Bartleby Goes to College: A Pragmatist Critique of Writing in Schools

A DISSERTATION
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA
BY

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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Dr. Thomas Reynolds, Advisor

June 2012

Acknowledgements

I suspect it is customary for writers to write the acknowledgement section as one of the very last rituals in bringing a project to its most complete state. For me, this is one of the most gratifying rituals simply because I have so many to sincerely thank--likely far more than I will be able to name here. Nonetheless, I will try and trust that those I have mistakenly omitted will understand. The people I thank here deserve to share any and all of the credit for this work and none of the blame.

While this dissertation is the culmination of a project 4 years in the making, the roots of my scholarship extend far deeper. I remain indebted to several professors at the University of Northern Iowa who guided me through the earliest parts of this journey while I was an undergraduate student. First and foremost, it was in David Morgan's class on Marxism that it first occurred to me that philosophy and the work of a scholar might be an avenue of concrete social change. Jerome Soneson's sage advice as a professor, a scholar, and as an advisor was instrumental in charting out unifying themes in my coursework. A chance substitute lecture by Harry Brod on the philosophy of Hegel was the initial departure point for the direction much of my work has taken. Jay Lees, Gregory Bruess, and Wallace Hettle from the history department all allowed me to pursue projects that I still draw inspiration from to this day. I also want to make a special note that during the morning of September 11th, 2001, I had classes with both Professor Morgan and Dr. Lees. Professor Morgan made an impassioned plea for understanding, tolerance, and peace, while Dr. Lees urged us to be responsible witnesses to history and to spend some time writing on that confusing day. I will remember both of these moments for the rest of my life. A special thanks is in order to Vince Gotera, Grant Tracey, and Samuel Gladden, all of whom were instrumental in helping me make the transition from undergraduate life to graduate school. And finally, to Anne Myles, who was there when I discovered the work of Walt Whitman and supported my work when I began thinking about writing and democratic life.

As a graduate student at the University of Minnesota, my work--a dissertation in *composition*, using *Pragmatism*! at a time in which neither benefit from prevailing winds

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in academia--would not have been possible without several key individuals. Geoffrey Sirc provided my first introduction to the field(s) of composition, rhetoric, and literacy studies, enabling me to find a "home" for my scholarship (and, let's be honest, just might be a little to blame for all this). Chris Russill holds the distinction as the first real, honest to goodness Pragmatist that I ever encountered in academia, and was instrumental in helping me penetrate a philosophical tradition that can be overwhelming and intimidating at first. Tom Reynolds, Patrick Bruch, Cynthia Lewis, and Timothy Lensmire--otherwise known as The Committee--have been there at all the major moments in my doctoral education. Patrick Bruch helped me locate a more socially and politically responsible strain of composition studies that has come to serve as the backbone of my work in composition studies. Cynthia Lewis introduced me not only to some of the major research methods in literacy studies, but also several theoretical traditions in literacy research that have proven to be deeply important. Timothy Lensmire, in ways only Timothy Lensmire can accomplish, shattered and reconstructed the my thinking about education, learning, and life. And especially Tom Reynolds, my advisor, who was comfortable with letting me find my own way with this project and offered critical advice and support during the writing of this text. This would not have happened without Tom's steadfast support. As the writer of this text, it is amazing to me that I can see the good work of all these people in this project. The fact that I still feel this text is in some way my own is a testament to their guidance and trust.

I also want to extend my deep gratitude to the many others at the University of Minnesota that assisted me in this project. To both Mary Wrobel and Nan Nelson for their assistance in navigating the sometimes bewildering paperwork and requirements inherent to any graduate program. To Donald Ross for being Donald Ross and reminding us to stop and enjoy the tulips every spring (and for being a wonderful DGS). To the members of the best (in my estimation) "Teaching Group" ever established in the Department of Writing Studies: Anne Wolf, Mary Jo Wiatrak-Uhlenkott, Ed Hahn, Tim Dougherty, and Mark Anderson for the indispensable and deeply invigorating conversations over the years. To Paul "Indefensible" Anheier, Greg Schneider, Brett Werner, and the others ahead of me in the doctoral program for welcoming me and

Dedication

For Elizabeth—who once risked certain trouble by sneaking off campus in order to listen to me sing impromptu songs about geese in the middle of the night.

Abstract

Writing instruction, particularly at the post-secondary level, stands at a crossroads. Since the attainment of some level of post-secondary education has become a near mandatory requirement for participation in the contemporary economy, students increasingly describe their decision to go to college as a foregone conclusion. The university level first-year writing course, itself a traditional gate-keeper to post-secondary education, thus occupies a critical space at the confluence of these powerful and interrelated forces. Further, because of this alignment to the economic demands of college preparedness, most if not all levels of writing instruction will be affected in various ways. Unfortunately, these elements enter into a dangerous contradiction when the economic growth everything is predicated upon falters--precisely what has occurred during the "Great Recession" that started in 2007.

Based on fieldwork conducted in a high school level college preparation writing class, this dissertation explores the consequences of these contradictions. In particular, this project starts with an observed phenomenon in the classroom in which many students simply "preferred not to" work on their writing assignments. Using this "Bartleby Syndrome" as a mechanism of problematizing the field of post-secondary writing instruction, this project builds a philosophical critique of the relationship between human action and the social, political, and economic environment in which students write. Central to this task is a reconsideration of what American Pragmatism, specifically John Dewey's work, can offer the field of composition. In doing so, this study not only offers a different perspective on some of composition's most vexing challenges, but also builds on the Pragmatist tradition to suggest ways the field of writing instruction can retain and revitalize its long standing project of expanding democracy in the United States.

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Note on Citations

The works of both John Dewey and Charles Sanders Peirce are voluminous to say the least. Thankfully, the development of "collected works" editions for both Dewey and Peirce has greatly enabled and enhanced contemporary scholarship drawing on classical Pragmatists. Without these resources, the task of usefully penetrating the mountains of writing would be arduous at best. However, the collected works for both Dewey and Peirce have their own citation style. In an effort to maintain some level of coherence with other scholarship utilizing these resources, I have adhered to these conventions in this dissertation.

References to the work of Charles Sanders Peirce are from *The Collected Papers, Vols. I-VI*. Ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931-1935), *Vols. VII-VIII* ed. Arthur W. Burks (same publisher, 1958), published as an online database by the Intelex corporation. In-text citations utilize the following format: CP Volume:Paragraph. For example, (CP 4:12) refers to Volume 4 of the *Collected Papers*, paragraph 12. While some follow this by the date in which the texts were written, I will not be utilizing a broad enough historical sampling of his work to warrant this. Where needed, I have mentioned the year of the text in the prose itself.

References to the work of John Dewey are from *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882-1953 (2nd Release)*. Ed. Jo Ann Boydston & Larry A Hickman (Charlottesville, VA, 1996), published as an electronic database by the InteLex corporation. This mass collection contains three previously published collections of Dewey's work:

The Early Works of John Dewey, 1882-1898. 5 vols. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern
      Illinois University Press, 1972.

The Middle Works of John Dewey, 1899-1924. 15 vols. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern
      Illinois University Press, 1978.

The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925-1953. 17 vols. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern
      Illinois University Press, 1985.

A citation style has been developed to maintain continuity within these collections across various editions and publication platforms. Citations utilize the following format: Collection, Volume:Page Number. For example, (MW 6:85) refers to the *Middle Works*, volume 6, page 85. All page numbers refer to the original printed publications of the collections.

Unfortunately, especially with the collected works of Dewey, such citation styles do not indicate which specific work they are referring to, nor do they indicate the year of original publication. The absence of these two bits of information creates an unfortunate situation in which a unified whole is suggested. This is unfortunate simply because the thinking of both Dewey and Peirce evolved over their very long careers--especially with Dewey who maintained an impressive output for seventy years. In order to mitigate this while preserving the continuity of the citation style, I have sought to provide the name of texts I utilize as well as dates of original publication in the prose as well as footnotes as necessary.

Introduction

In the state of the union address delivered in January of 2011, President Obama not only noted an ever-deepening crisis in the ability for the United States to compete economically on a global stage, but also strongly suggested that a major remedy for this crisis of competition is education. Obama, in his speech, framed it this way: "Think about it. Over the next 10 years, nearly half of all new jobs will require education that goes beyond a high school education. And yet, as many as a quarter of our students aren't even finishing high school." However, for students involved in the matrix of "the college educated," from those preparing for it to those engaged in it to those graduating from it (often with heavy student debt loads), this political rhetoric might rightfully be seen as some sort of cruel joke. By the fall of 2010, unemployment figures for holders of a 4 year college degree, regardless of age, had doubled from their levels prior to the catastrophic economic downturn starting in 2007. Worse, unemployment figures for 20-24 year olds with college degrees--supposedly those in the best position to obtain employment due to their "fresh" education--went from 3.4% in 2007 to a staggering 9.6% by September of 2010 (Konczal). Further, these numbers do not take into account the level of under-

employment (having a job but only working part time) nor inquire into the qualitative aspects of contemporary work--that is, how fulfilling might this employment be?

