

Liza Bruna, Ian Marshall,  
Tim McCormack, Leo Parascondola,  
Wendy Ryden and Carl Whithaus

# ASSESSING OUR ASSESS- MENTS: A COLLECTIVE QUESTIONING OF WHAT STUDENTS NEED – AND GET

*ABSTRACT: What follows is a colloquium whose participants are all doctoral candidates at the Graduate School and University Center of the City University of New York (CUNY). They are students of rhetoric and composition who are also teachers advocating for their own students, presenting, in public forums, arguments and testimony about current and proposed assessment practices in CUNY. United against screening assessments that would keep some students out of mainstream courses, senior colleges, even college altogether, they nevertheless represent a range of perspectives, not least of all because of their sensitivity to the complexity of the issues they address. Recently, they presented as a panel at a conference called "Confronting Extremes" and sponsored by the CUNY Grad Center's English Students' Association. Their presentations were compelling (and would fill an issue of JBW), but so was their conversation over coffee afterward, and so we asked them to develop an online discussion that would run about the length of an article and air the issues they were wrestling with in a way that could engage a national readership. Here's what they said:*

CARL: So much of our attention is on the testing situation in CUNY. How do we expand this to have national interest?

LIZA: I think it won't be difficult to broaden this discussion, especially if we begin with Wendy's call for an end to all assessment. I am stuck between respecting the work of revolutionary composition theorists like Freire and Shor and worrying that the revolutionary agenda is just not what most students want. What about the fact that working-class and low-income students have next to no "cultural capital" in our society? What about helping them gain access to the information and economic independence that would give them the options their professors have? Where do they weigh in on the question of what education is for and what acquiring "writing skills" is for? What do they want from their language?

IAN: I think Liza here has asked really important questions. But in answering them we should not forget the role of ideology. Helping

students gain access to the information and economic independence that would give them the options their professors have does not exclude them from the ramifications of the ideas espoused by Freire and Shor. What I wonder about is how well we help them see that, as Leo pointed out to me one day, "Freedom isn't free." What are they going to do when they get these jobs and the added economic independence?

What comes to mind also is Jean Anyon's essay, "Social Class and the Hidden Curriculum of Work." I think much more work needs to be done with the findings of her essay to examine social control mechanisms vis-a-vis ideology and its effects.

LEO: Leaving Anyon's essay to the side for a moment, I think we need to evaluate more closely how "cultural capital" functions in a society that divides mental from manual work and that rewards them unequally. We would need to consider phenomena such as corporate and university downsizing (including but not restricted to racist attacks on affirmative action and open admissions), how labor is evaluated and purchased in this society (proliferation of "flexible" part-time cheap labor), and the division of labor within the family and the relegation of women's "cultural capital" to the bottom of the socioeconomic scale. And what kind of "cultural capital" is writing? Is it primarily a technology for transmitting information? How will our students and their future employers value writing? I'm reminded of the inescapable question of our field: what makes writing good? Cultural capital is never politically innocent.

I question any analysis that attempts to explain inequality as a "lack" of cultural capital. That might just be conflating correlation with cause-and-effect. Such an analysis accepts the notion that U.S. society is a meritocracy in which talent, hard work, and "results" are rewarded appropriately. Well, even the most cursory glance at the distribution of skills against the distribution of income indicates that our economy is not, in fact, based on a meritocratic division of rewards. Everyone ought to receive as much education as they want, and it ought to be free. But increasing access to education, which has always been unequal, has not and will not—on its own—substantially change pervasive inequality. Inequality is structural, and, however much it hurts us to hear it, education plays a role in perpetuating it.

TIM: Hmmmmmm. Not sure any of us would disagree with Leo here: Education certainly plays a role in perpetuating inequality, especially given higher education's somewhat hidden capitalistic agenda, and the students' overt desires to gain better employment through education. But I think we are all dancing around the task of the writing

teacher. Even though education is politics, the writing classroom should never become a space where politics is in the foreground and writing is in the background. The writing classroom is a contact zone, no doubt. And we are the mediators of that contact zone. But more importantly, our primary job is as facilitators of a writing environment. In a writing classroom where plenty of writing is going on—where writing is being discussed and read aloud, where writers talk about how writing works, where writers see the power of writing in action—discussions of inequality, gender, race, class and others will certainly arise. It's the nature of writing to reveal.

LIZA: I think students (including myself) get a lot out of seeing their work in print, "experiencing" the reading public when they see their work being read and thus recognizing the other side of writing: being read, responded to, and writing again with a more visceral understanding of the community or contact zone that is their audience. With this in mind, my question for Wendy is what I would be concerned to call a complete erasure of product in a process-only approach.

WENDY: What is the goal of the writing class is the essential question. I don't think it should be producing essays—at least not the kind that have been traditionally elicited in the composition class. (And what I mean by that is a whole other question, isn't it? Because there really is no agreement about what we are looking for in product.) Anyhow, I *am* calling for an end of product, or at least a big de-emphasis of it. (I'm not calling for an end to assessment altogether—I "just" want a radical shift of criteria, which probably would sufficiently sabotage our concept of assessment to the point where it would be unrecognizable.) In Jasper Neel's Derridean discussion of form, he says, "The one thing the act of writing cannot be is structure. At the moment of structure, writing has ceased to be read because the writer is what must be gone for the reader to take over. As long as the writer is still the writer, any analysis of structure is precluded" (39). I think I'm interested in the writer staying the writer. Rather than this being an elitist position I see it as being democratic. I know Neel's project is to rescue writing from what Plato has Socrates do to it in the *Phaedrus*, but for a moment I would like to treat the condemnation of writing there transparently. What if we breathed life back into dead absent writing by keeping the writer and the writing together in the public space of the classroom where both could be interrogated rather than trying to produce this thing that will leave the writer and stand alone (like the cheese in the Farmer in the Dell). Maybe what I'm looking for (like Socrates?!) is a more dialectical approach to writing and what we want to be the goal of the writing classroom. This to me is also a move towards putting the rhetoric back in the composition because I envision students using

their writing in this sort of public space to persuade (and perhaps even plot action). And I do think that somehow by reintroducing literacy to students in this more "vital" way that their facility with language would eventually increase in ways that it doesn't for most people with the way writing is taught now.

