TEACHING FREIRE IN NORTH AMERICA: A REVIEW ESSAY OF IRA SHOR'S *FREIRE FOR THE CLASSROOM: A SOURCEBOOK FOR LIBERATORY TEACHING.*

GAIL STYGALL

Ira Shor (ed.) *Freire for the Classroom: A Sourcebook for Liberatory Teaching.* Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, A Division of Heinemann Books, 1987, 237 pp.

If I were to describe a class as student-centered, experiential, participatory, and multicultural, using students' writing as central texts and engaging students in critical thinking, most of the readers of the *Journal of Teaching Writing* would assume I was describing a process writing class. I am. But I am also describing a "liberatory" class as explained by many of the authors in Ira Shor's collection from Boynton/Cook, *Freire for the Classroom.* The publication

of this overtly political group of articles by Boynton/Cook, primarily an English classroom-oriented press, alone demands our attention, if only to mark a rising political consciousness in our profession. While many English teachers describe themselves as apolitical in the classroom, the radical educators writing in this collection assert that teaching process is in and of itself a political statement against a system of education that requires one-way transfer of knowledge from overly-managed teachers to passive students.

The question for writing teachers arising from Shor's collection is whether or not we should accept political responsibility for our classrooms. All of us who teach writing face classrooms where the conditions in which our students live can shock, outrage, and even grieve us. Racism, sexism, poverty, and alienation enter our classrooms. Most of us cannot in good conscience ignore these issues and so seek means to empower our students such as the theory and practice of Paulo Freire. But while provocative, *Freire for the Classroom* is silent on at least three issues necessarily important for writing teachers: it fails to provide an analysis of the changes required in applying Freirian pedagogy in post-industrial societies; it avoids close scrutiny of the institutional sites of literacy training in this country, our schools; and with the exception of a handful of articles, the volume presents no adequate theory of language. This troubling silence can be traced, at least in part, to the undertheorization of a critical theory of literacy as presented in most of the articles collected in this volume. In critiquing radical approaches to literacy education, Henry Grioux writes:

> When [literacy] has been incorporated as an essential aspect of a radical pedagogy, it is gravely undertheorized, and, though displaying the best of intentions, its pedagogical applications are often patronizing and theoretically naive. (4)

Such is the case with Shor's collection. This undertheorization, moreover, leaves the crucial issue of how we might transfer Freire's methods to a post-industrial United States inadequately examined. Freire's methods, developed for pre-literate populations in developing countries, require substantial adjustment to deal with the odd naive-sophistication of students in North America. Our students are at least partially literate, even if they are rarely critical in their practice of literacy. And our students—entranced by a consumer culture, pacified by simple visual representations of complex issues,

tracked into presumptive categories early in school—simply remystify life, rejecting human agency as a real possibility for them. How Freire is applied must take into account the fact that our students find the world nearly as inexplicable as poor peasants in the developing world do, if for quite different reasons. Unless we understand these differences, it will be difficlut to choose or to reject specific elements of Freire's pedagogy for our own classrooms. We need to know how to adjust the theory to fit the circumstances of partial, naive literacy and a more subtle alienation and consequent disenfranchisement.

Second, as a whole, the articles do not address the struggles of writing teachers to develop coherent theories and practices to support their students. Other than Shor's broad analysis of education in a conservative United States, we find little discussion of current educational disputes. Consequently, the institutional positioning of schools and writing programs within schools remains uninspected. For writing teachers, there are few connections to the issues we experience at our own institutions or to the theories we use to guide our practice. As the analysis rarely turns to actual sites similar to our own, we are likely to find the collection unconvincing.

Third, as teachers of writing, we should be gravely suspicious of pedagogies that lack an adequate theory of language, as most of the articles in this collection do. Without an adequate theory of language, at least two of these authors turn our students' struggles with the prestige language into a new prescriptivism, charging inability to use the prestige language results from uninformed political views. The lack of a language theory structuring the pedagogical application leaves writing teachers to contend with the same monolithic deterministic approaches to language that we have just barely escaped in the last twenty years. Language in many of the articles is a container, a neutral receptacle, holding the dominant culture's naming power. All we have to do is change who dominates, instead of carefully examining the socially constituted networks that make such a dominance possible.

