

## IMPLICATIONS OF REDEFINING "WORKING CLASS" IN THE URBAN COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

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In this chapter, we explore the disconnect between New York City College of Technology (City Tech) students' working-class subjectivities and the traditional implementation of first-year composition (FYC) pedagogy. We articulate the relationship between institutional realities, pedagogical tradition, and students' needs and how these intersections of institutionality and students' lives do not connect our students' working-class subjectivities to the educational project of FYC. We raise three questions we believe must be explored as part of the process of creating tangible changes to how teachers and scholars of FYC approach urban working-class students.

- How do we identify urban working-class students as working class in a positive, and productive, way?
- What aspects of composition pedagogy in its contemporary application devalue working-class students' subjectivities?
- How should we position ourselves within the diversity of working-class students' values and perceptions about literacy, language, and education to *serve* a contemporary working-class population?

A cultural disconnect exists between instruction for working-class students and the working-class subjectivities they bring into the classroom. Even as FYC has developed into one of the few courses (if not the only one) all students take, its present usefulness in our students' lives is limited. Writing teachers have invested decades in finding ways of bridging the gap between the methods of higher education and student learning potentials. Still, urban opportunity-granting institutions struggle to connect to students in the classroom and advance them toward an enduring and useful education. Here at City Tech, one of the most entrenched barriers preventing FYC from fully serving our urban working-class students is the social reality of class at our institution. FYC instruction is

complicated by a hidden, but acute, divide between how class (particularly the working class) is addressed institutionally and as part of pedagogy, and the realities faced by our students.

We must understand our urban working-class students beyond rigid socioeconomic and sociocultural definitions that reify the working class as an economic and social marker of identity. Historically, being marked as working class corresponded to perception of such students as having unfavorable learning habits and deep resistance to institutional authority, which is remedied through pedagogical intervention. We must break away from this attitude and move to a more nuanced reflection of problems and contexts that simple models cannot address. At City Tech, our working-class students individually represent complex subjectivities formed out of *radically diverse* backgrounds. What we see through our existing models limits our understanding of the subjectivities our students' bring to their educations and the usefulness of these subjectivities to student learning.

At City Tech, our urban working-class students have experienced traditional pedagogy (and how it structures power and authority) their entire educational lives. They are inured to it. If we do not reach out with a more nuanced understanding of what role class plays in our interactions with students, we do little more than continue the social reality in which our students are marked as "working class" through extant institutional and pedagogical discourses. If we seek no new insight into how our teaching practices affect our students' subjectivities, we continue to build barriers around the very ideology of class we expect students to overcome.<sup>1</sup> If learning involves negation and shifts in subjectivity, we must respect our students' subjectivities as authentic, even valuable to our own work, and the locus of both being and belonging in our students' lives—not as problems to solve through pedagogy. To connect with urban working-class students, all faculty must recognize the extent of difference, of course, but must also continually reassess their own subject positions within the class structures of institutional power and legitimacy and must triangulate these with our students' realities.

#### URBAN WORKING-CLASS STUDENT DIVERSITY

Founded in 1946 as the New York State Institute of Applied Arts and Sciences of the City University of New York (CUNY), the mission of City Tech was to develop a "technically proficient workforce" out of returning World War II veterans. The core of City Tech's educational philosophy has been to offer students a learning experience connecting



technical training with liberal arts. City Tech has developed sixty-six associate and baccalaureate degrees that serve a student population of staggering multicultural, multiethnic, and linguistic diversity.<sup>2</sup> As CUNY's technical college, City Tech provides working-class students the opportunity to emerge as skilled professionals holding both the technical skills necessary to perform in STEM-related fields and the broad range of perspectives provided through general education and the liberal arts.

City Tech students cannot be represented by traditional working-class definitions. Diversity at City Tech is a living force that inflects every aspect of our institutional character and operations. Even though students' families earn median annual incomes of less than \$30,000 (in expensive New York City), the construction of our students' subjectivities has as much to do with their complex cultural backgrounds as it does with family income or the fact that many of them work as they pursue their educations.<sup>3</sup> City Tech students arrive from 138 countries and most live in homes where English is not the primary language (62 percent).<sup>4</sup> Many do not identify with traditional markers of ethnicity because the complexity of their backgrounds defies simple categorization (e.g., students may self-identify as Indo-Caribbean, or Arab-Brazilian). Their extended families often reside on two or more continents, come from multiple ethnic backgrounds, speak many languages, and have substantial differences in educational attainment.

