# REWRITING SCHOOL: CRITICAL PEDAGOGY IN THE WRITING CLASSROOM

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*Everything will be done to wipe out their traditions, to substitute our language for theirs and to destroy their culture without giving them ours.*

Jean-Paul Sartre, Preface to *Wretched of the Earth*

The student demographic in K-12 education is shifting drastically. *The Digest of Education Statistics* estimates that, during the next decade, the enrollment of students of color in American K-12 institutions will rise to 41 percent. Despite the cultural shift in the K-12 student population, teachers of writing remain relatively white. According to Lettie Ramírez and Olivia Gallardo, K-12 writing teachers are not only almost exclusively white; many of them affirm almost completely traditional writing pedagogies that accentuate western thought and ideology (1). By contrast, students from almost every background are participating in textual worlds that emphasize difference and variety. Since a large and growing number of these students are of color and participate in social worlds that are textually rich and, perhaps, more diverse than their teachers, there is a need for K-12 teachers of writing to recognize the legitimacy and intertextuality of all students' voices and, by extension, promote multitextual, multisensual, and critical dimensions of writing in their pedagogies.

In this article, I talk briefly about the urgent need for K-12 teachers of writing to adjust their pedagogies to fit the needs of

our changing student demographic in order to meet the challenges of the new century. In addition, I discuss what multitextual, multisensual, and critical writing pedagogies might look like. If teachers of writing fail to turn to such pedagogies, then students whose cultural and social backgrounds differ from the schools will either perform poorly in school or will find themselves marginalized even in their cultural and social communities (Au and Jordan; Irvine; Ogbu; Suskind).

I am not arguing that K-12 teachers of writing abandon traditional writing pedagogies for more fashionable ones. Rather, I am suggesting that teachers of writing consider the multilingual and multitextual capacities needed to participate in a multicultural world. Further, I contend that future pedagogies of writing should present students with a dynamic textual toolkit, which draws equally from traditional teaching models and new ones that emphasize the relevance of students' language and lives. Currently, many K-12 pedagogies of writing simply impose hegemonic and formulaic procedures upon students and do not readily reflect the kinds of texts that many students compose in their daily lives. As it currently stands, many of our students, particularly those of color, are left with one of two very unsatisfactory options: acculturate into the dominant textual world by forsaking their own linguistic and textual backgrounds or fail in school. Either way, students, especially those of color, stand to lose much if K-12 pedagogies of writing do not change.

## Moving Beyond Socrates in the K-12 Writing Classroom

Current K-12 writing pedagogy is steeped in traditional, longstanding western ideologies, which in part emanate from the imagination of Socrates. According to Socrates, the serious treatment of words, which corresponds with the "art of dialectic," should form the basis of writing (Hillocks). For Socrates, the art of dialectic was concerned with probing, asking questions, and searching for logical and well thought-out answers, in an effort to

arrive at a better understanding of the world. The underlying epistemology that Socrates adopted was that writing should center itself on *logos*, or divine reason, in order to come close to some specific and determinate meaning which does not change. According to George Hillocks, this view of writing has "dominated composition in the secondary schools and is the organizing principle underlying most state-ordained assessments of writing" (113).

Highly reminiscent of the ideas of Socrates, contemporary writing pedagogies and textbooks endorse a similar kind of logos-centered thinking (or logocentrism), which encourages teachers to "ask questions and suggest possible solutions" to aid students with writing (Sebranek and Kemper 83). It should be noted that I am not arguing for or against logocentric approaches in the writing classroom. Rather, I simply wish to describe how current pedagogies of writing are shaped and promulgated along logocentric lines. According to Stephen North, the teaching of writing has "largely become a matter of routine" characterized mainly by "the accumulated body of traditions, practices, and beliefs" in terms of how practitioners have come to understand "how writing is done, learned, and taught" (22). In this sense, logic equates formulas for writing, and logocentrism is strongly linked to an exclusive body of western ideas, beliefs, and practices. Teachers that use only logocentric pedagogies of writing endorse almost exclusively standardized and monocultural writing expressions, such as the five paragraph essay and other expository forms that many students may never, or at least immediately, use again (Anderson; Emig). In addition, logocentric pedagogies impose a language standard upon writers that does not necessarily correspond with the language backgrounds of students of color.