Literacy education and writing instruction in particular thus finds itself at a crossroads. On one hand, the university level first-year writing course has traditionally served as one of the major gate-keepers to a post-secondary education and as such writing instruction at all levels have and will continue to align to this singular purpose. On the other hand, the narrow repurposing of higher education to economic growth and prosperity encounters a dangerous contradiction during times of economic distress. Unfortunately, the "Great Recession" that started in 2007 is one for the history books by most accounts. In these times, what is now needed is a reconsideration of the theoretical underpinnings of the field known as composition and rhetoric. This dissertation takes up that task.

My project here is very simple: to work through a *Pragmatist* critique of writing instruction in schools, particularly as it pertains to the post-secondary instruction of writing. The impetus for this stems from a long-standing feeling that something is absent from much of the mainstream theoretical work being conducted in the area of composition and rhetoric. For example, we have asked *who* are the students taking these writing courses, *what* are the values composition instructors implicitly or explicitly transmit in the act of teaching, and *how* exactly is writing to be done? From these basic categories, a bewildering array of subtlety and nuance have developed in the field. While this dissertation recognizes the importance of such inquiries and indeed relies upon them, given the depth to which we are in the midst of a major social crossroads, my question is a far more basic and fundamental question: *why this enterprise should be undertaken in*

the first place? Pragmatism, as I will demonstrate, offers an incredibly deep history of ideas and theories through which we can reconstruct not only *how* we understand the teaching of writing, but also *why* it matters.

What exactly is Pragmatism, though? According to Cornel West, American Pragmatism "can be understood as what happens to the Emersonian evasion of epistemology-centered philosophy when forced to justify itself within the professional perimeters of academic philosophy" (42). Unlike European philosophers (Descartes through Hegel) who saw knowledge as a set of representations to be justified or grounded, Emerson instead saw knowledge as "instrumental effects of human will as it is guided by human interests, which are in turn produced by transactions with other humans and nature" (36). Thus we can see the historical trajectory of American Pragmatism as a concern with re-working of all of philosophy, politics, ethics, and aesthetics once we shed ourselves of the way that western philosophy had fetishized the "given," or, knowledge as mere recollection. It is a distinctly American philosophy, deeply informed by a growing awareness of the own historical situation these thinkers found themselves in. Rorty and West both, at times, point out that part of what American Pragmatism has tried to accomplish in various ways is to "explain America to itself." While "Pragmatism" has meant drastically different things in the hands of different thinkers--and any attempt to place such diversity in one tent will always be controversial--this is arguably the central core from which all pragmatist thinkers start.

It is from here that some very basic commitments that Pragmatists hold come into view. Pragmatists adopt an anti-foundationalist stance and as such reject the idea that there is any fixed, eternal, and objective point from which to ground thinking. At the

same time, though, pragmatists also *reject* philosophical skepticism that holds that *if* there is no foundation to knowledge (an "Archemedian point" as Bernstein refers to it), *then everything* must start with universal doubt. Generally, Pragmatists accomplish this by noting a deep connection between truth and social inquiry (see especially Misak, 2000). In other words, just because there is no ultimate objective "truth" out there, it does not follow that "truth" simply does not exist. Instead, Pragmatists understand truth as the product of the social relations of human beings tempered through the actual lived consequences of those truths. Truth, in this light, is not something that is simply discovered but something that is *used*.

The full implications of these starting points are things that Pragmatists disagree on, often forcefully so. For my purposes, though, it is in John Dewey's work that Pragmatism reaches its full maturity. It is in his work, astonishing for its breadth, that these basic concepts are applied to psychology, politics, aesthetics, epistemology, education, and practically everything in between. More importantly, though, it is Dewey who makes the realization that if we can no longer appeal to universal values and static conceptions of "truth," then nothing less than full and radical democracy will do as a political system to ensure social inquiry can be brought to bear on the most pressing social problems of our times. It is because of this that Dewey's work can be utilized not only as a means to interpret and understand the theoretical problems we currently face in the field of composition and rhetoric, but to also provide a framework for proposing new directions to go in.

My basic argument throughout this dissertation is that the contemporary political and economic structure of society fails to provide—and indeed, *seeks to deny*—the

crucial elements needed for success in writing instruction *as it has been historically conceived*. What has been missing in the current blame game of educational reform discourse is a discussion of the condition of democracy itself in America. When it comes to the inevitable portion of educational reform discourse in which the source of problems is debated, many things come up: teachers, funding, unions, policy, students, culture, accountability, standards, and efficiency. What is not often discussed (or rather, never) is a broader interrogation built from a systemic social analysis; or, in other words, the final tragic result of what C. Wright Mills referred to as "the ending of political reflection itself as a public fact" (Politics 257). If we want to understand the ills of schools and schooling, we will have to take a hard look at the sort of society that schools are an expression of.

To this end, my dissertation grounds itself where composition itself moves from theory to actuality: the writing classroom. Deep within the recession in the fall of 2010, I sat in on a high school "college preparation" writing classroom. My initial reasons for conducting this fieldwork stemmed from a hunch that many of the conundrums post-secondary instructors of composition faced had their roots in something outside of the composition classroom: the previous educational experiences of students that had given meaning and shape to the idea of "writing." My goal, perhaps somewhat naive in retrospect, was to basically see for myself what writing instruction looked like in a typical high school. In other words, I wanted to see what my students had gone through prior to coming into my own composition classes. This hunch was born out of a personal frustration I had with my own students who seemed to resist attempts at pedagogical innovation that ran afoul of their expectations of what a writing classroom should be. I

hoped I could get a better understanding of where, how, and why these expectations formed through immersing myself in the last contact they had with primary and secondary education.

What I found, though, was something quite different. There were things I was prepared to see as well as ideas of my own I was on the look out for. Many of these things appeared in much the way I expected them to. There were palpable divisions among social groups within the classroom, there were interactions between students and between teacher and students that were dripping with issues of power, gender, race, and identity. There were the rituals of high school that seemed to permeate everything: the fall football season and subsequent attention to "school spirit," the ebb and flow of activities, the tensions and anxieties over college admissions, the grinding down of everything as the semester progressed and the nights got even longer in the coldness of winter. I had read about many of these things in other studies and thus was not surprised to see them. And then something changed in this class. I don't know if I had inadvertently "gone native" at some point during the semester, but all the sparks (and sometimes fireworks) from these elements became subdued in the classroom. It was in this quiet space of late autumn that I realized something else was going on.

In most of my thinking about the teaching of writing, I generally start with students writing. I think most theories of writing instruction start here, simply because without student writing, not much can happen. However, these students in this high school class, for the most part, were definitely not writing. I first noticed it during a "peer-conferencing" session about 6 weeks into the semester. The teacher had set a deadline to bring in two copies of an "early draft" of the assignment they were working

on. In class, they were to exchange these copies with other students who were to then read and respond to them. Except, out of 30 students, I could find only 4-5 who actually had written anything to bring in. This would become the major theme of the entire class, a problem that vexed both the teacher and the students. When it came to the big "research paper" required of these students (5-7 pages) that they spent 6 weeks on, a majority of the students started the paper with less than a week before the deadline. Many students did not meet the deadline and a few simply never wrote anything at all.

Drawing inspiration from a recent Gregory Palmerino essay in *College English*, I have been referring to this as the Bartleby Syndrome. However, and very much unlike Melville's archetypal character, this was not simply one or two students engaging in a quiet and non-aggressive stance of non-participation. The Bartleby Syndrome, once rooted in the class, seemed to affect everyone, even the students who *were* attempting to engage in the class. When I tell people this, usually they laugh and then say something like "that's not surprising." I suppose it isn't. The idea of schools as these "temples of ennui" is as old as mandatory schooling itself and older (think of Rousseau's *Emile*). However, it is precisely *because* this is not surprising to those in the field of literacy education that this phenomena deserves critical attention. On a practical level, it deserves critical attention because it represents an obstacle to all forms of literacy education.

More specifically to this dissertation, the argument I will be advancing in regard to the Bartleby Syndrome proceeds as thus: the problem of non-participation is at its root a question of human action. That is, why *do* people act? To this, I turn to John Dewey and his account of human action to make an argument that the actualities of praxis are inextricably linked to ends-in-view, which for Dewey--and myself--are thoroughly *social*

and products of the environment humans find themselves thrown into. These ends-in-view can be thought of as a sort of imagined future, or that is, deliberate action (precisely of the sort required in schools) is built upon actors imagining the actual, lived and practical results of the actions. Accordingly, this raises the question of what exactly are these "ends-in-view" or imagined futures of the students? Drawing from my fieldwork in the classroom, I point to two omnipresent things I kept running into while trying to figure this out: the imagined futures of students are either built from (frankly) depressing yet accurate understandings of what the economy holds for them or are so nebulous that they simply cannot form a solid enough picture from which to base action on. In this light, then, the Bartleby Syndrome is indeed not surprising at all. While not surprising, though, it does represent an incredibly important challenge to those such as myself who still see the writing classroom and literacy instruction as one of the more powerful sites of leftist educational praxis.