CARL: I want to get back to Liza's question: What about giving our students what they want? Specifically, students often request that we teach them "proper" English, the language of business (and, not so incidentally, the language of academia). Are we doing them a disservice by advocating for alternative methods of writing evaluation?

The issue of students desiring Standard English is a difficult question. I find this challenging because a fundamental principle of democratic education is that students should be able to decide what they want to study. Yet I think in many ways a request from a student to learn proper English is not solely (or even primarily) a request for grammar exercises. Rather we must consider the motivation behind the students' request; the request for instruction in proper English results from years of education during which the student was exposed to teaching which emphasized correctness over communication.

I've often found that students who ask this type of question are really inviting me into a dialogue about my teaching methods and the uses of language. That is, the students are asking about the *context* of language. They know that the code they use at home is not the code of business or of the academy. Logically, then, they are demanding access to power through access to language that matters.

Our job, I would argue, is not—and I don't believe any of us are advocating this—to exclude students from discourses of power, but rather to provide them with a way into that discourse. Yet the goals of a transformative, democratic pedagogy are not simply assimilationist but rather ask students to maintain their home identities, their home discourses (codes) *and* to understand (perhaps transform) the discourses of power.

To answer Liza's question, when a student asks, "Why aren't we learning more about 'proper' English?" we cannot tell them just to write what they feel, write any way they like, write about what concerns them (expressive writing has a place but is not the only agenda in writing); rather, we must take this question as a moment to bring up a discussion of context and codes. We should also think about the moment this question arises as a chance to invite students to rethink the university; it's time we stopped merely pretending to allow students



to regulate themselves and their discourses without helping them to see how they're situated and conditioned. Here I'm reminded of Pat Bizzell's insistence that "the cultural values and content" of the classroom need to be determined by both the instructor and the students. This question seems to me a great moment to encourage students to help us see the university from the bottom-up rather than the top-down. A transformative pedagogy must answer the question of "proper" English and grammatical correctness, must provide students access to discourses of power, but it also must provide students the chance to challenge and maybe even change the discourse of power.

TIM: My first impulse is to suggest that all language users have to worry about grammatical correctness. I mean, regardless of what group you are speaking and writing to, don't you have to use grammar to ensure that you are understood? The problem is typically that the students perceive Standard English to be *the* language/dialect and their own language and dialect to be inferior or worse. They do not realize that all languages and dialects have reasons for existing, reasons that give them real integrity—grammatically and otherwise.

LEO: I want to comment about something Liza said earlier. She points out that many students really expect and need to learn Standard English and that it's our obligation to teach it. No disagreement there. I just think we have to be very careful about how we characterize that desire and that need. The facts are indisputable. We live in a class society, and within it (risking a gross reduction here), there are dominant and dominated classes. Those in the dominant classes use, endorse, and require their own class dialect for the purposes of formal, business, and academic writing and communication. This dialect has become known as Standard English. Our professional obligation is to help students understand and implement the syntax and punctuation of Standard English. I only dispute why.

Students come to us with all kinds of needs, and, as writing teachers, we greet them with all kinds of demands. For example, placement instruments such as the decontextualized timed impromptu indicate of the irrational nature of some demands that students have to negotiate. I think it's fair to say that we agree that tests such as the CUNY WAT (Writing Assessment Test) are bankrupt. They don't measure what they claim to measure, in part, because they were never intended for use as placement instruments.

Students' anxiety over their failure to command Standard English is no doubt substantially produced by the recognition that only those who can speak and use this dialect proficiently have a chance at the

economic rewards of a capitalist society. That is to say that the way our students *read* the relationship between inequality and language is produced by the same system that creates inequality. They are often ideologically predisposed to blame themselves (i.e., their failure to command SE) for their own oppression. Put differently, ask yourself: if every African American teenager (who did not already do so) could learn to speak and write SE overnight, would it make an appreciable dent in unemployment among black youth? I think not. Racism and economic oppression are structural elements of our society. They can be decreased but not obliterated through an increase in literacy. This doesn't mean we shouldn't fight as hard as we can to win whatever reforms will ameliorate these conditions. We should! But learning the codes of Standard English is not proof of cognitive capacity, nor is it a ticket to prosperity.

WENDY: I want for the moment to separate the radical from the efficacious and point out as Carl does that no one wants to keep students in the dark. If I had a magic wand, I'd give everybody command of Standard English, including myself. Clearly it won't happen through red-lining papers or doing all the other things that are traditionally done because if that were the case, there'd be no problem. When my students "invite me into a dialogue about my teaching methods and uses of language" (as Carl puts it), they often show concern about having their grammar corrected and their essays structured. My response is if this is how they have been taught in the past, then something must be wrong, because they are not happy with the results. They still don't think they write well. Maybe it's time to try something different.

