses the excellent experiments underway at South Carolina by Rhonda Grego and Nancy Thompson, who set up writing studios as peer-group tutorials adjunctive to regular writing classes. I also like the experiments by Barbara Gleason and Mary Soliday at City College of New York, where they use an expanded freshman comp course over two semesters which mixes erstwhile basic writers with regular students, abandoning BW as a tracking device. I urge people to contact these colleagues and to read their work as well as Peter's and Lee Odell's and also Bruce Herzberg's excellent report on service-learning at Bentley College ("Community Service and Critical Teaching").

We also need to revive the Wyoming Resolution of 1987, to pick up where brave Jim Slevin, Sharon Crowley, and others have brought us, in terms of relentlessly exposing the shameful foundations of "English" as a field, the ugly subordination of composition to literature, the destructive denigration of teaching to publication, the expanding exploitation of underpaid, overworked part-time instructors.

In this regard, I propose we urge CCCC to declare a "Labor Policy": "All positions in the field are designated full-time, to be divided at any program only at the request of instructors themselves should any choose not to work full-time. Split positions would carry full-time benefits even if some prefer less-than-full course-loads." Regarding the costs of this Labor Policy, some may think that money does not exist to pay for it. I disagree. Any who wonder where the money is should note the booming economy and the vast military budget; then, find out how big a surplus your local BW/comp programs are generating each year, like the $1 million generated by the former comp program at Minnesota, I was told. BW/comp is a cash cow—full-tuition paid by students while part-time wages are paid to teachers. No costly equipment needed as in engineering labs or nursing departments. BW/comp is like the former colony of India, the jewel in the crown, a territory generating lots of wealth for the imperial metropoles of lit, grad school, and administration. In terms of enforcing the Labor Policy, I would suggest that any institution not complying be targeted vigorously by CCCC with a "corporate campaign": high-profile negative publicity informing prospective students, teachers, and parents that this college's labor and language policies interfere with good teaching and learning. The time to take this kind of action is long overdue. Echoing in my thoughts here is Edwin Hopkins's 1912 lead article in the very first issue of the spanking new NCTE journal, where Hopkins gave a decisive "No" to the question, "Can Good Composition Teaching Be Done Under Present Conditions?"

If we are serious about teaching well and about students learning to write passionately and to think critically; if we are serious about

democratic education in a democratic society; then we need a Labor Policy on the one hand and a curricular policy against tracking, testing, and skills-based instruction on the other. Let's promote ethnographic, context-oriented, community literacy, which I and others like Linda Flower have advocated. We can invite students to do literacy projects about their education, the college, the community, their jobs, or society-at-large, including media criticism and media production. Many of us have already moved away from skill-and-drill workbook exercises, away from disembodied language work, towards critical literacy mobilized by the students' natural language competencies, something emphasized by John Mayher in his profound book *Uncommon Sense*.

BW/comp teachers committed to cultural democracy and critical literacy can examine their local conditions and decide what strategies for change would work best at the places where we work. For example, good mainstreaming experiments, like those at South Carolina and City College, appear to require structural changes, thematic changes, different course/credit/staffing structures as well as new student-centered subjects and methods, like the literacy narratives deployed by Soliday and Gleason at City College (see Soliday's "From the Margins to the Mainstream"). Sometimes it is said that we get the history we deserve, which is another way of saying that resistance to anti-educational regimes limits the destructive status quo and opens constructive possibilities beyond the givens of the corporate economic agenda. In the late 1990s, after two decades of conservative restoration and cutbacks in school and society, many teachers and students feel vulnerable, isolated, disoriented, and powerless. This is understandable, given the great assault on equality and cultural democracy launched after the activist 1960s against public education, women, children, minorities, labor unions, affirmative action, and gay rights. Feeling vulnerable, many think little or nothing can be done. I don't agree. A lot has already been done and is being done right now. The literature in the field is rich in material supporting those who want to develop democratic language arts (see Auerbach). All around the country, teachers are experimenting, testing the limits, like the exemplary experiments I already mentioned at City College and South Carolina (see also Grego and Thompson's "Repositioning Remediation").

What to do? as Elsbeth Stuckey asks in *The Violence of Literacy*. Find allies with whom to study, talk, experiment, and plan campaigns against testing, against tracking, and against the imposition of skills-based teaching, what Paulo Freire famously named the "banking" method. Don't confront the lion alone, Paulo said when he was alive. Work with colleagues and allies. Remarkable progress has been made in these conservative times—progress in feminist, multicultural, student-centered, and critical pedagogies, despite the growth in testing

and in part-time labor. As Paulo told us in *A Pedagogy for Liberation*, "Education is politics" (46). He urged us to think that the future was made by what we did today. Adrienne Rich, companion to Mina Shaughnessy in the heroic Open Admissions days at City College, wrote, "My daily life as a teacher confronts me with young men and women who have had language and literature used against them, to keep them in their place, to mystify, to bully, to make them feel powerless" (63). Similarly, Tom Fox insisted, "The need is not so much to initiate students into the discourse community, to teach them the particular forms of language in the academy. Instead, we need to convince students that this community is theirs, that it will not work against their identity and their interests" (75). Likewise, John Rouse concluded that "Any decision about language teaching is a moral and political decision" (12). Finally, Carole Edelsky said that "Retheorizing language education to make it serve education for democracy means highlighting the relationship of language and power.... It means figuring out and then spelling out how systems of domination are part of reading and writing, part of classroom interaction, part of texts of all kinds—and doing that as part of our constant and primary, not secondary, enterprise" (255).

We know the unequal society in whose arms we came of age; we can learn the history and politics that brought undemocratic arrangements into being at our worksites and elsewhere; we can take some risks together as citizens to change society and as teachers to change the conditions of our work, against language policies that divide and discourage, in favor of inspired learning, critical writing, equal funding and humane democracy. Farewell to educational apartheid; farewell to tests, programs and classes supporting inequality; farewell to the triumphant Harvard legacy now everywhere in place, constantly troubled, widely vulnerable, waiting for change.

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