Method, Methodologies, and Data

Since empirical fieldwork will be an important component of this project, some consideration must be given in regard to how I conceive of my method and methodologies, specifically concerning the word "ethnography." Clifford Geertz writes that "[d]oing ethnography is like trying to read (in the sense of "construct a reading of') a manuscript--foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries, but written not in conventionalized graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped behavior" (10). In one sense, then, my work here shares an important commonality with ethnography in which my goal throughout is to reconstruct a

fragmented narrative. However, and very much unlike Ethnography proper, the object of my analysis is not individuals and their communities or even the setting of human interaction. Put bluntly, the role of my time in the field was not so much to discover something about high-school classrooms that other theorists have missed, or to distill an insight into human interaction that has been ignored, or even something about what students do in classrooms that other educational ethnographers have overlooked. Rather, I discovered that what I was really exploring while in that classroom was ourselves, and by ourselves I mean those in the field of composition studies. Accordingly, this study is about the bigger context in which these projects are all carried out.

My time at the high school, my time spent talking with the students, talking with the teacher, and in general being a part of the daily ebb and flow of this institution has pointed me in the direction of the problem to track down. The problem I'm focusing on, though, isn't located in the high school. What I saw in the high school is an extension, a symptom if you will, of this larger problem addressed in this dissertation. The reason I say this is manifold. For one, even though I ended up being in the classroom nearly every day (both because it was interesting and because I felt a sense of solidarity with these students and with the teacher), it was hardly enough time to truly capture the 30 some different spheres of individual circumstance, struggle, and history that all interacted with each other on a daily basis. Additionally, my time was spent in one particular classroom, and as such, my contact with other areas of the lives of students and the teacher was accordingly limited. I was aware of this limitation heading in to the field and am not surprised with this. That aside, the reward in all this fieldwork was clarifying the problem to pursue. I realized pretty soon in this whole endeavor that I was not there to study the

students or to study the teacher or even study the school. Rather, I was there to listen and witness with these people and to, with their help, make visible that which I should pursue in inquiry. Accordingly, even though my fieldwork is located in the secondary level, this dissertation focuses on writing instruction at the post-secondary level, the field of knowledge known as composition studies that informs this endeavor, and the function and role of higher-education through which writing instruction occurs.

While the data collected in this fieldwork is not the main object of my inquiry, I will share and refer to it often, as I believe it offers tremendous insights into these larger socio-political forces at play. This data will include things such as narratives of moments in the classroom recorded via field notes; formal (recorded) and informal interviews with the teacher and students in the class; documents from the class such as assignments, tests, guides, and readings; and the writing the students themselves produced. These methods of data collection serve my larger methodological strategy, which I locate in the tradition of pragmatist critique. Specifically, my methodology falls largely in line with Dewey's historical-philosophical strategy in several of his works, such as his 1920 collection of essays titled *Reconstruction in Philosophy*. In this work, like many others, Dewey sets out by using contemporary ruptures and impasses in thought as an occasion for historical reflection. This historical reflection is aimed at untangling the roots of contemporary ideas by locating their emergence and subsequent evolution as responses to the times in which they came from. This move serves two important purposes: first, it historicizes ideas and thus takes them out of the realm of the eternal and the objective; second, it paves the way for outlining the limits of these now historicized ideas in contemporary times. The result of such a move is to resolve (or, as many have noted, *dissolve*)

seemingly impassable contradictions.

Chapter Breakdown

The basic path I will be taking in this dissertation will be as follows. I will first start by theoretically grounding this project within the tradition of Pragmatism. From there, I will turn to an exploration of writing in the classroom, guided by my fieldwork, to set up the issues and problems to be worked through. In the remaining three chapters, I utilize a pragmatist critique to explore three levels or sphere of interpretation and explanation: at the local level in regard to human action and activity, at a slightly broader level in regard to the project of writing instruction and literacy crises, and finally at the broadest level—an examination of the social, political, and economic context in which these others spheres exist.

The first chapter, "Democracy as Writing," sketches the theoretical foundation for the dissertation. In this chapter, I start by suggesting the affinities between sociocultural literacy studies, composition studies and Pragmatism as a means to suggest Pragmatism's role in extending such conversations. I then turn to the work of classical Pragmatists C.S. Peirce and John Dewey as a means to sketch the relationship between education, political democracy, scientific inquiry and the tradition of Western liberalism, a topic that will be explored more fully in later chapters. I end with a discussion of Pragmatism's contributions to composition studies as well as where Pragmatism has yet to be fully explored.

In chapter two, "Welcome to College English," I introduce the ethnographic fieldwork I carried out in a high school level college preparation writing classroom. In

describing the class and offering an analysis of what goes on in such a class, this chapter posits the major theoretical (as well as practical) issue I encountered while collecting data: an alarming lack of student interest, motivation, and purpose within the class. I refer to this as the "Bartleby Syndrome." I introduce the idea that the Bartleby Syndrome is, in actuality, a specific type of *literacy practice*, as opposed to some form of lack or deficiency. I end the chapter by suggesting that a full understanding of these literacy practices necessitates an understanding of human action and activity.

In the third chapter, "Of Agents and Actors," I work through a Pragmatist account of activity and agency. This chapter starts with a discussion of the need for a theory of agency and activity within theories of literacy. After this, I move to consider cultural-historical activity theory as one such answer to this need. However, I then move to discuss limitations of this approach and in doing so, suggest where Pragmatism, and in particular, Dewey's philosophy grounded in a concept of "organic unity" offers an important way to understand human activity. flesh out the general unspoken theory of human action within discussions about writing instruction. My purpose in doing this is to suggest a powerful lens through which to understand the data I collected while doing field work. This chapter posits a strong relationship between the nature and strength of "democracy" as outlined in the first chapter and the actions of students in classrooms that will be explored in the final two chapters.

Chapter four, "College, Crises, and Discontent," takes a closer look at the different ways the purpose and objective of a college preparation writing classroom is understood by different parties. Specifically, I analyze and contrast the way "college preparation" is understood by teachers and by students through data collected during my

fieldwork. I start by situating the phenomena of college preparation within a long history of various "literacy crises." I also explore three current "genres of discontent" in regard to academic scholarship investigating the shift between secondary and post secondary writing. I then return to the data I collected during my fieldwork to problematize many of the assumptions (implicit and explicit) inherent to writing instruction directed towards college instruction. In doing this, I argue that a class focused on a future potentiality (i.e., college) removes meaning and purpose within the class for both student and teacher. Instead of an aberration or a failure of instruction, I argue that this is precisely the goal of education within a neoliberal framework, something I explore more fully in the next chapter.

In the final chapter, "Bartleby Redux: Composition, Liberalism, and Inquiry," I examine the deep connection between "inquiry," "liberalism," and "democracy" and the potential relevance it holds for writing instruction. My purpose in this chapter is to expand the lens of my Pragmatist Critique to its largest field of view. In this chapter, I argue that a full and complete understanding of the Bartleby Syndrome can only be understood within the context of *neoliberalism*. To do this, I turn to Dewey's own understanding of liberalism and how he understood his place in it to set up a framework for understanding neoliberalism. I then turn to work through the theoretical legacy of the tradition of liberalism within composition, particularly as it relates to attempts of writing theorists to use the composition classroom as a space for democratic and emancipatory projects. Specifically, I argue that it is an internal contradiction within Liberal theory that best explains some of the most contentious debates within composition theory. This internal contradiction, which I refer to as the "honor-maxim" severely limits any leftist

conception of the writing classroom and must be dealt with if an answer or solution to the contemporary situation in writing instruction is to be addressed. Drawing on the concept of inquiry in Dewey and Peirce's philosophy, I argue that Pragmatism, and in particular its conception of inquiry, presents a viable way out of this quagmire.

Chapter 1
Democracy as Writing

Introduction

    The theoretical underpinnings for this project are informed by the philosophical

tradition of Pragmatism and writers, theorists, and philosophers within this tradition.

Pragmatism, as with any *ism* with a long tradition, resists and at times outright rejects

simple definitions. Among the three major "classical" Pragmatists of Peirce, James, and

Dewey, there was much internal disagreement. Further, neither Peirce nor Dewy used the

word "Pragmatism" to define their work; Peirce referring to it as "pragmaticism" and

Dewey often referring to his work as "instrumentalism," "experimentalism," and even

"experimental instrumentalism." My goal in this chapter is to outline just what I mean by

Pragmatism for this research, which Pragmatists I am drawing on, what conversations I

am entering into in regard to Pragmatism and writing instruction, and the relevance of

such a theoretical underpinning for my work in this dissertation. Before all that, though,

is a perhaps more pressing question: *why* Pragmatism at all? After all, my work in this

project is largely contained within two other complimentary fields of inquiry: literacy

studies and composition studies. After all, both fields of inquiry have their own rich and deep traditions with an impressive resume of important research. What, then, does *Pragmatism* offer such established areas?