CARL: Here's something from Freire. It seems important in working toward an answer to the question of teaching Standard English. "Indeed, the interests of the oppressors lie in 'changing the consciousness of the oppressed, not the situation which oppresses them' [Freire quoting de Beauvoir] for the more the oppressed can be led to adapt to that situation, the more easily they can be dominated. To achieve this end, the oppressors use the banking concept of education in conjunction with a paternalistic social action apparatus, within which the oppressed receive the euphemistic title of 'welfare recipients.' . . . The solution is not to 'integrate' them into the structure of oppression, but to transform that structure so that they can become 'beings for themselves'" (55).

WENDY: I agree, and I have found this tension between traditional expectations and "my" new-fangled ways to be beneficial (although not always exactly pleasant) in producing transformations in usage.

It's no longer business as usual, let the teacher fix what's wrong. People have a heightened awareness about their use of language, which affords the opportunity to produce real change in their relationship to that language. So I think those questions about why they are not being taught the "regular way" are exactly the kinds of questions critical pedagogues want because now students are questioning their educational experience. It's essential to give space for this in the class, to make it part of the class and in this way allow, or perhaps insist, on that discussion of contexts and codes. If it were an easy thing to "assimilate" people, you might even be able to convince me to do it. But it seems only a very few can make it that way. Everybody else gets left behind.

And just another thing to throw into the mill here: A student just sent me a copy of an application statement she wrote to try to get a scholarship—it was really terrible, and I don't think she'll have time to make it better, but I sent her my suggestions anyway. That created a very different context for me as an instructor, reader and editor. I responded in a very practical way. Does anybody ever ask students to write letters or application statements for assessment purposes?

TIM: Wendy's question about assessment "product" is applicable to process as well. Recognizing that we are mediators between language communities rather than teachers of a single standard is step one of a sound critical pedagogy. I use language communities as a plural here not because I mean two; I mean many. There are the language communities the students bring, the language communities of the academy, and the language communities of the work force (just to name some arbitrary divisions). All of these can be split into smaller divisions: certainly the language community of someone from Bay Ridge is different from someone from Park Slope; just as, the language community in the history department talks differently from biology; and in the business world, the marketing department talks a different game than R&D. All of these communities have rules and grammars and styles and forms to be followed. The problem is for a multitude of reasons (not the least of which is the subjugation of Composition under Literature) that students (and some academics) are led to believe that the language community of the academy is all one, and that it mirrors the language community of the white-collar working world. This is simply not true. But students come to us asking for THE language, as if we can teach one, without realizing the relationship between their languages, dialects and codes, and what it is they seek to know. So, I agree with Carl: when students ask for Standard English, they open up a great opportunity to discuss language use in context. If we can help them realize they already have multiple languages (codes)

and that they already code-switch all day long, that's certainly a critical pedagogy in action.

What is so bad about giving students the opportunity to learn a new code? Teaching Standard English does not have to be offensive, identity-stripping, colonizing behavior. If it is taught under the right conditions—where it is not the only validated language—Standard English can be a powerful weapon in the arsenal of any student. And perhaps, as Liza suggests, once they are more proficient members of this new language community some students can transform the hierarchy of language and end our use of Standard English as the pinnacle of language learning, and as the gatekeeper to the university and other institutions of status and class.

The problem is not whether we should listen to our students' requests and teach them what Jesse Jackson calls the "cash language" ("cash code"?). We should. But we need to make sure we foreground the question Liza posed. (Her question sounds like a great way to begin a writing class.) Students need to see Standard English for what it is: a meaningless term for multiple language communities which is used as a panacea to control and limit access to society; not for what it is not: a magic elixir, which, if they obtain it, will transform them into Bill Gates, or at least Donald Trump.

LIZA: I agree with Tim that "Standard English(es)" are not one language, nor the only language with a grammar, and I especially see value in helping students recognize their use of code-switching and their adherence to the grammars governing the codes they use as a point of entry into discussions of "the code formerly known as standard English." It reminds me of an article by Nan Elsasser and Pat Irvine about a curriculum Elsasser used at the University of the Virgin Islands, which centered on the theme of perceptions of Creole(s). These students spent a semester discussing the varieties of Creole they spoke, negotiating their grammar rules, discussing why no one wrote in Creole, and writing in Creole themselves, thus developing their mastery "of their own codes" and developing the language itself by using it for academic pursuits. This work was necessary, Elsasser found, in order to contextualize the dominant code for the students who had felt that they did not speak a language at all, but a "broken" form of English. It seems to me this type of curriculum answers the invitation to discuss the context of language and the relationship between certain codes and power that Carl spoke about.

Some practical problems I see are: a) heterogeneous classrooms where one cannot invite all the speakers necessary to discuss the grammars

governing all the different codes in use (as Elsasser did), b) the unlikelihood that one teacher will be familiar with and thus able to help students develop skills in their own codes, c) the question of where ESL students stand: do Russian speakers who are learning English speak a variety of English that needs to be validated in the same way that speakers of Tex-Mex or of Caribbean Creoles do? In classes where the population is diverse, the issues students have with the particular code used in English classrooms are going to be quite different.

IAN: I see problems too. I wonder about Tim's earlier point about students transforming the hierarchy of the institution through language and also Liza's point about the problematics of validating one language over another. It seems to me that both these comments talk around, but not directly to, the tie to racism and sexism and their necessary function in capitalist USA, as Leo suggests earlier. To respond directly to Tim, in a way the problem isn't language so much as its insidious use. History seems to point out that speakers of other dialects rarely get to use these dialects to change the nature of the academy, but instead these dialects are used to help reinvent the hierarchy. The different dialects are used as weapons in the academy on the one hand to give the illusion of inclusiveness and on the other hand to accentuate difference in unhelpful ways such as complicated ESL and Basic Writing policies. The dialects get enveloped by the academy. This leads me to Liza's point. The accentuation of difference in this way makes it unnecessary to treat Russian speakers the same way we would treat speakers of Tex-Mex or Caribbean Creole. Different signals go off in heads when we hear Creole dialects for example than when we hear Russian dialects. In a way, you might call this passive racism.