While most City Tech students are not economically privileged, their significant cross-cultural competencies are valued by faculty in the classroom. Our colleagues throughout the college deeply respect our students' ethnic, religious, and linguistic differences (one could not teach here otherwise). However, when these differences are stretched to include our students' working-class backgrounds, the conversation often moves from respect to frustration. The mismatch in expectations between student and teacher is rooted in unexamined assumptions about class and its contribution to subjectivity. Working-class students' subjectivities contribute to their own expectations about what they will be learning, how, and to what end, just as our subjectivities as faculty contribute to *our* own expectations. Though City Tech students are labeled working class by economic and cultural definition, their representation of what this label means is different from how they are *defined* in the classroom.

This disconnect between class, subjectivity, and learning has serious pedagogical implications in writing instruction. Beyond the pedagogies of identity, the subjectivities formed by diverse groups of urban working-class students are distinct from those of their instructors, regardless of the teacher's own background. When faculty make assumptions about

the nature and value of the subjectivities of their students (or overlook them entirely), we are creating barriers, depreciating the complex subjectivities working-class students bring through their cultural environments. We compound the problem by developing classroom instruction that shows working-class students that their subjectivities are not recognized or valued because these subjectivities do not correlate with the identities or intellectual goals valued in FYC.

#### INSTITUTIONAL CONDITIONS OF WORKING-CLASS EDUCATION

As a course sequence traditionally rooted in the study and expression of identity, FYC is deeply imbricated in issues of class, but our pedagogy often fails in examining the relationship among subjectivities, particularly working-class subjectivity within the context of conflicts between instructors and institutions. Teachers of writing, through education, professional development, and the folkways of experience have understood what constitutes effective teaching in their field since the 1970s. Yet, our ability to realize long-term, systemic, and effective change has been slow.

Even though we understand what makes pedagogy effective, and know how to guide our students to praxis when they come to us ready and willing to learn in a way we recognize, we are faced with institutional conditions born out of the increasingly manifest poverty of public funding, of systemic mandates that serve a surveillance bureaucracy more than students, and a staggeringly diverse student population that lacks familiarity with traditional higher education teaching methods and ideological imperatives. Within this cluster of material, ideological, and cultural conditions, implementing the best pedagogical advances of our field is an ongoing challenge.

Like its peer institutions, City Tech has difficulty graduating the students it serves. City Tech loses about a third of its entering students by the second year, almost half by the end of two years. Close to one-quarter of its students have earned associate or baccalaureate degrees after five years.<sup>5</sup> Part of the problem is that support for students outside elite US institutions is dwindling precipitously. There are institutional, cultural, and political reasons for this loss, but one tendency is to blame the ideology and work ethic of faculty. This devaluation of the subjectivities of faculty, of relegating their professional vocation to delivering and assessing content under an increasing paucity of resources, creates an environment in which subjectivity is categorically devalued in the learning process.<sup>6</sup> New emphases on delocalized assessment, continuous "quality" improvement, and rote technological solutions to pedagogical



issues play significant roles in the material and instructional conditions of the classroom and the extent to which subjectivity can be valued. Yet even "techniques such as reducing class sizes, applying different pedagogical methodologies, offering psychological and societal interventions, and . . . utilizing technology ultimately will offer smaller potential for improvement in student learning" than do teacher contributions because it is that nexus of interpersonal interaction and subjectivity formation that guides the learning process.<sup>7</sup>

Two policy directions affect the extent to which individual subjectivities can be explored, particularly in the classrooms that serve working-class students. The first, "teacher proofing," is "the practice of limiting the autonomy of individual teachers [in order] to produce a more uniform and controlled experience" through increased curricular control and pacing, high-stakes testing, standardized course content, and rote instruction.<sup>8</sup> Teacher proofing sees the teacher not as people who have their own individual subjectivities but as assembly-line workers. The assumption is that variability in teacher skill and student populations can be lessened through breaking tasks down into simpler components with increased oversight and decreased autonomy. At CUNY, we have our own teacher-proofing initiative, Pathways, which is an attempt to regularize general education over the first two years of college across the entire system. Teacher proofing is always top down (Pathways was imposed by CUNY's central administration), with its goals imposed on teachers and students by forces far from the classroom.