Another viable critique of logocentric writing pedagogies is their emphasis on the textual experiences of a narrow population: middle-class white Americans. Shirley Brice Heath paints a provocative picture of how such biases might play out. In her seminal work *Ways with Words*, Heath looked at oral and written

language use in two working-class communities and in the homes of middle-class teachers in the Piedmont Carolinas. The individuals in Heath's study were treated as literate because they all used written language in some meaningful way to function within their social and cultural worlds. However, Heath finds that only the middle-class individuals used written language and, by extension, talked about written language in ways compatible with the pedagogical models used in schools. For example, people in all communities made lists and wrote, but only people from the middle-class communities would bring home expository or logocentric writing tasks, such as writing summaries and reports. Hence, there are issues surrounding writing pedagogy that are less about writing than they are about language rights and representation. Smitherman sums up the issue in the following way: "In the struggle for [student] language rights. . .you are doing battle on two fronts: class and race" (381). Based upon Smitherman's infusion of race and class into the language rights and representation discussion, we cannot assume that current writing pedagogies are at all neutral or exist independent of the hegemony of dominant linguistic and cultural representations.

All writing practices, then, are evocatively tied to culture and society. According to Anne Haas Dyson and Sarah Warshauer Freedman, "writing is a cultural invention and is consciously learned, and its learning is inextricably linked not only to individuals' efforts but also to relational contexts and broader social and institutional structures" (4). Given this, the politics of textual production—what kinds of writing get taught in classrooms and for what purposes—have incredible power to shape the world. Dyson and Freedman argue, "writing can be an avenue for individual expression and at the same time it can serve to construct or proclaim the individual author's membership in a social group" (1). In this sense, writing tasks or practices are tied not only to knowledge production but also to social and cultural reproduction.

On the level of reproduction, the practice of writing acts as a gate-keeping mechanism that both includes and excludes certain

students from gaining membership into prestigious social and cultural networks (Bourdieu). As such, writing is also a mechanism for production; in that, it is a cultural and social apparatus for producing, organizing, and distributing knowledge and culture. Based upon this understanding, the practice of writing is very powerful, and yet the traditional teaching of writing has subsumed the power of writing, usually working against students of color.

Writing pedagogies are extremely influential upon how one acts, thinks, believes, and behaves. That is, learning to write is tantamount to learning to think. Hence, those who control the teaching of writing also help train our minds and therefore our actions. Perhaps Carter G. Woodson (1933) says it best when he writes, "When you control a man's thinking you do not have to worry about his actions. . . . You do not need to send him to the back door. He will go without being told. In fact, if there is no back door, he will cut one for his special benefit. *His education makes it necessary*" (xix, emphasis added). Writing is a deeply political activity; therefore, the teaching of writing is also political. For the most part, traditional and logocentric pedagogies of writing have been inherently tied to certain agenda and determine, almost definitively, how thoughts are shaped and represented.

Further, logocentric writing pedagogies take for granted first that language (spoken language) is a more or less adequate expression of ideas already in the mind, and second that writing inhabits a realm of derivative, supplementary signs, a realm twice removed from the 'living presence' of the *logos* whose truth can only be revealed through the medium of authentic (self-present) speech. In an age where culturally narrow writing pedagogies and high stakes tests based upon them dominate, students of diverse cultural backgrounds learn to write in classrooms that are structured to advance dominant social and cultural practices.

# Toward a K-12 Critical Writing Pedagogy

In order to achieve greater justice and equity in our society, critical writing pedagogies are needed in our K-12 writing classrooms. Such pedagogies establish the apex of students' written worlds and exists at the intersection of all of our students' multiple and diverse textual worlds. Critical writing pedagogies, in this way, seek to complicate what kinds of texts are admissible within the writing classroom by questioning "long-held assumptions about the cultural neutrality of curriculum, suggesting that in a multicultural society we need to consider carefully whose interests are served by which approaches to literacy and language teaching" (Beck and Oláh x). Hence, critical writing teachers construct their pedagogies by challenging dominant suppositions about textual production. According to Derrida, "Nothing. . .can be said to be *not* a text" (xiv). In keeping with his logic, critical writing teachers represent all things textual in their classrooms.