Thinking about what others have said here, I was reminded of something Leo said. He was quoting someone, I cannot remember who, and he said, "If speakers of non-Standard English truly felt they had an investment in learning Standard English, you couldn't prevent them from mastering it." This is telling for me because it says that students know what the academy is all about. They don't trust it, and they don't feel a part of it. I've been thinking that it might be possible to evaluate a student's proficiency at "Standard" English as proportional to their belief that they are a part of the academy. Also, they are in no particular hurry to be transformed by something that does not accept them. I would also say that I think if you learn a different language, then, to some extent, you become someone different. You become a part of the group that speaks that language. I'm not sure how much I buy the idea that we can simply code switch. To me, code switching is not merely assuming one identity over another when we have a mind to or perceive that we should. I see it as a potentially painful, perhaps

even contradictory thing. We are not different and multiple identities: we are one identity, though various facets of this identity may show themselves at various moments. I see some code switching as nearly impossible for some people without betraying something dear and important.

I for one don't mind if my students want to learn Standard English. I'll be glad to teach it to them. However, I would want them to know and understand that there are consequences to learning it: both personal and public, both good and bad. I want them to understand *why* they want to learn it. And I would want them to understand also that there is a difference between learning the language and learning Standard English in the academy. When we learn the language in the academy, we learn it in the stew of its politics I mentioned. What we have to do is not limit the students' ability or access to this language but change the political climate and atmosphere that they learn it in. We must see things like assessment and harking toward standards as social control mechanisms, particularly the way they have manifested themselves in the academy at the moment.

Tim's comments reminded me of a conversation I had with Wendy. We were talking about students' desire to acquire new language without recognizing that they have to change as a result. What seems inevitable, in fact, is that they must change. Our job, I think, is to teach that some changes are better than others. Some may be interpreted liberally as accommodations rather than true transformations; others may amount to true and helpful change—and the helpful change may be the more painful. I think if we want students to change, really, transformatively, and thereby change institutions, we have to see, and help them see, the systematic connections between the CUNY Writing Assessment Test and scarcity of Ph.D. positions or the South East Asian economic crisis and boom time on Wall Street with an increase in poverty nationwide. These are important connections to make.

WENDY: I thought I'd just add something Ian and I spoke about with regard to the Standard English question: remember the standard doesn't stay standard; it is also in flux so that the codes of students change the code of the academy they enter. The standard is not an unassailable bastion that stands protected from the rabble it tries to exclude: the conqueror, too, is changed by the conquest. Baldwin says he doesn't know what English would look like if there were no Black people in America, but he knows it would be a very different language indeed.

LIZA and TIM: (This reply to Ian is coming from Liza and Tim working collaboratively, which may be an effective rhetorical strategy for



producing dialogic discourse, though we are having difficulty over ownership of this discourse, so there may be disparity in the use of pronouns.)

We understand where Ian is coming from when he says learning a new language or code changes a person. We have talked about this in regard to our own experiences going “home” from the academy and feeling alienated. But we’re not convinced that identity is not fluid, or that we cannot move through many roles and feel somewhat comfortable in each of them. Personally, though sometimes alienated by or in some contexts, we would have felt trapped if confined to the narrow language communities we grew up in. Which of course brings us right back to agency. Regardless of whether we take an essentialist or fluid view of identity, if a person (like me or us) wants to attain a new community, it would be oppressive not to be allowed to do so. So, we think, we all agree that student agency should remain our prime concern, and we all agree that students learn language more adeptly if they are driven by their own interests. So we agree with Ian that academia can or at least should be transformed in and through the classroom by making students aware of the hierarchies and context-specific nature of language communities. We appreciate, too, the harm that the attaining of a new language or code can do to personal identity. Taking such things into account can lead to a meaningful transformative pedagogy. The stakes are higher for some than for others because those who can “pass” are more easily able to assimilate or perform multiple identities. Learning “Standard English” should be done in a context that emphasizes “transculturation,” Mary Louise Pratt’s term for usurping the “master’s tools” for one’s own purposes.

LEO: I’d like to throw something in here about fluid identity and the trap of one’s home (or any other self-selected) dialect or language. Many working-class academics have testified to a sense of shame about their former status as “nontraditional” students—the fish-out-of-water syndrome (see Janet Zandy’s collections *Liberating Memory* and *Calling Home; This Fine Place so Far From Home* edited by C.L. Dews and Carolyn Leste Law; also, forthcoming texts by Gary Tate and Sherry Linkon). Tim and Liza’s reference to a language trap reminds me of my own situation, having worked so long as a transit worker. I discovered there what my college education had made nearly invisible—that college graduates do not have a purchase on intelligence; they merely have an advantage in credentials. Cognitive capacity has nothing whatsoever to do with speaking a “nonstandard” dialect (see Labov’s *The Study of Nonstandard English*).