In regard to literacy studies, my work aligns very closely with those working in the area of *sociocultural theory* and literacy. This arc of scholarship interested in "literacy," especially in relationship to education, has largely owed its own theoretical existence to numerous scholars working in the early parts of the formation of the Soviet Union: Vygotsky, Bakhtin, Voloshinov, Leont'ov, A. N. Luria, and so forth. Additionally, this area has successfully drawn on other threads of critical theory, post-structuralist theory (despite many antimonies between the two), as well as critical sociolinguistics that, in contrast to structural linguistics like what we might find with Noam Chomsky's work, worked towards an understanding of language as being constituted through social structures[1]. The crucial insight I see in this arc of scholarship is precisely the understanding that "literacy" is itself not the mere application of eternal and universal laws of language, but rather, and as Voloshinov points out in his *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, that the laws of language generation are *sociological*. This has profound implications for the study of literacy. Instead of simply focusing on an analysis of the language of the text itself, sociocultural research in literacy has sought to understand the social relationships embedded in as well as concealed by the text. In other

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[1] As Kress noted, "If, like Chomsky, we treat what speakers actually do, their performance, as mere 'noise,' as 'distortions' of the real, an exceedingly sparse inner, mentalist organization, then there really is nothing to explain. If, like Saussure, we think that what speakers do - parole - has no effect on the system, then we have no serious reason for investigating it. If, however, we think that what people do needs to be understood, then we have a series of questions. These are, as I said earlier, questions around the role of the social, about the possibilities for real action by an individual acting in social environments" (33).

words, instead of understanding "literacy" as a skill, sociocultural literacy theorists understand it as a *social practice*. The pedigree of such a vantage point no doubt owes a great debt to Marx, particularly in his insight that *value* within any commodity is simply congealed human labor, abstracted so that it is no longer visible in the commodity itself (what he termed *commodity fetishism*). Thus, much scholarship in sociocultural literacy research has sought to find ways to un-abstract the social relations hidden within the act of producing language. This has lead to various methodological techniques such as ethno-linguistics, ethnography of communication, discourse analysis, and critical discourse analysis with theorists such as Halliday, Cazden, Hymes, Labov, Mehan, and later linguistic theorists such as Norman Fairclough and James Gee producing important works that deal specifically with language as constituted by society. Additionally, other scholars have turned to anthropological work to enact diachronic social analyses of language usage. In this vein, the work of Shirley Brice Heath; Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole; Brian Street; and more recent works by Niko Besinor, Deborah Brandt, and Cynthia Lewis have all produced important contributions to the understanding of the social contexts generative of literacy.

This understanding of language as situated within culture, as mind as situated within culture, and as *action* situated in culture and derivative of it shares, as we will see, a striking similarity with some of the major thrusts of Pragmatist philosophy. Michael Cole and James Wertsch rightfully point out that this argument of the primacy of cultural mediation is shared between Vygotsky and Dewey (Beyond The). Beyond a brief meeting of Vygotsky and Dewey when the latter visited the Soviet Union before Vygotsky's death, direct references between the Pragmatists and the Soviet Psychologists

are painfully rare. This gulf should be understood within three historical contexts. First, obviously, was the social and political context of the United States and the Soviet Union. For example, while Vygotsky was a direct contemporary of Dewey (dying of TB in 1937), English translations of Bakhtin and Vygotsky were not readily available until long after Dewey's death in 1952. It is likely that, while Vygotsky was in some form familiar with the work of Dewey, it is very unlikely that much of Dewey's work would have been readily available in the early Soviet Union (it must be remembered that Dewey presided over the trial of Trotsky in 1937, something that would not have endeared him to the official Soviet State apparatus). Second, Dewey's work in psychology (much like that of William James) never held any sort of "orthodoxy" status within the emerging field of psychology and as such was very quickly overshadowed by that of Sigmund Freud and later (and especially in educational circles) Jean Piaget. It is likely that, especially with Vygotsky, Pragmatist psychology was simply not seen as the proper conversant. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Pragmatism has only recently reemerged after spending decades in a state of ill-repute with philosophers, particularly to those within the analytic tradition. Even in Dewey's time, his actual philosophy was seen as weak and "muddy." While no one questioned Dewey's status as a public intellectual and a figurehead of the progressive movement who seemed to be capable of opining on practically anything, it was primarily *this* that he was known for instead of the philosophical work that undergirded such political ideals. The idea that under such political sentiments is a robust philosophy worthy of serious study has only really come around in the past 30 years or so. This is probably the most important reason as to why such connections between Pragmatism and sociocultural research has been slow, uneven, and superficial. None of

these contexts, though, suggest any major incompatibility between the two traditions.

While sociocultural literacy research owes its existence and disciplinary identity to a particular object of inquiry (that is, "literacy"), composition studies owes its existence to a rather peculiar *practice*: the teaching of writing in the post-secondary educational environment. I say peculiar because this is a phenomenon that is nearly unique to North America and has very specific social, cultural, and historical roots. In particular, composition's identity, function, and purpose are inextricably linked to the site in which it most often occurs: the American public research university. The identity of composition studies has further been formed by its long association with Literature Studies within English Departments as well as the study of Rhetoric[2] (thus explaining its common moniker of "comp/rhet"). This is not to say that composition studies has not produced scholarship of its own. Within the broader field of composition studies, there is a strand that has (not so unlike sociocultural literacy research) sought to understand the relationships between the production of meaning through language and broader social dynamics. For example, seminal texts within this tradition such as Richard Ohman's *English in America*, Lester Faigley's *Fragments of Rationality*, Judith Goleman's *Working Theory*, Tom Fox's *Defending Access*, and Nancy Welch's recent *Living Room* have all sought to understand the ways in which practices of teaching writing situate students in different ways for different ends. Other texts such as James Berlin's *Rhetoric and Reality* and Sharon Crowley's *Composition in the University* have sought to understand the history of the field and how various practices around teaching writing have been inextricably linked to larger social and political movements. Further, scholars in this

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[2] See especially Harvey Graff's *Professing Literature*, James Berlin's *Rhetoric and Reality*, and Sharon Crowley's *Composition in the University* for further discussion

tradition such as James Sledd, Joe Harris, Tony Scott, and Marc Bouscquet have also explored the ways in which the structure of labor for the teaching of writing as well as the university as a whole exerts influence upon the ways in which we define and practice writing. Importantly, what ties these works together is an overarching concern for evaluating the possibilities and potential for realizing *democracy* through writing instruction as well as identifying barriers to this project. This claim may seem more radical than it really is. Even "conservative" composition theories such as "current-traditional rhetoric" are still in some sense concerned with "democracy," if only in that they seek to *exclude* those from it in a (misguided) belief that this might strengthen the state of democracy.[3] Consequently, I know of no explicitly "anti-democratic" strands within the history of composition studies. Importantly, though, composition's democratic project is entering a crucible concerning the manifestly undemocratic nature of the growing dominance of neo-liberalism, a topic I will return to in the final chapter.

As I mentioned in the introduction, the theorization of the relationship between writing instruction and democracy defines the broader horizon of my scholarship. As a researcher in composition studies, my ultimate concern is an evaluation of the state of writing instruction at the post-secondary level with a mind towards the possibilities of such democratic work while identifying the barriers to such a project. While I will be using many of the methods of sociocultural literacy research, and in particular an ethnographic examination of the various social relationships that are constituent of literacy as realized through writing, I am primarily a scholar of composition studies. Because of this, the end point of my inquiry is focused on practice. More formally, the

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[3] See in particular Berlin's *Rhetoric and Reality,* p44-46.

ends of my research are grounded in *political praxis,* particularly as it pertains to the relationship of the act of writing to the expansion of democracy within the United States through the function of higher-education. It is precisely here that Pragmatism, especially as I will be formulating it in the rest of this chapter, is the crucial component of this work. The thread of Pragmatism I will be working with is not only a set of claims about knowledge, but also a tradition of writers attempting to work out the full implications of such claims. As Dewey realized very early, and would become one of his major preoccupations, these implications invariably lead to a rather radical conception of democracy. It is here that I define Pragmatism's work *as* composition's work. It is this that I have in mind with the title of this chapter: *democracy as writing*.

Because of this, I will not be employing Pragmatism as a replacement of sociocultural literacy research, but rather as an important *extension* of it. While literacy research in this vein has produced terribly important work concerning broad social dynamics such as race, class, gender and their relationship to literacy practices, such findings from research do not and cannot on their own make normative claims on the value of such social relations and the literacy practices they produce. As I will argue, Pragmatism offers us a way to build a strong case for working against the conditions which produce such literacy practices. Consequently, while I will not be focusing on elements such as gender, race, class, and so forth, such concerns remain firmly planted in my rearview mirror. The larger claim I will be building in later chapters is that the forms of literacy unleashed by political and economic demands threaten to render the traditional projects of social justice, equality, and inclusiveness as dead ends. In this, I see my work as an important component to those committed to such leftist ideas in the area of literacy

studies.