The second direction starts from the dynamic of teacher-and-student interactions and depends on goals developed by students in conjunction with their teachers. Instead of teacher proofing, this emphasis on personal relationships gives both teacher and student an opportunity to continually hone skills and knowledge in a fashion appropriate to the individual. It is not based on assessment or external oversight and goal setting but on growth from the individual student's starting point. This direction, one most writing teachers are familiar with, owes a great deal to the progressive ideals of John Dewey and his work's influence on twentieth-century United States education.<sup>9</sup> This direction begins by recognizing the subjectivity of the teacher as valuable in the learning dynamic. Ideally, it would also afford the same value to the subjectivities of individual students, but this does not happen automatically. Though basic to the disciplinary framework of FYC, valuing the subjectivities of students is an approach frequently hamstrung by institutional limitations. It is effective only when student and teacher cocreate a meeting point from each other's cultural subjectivities.

Given institutional constructs inimical to appropriate instruction (e.g., large class sizes, limiting physical spaces, and inflexible curricular structures), moving urban working-class students through FYC in a way that values individual subjectivity as a crucial aspect of learning can be challenging. Students and policymakers blame writing teachers for lack of success, and all too often, in hallway and water-cooler talks (and occasionally in print), writing teachers blame students or, at least, their working-class subjectivities. Though improvement does not rest on the faculty alone, our most immediate contribution to urban working-class student success will come from understanding students' needs and quandaries, both cultural and institutional, and from acting with these in mind. While we can make little immediate change in institutional contexts, we *can* reexamine, as Ira Shor suggests, our relationships with working-class students—the "already-existing conflicts" present in the classroom, in the institution, and within socially unjust economic systems. Equally important, we can focus on the students themselves, their own conflicted relationships with socioeconomic and cultural realities, and what they struggle with as they further their education.<sup>10</sup>

#### CRITIQUING THE "WORKING-CLASS IDENTITY"

Though City Tech students fit many working-class demographics, they do not fit traditional assumptions about the working class—a problem manifest in FYC, where the politics of identity is typically made overt as a matter of ethical pedagogy. One of the dangers of trying to define a class or group other than our own is that we end up looking at the other group *only* in terms of our own. Conversely, when we try to define our own class, we have very little to compare it to, usually having no substantial knowledge of other groups. As a result, when we compare teacher and student identities, our benchmarks are often clichés and assumptions based in our own subjectivities.

Much traditional scholarship of working-class identity fails to consider how the powerful working-class subjectivities our students bring into the FYC classroom are *hidden subjectivities* without easy correlatives in the scholarship of identity. Further, working-class subjectivity is at odds with the identities students at colleges like City Tech believe they come to college to acquire. At the same time, like faculty everywhere, few of the teachers come from working-class backgrounds. Writing teachers too often operate on outdated visions of what it means to be working class. They carry forward old assumptions, including



- that the liberal arts and humanities will enlighten working-class students about themselves and the world;
- that the value of composition pedagogy can be exported to other (frequently vocational) departments and programs without a mutual exchange of disciplinary perspective;
- that class and ethnicity can function separately as relevant concepts affecting learning outcomes; and
- that individual courses like FYC can, by their very essence, promote working-class students' progress toward relevant educational goals.