In short, the collection lacks a coherent statement of Freirian theory applied to North America, a realistic analysis of the political implications of current writing theories, and a fully elaborated theory of language appropriate for teachers of writing. Instead, we have a kind of cookbook of "liberatory teaching" missing some of the essential ingredients.

The collection consists of eleven articles, with only one making a debut in this volume, Shor's "Monday Morning Fever: Critical Literacy and the Generative Theme of 'Work'." *Harvard Educational Review* and *Radical Teacher* were primarily the original venues for these articles, although the nearly classic Fiore and Elsasser article "'Strangers No More': A Liberatory Literacy Curriculum" appeared in *College English* in 1982. Two of the collection's articles deal with Freirian pedagogy in English as a Second Language courses. Both articles, one by Wallenstein and one by Auerbach and Burgess, adopt only part of Freire's approach, selecting problematizing as appropriate, but reject a full scale analysis of the role of ESL courses in the curriculum or their relationship to the society at large. Zimmet's article on critical reading in high school, Schniedewind's article on linking feminist pedagogy with Freirian pedagogy, and Frankenstein's Freirian approach to math take the collection's concerns outside the freshman writing classroom. The collection also includes a short piece from Freire himself, entitled "Letter to North-American Teachers." An appendix by Cynthia Brown, "Literacy in 30 Hours: Paolo Freire's Process in Northeast Brazil," completes the collection, allowing teachers to examine how Freire originally approached literacy in Brazil.

For my purposes, two groups of articles—the pieces by Shor and by Finlay and Faith, on one hand, and the three entries by Nan Elsasser, on the other—constitute the core of the collection and offer two distinct representations of Freirian pedagogy. The first group—Shor and Finlay and Faith—illustrates the dangers of undertheorizing literacy, while Elsasser's articles demonstrate just how powerful Freirian pedagogy can be when carefully applied and informed by an adequate theory of language.

SHOR: MAKING FREIRE FIT

Collection editor Ira Shor dominates this volume. His introduction plus his own two articles weigh heavily on the volume, both in sheer page count and in his interpretation of Freire. While the introduction simply overviews the volume and its contributors, his first article, "Educating the Educators: A Freirian Approach to the Crisis in Teacher Education," orients all subsequent discussion. In this article which originally appeared in slightly different form in *Harvard Educational Review* in 1986, Shor argues that all the so-called educational reforms aimed at teachers in the last decade

have been and will continue to be massive failures. Students and perhaps teachers as well are on a "performance strike," as Shor argued more forcefully in *Culture Wars: School and Society in the Conservative Restoration, 1969-1984*. Thus, as long as the same policies prevail in education and as long as the same social forces structure and dictate national agendas, students will deliver lackluster responses, a kind of passive resistance to education. His most insightful point in this article is his observation that nearly all the reform models fail to question the passive model of teaching, what Freire calls the banking metaphor for teaching. Freire describes what for many of us is the all-too-familiar lecture-driven classroom:

> Narration (with the teacher as narrator) leads the students to memorize mechanically the narrated content. Worse yet, it turns them into 'containers,' into 'receptacles' to be 'filled' by the teacher. The more completely he [or she] fills the receptacles, the better a teacher he [or she] is. The more meekly the receptacles permit themselves to be filled, the better students they are. Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 58)

With the conservative agenda of more testing of would-be teachers, of more years of education, and of more teacher training, Shor argues that the very thing that most needs to change—the banking metaphor—is ignored. In its place, Shor asserts, we should teach by Freirian methods.

What it means to teach by these methods, as I've already suggested, becomes problematic in the United States. Freire himself is most clearly associated with literacy programs in Brazil, Nicaragua, and Guinea-Bissau. Programs in these countries are focused on the pre-literate poor, the peasantry, and the working class. For these participants in Freirian culture circles, or literacy groups, Freire suggests that consciousness is the critical factor, consciousness about distinctions between nature and culture. By this analysis, an agrarian worker, for example, may have little understanding that social custom, including literacy, is socially constructed, that is, made by human beings. Literacy becomes possible when the emotional force of key words and the critical analysis of those words arise from the experiences of the participants, and the participants begin to see literacy under construction. Thus, Freirian literacy teams start by investigating the social and working conditions of the partic-

ipants in the culture circle, searching for generative words for focus in early group work. Though Freire argues that the investigation should be characterized as a joint project, including both teachers and students, it is often the teacher who sets the agenda of generative words for pre-literates and generative themes for post-literates.