Additionally, it is important to note that while I am claiming that composition and the teaching of writing in the University has a long (and often tortured) relationship with the drive to expand democracy, this is not to say that composition studies as a whole is benevolent or has always had the best ideas on how to further this goal. In fact, at the writing of this dissertation, there is much reason to be alarmed that composition is unwittingly participating in its own destruction of this tradition. This is a bold claim that will obviously need to be handled carefully. In this instance, much like the move I will be making in regard to literacy studies, Pragmatism once again provides a set of ideas that has the potential to help recalibrate composition's own place within the left. It is here that I turn to an exploration of Pragmatism itself.

Origins of Pragmatism

I am far from the first writer to rightfully feel nervous at the prospect of defining Pragmatism. In one sense, Pragmatism could be defined as much by the disagreements between "Pragmatists" (including those who deny they are any such thing to start with) as there are commonalities. Apologies aside, we are lucky to have several historical accounts of Pragmatism's birth. We are even lucky enough to know exactly when the word "Pragmatism" was first used in the context of a new philosophical perspective. This occurred in the context of a lecture by William James in 1906 in which he attributed the idea of "Pragmatism" to his "dear friend Charles Peirce" in describing a new method for evaluating philosophical claims. This method, the "Pragmatic Method," was described by James as such:

> The pragmatic method in such cases is to try to interpret each notion by tracing its respective practical consequences. […] If no practical difference whatever can be traced, then the alternatives mean practically the same thing, and all dispute is idle. Whenever a dispute is serious, we ought to be able to show some practical difference that must follow from one side or the other's being right. (28)

However, this was a slightly modified version of Peirce's original formulation of the pragmatic maxim, which, in 1878, he described as "Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object." In his historical treatment of the origins of Pragmatism, Louis Menand attributes this germ of an idea to a group that regularly met to discuss, consider, and debate the ideas of their day. In addition to James and Peirce, this group--the "Metaphysical Club"--would count as its members such luminaries as jurist Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr.

What Menand's version of the story provides is an insight into both the intellectual culture in the mid to late 19th century. While much philosophy and theory today is conducted within academic departments within Universities, such a phenomena was nonexistent at the time. This is not to say that an intellectual culture did not exist. Rather, the country was literally dotted with various clubs or groups whose purpose was to provide a space for interested members to converse over the fashionable intellectual topics of the day. For example, as Bernstein notes, there were several "Kant Clubs" and "Hegel Clubs" that helped lay much of the foundation for the serious study of Philosophy in the United States (Pragmatic Turn 89). It was from one such group that W. T. Harris, a man who undertook the project of translating Hegel's *Philosophy of Law* into English, would eventually start the *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, a journal that would publish papers from all the major early pragmatists. The other important facet of these

groups was that the membership was often comprised of a surprising diversity of backgrounds and professions. In the "Metaphysical Club," James was the only one who could count "philosopher" as a legitimate job title. The rest of the group was comprised of lawyers, scientists, biologists, and so forth. Even Peirce claimed himself to be a practicing scientist as well as a logician and not a philosopher.

This influx of Kant, Hegel, and other bits of continental philosophy would leave its mark on Pragmatism. However, these works were being imported into America just as transcendentalists within the American literary scene such as Ralph Waldo Emerson were mounting an attack on the idea that true knowledge has one singular source (God) that exists outside of nature. As Cornel West suggest in his own historical treatment of Pragmatism, Emerson instead saw knowledge as "instrumental effects of human will as it is guided by human interests, which are in turn produced by transactions with other humans and nature" (36). This stood in stark contrast to European philosophers who saw knowledge as a set of representations to be justified or grounded within universal, unchanging laws to be discerned by rationality. Just as important, however, was the story going on with science. The 1859 publication of Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* and, in particular, his theory of evolution would prove to be a crucial inspiration for the early Pragmatists.

This environment of a multi-disciplinary group considering continental philosophy transposed upon a growing American tradition that sought to do away with dualisms all while being inspired by Darwin's work would set the stage for Peirce, James, and Dewey. All three, for example, would develop their own nuanced appreciation for as well as blistering critiques of Hegel. Common to all three was an agreement that Hegel

was on to something in his work to point out that disunities and contradictions were not

ontological features of reality, but were rather transposed upon reality by humans. In this

regard, Hegel's dialectical logic would prove to be a lasting feature of Pragmatism,

particularly in how contradictions inherent to any position require us to move beyond

them. In an uncharacteristically personal and emotive bit a prose written late in his career,

Dewey explained his early attraction to Hegel:

> "It is more than difficult, it is impossible, to recover that early mood. But the
> sense of divisions and separations that were, I suppose, borne in upon me as a
> consequence of a heritage of New England culture, divisions by way of isolation
> of self from the world, of soul from body, of nature from God, brought a painful
> oppression—or, rather, they were an inward laceration. My earlier philosophic
> study had been an intellectual gymnastic. Hegel's synthesis of subject and object,
> matter and spirit, the divine and the human, was, however, no mere intellectual
> formula; it operated as an immense release, a liberation. Hegel's treatment of
> human culture, of institutions and the arts, involved the same dissolution of hard-
> and-fast dividing walls, and had a special attraction for me." (LW 5.153)[4]

Later, Dewey makes perhaps an even more uncharacteristic statement in saying that

"[w]ere it possible for me to be a devotee of any system, I still should believe that there is

greater richness and greater variety of insight in Hegel than in any other single systematic

philosopher—though when I say this I exclude Plato, who still provides my favorite

philosophic reading" (LW 5.154). As we will see, the dissolution of the divisions

between "facts" and "values" would be one of the most important characteristics of

Pragmatism, and serves as one foundational principle for the type of Pragmatism I am

outlining here.

However, while Hegel's critique of Kant's relegation of certain kinds of

knowledge to unknowable realms would be important for Pragmatists, it was Darwin--

and in particular his notion of natural selection--that would provide the key insight as to

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[4] Originally published as "From Absolutism to Experimentalism" in 1929.

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how to fully socialize knowledge and remove all of it from realms unattainable by inquiry. What Pragmatists found to be particularly useful was the way in which Darwin did away with arguments for overarching "purpose" that is fixed in eternity that species aspire to fulfill. As Dewey noted, "The Darwinian principle of natural selection cut straight under this philosophy. If all organic adaptations are due simply to constant variation and the elimination of those variations which are harmful in the struggle for existence that is brought about by excessive reproduction, there is no call for a prior intelligent causal force to plan and preordain them" (MW 4.9)[5]. This rejection of a fixed *eidos* for species, when applied to thought, produced a radical insight. Instead of the idea that rationality is slowly but surely coming ever closer to the final immutable truth, Pragmatists were able to see something else going on. In the same aforementioned essay, Dewey later made this argument:

> Moreover, the conviction persists—though history shows it to be a hallucination—that all the questions that the human mind has asked are questions that can be answered in terms of the alternatives that the questions themselves present. But in fact intellectual progress usually occurs through sheer abandonment of questions together with both of the alternatives they assume—an abandonment that results from their decreasing vitality and a change of urgent interest. We do not solve them: we get over them. Old questions are solved by disappearing, evaporating, while new questions corresponding to the changed attitude of endeavor and preference take their place. Doubtless the greatest dissolvent in contemporary thought of old questions, the greatest precipitant of new methods, new intentions, new problems, is the one effected by the scientific revolution that found its climax in the *Origin of Species* (MW 4.14).

In short, Dewey redefined Plato's *eidos* (essence) as something to be determined by *telos*. However, in this Darwinian inspired understanding, there is no ultimate beginning or predetermined end to the *telos*.

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[5] Essay originally published in *The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy and Other Essays in Contemporary Thought*, 1910.

From these influences and historical circumstances, Louis Menand suggests that

what ultimately linked these three thinkers was an "idea about ideas." As he explains,

> "They all believed that ideas are not 'out there' waiting to be discovered, but are tools...that people devise to cope with the world in which they find themselves. They believed that ideas are produced not by individuals--that ideas are social. They believed that ideas do not develop according to some inner logic of their own, but are entirely dependent, like germs, on human careers and environments. And they believed that since ideas are provisional responses to particular situations, their survival spends not on their immutability but on their adaptability. (xi-xii)

Or, as I like to frame it, Pragmatism is a conversation about the purpose, function, role,

and constitution of ideas, belief, and truth *in every day life*. It is a consideration of not just

ideas, but how ideas *work*. More importantly, though, these conversations Pragmatists

have conducted on knowledge position *action* as the fundamental question of

philosophical investigation.