If we have felt trapped in the past, and feel “empowered” now that we

have facility in Standard, that is all to the good. The problem is that the feeling of liberation that often accompanies code switching is nearly always attached to the cognitive dissonance of mixed social identity. We all know that you don't get nuttin' for nuttin'; there's always a price. The price for the nontraditional student is that as they become more comfortable in Standard dialect, they are inevitably required to speak, think, and write as if they were someone else, someone not from the working class. The social "emancipation" or "liberation" we often identify as one result of higher education cannot change the dominant social relations of the culture. As Freire and even Dewey have pointed out, education is politics. In this case, the politics is usually that of the reproduction of the dominant social relations of capitalism.

CARL: If one of the goals of a transformative pedagogy is teaching (or facilitating) "transculturation," how do we put this into practice? I'm especially thinking about how we do this when administrative constraints and agendas are opposed to this type of teaching.

I think Liza and Tim are suggesting that students learning "cash language" (or "cash code") is a positive move because it creates an opportunity (access) for them to enter into the discourse(s) of (economic) power. And while I understand the desire to give students this access, I wonder if we can do this and create a transformative system of education. That is, if students learn to use "Standard" English, switch codes in the context of the university classroom, don't we miss a chance to reform the context, to reform—or transform—the university?

There is a tension between an approach that uses a "non-academic" code to challenge academic definitions (and rethink the college context) and an approach that argues for code switching as access and empowerment. Can we do both? If we argue for switching, do we leave "cash language" (and all its problems) in place, or can that method also challenge the status quo?

LEO: In this context, I will throw a monkey wrench into the conversation and suggest we ought to problematize our students' desire for social mobility. Hey, did I really just say that? Social mobility is one of the fundamental claims (like equal opportunity and political and legal equality) of U.S. political democracy. And higher education is one of 'he tickets out of the working class. However, the implicit paradox is that as more people "climb the ladder of success" (social mobility through increased education), inequality increases.

Radical economists and sociologists deny the routine claims to correlation between a general increase in education and higher income. In



their *Schooling in Capitalist America*, Herbert Gintis and Samuel Bowles attempt to disprove this claim by arguing that since the end of World War II, the general increase in access to higher education has not produced a corresponding increase in income equality. As a matter of fact, economic inequality is worse now in 1998 than it was when they first published in 1977. All economic indicators point toward a consistent reduction in "real wages" since the early 1970s right through the 1990s. There is currently a greater disparity between upper and lower income groups in the U.S. than ever before. This is all true in a country in which there are nearly 15 million college students, more than in all the countries of Western Europe combined. More people are going to school than ever before — and for a longer time. Nevertheless, just like my grandma always told me, the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. You could look it up! (See Doug Henwood's *Left Business Observer* for more recent research on the correlation between increased education and higher income.) I'm working on a Ph.D., and my grandma never made it out of elementary school. Who's smarter?

CARL: Leo's monkey wrench — his problematizing of social mobility — hits directly upon the "tension" I was talking about between academic and "nonacademic" discourses. How can we use, and invite our students to use, ways of thinking about the world that have traditionally been excluded from the academy? The works of Zandy, Dews, and Law open the door for alternative methods by acknowledging the tensions those of us in the academy feel with working-class backgrounds. Yet, as the product of a working-class family that used education as a tool for social mobility, I find it hard to deny my students a similar opportunity. I don't want to deny my grandfather's (nor Leo's grandmother's) ways of knowing and speaking. Forty-some years of working on the bottling line for Anheuser-Busch and being a union man taught my grandfather that his daughter and grandson had a right to social mobility and that social mobility required education! A college degree and the economic benefits it brings are not myths. Yet the current university structure wasn't designed to change the inequalities in society; to apply Freire's critique of education, we could say that colleges "'integrate' [working-class students] into the structure of oppression." Our goal should be "to transform that structure." The question is how?

LEO: Conceding to students that they have a "right" to social mobility may just be an encouragement to prolong oppression. It ought to be challenged. Everyone has a right to education. This is significantly different from encouraging expectations of social mobility. Universal education is a position on which we should never compromise. The question is to what uses people put their education and what rewards

they expect for their work.

As I mentioned before, this society encodes powerful differences between mental and manual labor, with immense differences in rewards. Our pedagogy should include a segment that challenges students to recognize when and under what conditions their education puts them in a position to reproduce inequality. It seems if we want to make a claim to a radical, critical, and "transformative" pedagogy, we should think about what is being transformed—the student or society. In *Critical Teaching and Everyday Life*, Ira Shor asserts that writing involves negotiating between competing interpretations of reality. I think he says that reading and writing are "occasions for questioning social reality." Education and culture provide one set of critical lenses; they are not and cannot be neutral. James Berlin and Richard Ohmann have said much the same thing in their discussions of education, ideology, and the writing classroom. A truly "critical" writing pedagogy ought to keep these distinctions in the foreground. Transformative education needs to keep a sharp focus on the goal of social equality and "transforming" and questioning the university as we attempt to make that a reality.

WENDY: Carl's use of the term "discourse" reminds us that the students are not just about the learning of Standard English; they are also supposed to learn standard forms and conventions—and to perform well on "standardized" assessment. Can we envision other kinds of assessment, ones that ask for some other kind of writing? Like a letter, for example, or an application for getting a scholarship? (I'm thinking of that experience I had helping a student do this recently, and how I found it a very different experience from the way I respond to a student's writing in class). Doesn't it make sense that we should move away from a fixation on the essay, that different genres should be tested? And would this get us anywhere in a critical pedagogy?