It is perhaps here—the question of who generates the words and themes—that American culture and composition theory part company with Shor's interpretation of Freire. As historian of American rhetoric and composition James Berlin has suggested, we English teachers have placed a high, even romanticized value on individual creativity, and as such, the romantic strand remains a major thread in process-paradigm composition. Consequently, composition theory has often emphasized teaching students how to generate their own topics and writing and how to establish and maintain their own individual voices. Here, too, then, under-theorization becomes a problem: Shor writes as if there have been no paradigmatic disputes in writing pedagogy. While Shor acknowledges Peter Elbow and Ken Macrorie as proponents of student-centered approaches to writing, he leaves untouched the theoretical problem in composition theory of the valorization of the individual. What Macrorie and Elbow have to say has been attacked by the right—for letting students do whatever "unproductive" thing they want—and by the left—for completely ignoring the dominant culture's socialization with its focus only on individual effort (cf. Berlin, "Rhetoric and Ideology in the Classroom"). For writing teachers, Shor misses an opportunity to compare writing theory with Freirian theory. And this missed opportunity creates an important gap. By conflating Freire and process pedagogical approaches, Shor allows us to think we are being liberatory, when what we are teaching may be simply a version of self-actualization, student-centered but hardly liberatory.

Further, neither English departments nor writing pedagogies are problematized or historicized. A Freirian approach, we hope, would help us locate the current demands for improved writing, read our own world, as it were. For whom are we preparing these writers? Whose interests are served by having "better" writers? What does it mean that writing programs are typically housed in English departments? Why are composition teachers typically in the "basement" of these English departments, while literature teachers are housed on the "upper, sunlit floors" (*ADE*, "Report of the Commission on Writing and Literature" 70)? Do the forms and modes

we teach link in important ways with forms and modes beyond the university? What is the role of the writing teacher? That same romantic strand of English department hopes—that we prepare our writers for self-understanding and self-growth—is often belied by concrete and insistent demands to prepare writers for business, industry, and government. And by ignoring the discussion of these problems, Shor manages to de-historicize the questions that should be important. On the issue of forms, for example, Richard Ohmann's *English in America* links the kind of form we may typically teach in a writing course with its later use and abuse in public life. Though Shor could help us focus on these questions for ourselves, he ignores the context of his own teaching—the writing course, the English department, the public university.

Moreover, by presuming to know what generative themes are best, Freirian practioners may appropriate the "text" from their learners. Clearly, that appropriation is a problem in Shor's second article, "Monday Morning Fever." Claiming that it is impossible to investigate his urban university students' lives in the ways Freire suggests in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Shor offers "work" as a generative theme, designing his writing class around it. Though Shor's writing pedagogy is process-oriented and well integrated into his generative theme of work, Shor seems indifferent in his own class to the other forms of oppression American culture produces. Perhaps Shor's female students would have chosen women's roles as a generative theme. Perhaps his black students would have chosen race. And perhaps his Hispanic students would have chosen language. His own political ideology apparently requires that economic analysis—in this case, work—supercede all other forms of analysis. And that is an unfortunate flaw for an otherwise good discussion of a positive writing class.

By examining "Monday Morning Fever" for its assumptions about curriculum, we can see the traditional English model firmly in place. Shor's role is that of the conduit; after setting the topics, he reformulates his students' words to fit into appropriate academic discourse. He apparently doesn't allow his students to write full texts from the start of class, other than ungraded freewriting; instead, we find he asks for the standard basic writing *paragraph*, albeit a "good sized one" (108). Unconsidered is this part-to-whole segmentation so dominant in current traditional writing pedagogy. On the issue of written versus oral language, Shor suggests that paired read-alouds allow students to manage corrections to the

prestige forms of written English, but the question of where this knowledge of prestige forms is to come from is left unanswered. As a reading model, Shor holds the traditional encode-decode model, a model much under fire in the last fifteen years by reading specialists such as Harste and Smith, and literary response critics such as Fish and Bleich, all of whom question an objective, determinate definition of meaning, one Shor's model of reading upholds. Finally, we don't know if Shor's students reach critical consciousness by the end of the semester, or if they have reached a point of strategic planning for change outside the classroom. What we do know is that his English curricula is the standard model draped in liberatory clothing.