This orientation has led to several stances or positions that many Pragmatists

adopt. Since an in-depth explication of Pragmatism is not the sole purpose of this

dissertation, I will briefly list several of these positions here:

- Knowledge is not "out there," independent of humans and simply waiting to be discovered. Instead, knowledge is something *produced* by humans, mediated through social conditions, and utilized as a mechanism for dealing with discontinuities in everyday experiences.
- Ideas and beliefs form the basis for all human activity, including human activity that results in social institutions and structures.
- Accordingly, culture "goes all the way down" in regard to knowledge. There can be no "direct knowledge" of objects that escapes trans-action[6] through social structures.
- The universe itself is *active,* in motion, and still evolving. Because of this, no idea or belief can be "True" in the sense that it is valid for eternity, even ones concerning laws of physics. Because of this, knowledge is understood as always being fallible.
- Despite the emphasis on "knowledge" as a product of humanity and matched to an

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[6] I use the term "trans-action" here tentatively, noting that the term "mediated" suggests inner/outer dualisms…something Dewey would find to be erroneous.

active universe, it does not follow that there is no external reality. Because all knowledge trans-acts with and through social conditions, *and this includes natural environments as well as intersubjective rationality*, something like "objectivity" is possible. In other words, you cannot put a few feathers on a bus and expect it to fly. Knowledge is still beholden to the environment and thus cannot be whatever we wish in our individual minds.

- Even though all ideas are fallible and may eventually need to be revised, because of the intersubjectivity of ideas in regard to culture and nature, we can identify ideas, beliefs, and concepts that are better or worse than others. In other words, we do not have to be skeptical about everything all the time.
- Because knowledge is understood as a tool utilized through action, evaluation of ideas should focus on what effects the ideas have in real, lived experience. In other words, if two ideas produce the same results in reality, they are in all practicality the same thing.
- Since knowledge is a product of social conditions, things such as the concept of an "individual" itself is also a product of specific social conditions. In other words, it's only through specific social structures that we come to have an idea of "an individual."
- Humans have found many ways to reconstruct ideas when faced with contradictions and doubt. These different ways of resolving doubt (inquiry) produce different results. We can evaluate these methods by exploring the results they produce in accordance to desired social ends.

These very broad positions serve as the backbone for much Pragmatist thought. In the next two sections, I will turn to four very specific concepts situated within this Pragmatist outlook worked out by Peirce and Dewey that are important to my research.

Truth and Inquiry

As mentioned above, my ultimate goal is to chart a path of explication that will eventually bring us to Pragmatism's rather unabashed obsession with "democracy." This path, though, starts in a very unlikely place. I say this because Charles Sanders Peirce, the man William James burdens with the responsibility of originating "Pragmatism" itself, and where our journey towards democracy begins, could not (and would not) be considered as someone who was passionate about democracy. The path starts here, though, not because Peirce seemed to care one little bit about the expansion of

democracy, but rather because it is in Peirce's work that the inextricably linked concepts of "truth" and "inquiry" are re-worked and reconstructed in such a way that justifications for democracy are made possible. I also start here because this is where one of the great forks in the roads in Pragmatism philosophy exists. In particular, the concept of "truth" stands at the center of a great family debate between Pragmatist philosophers. With "truth" comes the thorny concept of "objectivity." On one side, we have the likes of Richard Rorty who sees nothing but folly in maintaining *any* conception of truth, facts, and objectivity. For Rorty, these concepts carry with them a danger analogous to authoritarian religion. Instead, and even though he rejected the term, Rorty relies on something like relativism (or, more technically, ethnocentrism). However, while Rorty has been uncommonly successful in popularizing his brand of Pragmatism, this view is not the only one. All three of the classical Pragmatists (Peirce, James, and Dewey) and many more recent "neo-Pragmatists" such as Putnam, Bernstein, Misak, Tallisse, Brandom, and even in some ways Jurgen Habermas have all sought to argue that a Pragmatist conception of objectivity is indeed viable. Further, it is through this Pragmatist conception of objectivity, truth, and inquiry that Pragmatism's political implications become fully apparent.

To understand the connections between Pragmatism, truth, inquiry, and Democracy, as well as this schism between relativism and objectivism, we must start with a consideration of how Pragmatism sought to overcome the problems with philosophy that contemporary science illuminated. A helpful way to understand the point in which Pragmatism most fruitfully intervenes in philosophy is through Richard Bernstein's concept of *Cartesian Anxiety*. As Bernstein notes, the split between

objectivists and relativists has been a continual plague of philosophy. Objectivism, as he

describes, refers to the

> basic conviction that there is or must be some permanent, ahistorical matrix or
> framework to which we can ultimately appeal in determining the nature of
> rationality, knowledge, truth, reality, goodness, or rightness. [...] Objectivism is
> closely related to foundationalism and the search for an Archimedean point. The
> objectivist maintains that unless we can ground philosophy, knowledge, or
> language in a rigorous manner we cannot avoid radical skepticism. (Beyond 8)

On the other side is the relativist. The relativist, appealing to any examination of the most

fundamental concepts that philosophers have asserted, have always noted that such

concepts are never ahistorical or universal, but "must be understood as relative to a

specific conceptual scheme, theoretical framework, paradigm, form of life, society, or

culture" (8). Where this gets interesting, though, is what philosophers have understood as

being at stake in this split. As Bernstein points out, nowhere is this more evident than

with the project Rene Descartes embarks upon: "With a chilling clarity Descartes leads us

with an apparent and ineluctable necessity to a grand and seductive Either/Or. *Either*

there is some support for our being, a fixed foundation for our knowledge, *or* we cannot

escape the forces of darkness that envelop us with madness, with intellectual and moral

chaos" (OR 18). The anxiety, then, is the quest for certainty as the triumph over madness

and chaos. Bernstein paints this in stark terms:

> We may even purge ourselves of the quest for certainty and indubitability. But at
> the heart of the objectivist's vision, and what makes sense of his or her passions, is
> the belief that there are or must be some fixed, some permanent constraints to
> which we can appeal and which are secure and stable. At its most profound level
> the relativist's message is that there are no such basic constraints to which we can
> appeal and which are secure and stable. (19)

Peirce provided the crucial insight to getting around these problems: a

modification of how we understand the process through which a "belief" becomes "fact."

As he wrote in 1878, "I only desire to point out how impossible it is that we should have an idea in our minds which relates to anything but conceived sensible effects of things" (CP 5:401). While this sentiment was the avenue in which Peirce first formulated his pragmatic maxim—"Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object" (CP 5:402)—, his ultimate project was to outline a way in which we might not only clarify ideas but evaluate them. For Peirce, this was a necessary project as science had done away with previous ways of knowing and replaced it with a sort of experimentalism. In one of his early essays, "Some Consequences of Four Incapacities," Peirce notes that scholasticism had been replaced by Cartesianism but that "modern science and modern logic require us to stand upon a very different platform from this" (CP 5:265). In this, Peirce proceeds to build a case against the Cartesianism that dominated philosophy in his time by noting four distinguishing features that separated the philosophy of Descartes and the "scholasticism" that it replaced. First, Descartes asserted that all knowledge must begin with universal doubt. For Peirce, this was a stark contrast from scholasticism that relied upon some fundamentals and which were never questioned. Second, Cartesian philosophy asserted that the veracity of true knowledge was to be attained within the individual consciousness. Previously, the veracity of knowledge was to be located in traditions and authorities within the Catholic Church. Third, whereas philosophy before Descartes relied upon "multiform argumentation," Descartes sought to replace this with a single thread grounded in premises that were often inconspicuous. Fourth, and finally, while Scholasticism sought to "explain all created things," Cartesianism often times sought to

place certain elements beyond the realm of understanding, except for, as Peirce

mockingly put it, "to say that 'God makes them so' is to be regarded as an explanation"

(CP 5:264).

These four features of Cartesianism were simply untenable to Peirce. First, Peirce

notes that such "universal doubt" is impossible. While we can position ourselves to

methodologically doubt some things at the beginning of inquiry, there are just as many

things that simply do not occur to us as a focus of doubt. Therefore, such "initial

skepticism will be a mere self-deception, and not real doubt; and no one who follows the

Cartesian method will ever be satisfied until he has formally recovered all those beliefs

which in form he has given up" (CP 5:265). Second, Peirce notes that Descartes'

emphasis on the individual mind creates a situation in which they have to essentially

assert that "whatever I am convinced of, is true." Peirce mocks this by noting that with

this as a foundation, metaphysicians will agree on such a standard of certainty, but will

never be able to agree on anything else. Third, Peirce sees nothing but danger and folly in

suggesting that there is but one thread of argumentation that must be created for all other

knowledge to depend on. *Even worse*, for Peirce, is the suggestion that it start with

premises that cannot be subjected to scrutiny. Fourth and finally, Peirce responds to the

bracketing of some phenomena as inexplicable by arguing that "Now that anything is thus

inexplicable can only be known by reasoning from signs. But the only justification of an

inference from signs is that the conclusion explains the fact. To suppose the fact

absolutely inexplicable, is not to explain it, and hence this supposition is never allowable"

(CP 5:265).

For Peirce (as well as Dewey), science provided the inspiration to a way to get

beyond the problems of Cartesian philosophy. In his rather amazing essay "The Fixation of Belief," Peirce identifies the project thusly: "The object of reasoning is to find out, from the consideration of what we already know, something else which we do not know" (CP 5:365). On its own, this proclamation is rather pedestrian. It is how Peirce works out the method of this object that is fascinating. He first starts by identifying the trigger of the whole process: doubt. For Peirce, the opposite of doubt is "belief," something which "guide[s] our desires and shape[s] our actions" (CP 5:371). What marks "doubt" and "belief" as different is that "belief" leads to a feeling of sureness about how to act whereas doubt never produces such an effect. Therefore, the purpose of doubt is that it spurs action with the intent of arriving at a belief. For Peirce, this is the basic concept behind inquiry. The sole purpose of inquiry is the settlement of a belief or opinion that can guide action and alleviate us from the feeling of doubt.