#### THE SOCIAL REALITY OF BEING WORKING CLASS IN THE FYC CLASSROOM

However we fight to improve education, we must not pretend to be out to free our students from slavish adherence to a "system" that we, by virtue of our positions, remain slaves to. Like Thoreau's "statesmen and legislators" in "On the Duty of Civil Disobedience," many of us stand "completely within the institution." We are governed by what Luc Boltanski defines as social reality, not reality "as it is actually experienced by individual actors in the diversity of everyday situations" but "reality as a whole, resting on a framework of formats, rules, procedures, knowledge and tests that purport to be generally applicable, a reality sustained by institutions that determine its shape."<sup>11</sup> But inasmuch as social reality contributes to ours and students' subjectivities, we have become comfortable within ours and uncomfortable with our students'. In doing so, we prepare our working-class students to accept, among other things, institutional limitations on the value of the education they seek. If we do not begin examining and questioning our own class-based assumptions and engage the experiential realities of each of our working-class students, we risk throwing a tunic of emancipatory rigmarole over the already substantial vestments of tradition. We end up appearing just as many of our working-class students already imagine us: guardian priests of an insider tradition of which they cannot, or will not, partake. They wouldn't be far from wrong.

To make matters worse, we continually develop a prescription for scholarship and even learning based on conventions and artifices known only to insiders. Our insistence on teaching particular citation formats, for example, is an alien practice to those not trained to it. Worse, it is a set of conventions that has little extrinsic necessity outside academic life. Our working-class students see citation as institutional make-work, but the real role it plays is one of ensuring conformity to a discourse that has much more to do with institutional tradition and faculty values than it does with a useful organizational practice for students.



[Citation] is the means by which the "real" is instituted. To cite the other on their behalf is hence to make credible the simulacra produced in a particular place. . . . To cite is thus to give reality to the simulacrum produced by power, by making people believe that others believe in it, but without providing any believable object.<sup>12</sup>

With our instruction in citation, we promote conformity to a pattern of "knowledge" based on old assumptions about language, influence and heredity—not about an experiential reality our students will need to carry forward in their education and their lives.

We don't often question such assumptions of our own, though we constantly ask students to question theirs. This unequal ground raises our cultural attributes above theirs, creating a standoff. Few students are going to jettison their cultural baggage on the say-so of a teacher. More widely, fallout includes criticism of universities for "political correctness," a reaction to the arrogance of intellectuals in believing their views of the world are more accurate and appropriate—and better—than those of others. Though we on the faculty may pride ourselves on being cultural warriors, we are all defenders of a cultural status quo, adhering to rule-bound organizations and educational processes. We carry within us cultural norms we are rarely willing to recognize. There is no fundamental or essential necessity to the formalisms of citation in our FYC students' lives, and for most there never will be.

Of course, teaching writing involves cultural norms and expectations as much as development of abstract competencies. Nothing about FYC can be simply skill based; everything about it is affected by traditional means of dividing people into class categories through language. When we say our students can't write, we are not telling the full story: our students may well be able to communicate on paper, and effectively. What they can't do is write within the conventions we consider standard.

#### REACHING OUT TO WORKING-CLASS STUDENTS

Because FYC pedagogy occurs within narrow curricular structures of general education and writing faculty's own education and professional development, harmful assumptions about the role of writing and communication are easily propagated and amplified, both within the degree paths of our students and in writing pedagogies. Even the liberatory pedagogies typically associated with class-based politics may fail City Tech students and those like them, preventing them from expanding their subjectivities and from producing desired educational outcomes. As Shor writes, "Exercising various kinds of agency in an unequal setting



where they lack formal authority, students also resist/engage/manipulate the teacher."<sup>13</sup> An us/them battle line can quickly form. Students have "become resilient experts in the skill most taught by mass education—spitting out and spitting back the official syllabus force-fed to them year after year."<sup>14</sup> The teacher cannot change this by demand, and depending on how we are theorizing our working-class students, we might never reach or engage them at all.

The ideological models about working-class students found within composition scholarship help us theorize composition as a middle-class enterprise but do not value the working-class subjectivities of FYC students. Following Henry Giroux, Beth Virtanen claims that working-class internalization of the ideology of the dominant culture often reinforces working-class positions<sup>15</sup> and categorizes working-class students as

- Those Most Likely to Succeed;
- Reluctant Scholars;
- Unlikely Candidates;
- Those Who Choose to Not-Learn.