IAN: Both Carl and Wendy's comments here suggest to me that the role of the academy is not so much to teach practical things on the one hand and is hardly a site for real social change on the other. Would it be crazy for me to suggest that we should change the structure of our courses in radical ways? For example, make things more dynamic by doing more things outside of the classroom like attending a local rally organized against racism, sexism or the WAT and then talk or write about the experience in the classroom afterwards. What I mean to suggest is that if we are truly against something like racism, shouldn't we both practice what that means as well as theorize about it? Doing something outside of the classroom like attending a rally would be doing something. The more I think of this the more I question the

academy's purpose and role. At the Conference on College Composition and Communication, this year I was in a workshop with, among others, Ira Shor and Gary Tate. Gary asked a question that went something like this: "What is it that separates you from the people you grew up with?" My first thought was that I spent much of my free time thinking and reading about the things I was interested in. Forming and attending reading groups and talking about stuff like politics, history and literature. Very often this time spent reading and thinking introduced me to alternative ways of seeing what I did in school. I even read at my part-time job while my friends worked at jobs that didn't necessarily allow for reading or did other things with their spare time. As I was thinking this, Ira said almost verbatim what I was thinking. The point I want to make here is that most people, working class people, at least, don't learn these critical skills or discipline knowledge in school. Of course, this may not be a surprise to us, but my further point is that school as we know it may never be positioned in a way to allow real critical evaluation of itself to take place or real change. Something drastic or radical is needed.

LIZA: I know you are asking about "standardized assessment attempts," but I wanted to share my attempt to use a standard writing format subversively, and to create a final exam that asked for alternative forms of writing, for what it's worth. I just finished teaching an adult education course through a Cornell University "off campus" program. They employ part-time teachers to teach employees at several corporations (Am Ex, Xerox, Chase). It was the kind of thing you'd hate, Wendy: business writing for Chase Bank employees (education for the corporation, paid for by the corporation).

Anyway, for this term I asked them to pick a theme; they chose family. I began giving them stories and articles that talked about family and work, and we began discussing the family leave policy at Chase. This evolved into an assignment to write a business report on the bank's family leave policies, comparing them with policies at other corporations, and in other countries, most notably Sweden, the place where they all said they would prefer to be pregnant (even the two men in the class). Students really got into this project; even one woman who had said it had nothing to do with her because she was done having children went to the library and got extra articles on the subject to include in her report. Their "final exam" had to be in-class writing, so I gave them two choices that both drew on the context we had built through discussions in class. Choice A was to write a letter to President Clinton telling him their feelings about the FMLA (Family and Medical Leave Act) passed in 1993: they could critique the act, make proposals to expand it, tell how it affected them, or make any other

comments about it. I told them to bring to class the articles on the act we had discussed, and to use any arguments from their business reports that applied. Choice B was to write an extended journal entry modeled after Tillie Olsen's "I Stand Here Ironing." I haven't read them yet, but I was impressed by how long and concentrated a writing session it was. Most students wrote many more pages than I had requested. To sum up then, students used the conventional business report format to assess the corporation. They, in turn, will be assessed on their reports and on the timed exam that asked for alternative forms of writing, drawn from the context we developed over the course of the semester.

WENDY: Bravo, Liza—and I just wanted to point out that I approve of corporations paying for corporate training. I think corporations should assume that responsibility. What I balk at is corporations using public money (via the public school system, not least of all that the post-secondary level) for that training.

TIM: I agree that Liza deserves applause and I think the academy could learn from her assessment measure. Unfortunately, had her students been in the academy, they would have had to take a standardized, timed, impromptu test at the end of her class. A test that she would not grade, and a test determining whether students failed and would not be "promoted." This is the conundrum we face as writing teachers: we are not in charge of the assessment. The assessment measure is exterior to the class, and the students know it. Although I try to create a classroom atmosphere that is not manufactured and contrived, although I work hard to have my students write for a purpose that is connected to their real world, along comes the assessment measure which breaks that connection. Assessment thrusts students back into the clinic—the laboratory. They have been in the educational maze for so long, they smell it a mile away: the goal is to get the cheese in the fewest tries. So, no matter the form or genre of the exam, when they smell assessment, they return to a manufactured discourse to fulfill what they think the academy wants from them. And in most cases, if they deliver the dull five paragraph essay, they will in fact get the tasty morsel of cheese.

I think the issue here is less about writing, more about control and money. I don't subscribe to the idea that any single assessment measure really tells us much about how well students can write overall, and certainly no single assessment measure can tell us whether students should be allowed to stay in school or not. Though a choice of readings or genres can improve an assessment's validity and reliability somewhat, the improvement is negligible because the whole sys-

tem is flawed. The idea of a "standard" for writing gives it away. In order to produce a standard, everyone has to read and write the same way. Without that control you don't have a standard; you have individual teachers deciding who can write and who cannot. This is exactly what they don't trust writing teachers to do. Sometimes I think the whole issue of standardized assessment is a slap in the face of faculty. Standardized tests are really saying: "Hey, teachers, you are not doing your jobs. Your students are passing your classes, but they can't meet our standards."

For the sake of argument, let's say that the college writing classroom is not doing the job for the majority of its constituents. Why punish the students for what the system has not delivered? Why aren't we improving the instruction (shrinking class size, increasing teacher training, exploring new pedagogies) rather than adding assessment barriers to a system that already assesses students more than any other system, anywhere in the world?