In addition to expanding the notion of text, a *critical writing framework*, which is the basis for a critical writing pedagogy, must acknowledge the intertextual and dialogic nature of the writing act. Within this frame, critical writing teachers understand that the written worlds of their students are constitutive of multiple textual identities and are, therefore, multitextual, bearing "traces" distinctive of past histories, cultures, and social systems (Derrida). Bakhtin refers to the constancy of such influences as "echoes." In this way, the writing act as well as, by association, writing instruction, "is a link in a very complexly organized chain" of other such acts. By acknowledging the various influences that are implicit in the writing act, critical writing teachers are at the same time addressing the complexity of writing itself.

Interestingly enough, national writing standards are beginning to reinvent themselves by taking into account the complexities of students' written worlds. According to the *IRA/NCTE Standards for the English Language Arts*, the writing classroom should help students engage the following critical, multitextual, and multisensual tasks:

- Adjust their use of spoken, *written*, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.
- Employ a wide range of strategies as they *write* and use different *writing* process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.
- Develop an understanding of and respect for diversity in language use, patterns and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions and social roles.
- Use spoken, *written*, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information). (3, emphasis added).

Notable scholars such as Nancie Atwell share views similar to the ones that appear in the national standards. According to Atwell, "Writing becomes purposeful, personal, and world-changing—not the turf of the talented few but the domain of everyone who has something to say and someone to say it to" (147). With respect to the national standards and Atwell's contention that writing is for everyone, critical writing pedagogies that start with students also end with them. Therefore, the primary goal of any critical writing pedagogy is to recognize the intertextuality of all students' voices, to help students weave those voices intertextually in relation to other such voices, and to give students multiple ways of representing what they have to say.

Implementing a critical writing pedagogy is by no means an easy task. Critical writing teachers must be committed to the project of social change through their teaching of writing and must see the world inside-out. They do this by exploring textual domains with which they may not be familiar and deny standard tendencies to emphasize logocentric writing formulas that benefit the few. In addition to traditional writing forms and standardized

language, critical writing teachers represent other forms of written expression in their teaching for at least two reasons: to provide cultural relevance for their students and to represent textual expressions that are meaningful to their students' social and cultural communities. Hence, the critical writing classroom looks quite different than most traditional classrooms. Within the critical writing classroom, teachers can emphasize at least three forms of textual expression that account for this difference: visual expressions, musical expressions, and multilingual expressions. While the ideas are conceptually based, they have been developed through my work with preservice English teachers at Michigan State University (MSU). At MSU, I teach preservice English teachers how to develop writing pedagogies that embrace the multitextual lives of all of their students, especially of their students of color.

**Visual Expressions**

By visual forms, I am referring to texts that appeal to the human eye. Visual texts are written in the form of cultural and political art, like political cartoons and Hip Hop graffiti. They can also take the form of pictures that represent the collective experiences of a student, like an autobiographical pictorial diary, like the one used in the movie *Cruel Intentions*. Visual forms become meaningful in the hands of students because students would usually write them in response to salient issues that resonate in their cultural and social worlds.

In a broader but equally important way, the Internet and video texts are kinds of visual forms that can represent student voices in more animated ways. By creating web pages that have critical and cultural inventiveness, students can bring their social and cultural worlds to life. In order to generate these kinds of texts, it takes certain technical abilities that many students already possess or are willing to learn. In this regard, the technical culture that has emerged among the youth is not only salient but remarkable. For instance, Kirkland et al. comment on the extraordinary textual world that students have created on the

Internet. Not only do students have ownership of certain parts of this domain, they participate in it regularly and dialogically, speaking to one another inventively through message boards and web pages.

Students can also write using video. By using video to teach writing, teachers can help their students produce texts that are already familiar to them, like documentaries, music videos, and reality skits. In addition, the practice of engaging video texts is very consistent with cultural practices of youth today. According to Sege and Dietz, American children spend more time watching television than they do in school. Given the amount of time that they spend watching television, students can learn a lot from creating such texts of their own. By learning the conventions of video, students become empowered as video-markers and acquire a kind of insider knowledge that will, potentially, help them better appraise the video texts that they view daily.