Virtanen's model captures the resistance of working-class students but categorizes it as a condition with a continuum of success depending on how resistant working-class students are. Those Most Likely to Succeed are the students who willingly divest themselves of their working-class identities. They see themselves as "better" within the meritocracy of pursuing the American Dream. Their limitation is that they still perceive a distance between the working class they are leaving behind and the middle class to which they aspire.<sup>16</sup>

Virtanen's students categorized as Those Who Choose to Not-Learn are the most resistant students, ones who challenge authority, who recognize (often unconsciously) the vast inequality in educational systems. They do not want to join the traditional middle class. These students "take from education what they see will enhance their lives, and they strongly reject the notion that higher education requires leaving their home communities. Attaining a higher education is an experience in finding out what is insightful in one reality and merging it with their prior sense of how things are."<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately, these working-class students are the ones we overlook as difficult, those with perspectives least valued in our classroom because they defy the ideological project and identity politics of FYC disciplinary thinking.

In articulating FYC as a "middle-class enterprise," Lynn Bloom writes that FYC addresses aspects of social class that are "enabling students to think and write in ways that will make them good citizens of

the academic (and larger) community, and viable candidates for good jobs upon graduation."<sup>18</sup> Of course, "Composition is taught by middle-class teachers in middle-class institutions to students who are middle class either in actuality or in aspiration—economic if not cultural."<sup>19</sup> Composition cannot be removed from questions of class. City Tech students cross ethnic, class, and social lines, each one creating a new pattern of cultural interactions and learning possibilities. As a result, City Tech's working-class students cannot be modeled or reached as members of a single politicized class; they resist class-based identities and the very politics of class. So, instead of relying on what we've learned about the working class, especially in relation to the middle class, we must approach them as individuals immersed in a myriad of identities that share certain subjective experiences, with unique configurations in each particular classroom.

#### COMPOSITION PEDAGOGY BEYOND TRADITIONAL NOTIONS OF THE WORKING CLASS

Many working-class students at City Tech believe their educational failure is endemic—that even being at the college is itself a failure of not obtaining admission to a more prestigious institution. Coupled with the barrier created by our assumptions as faculty, this belief guarantees that the walls between student and teacher and student and institution almost always remain intact and that student success rates remain low. Unfortunately, teachers, given short semesters and heavy teaching loads, haven't time to explore individual student backgrounds; they start instead with generalized assumptions about the cultural backgrounds of even individual students, and they often end there. These assumptions must be challenged, and a new flexible and individual-centered means of approaching FYC classrooms in colleges such as City Tech must be established even in the face of a rigid social reality.

It's worth repeating that the concerns we express are not new. Scholars of education and writing have explored them intensely for decades. For a variety of reasons, the changes called for in scholarship have not appeared in the classrooms that serve working-class students, so this is where we must now focus. Prevalent older and ineffective assumptions persevere, including the "banking model" of education Paolo Freire and two generations of scholars after him have critiqued. Nearly fifty years after James Moffett wrote that "a child is not an empty vessel when he enters school; he comes replete with a set of abstractions about the world and himself," classroom teaching still fails to account



for working-class students' subjectivities.<sup>20</sup> As Shor claimed in the nineties, "Students are creative, intelligent beings, not plants or blank slates or pegboards for teacherly hammering."<sup>21</sup> As a discipline, we accept these commonplaces wholeheartedly, but they have little impact on the educational lives of urban working-class students, perhaps because we cannot describe the content of the vessel, the subjectivity of the student, any more than we can describe the vessel itself.

As teachers, we spend a lot of time attempting to create and illuminate goals for education. We are trained to talk about "outcomes" and craft careful statements describing what they look like and why they are necessary. Yet this work has little impact on the individual learning of working-class students. That's because, in part, we spend very little time at the other end, with "incomes." Perhaps instructors are satisfied that the standards for entering students place them all at the same basic level, but such uniformity is unlikely. Anyone who has taught FYC at a college like City Tech knows classrooms are likely to contain both fluid and confident writers and those close to being functionally illiterate. To make matters more complicated, working-class students are coming from various cultural and economic backgrounds. *Writing* can mean quite different things to different students—and the goals represented by attendance at college can be as widely divergent.