On the surface, this conception seems to be riddled with holes. As Peirce notes, "If the settlement of opinion is the sole object of inquiry, and if belief is of the nature of a habit, why should we not attain the desired end, by taking as answer to a question any we may fancy, and constantly reiterating it to ourselves, dwelling on all which may conduce to that belief, and learning to turn with contempt and hatred from anything that might disturb it" (CP 5:377)? For example, Peirce recounts the advice given to him to avoid reading an article lest he be swayed by arguments that he did not fully understand. Additionally, people might simply stick to their beliefs at all costs, no matter what they encounter. This sort of pride in not "flip-flopping" is something we see commonly today in political rhetoric. Additionally, people might simply seek to ignore anything that might make them feel uncomfortable (something Peirce likens to an Ostrich sticking its head in

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the sand). For Peirce, these examples are all part of a broader method of fixing belief: tenacity.

On an abstracted individual level, Peirce seems to have no fault with this method of tenacity. In practice, however, he thinks it is impossible. His reasons *why* this is so is perhaps one of the most crucial insights of all. As he writes:

> The social impulse is against it. The man who adopts it will find that other men think differently from him, and it will be apt to occur to him, in some saner moment, that their opinions are quite as good as his own, and this will shake his confidence in his belief. This conception, that another man's thought or sentiment may be equivalent to one's own, is a distinctly new step, and a highly important one. It arises from an impulse too strong in man to be suppressed, without danger of destroying the human species. Unless we make ourselves hermits, we shall necessarily influence each other's opinions; *so that the problem becomes how to fix belief, not in the individual merely, but in the community*. (CP 5:378, emphasis mine)

Once the project is restated in these terms, Peirce can start untangling the more interesting aspects. One solution to the question of how to fix beliefs in the community is to construct an authoritarian social institution that is charged with regulating, validating, and controlling meaning. Peirce clearly has in mind the Catholic Church as an example *par excellence* here. This method of fixing belief, which Peirce labels as the "method of authority" has been undeniably successful, despite the fact that "[c]ruelties always accompany this system; and when it is consistently carried out, they become atrocities of the most horrible kind in the eyes of any rational man" (CP 5:379). Still, according to Peirce, "For the mass of mankind, then, there is perhaps no better method than this. If it is their highest impulse to be intellectual slaves, then slaves they ought to remain" (CP 5:380). As I mentioned before, no one could ever mistake Peirce for a democrat.

However, just like Peirce felt that the individual method of tenacity would fail simply because individuals would encounter other individuals with different beliefs,

Peirce notes that even within the most "priest-ridden society" in which meaning is strictly controlled, there would be those who would look beyond their own current culture to see that other cultures in other places, and in other times, have held different beliefs. It is these few individuals, then, that needed something that would go beyond tenacity or authority. Peirce offers one last unsatisfactory method, and that is to simply assent to whatever is "reasonable." He refers to this as the *a priori* method. This method, though, has been disastrous according to Peirce. For example, even though "metaphysicians" *all* seemed to rely on rationality, they *still* managed to disagree with each other. What is missing from this method is *experience.* But by experience, Peirce is also not referring to a sort of atomistic "experience" that an individual might have, but rather *experience* as something shared amongst a group of people.

Finally, then, we can piece this all together. Once Peirce rejected the spectator conception of knowledge in which "Truth" is simply discovered and denied the Cartesian concepts of deep skepticism and introspection, *experience* became the crucial linchpin of all knowing. Human activity is rooted in beliefs that guide not only our interpretations and understandings of the world we encounter, but also guide us in understanding how to respond to the undulations of the world (and, hence, *experience).* Beliefs (and our actions rooted in them) remain in a sort of stasis or harmony (or *habit*) until, due to the plurality of experience within social groups, we encounter different and alternative ideas. The result of such an encounter is doubt. Doubt is the great lever of action in the formation of new ideas. Over time, humans have developed several ways to deal with doubt. Since we are social beings, the real question is not a fixation of belief in individuals but within large groups. One effective solution to this has been through centralized authority.

However, this will always be incomplete because some members of the group will eventually find a way to look outside their own culture and their own time to realize there are indeed alternative ways of being. Because of this, Peirce looked to science as an ideal model for the way in which, instead of ideas having to correspond to authoritative traditions or personal / private reasoning, ideas were evaluated by a *community of inquirers* against a shared outer-world or "experience." Peirce's definition of science is highly suggestive in understanding "truth" in a pragmatist sense and worth quoting at length:

> Science is to mean for us *a mode of life whose single animating purpose is to find out the real truth* [emphasis mine], which pursues this purpose by a well-considered method, founded on thorough acquaintance with such scientific results already ascertained by others as may be available, and which seeks cooperation [sic] in the hope that the truth may be found, if not by any of the actual inquirers, yet ultimately by those who come after them and who shall make use of their results. It makes no difference how imperfect a man's knowledge may be, how mixed with error and prejudice; from the moment that he engages in an inquiry in the spirit described, that which occupies him is *science* [emphasis in original], as the word will here be used. (CP 7:54)

Or, as Misak helpfully puts it,

> The core of the pragmatist conception of truth is that a true belief would be the best belief, were we to inquire as far as we could on the matter. We shall see that 'best' here amounts to 'best fits with all experience and argument,' not the kind of 'best' that other pragmatists, James and Rorty, for instance, have flirted with--consoling, best for our lives, or most comfortable. A true belief, rather, is a belief that could not be improved upon, a belief that would forever meet the challenges of reasons, argument, and evidence. (49)

However, and what is terribly important to note in this formulation, is that "truths" are never private and are always *provisional* simply because the "hypothetical end of inquiry" (as it is sometimes phrased) can never be reached simply because the *world* (including humanity) is always changing. Also important to note is that this conception of "truth" and "inquiry" does not rest on consensus or agreement, although such moments

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may be sufficient to temporarily suspend inquiry. The end result of inquiry is belief which is the foundation of our actions (through *habits*). This last point is perhaps the most interesting because it shows how *inquiry* is always reformatory at a minimum and often is potentially revolutionary.

As such, the Cartesian Anxiety that focuses on the tension between "objectivism" and "relativism" is effectively dissolved. On one hand, this Pragmatist conception of truth agrees with the relativists that no truth exists outside of history. However, the Pragmatist also denies that this means truths cannot exist at all. In other words, it is through this that we can finally understand Hilary Putnam's oft-repeated claim "that one can be both fallibilistic and antisceptical is perhaps the basic insight of American Pragmatism" (Pragmatism: Open Question 21). In the realm of scientific knowledge, such a conception of truth is fairly uncontroversial. However, when applied to political and moral concepts, the scene dramatically shifts. Peirce himself, as Misak notes, did not think such a method of inquiry was fit for questions concerning morality and politics. However, other Pragmatists have sought to flesh out the implications of such a notion of "truth" has for political, ethical, and moral deliberation.

I want to finish out this section with an example that I will return to in Chapter 5 of this dissertation. One victim of the belief that "objective truth" doesn't exist is that it precludes modern liberal democracies of envisioning a way in which conflicting conceptions of how to live "the good life" can be adjudicated. This is premised on an assumption that there exists no "objective" truth that is transcendent to the conflicting ends that could serve as a point of evaluation. However, as Pragmatists will point out, such an objective, eternal and ahistorical "Truth" is not needed; local, slightly less grand

"truths" produced through social inquiry work well enough. Once we rid ourselves of that faulty assumption, it becomes apparent that we *can* in fact engage in inquiring as to whether one person's conception of the ends of life are indeed better or worse than someone else's, especially where they come into conflict with each other. Putnam uses the example of female circumcision here, noting that some might "reject the idea that we can criticize traditional societies even for such sexist practices as female circumcision" and that "traditional societies are viewed by these thinkers as so superior to our own societies that we have no right to disturb them in any way" (Renewing 183). Putnam describes it this way: "what I think we are seeing is the revival of the myth of the noble savage" (183). The problem with this idea is that it ignores the possibility that women living in societies that practice female circumcision would want to know about alternative ways of thinking about the practice and are incapable of deciding for themselves which might be better. In short, the "noble savage myth" blocks the path of inquiry. Similarly, James Garrison notes that the anxiety or fear over "indoctrination" via education is misplaced simply because it assumes a passive instead of *active mind*. The active mind, one that is capable of inquiry, is not a mere receptacle of information to be delivered hypodermically. Thus, since indoctrination is inevitable in the process of education, the real solution is "inoculation," or rather teaching students to utilize inquiry so that further attempts of "indoctrination" are never accepted wholesale (Paradox 267-8). In the next section, I turn to an analysis of "experience" and "habit," especially as it is worked out in John Dewey's philosophy.