LIZA: That seems to be a rhetorical question, so I'm going to ask a question that isn't, but it will take a little setting up. At a local conference held just recently, I related the "literature" the speakers were celebrating to student writing (apparently to the great surprise of all in attendance). One presenter gave a paper on the "transcultural" writing of Guaman Poma de Ayalla (a mestizo Peruvian who, in the late 16th century, wrote a 1200-page letter to the King of Spain in Quechua and Spanish asking him to stop the violent abuses in the New World and telling him how the colony could be better managed); this same presenter also celebrated the projects of current U.S. Latino/a writers as creating new spaces in language as well as in the territories they inhabit. I asked if he shares such writings with his undergraduate students and suggests them as models students could draw inspiration from. I also questioned whether he had thought about current assessment measures that do not allow for the kind of new "hybrid" languages and identities which he celebrates as particularly "American" in Poma's writing. I thought this so relevant to his talk as to be something he must already have considered. I was wrong. He responded, somewhat bemused, somewhat irritated, that he thought the project I suggested was an interesting one, but one he has not undertaken, though he might respond at some other time and "in a more appropriate forum." The woman to my left muttered something indicating she was relieved that I was thus dismissed. What was inappropriate about making connections between "literature" and student writing? How could someone whose knowledge of Guaman Poma's text owed much to Mary Louise Pratt's analysis of it (in her famous "Contact Zone" piece) completely miss the point of that analysis, her

notion of the political act of transculturation and the larger issues it implies about all writing productions? Must we assume the sort of response I got is only to be expected now and in the future?

WENDY: It's funny (or rather not) what an enormous gap there is between what the academy will let in as the subject of literary study and what we will allow students to write. We can ask students to study somebody like, say, Anzaldua in the colonized space of the literature class in such a way that it has no effect on our expectations about student writing and transculturation.

LEO: I'm a little surprised, Liza, that you didn't anticipate the speaker's response or even the dismissal by the woman in the audience. The lit conference is a venue that is, after all, specifically organized to allow literary scholars to shine on their home turf. The artificial split between interpretation and invention (read Literature and Composition) is a fundamental aspect of the way English has been organized as a discipline in the American university for about 100 years. (See histories of English studies by, among others, Ohmann, Berlin, Miller).

TIM: Leo suggests that Liza shouldn't be surprised. I disagree. I'm constantly surprised — and perplexed to the point of astonishment — at the continued lack of connections made between how we read and study texts as literature, looking for their various representations of repression, yet fail to analyze how we are complicit in oppressing our students every day.

LIZA: I'd like to thank Leo for crediting me with more political savvy (and finesse) than I have ever claimed for myself. I guess I did not understand the context of the event (familiarity with rhetorical conventions may be more important than some of us would like to admit) and spoke from this position of naiveté. But frankly, reading the context just as Leo has suggested I should have, I would ask the same sort of questions (Blake's Idiot as provocateur). Watching literature scholars so completely isolate and privilege published literary productions over student literary productions was an experience I will not soon forget. (Perhaps a single experience is worth a thousand pages of theory?) And I would encourage us all to hang on to some outrage; for me, anger is the emotion of agency and activism.

CARL: Clearly, although Liza is responding to a specific exchange at a specific event, the tendency to wall off literary studies from work with student writing seems to be a broad problem with how English departments are constructed and run (See Scholes' *Textual Power*). Liza's question about Poma's *New Chronicle* and its relation to student writ-



ers seems entirely appropriate. What is interesting here — and what I think may be overlooked in discussions of literature and composition divisions — is that literary scholars early in their careers often teach “basic” writing and composition while developing their “more important” literary work. The connections between these activities (the pedagogical interaction with students and the research) occupy two distinct areas — not only in the department structure but often in scholars’ minds. Thus a lit/composition division is internalized and allows one to work comfortably with the “radical” in literature (as a relatively safe and privileged object of study) while denying the contemporary existence of the radical in student writing (which is far from safe but, as an object of study, is as marginalized as the students it examines).

TIM: Carl’s comment about how the mechanisms of the English Department continue to replicate the hierarchy of literature over composition scholarship is key here. One of the main reasons composition remains a subjugated discipline — despite the fact that it generates carloads of cash for the university — is that the mechanisms of the discipline privilege the study of Poma’s relatively ancient letter, while ignoring the student letter written yesterday. What is to be gained by studying Poma’s letter if we don’t recognize the class system within the academy that validates it as something to be studied in the first place?

LEO: Tim is making an important point. Transculturation may allow the oppressed to use the master’s tools to “speak truth to power,” but there’s no guarantee that the master will listen or make changes. If memory serves, Poma’s 800-page letter on improving the management of Spain’s colony was never delivered. But again, if memory serves, Poma was a mestizo prince, hardly a paragon of Freirean resistance, merely a local ruler with local grudges against the Spanish. I prefer the much shorter and (perhaps) apocryphal demand a seventeenth-century King of the Congo delivered to the King of Belgium about the African slave trade: “Cut it out!” This is unruly language of the type that creates aesthetic recoil from the guardians of the language of academe. Students might very well write to the administrators or the trustees that are calling for more testing, “Cut it out!” Their own unruly language more often than not lacks the potency of the Congolese king’s three-word message. It will take an expanded vision of the nature of English studies to encompass all the issues posed by the relation of literature and literary scholarship to the teaching of writing to poorly skilled, inexperienced writers.

LIZA: A few clarifications on Guaman Poma. Contrary to what Leo remembers, he was not a “mestizo prince” but an Incan who claimed

some noble ancestry. He was not a local ruler, but held a low position in the colonial administration. He did years of ethnographic research among his fellow Incans before composing his 1200 page letter (400 pages were diagrams), which gave voice to their grudges and concerns as well as his own. While his goal was better management of the Spanish colony (rather than outright resistance), his struggle to create a self that could write to a powerful authority, his subversion of the notion of the king's authority in his presumption to advise, and his creation of a hybrid language, part Quechua, part ungrammatical and, one might say, "broken" Spanish in order to fulfill the act he felt compelled to perform — these are all issues that our students can relate to.