#### THE INERTIA IN FYC INSTRUCTION

Lack of teacher understanding of working-class cultures has acculturated the affected students to certain forms of performativity as students in a writing classroom. For many City Tech students, there is an additional range of cultural reticences creating resistance to the kinds of writing assignments found in FYC classrooms, especially if they concern family and background. Our students may find family a private matter and wish to keep it so. A student may have grown up behind a Chinese restaurant, a family of five or more living in two or three rooms—possibly even in an undocumented situation—and may not want to describe home life or even relate stories of parental life back in Guangzhou, where the living situation may have been even worse.

Many young immigrants and children of immigrants are more interested in looking forward, not back, and others do not wish to share their private lives with faculty. City Tech students often work at jobs in which they serve people much like their instructors or their families—or people who appear to be of that class, one distinct from their own. They are in college because they don't want to stay in such jobs—and they do not



expect their teachers have had any experience in similar situations; they don't believe their teachers could understand anything they say about their work. Having been trained in "proper" behavior in service roles, they know those they serve have very little interest in them. They can even feel patronized when interest is expressed.

This situation is further complicated by questions of ethnicity and race. Race, in particular, has an impact on almost every facet of instruction and programming in schools like City Tech, especially because our working-class students are also students of color, even though many would not identify as either. bell hooks writes that

throughout the history of the civil rights struggle to end racial discrimination, exploitation, and oppression, freedom has often been determined by the degree to which people of color have access to the same privileges as white peers. Embedded in this notion of freedom is the assumption that access is all that is needed to create the conditions of equality. The thinking was: Let black children go to the same schools as white peers and they will have all that is needed to be equal and free.<sup>22</sup>

There is no way teachers, on their own, can overcome the failure of this belief. There are factors that simple race avoidance can never address or overcome, one example being shame.

Many black students with excellent academic skill and talent are performing poorly in academic settings because they are shame-based and in settings where shaming is a common practice. In many cases simply the experience of being "judged" activates deep-seated feelings of shame. Messing up, performing poorly eases the anxiety. If the fear is that they will be found wanting, then as soon as they can inappropriately act out so that they are indeed wanted, they can feel better. There are serious taboos against acknowledging shame. Individual black students and colleagues have broken down emotionally as we talk in my office about negative experiences in predominately white academic settings. They voice shame about feeling shame.<sup>23</sup>

The combination of race, class, and institutional hierarchy makes it unlikely that any of these barriers can be overcome—even when one of them has been reduced through identity, a black teacher working with black students, for example.

#### THE SOLUTION IN THE PROCESS

At their best, FYC teachers take to heart the advice of the members of the Society of Friends at Balby in 1656, who wrote, "These things we do not lay upon you as a rule or form to walk by, but that all . . . may be guided: and so in the light walking and abiding, these may be fulfilled in



the Spirit, not from the letter, for the letter killeth, but the Spirit giveth life." Each semester, effective FYC instructors go through a process of learning along with their students; class structures and syllabi must be reevaluated and rebuilt in light of individual experience. No formula fits every situation.

One suggestion that has proven useful at City Tech is to keep syllabi lean so they don't drive the courses. An outline of course regulations and a short schedule is all that is necessary for FYC. It can also be useful to allow the students to suggest alteration of certain requirements and dates as set out on the syllabus, moving a weekly deadline from Friday to Saturday for e-mail submissions, for example, after students explain that the work schedules for many of them make the weekday deadline difficult. Minor actions can have a major impact, for they give students an understanding that they can—and should—be actively involved in their courses far beyond simply responding to assignments.

Standardized "outcomes" and course goals exclude too many students from success. We can see this in the way, institutionally, we treat nonnative speakers of English or even those whose dialects are nonstandard. Though there have been attempts to recognize differences in dialect as acceptable parts of higher education, these attempts have failed. The reason is simple: US power structures use dialect as a sorting mechanism. Students, though they may be proficient in communication within their native languages and dialects, are considered deficient when they enter US higher education without being able to handle the narrow forms and conventions of US written communication. Their skills are swept aside; they are placed in remedial environments, as though they have failed when, in fact, they are simply differently abled.