Shor is joined in a rather rigid political analysis by authors Finlay and Faith in their article "Illiteracy and Alienation in American Colleges: Is Paolo Freire's Pedagogy Relevant?" Originally published in 1979 in *Radical Teacher*, Finlay and Faith investigate the uses of Freirian pedagogy in college writing classrooms. Along similar lines to Shor's analysis of a student performance strike in *Culture Wars*, these authors maintain that the poor performance of college writers is a form of resistance to oppressive institutions and language, unconscious but present across all class lines. Though Finlay and Faith allow students to generate their own list of possible generative words and themes, their linking of particular linguistic features to stages in the development of critical consciousness is the worst kind of political prescriptivism. For these authors, bad politics equals bad writing. Finlay and Faith provide the following description of students' writing:

> . . . a jargon replete with vague phrases and passive constructions, and marked by the absence of detailed analysis. They repeat formulas they cannot explain, and account for social structures by referring to a vague and powerful 'they' (67).

While accepting the institutional definition of good writing—active voice, clear reference, detailed development—they diagnose the students with a new illness: undeveloped politics. This new illness neatly substitutes for the more conservative language deprivation theory, in which students are thought to be silent because they have no language whatsoever, a linguistic misanalysis of immense proportion. And demeaning diagnoses of students are no more desirable when clothed in radical politics than when they wear conservative dress.

Finlay and Faith's endorsement of standard language is well accepted in the radical education community. In an articulate and sufficiently complex analysis of the role of radical education in the United States, Henry Giroux in *Theory & Resistance in Education: A Pedagogy for the Opposition* asserts:

> To argue that working-class language practices are just as rule-governed as standard English usage may be true, but to suggest at the same time that all cultures are equal is to forget that subordinate groups are often denied access to the power, knowledge, and resources to lead self-determined existence (229).

In effect, he says when language is viewed as merely different, we overlook the very real power structures that assign value to language difference. However, many progressive and reform-minded teachers have clearly taken a liberal view, that teachers should understand that difference in language is a product of society, and that knowledge of society is thereby enough to diminish the negative value assigned to the language difference. But clearly, knowledge "about" language difference is not enough to challenge the social structures that impose the value judgments in the first place. Simply to show students that codings of social and institutional power surface in their own language and writing is just another form of knowledge "about" language difference. Nor is it enough just to avoid the denial of responsibility evident in passive constructions and verbose nominalizations. It does not necessarily follow that students will transfer the analysis or resolve the contradictions of these kind of codings from their own writing and their classroom to social contexts beyond the classroom.

On the other hand, many sociolinguists and creolists have situated language difference in a social and historical framework. To ignore this work, as Finlay and Faith do, suggests we may assume that even radical educators teach only the standard language, without examining why this might be preferable. Even more damaging, ignoring this work overlooks the potential for empowerment when speakers of a non-prestige dialect recognize the structural complexities of their own language and the role social institutions play in denying power to speakers of non-prestige dialects. Though Finlay and Faith reject the demeaning, fragmented grammar exercise of the workbook page, they also have rejected full, careful

grammatical and discourse analysis with it. As Roger Fowler, Bob Hodge, Gunther Kress, and Tony Trew have demonstrated in *Language and Control*, careful analysis of sound, sentence, and discourse inevitably reveal social power dimensions. But these analyses become available to students only through the direct study of the non-prestige dialect in comparison to the standard dialect or the direct study of "powerful" speech and writing in comparison to "powerless" versions.

A BETTER FIT: VYGOTSKY, WRITING THEORY AND FREIRE

What the Shor and Finlay-Faith articles lack is a coherent, fully applied, socially constructed theory of language. On the other hand, the three articles to which Nan Elsasser is a contributor present more positive and potentially workable approaches to the North American Freirian classroom. All three articles, and especially the Elsasser and John-Steiner essay, invoke the work of Soviet social psychologist Lev Vygotsky for his understanding of the development of inner speech and its relation to writing.