## Musical Expressions

Music is another textual resource that can be used in the critical teaching of writing. Considerable work has been done in this area. Cultural scholars and sociolinguists talk about the power of music, both *melody* and *noise,* in the lives of students (Rose). Chief among them, Tricia Rose suggests that not only does "noise" speak to students, but certain students exercise "noise" to resist the oppressive aspirations of nihilism. Other scholars from DuBois to Smitherman talk about the melodic sounds of African American youth, who croon their "souls" in vibrant, ritualized melodies of penury and poetry (DuBois; Rickford and Rickford; Smitherman). Critical education theorists have focused on the rhythmic ties that bind some students to musical forms like rap and Hip Hop (Morrell and Duncan-Andrade).

For many students of color, music and rhythm vibrate in their use of language (Smitherman). However, beyond linguistic classification of rhythm in language (i.e., stress-timed, syllable-timed, and mora-timed languages), the language of the American

background—Ebonics, Spanglish, etc.—have inherent rhythms (Adjaye). In this way, the music of language—rap, rhythm, and rhyme—becomes significant features of text and is, therefore, put to use in the critical teaching of writing. In addition to using more traditional expressions of texts, critical writing teachers access the music that emanates from their students' languages.

## Multilingual Expressions

Multilingual expressions can also be used to enhance student writing. A number of researchers (Anderson-Janniere; Clark; Smith) have looked at multilingual expressions as a way to bridge the literacy achievement gap between "linguistically diverse" students and their white counterparts. Such efforts have been originally conceived of as a strategy to liberate students of color from the traditional boundaries of writing instruction. Researchers saw writing pedagogies that allowed for multilingual expressions as a way that teachers could help students of color learn and perhaps master an academic voice in order to enhance their school destinies, which would promise greater economic and social prosperity (Palacas).

In fact, the research literature suggests that allowance for multilingual expressions have, indeed, helped some students increase writing proficiency. Hanni Taylor's study illustrates how Contrastive Analysis (CA) significantly reduced the frequency of AAL features appearing in student composition. Working with African American freshmen taking a college remedial writing course, Taylor developed and taught a curriculum that incorporated AAL and Black culture to an African American experimental group. Her control group received traditional writing instruction. Taylor found that the experimental group reduced their use of AAL features by 59.3 percent in their essays, while the control group increased theirs by 8.5 percent.

More recently, Kelli Harris-Wright mirrored these results in a similar, large-scale CA program in DeKalb County, Georgia. Harris-Wright's bi-dialectical contrastive curriculum was shown to increase reading scores. After receiving bi-dialectical language

instruction, Harris Wright's experimental group's reading scores increased, while students in her control group received worse scores at the end of the school year than they had at the beginning. Harris-Wright's results resemble Taylor's, in that, both studies demonstrate the effectiveness of multilingual approaches in helping African American students improve writing performance.

In this way, nontraditional forms of texts offer the kinds of complexities that cut across race and class and into the complicated existences of our students' social and cultural universes. If used in a critical way, these textual expressions can give students' voices greater moral character and sanguine social and political flare.

## Some Final Thoughts on Critical Writing Pedagogy

It is important to bear in mind a couple of tensions. First, the audiences of such texts exist beyond individual logic. In this sense, we can think of composition and by association rhetoric as not only appealing to the mind, but also to the human senses. Textual expressions like music and visually expressive language appeal beyond the mind to various senses: the eyes, the ears, and even the calming touch of the familiar. In addition to the complexities of audience, there are complexities of process that we must consider. The processes for composing visual, musical, and multilingual texts are complex. For example, some of the texts with which students are most familiar are written spontaneously. Texts like freestyle battle rapping and graffiti tagging do not require a systematic writing process, but emerge as a result of students understanding the creative social and cultural uses of language. In advocating textual diversity in the writing classroom, I understand the importance of teaching students to write in traditional ways. While I acknowledge this, it is imperative that we allow space in our classrooms for students to express themselves in ways that make most sense to them.

Therefore, critical teachers of writing must maintain the legitimacy of all textual forms in their classrooms. Taught within a critical context, multitextual and multisensual writing pedagogies can be empowering for students, liberating to their voices, and beneficial to us all.

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