One of the first things an FYC instructor can do is sidestep the cultural arrogance most of us carry. We can do this in two ways: first, we must challenge our own generalizations, our imagined outlines of our students and their possibilities. Second, we can create a strict agenda for the teacher and a corresponding freedom for the student, the opposite of what we normally attempt. This approach should cede some classroom control to the students, keeping teacher interference to needed support. The position of the teacher, as their role becomes more regimented and, indeed, restricted, moves from the center of the course experience to the side. From this new place, the teacher keeps priorities in proportion: "The basic problems of understanding what someone else says to us, or of putting thoughts into words, can and should be separated from mere decoding of letters and mere transcribing of speech, which involve only perceptual and motor skills, not thought and

emotion."<sup>24</sup> We teachers might always keep in mind that "when students can connect what they are learning to accurate and relevant prior knowledge, they learn and retain more. In essence, new knowledge 'sticks' better when it has prior knowledge to stick to."<sup>25</sup> To teach, we must know what the students know.

The universes of discourse each student operates within are often quite different from the standardized one created by the contemporary mania for easy assessment. Standardization reflects the assumptions, the social reality, of a particular and well-educated elite. Standardized exams in writing are chosen by faculty and reflect *their* cultural biases and understandings, carrying the expectation that those of the students will be no different. Students often fail from lack of familiarity, not lack of skill. For this reason, it becomes useful to allow students to develop writing topics through a process of exploration. This is an old composition strategy, of course, but it is often abandoned in situations in which students seem particularly passive, as they can seem at City Tech.

The question for the FYC instructor is, how do I design student-enacted exercises that utilize a student's own cultural strengths within a milieu alien to that student's culture? The answer cannot be universal; it will never fit within the pattern of standardization increasingly imposed on US education. The answer requires a great deal of institutional confidence in individual instructors and their judgment, something few higher education administrations, in our assessment-happy environment, are willing to develop.

One of the first steps toward creating an environment in which the student feels unfettered by the constraints of the instructor's belief is deemphasizing the necessary hierarchy of the classroom itself. Active student learning should not be imagined to center on passive reception of teacher lectures. Freire explains why, writing that "leaders who deny praxis to the oppressed thereby invalidate their own praxis. By imposing their word on others, they falsify that word and establish a contradiction between their methods and their objectives."<sup>26</sup> The purpose of large-group activity should be coordination of other activities and motivation of students toward those activities—or provision of a singularity (such as watching a film, theater presentation, or lecture) that will be useful to subsequent and more individualized activities. In any case, such large-group activities should never dominate the course but should be seen as tools enhancing individual writing projects.

Instead of relying on prepared prompts and exercises, writing topics should be developed through student interest and knowledge. Teacher, what do you want? should be a question kept well in abeyance, with



students working within their own prior conversational universes to develop topics. What do you talk about with your friends? What does your family discuss? What comes up at work? What do you think about and dream about during any free time? These and other questions, when carefully formulated to keep the student from feeling cornered or pushed, can lead to the generation of personalized topics that can, without intrusive manipulation, become the basis for genuine and effective writing. In their prior coursework, students have only been taught to select topics that will meet with teacher approval. They will continue to do so unless the teacher deliberately moves from a controlling centrality. Taking a lesson from South African black activist Steve Biko, we teachers must understand the necessity for space where students can develop decision-making skills. They cannot do this under our direct supervision, but we teachers are often too nervous (or are too much under institutional constraint) to give students this necessary freedom.

Just as whole-class instruction is too teacher centric, technologically mediated individualized instruction also confines students through visions developed outside their personal experience. Both are useful, but each removes communication from the one-to-one interaction so should not be the center of the FYC experience. Lou Kelly, author of *From Dialogue to Discourse: An Open Approach to Competence and Creativity*, argues that writing works best when it starts with discussion, then moves to "talking on paper" and from there to more formalized written constructs. Though whole-class events and technological aids can assist in this process, it's the act of communication itself that concerns FYC, and that act, as Kelly realizes, starts with conversation. James Britton wrote over forty years ago that "in a good conversation, the participants profit from their own talking . . . , from what others contribute, and above all from the interaction—that is to say from the enabling effect of each upon the others."<sup>27</sup>

Keeping student tasks to small, discrete (though ultimately interconnected) units—with the teacher developing the tasks but staying one step ahead of the students completing them—can allow the instructor to use past activity in the particular classroom to scaffold the new, building on evident activity and interest. This approach also keeps the teacher from falling into assignment design based on convention—and it necessitates a continuing discussion involving instructor and students. A course designed in this way cannot run itself, that is, it does not unfold according to a script—but this flexibility is often just what is needed for students who are not already acculturated to academic writing standards.