WENDY: But one of the implied issues here takes us back again to the question of transformative pedagogy and the questions Leo raised about Poma's intentions: to what extent was Poma a collaborator rather than a resister? More broadly, when does the strategy of transculturation become the strategy of collusion in our pedagogy and elsewhere?

LEO: Yes, but we don't want our students' writing to lay dormant for 800 years!! Unfortunately, that's an attitude I see too often among composition instructors. Student writing carries no weight and bears little importance inside the academy. How do we present "occasions for questioning social reality" as we structure assignments or collaboratively build them with our students? I think one answer may lie in Carl's reminder that the dominant paradigm in English studies "allows one to work comfortably with the 'radical' in literature (as a relatively safe and privileged object of study) while denying the contemporary existence of the radical in student writing." If for our own purposes we can substitute the word "critical" for the word "radical," then that safe object of study remains comfortable because it is static, frozen in time, inconsequential. There's a lot to be said (and much good recent scholarship) about the glorification of radical U.S. writers as dead — and, therefore, safe — objects of study. The essence of the writing is lost without reminders of its connections to specific rhetorical purposes, and the old poststructural bogeyman, intentionality.

This is the all-too-commonly held view of student writing. It's dead, and that's good. It's safe because it's dead. Who wants thousands of college students writing about real social confrontation or, worse yet, class struggle? Not administrators and trustees. Richard Ohmann reminded us (in *English in America*) of the composition student who sits, pen poised, contemplating a "theme" with "no compelling reason to write." Compelling reasons are the essence of all good writing. It matters because the writing makes a difference, it means something in



the world. It changes something, if only an attitude or perception. Perhaps, a better question to the panelist would have been whether his/her students ever have the opportunity to write with the same compulsion that motivated Guaman Poma (or the King of the Congo). What type of writing could students produce under those circumstances?

LIZA: I agree with Leo that it is this compulsion, the need to effect change, which is "the essence of all good writing," and which is almost always ignored in the classroom. And while I agree that "there's no guarantee that the master will listen or make changes" to indigenous or student demands, I do not think it is helpful to grant said "master" all the power in any rhetorical or other situation. The media can ignore, the think tanks discredit, the politicians disdain, but student agency affects the power structure; and in order for our students to have more effect than Guaman Poma or the Seventeenth-century King of the Congo, we faculty have to make sure they are heard.

LEO: Point granted. But I also think that we could push the literature and composition split too far in this particular conversation. Secessionist sentiment and recriminations have not yet produced any meaningful solutions to this problem. Perhaps, we should all look again more closely at Berlin's and Eagleton's suggestions for alternative conceptions for English studies. We may have valid reasons to protest the fact that literary scholarship is privileged, but our energies might be better spent articulating broader visions of literature and composition that are interdependent in new and creative ways. Has anyone seen Mary Soliday's description of the first-year writing course at City College of New York that mainstreamed basic writers and urged students to do research on their own language use? I'm convinced that learning to use language in powerful, critical, "radical," and purposeful ways is connected to the type of linguistic, ethnographic, and literary exploration demanded in such a course.

TIM: Hey, we've lost the students in all of this. Although the composition and literature split has a long history of discussion, it never has been framed in terms of the students, which would or should give us new angles on how the split reinforces composition's function as the university's gatekeeper. By subjugating composition to non-discipline status under the rubric of a literature department—and by staffing composition with so many part-time faculty—universities are able to use writing classes for their own goals. These goals are developed at too great a distance from the students and those faculty who know them best. I find no better way to outline the consequences (and provide provisional closure for our discussion) than by posing the kinds of questions that keep coming up in our talk: How come we need

externally imposed assessment measures in composition but virtually nowhere else? How does the reliance on adjunct labor in composition, combined with the control of composition by literature professors, contribute to the subjugation of composition as a teaching profession and as a field of scholarship? Why is statistical, ethnographic, anecdotal, historical and outcome oriented research by composition specialists so ignored? And there is one more question we keep dancing around, the most difficult of all because it turns the mirror back on us: if we all agree that mandated assessments disrupt our writing pedagogy and hinder our students' development as writers, why—as individuals—do we continue to participate in the system, accommodating such assessments and living with their outcomes? (As scholars who know better, are we complicit in faulty assessment measures that keep our students from succeeding?)

And since I don't want to end on an accusatory note, I want to thank you all individually and collectively for at once expanding and challenging my views on a whole range of important issues. I can't recall learning so much so quickly, or enjoying the process so completely. And I think "process" is the key word, too: our conversation shows that the scholarly writing process does not have to be an isolated experience bound by traditional forms. Clearly, collaborative/conversational discourse like ours can also produce "useful" knowledge and offer alternative forms of inquiry and presentation.

IAN: I'd like to add to Tim's closure by saying I think he's absolutely right! I'd also like to add that what I think he's describing here, in part, is a culture of liberalism both in our profession and throughout the institution itself. I don't mean to end by suggesting that we should all walk around saying *mea culpa, mea culpa*! What I think should be explored is the ways in which we in the academy reform on the one hand and compromise on the other. If we truly believe in quality education for everyone, free of the things that seem to disrupt and hinder it, then we should teach, act, protest and disrupt the institution in ways that demonstrate that belief. We are, as Tim suggests, complicit in mis-educating students as well as controlling their access to the limited comforts our society offers. We should continually seek to push the envelope (without losing our jobs, of course) with our institutions, exploring ways to demonstrate in action the shortcomings of its policies and ideology as well as articulate them with words.

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