Vygotsky claimed that inner speech is the so-called outer or egocentric speech of childhood—that running commentary of the young child engaged in activity—mediated by social contact, reduced and turned inward for storage. What we draw upon when we write is inner speech; thus writing demands that we revise the reduction and mediate it socially again. Many composition theorists have found Vygotsky's theories attractive, thus anchoring the three Elsasser articles within current composition understandings. Moreover, such a theory of language makes it possible to preclude the contradiction of maintaining a traditional curriculum with a Freirian approach to education so evident in Shor's articles and to block dismissal of the complexities of language in use as in the Finlay and Faith article.

By using Vygotsky's social perspectives, Elsasser and Irvine, in "English and Creole: The Dialectics of Choice in a College Writing Program," make questioning the relegation of Virgin Islands Creole to oral contexts a central issue for their writing courses, one a remedial class, one an Honors sequence. After listening to a Creole linguist and a Creole author, students in the remedial class wrote the speakers, using both standard and Creole, reacting to the presentations. This mediation of the social into writing in

and about Creole was necessary because of students' prior experience with the banishing of Creole from institutional contexts. Instead of Shor's hands-off journal entries and audience-free basic paragraphs, students in Elsasser and Irvine's class immediately made writing social. Moreover, the direct examination of power related to Creole and standard was part of both courses. Students examined where, when, and how each dialect was used, becoming more conscious of the complexities of language use. But there are no easy answers suggested here, as Elsasser and Irvine present the agonizing choices students made about their language once they were fully aware of the implications. As the authors relate, one student fearful of "the reprisals that might result" waited six months to send a letter to the editor of a local newspaper advocating use of Creole (142-143). Unlike Finlay and Faith's halt at the classroom door, Elsasser and Irvine's students went public and social.

The Fiore-Elsasser collaboration, based on a class taught primarily to women students at The College of the Bahamas, is Freirian pedagogy at its best. The reoccurring subject of these students' discussions and generative word lists was gender relations, and the instructors pursued the topic, learning along with their students. Moreover, in this article, more than in any of the others in the collection, the students progressed to taking action. At the end of the semester, they produced and published an open letter to Bahamian men, describing their experiences, with suggestions for change, public and social, claiming human agency for their own.

CONCLUSION

Freire's final statement to North-American teachers leaves us no closer to answering our question of the applicability of his pedagogy to North-American classrooms. He tells us we must recognize the political agendas that institutional education invariably produces and that teachers must be active, engaged learners with our students, all venerable advice. But with the exception of the Elsasser articles, this collection, unfortunately, does not help illuminate the problems of applying Freire to the North American classroom. Peter McLaren, remarking on Henry Giroux's analysis of Freirian pedagogy, suggests the following:

> . . . given the sophisticated capacity of advanced North American technology and science to administer and manipulate

> individuals and to conceal class-specific interests and systems, the existence of forces of domination must be *proven* [emphasis in original] to many North Americans. (197)

The remarks are equally valid for both students and teachers. We who teach writing haven't stopped to ask ourselves why writing has become central in many "reform" programs for schools. Instead, for the most part, we have basked in the sunlight of being needed and rewarded after years in the basements of English departments. Nor have we asked ourselves what it means when the methods of process-paradigm composition so closely resemble the methods of critical education or of American feminism. Are we invoking the same principles or is it just similarity in method? By not asking ourselves these questions, we have no answers when asked what the agenda is in our classrooms and whom that agenda serves. Are we "liberating" anyone when we move to a process classroom, still designed to serve only an unconsidered standard of "good writing"? Are we violating "fairness" and the "right" to individuality when we set the topic agenda in our writing classrooms? While Ira Shor's collection may be thought-provoking for teachers of English, it neither asks nor answers our most important questions.

Gail Stygall, Assistant Professor of English, teaches linguistics and rhetoric and composition at Miami University. She is currently engaged in a joint project on basic writing between Miami and Temple universities. She has published on basic writing, Toulmin, and legal language.

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