As we work within our classrooms, we instructors also must be looking at forces outside, often running interference for protection of the

learning process, refusing to use imposed grading rubrics or other tools that reduce student writing from acts of communication to quantifiable marks on sheets of paper. If we grade in the manner so often being asked of us for purposes of assessment and standardization, we once more push student personalities and needs out of the equation, reducing the effectiveness of our instruction and the likelihood students will remain motivated enough to complete their degrees.

In 1969, Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner presented an optimistic view of the teaching profession as an instrument of change, *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*. They argued that while institutions of learning may be hidebound and committed to preservation of the status quo, teaching does not have to be. They are right, but resisting the status quo is not so simple. There is plenty of room for self-delusion, making it easy for teachers to fall into smug self-satisfaction, convincing themselves that they are struggling *against* the institutions making their activities possible. Writing in the caldron of the sixties, Postman and Weingartner believed they could use cultural confusion as a springboard to change. Since then, unfortunately, too many in education have used the same reasoning as an excuse for inaction.

One of the intents of many FYC instructors is to create a "safe" space for students to express their opinions, a space that can accept all sorts of diversity. The problem, from the student point of view, is that this "safety" is prescribed by the instructor's own prejudices so is not really safe for all. Some students' concerns about homosexuality, for example, must be masked, creating an "unsafe" environment for them in order to create a safe one for others. The idea of safety, in other words, is a reflection of the understandings and biases of the institution with little respect for those of a diverse body of students. Factors like these affect students' attitudes toward expression, influencing each one differently—and such influences must be taken into account in course design.

What we have learned through teaching working-class students at City Tech is that each new group of students is different and that tactics for the semester must be developed in response to the particulars of the individuals. As a result, there are few specific tasks or procedures we can suggest, other than making sure one comes into the FYC classroom with as strong a grounding in the scholarship of composition as possible and a commitment to continuing participation in professional conferences and discussions. Beyond that, these are the only rules we can offer:

1. Trust in your own judgment.
2. Listen to your students.



3. Teach the class, not the rules.
4. Remain flexible, remembering George Orwell's dictum in "Politics and the English Language" that it is better to break any rule than to allow the barbarous.

Each teacher, like each student, is different, and able in distinct ways. We must recognize our own individual strengths and weaknesses, but in every case, we *must* make the individuals in each group of students the heart of each semester.

Effective FYC instruction, by starting with the students' own cultural subjectivities, can introduce students to writing processes that do draw on their passions and that can demonstrate to them the power of the written word under their own control—and that they *can* control their own writing. This should be our goal.

#### Notes

1. Alcott, "Cultural Feminism."
2. New York College of Technology, "About City Tech."
3. New York College of Technology, "New York City College of Technology: Facts 2014–15."
4. New York City College of Technology, "New York City College of Technology: Facts 2014–15."
5. New York City College of Technology, "City University of New York."
6. Arum and Roksa, *Academically Adrift*, 191–99.
7. Ferster, *Teaching Machines*, 10.
8. *Ibid.*, 3.
9. Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 73.
10. Shor, *When Students Have Power*, 17.
11. Boltanski, *Mysteries and Conspiracies*, 16.
12. de Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, 188–89.
13. Shor, *When Students Have Power*, 17.
14. *Ibid.*, x.
15. Virtanen, "Working-Class Students," 445–46.
16. *Ibid.*, 455–56.
17. *Ibid.*, 463–65.
18. Bloom, "Freshman Composition," 655.
19. *Ibid.*, 656.
20. Moffett, *Teaching the Universe of Discourse*, 24.
21. Shor, *When Students Have Power*, 12.
22. hooks, *Teaching Community*, 93–94.
23. *Ibid.*, 100–101.
24. Moffett, *Teaching the Universe of Discourse*, 15.
25. Ambrose, et al., *How Learning Works*, 15–16.
26. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 120.
27. Britton, *Language and Learning*, 239–40.