Experience, Habit, and Democracy

The emphasis on testing knowledge against experience is more fully explored in John Dewey's work. Dewey opens his major work on metaphysics, *Experience and Nature*, by discussing the difference between naturalistic sciences and western Philosophy. In naturalistic sciences, "experience" has such a fundamental role in what goes on that it is not even named. This is a departure from before when there were arguments over whether the experience of empirical research would win out over Cartesian emphases on intuition. Essentially, it breaks down like this: What is valued in empirical research is exactly that which is experienced. This is a stark contrast to philosophy that assumes the theory itself is the end point, even if it does not somehow lead back to experience (LW 1:11)[7], something Dewey referred to as "the philosophic fallacy" (LW 1:35) "Experience," then, is the test of what value things have in lining up with our everyday moments. For instance, what leads us to accept or reject a hypothesis is our experience of testing it. If we try out a hypothesis and it doesn't work, then it is trashed. If it helps us to predict and understand something, then we keep it. This is where "experience" comes in. If we do not include "experience," then we would stop at the completion of stating a hypothesis, relying on how pretty, interesting, or "rational" it may be, even if it would have no useful outcome if actually tested. This is where theories, hypothesis, morals, whatever are thus mediated through how they actually work if we are to put them into practice, and using their usefulness in practice as the reason for affirming or denying them. Experience, then, becomes the way in which we understand everything.

To try to explain this another way, we can think of the statement "the most apples that will fit in this barrel is three." What makes this true is that we can actually put three

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[7] Originally published as *Experience and Nature*, 1925.

apples in a barrel and see if there is any room for more. By using the act of trying out the statement as a means to believe it, we're in a better position than to just accept the statement out of hand using extra-empirical ways of believing (such as some sort of logical or rational statement that tries to assert the validity of the statement without recourse to actually putting apples in the barrel). The danger of an external justification for truth without experience is this: what if the apples evolved to become twice as large as before? With out including experience, we would believe in something that may or may not potentially hold any connection to what is useful. We would then get three apples and find only one fits, and have to throw away the other two.

Consequently, Dewey's concept of "experience" is the crucial linchpin for understanding how we can know and do anything after we have rejected conceptions of knowledge and truth that rely on static, universal forms. Since Darwin's work replaced a completed, unmoving world with a world and universe that was still in progress, it is this connection between the natural world that is constantly in flux and our everyday interactions with it that form the bedrock of what we know. Additionally, if the universe itself is still in the process of becoming, then it opens up the possibility that we possess the power to increase the quality of our lives instead of being trapped in a deterministic trajectory that only has to play itself out. In a sense, then, like Peirce, it is "science" that Dewey casts his lot with instead of "philosophy," for "through science we have secured a degree of power and prediction and of control; through tools, machinery and an accompanying technique we have made the world more conformable to our needs, a more secure abode" (LW 1:46). However, Dewey was also quick to note that not all "experiences" were "an experience" that would lead to knowledge and meaning. The

crucial distinction, made most clearly in *Art as Experience*, between the experiences and

an experience was that an experience "marked out from what went before and what came

after" (LW 10:44)[8]. Unlike experiences, which we are constantly bombarded with, to

have an experience is to have a period of time marked by a singular quality "pervades the

entire experience in spite of the variation of its constituent parts" (LW 10:45). What is

required to actually have an experience is a perception that joins both action and

consequences (LW 10:52). This is critical because it is having an experience that not only

reformulates what went before the experience, but also modifies our future responses to

future stimuli. The accumulation of these experiences formed what Dewey referred to as

"habit." It is through habit that our general modes of responses to life are solidified, only

to be changed when another experience requires it (LW 1:24). This is important as if it

were not for habit, we would be forced to continually revise our knowledge with every

second of every day, an exhausting thought to be sure! Consequently, Dewey is able to

explain how we come to "know" things (experience) as well as why we act or respond in

certain ways to external stimuli (habit).

For Dewey, "The essence of habit is an acquired predisposition to ways or modes

of response, not to particular acts except as, under special conditions, these express a way

of behaving. Habit means special sensitiveness of accessibility to certain classes of

stimuli, standing predilections and aversions, rather than bare recurrence of specific acts.

It means will" (MW 14:32)[9]. Or, as Westbrook defines Dewey's Habit,

> 'Habit' was yet another of those commonplace terms Dewey insisted on defining
> against the grain of ordinary usage. For him, it meant not simply routinized
> behavior (though that could be a component of a habit) but something much

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[8] *Art and Experience* was published in 1934
[9] Originally published as *Human Nature and Conduct* in 1922.

broader. Habit was 'human activity which is influenced by prior activity and in that sense acquired; which contains within itself a certain ordering or systematization of minor elements of action; which is projective, dynamic in quality, ready for overt manifestation; and which is operative in some subdued subordinate form even when not obviously dominating activity. (Dewey and American Democracy, 287)

In other words, it isn't just routinized activity, but rather a guiding force of future activity. Habit guides the *ways* or modes of response.

Dewey sees habit much like he sees physiological functions. Breathing was not just an act of the lungs, but also included the environment (air). Habits are through and through permeable to the social environment. The only difference, though, between breathing and habits were that habits are always social. What is also of interest to note here is that habits are not necessarily linguistically acquired, although they are always mediated through language and communication. Dewey argued that the customs of any society were its prevailing habits. Further, Dewey argued that individual "minds" were, in fact, the product of customs and not the other way around. Hence why education would be so dramatically important to the continuity of a society. Crucially, Dewey wrote that "Customs persist because individuals form their personal habits under conditions set by prior customs. An individual usually acquire the morality as he inherits the speech of his social group" (MW 14:43).

To risk oversimplification, we can think of it this way, starting first with a physiological example: A child encounters a flight of stairs in their home that they must traverse multiple times a day. This flight of stairs is comprised of exactly 10 steps leading up to a landing and another 4 after the landing. As the child grows, this particular flight of stairs becomes so utterly familiar that the child is able to bound up and down the stairs with increasing energy, knowing confidently where the steps begin and end, eventually

learning to skip stairs in order to move up and down them faster. The knowledge of the

stairs in relation to physical activity becomes almost automatic. However, one summer

the child goes away for a summer camp. While away at summer camp, the parents

remodel the house adding a few stairs at the top and removing some on the lower landing.

Even though the child knows of this remodeling, the first time up the stairs results in a

rather nasty fall when the child miscalculates her footing. This pain thus triggers

something the child has not had to do in a long time: evaluate the number of steps in each

section of the flight of stairs. The very real and felt "pain" thus serves as the motivating

factor for a reevaluation of something that had been entrusted to habit. Like these

physical stairs, ideas also are internalized. And like the remodeled stairs no longer fitting

the previously acquired habits of action, the felt effects of a changing environment spurs

reform. The trick, for Dewey, is to not let encrusted habits get in the way of this ability to

reform our beliefs about the world.

For Dewey, "habit" was not just essential in understanding human conduct, but

was crucial to understanding how reform might happen. In the introduction to *Human

Nature and Conduct*, his major work on the concept of habit, Dewey starts out by

describing two common ways of thinking through social reform. One bases the idea of

morality on something intrinsic or "mysteriously cooped up within personality" (MW

14:10). Because institutions are built from individuals, good individuals are seen as

synonymous with good institutions. Therefore, to change human institutions one must

first purify the human heart or soul. The other is basically the opposite, that there is

nothing stable in the human and as such we are completely porous to institutions.

Therefore, the solution is the opposite: we must change institutions first and individuals

will simply follow. Dewey points out that the latter is hopeless because it leaves no room for leverage. We can only hope for accidental change, or we must appeal to a teleological source or "spirit" guiding us toward perfection. It removes intelligent action from the equation, and as such we must simply wait it out. Dewey finds this untenable.

Dewey's way out between these two unacceptable positions works by reformulating the starting point: "We can recognize that all conduct is *interaction* between elements of human nature and the environment, natural and social" (MW 14:9). Why is interaction important? Because it locates social change in *how* we use the world around us, thus avoiding—to use Dewey's terms—the basement (purify the soul) or attic (purify the institutions) route. It puts the emphasis on *interaction* as opposed to enacting change or waiting for change to be enacted upon you (both of which are impossible). This then is why *education* is absolutely central to the whole task. Through education we can modify the way in which we interact with the world around us. As Dewey says, "Then we shall see that progress proceeds in two ways, and that freedom is found in that kind of interaction which maintains an environment in which human desire and choice count for something [...] When we look at the problem as one of an adjustment to be intelligently attained, the issue shifts from within personality an engineering issues, the establishment of arts of education and social guidance" (MW 14:9-10). Dewey ends the intro by tying this all into his brand of Pragmatism, noting that all action is "an invasion of the future," and "conflict and uncertainty are ultimate traits." However, Dewey casts his lot with science, writing that "A morals based on study of human nature instead of upon disregard for it would find the facts of man continuous with those of the rest of nature and would thereby ally ethics with physics and biology" (MW 14:11). This does not mean that it

would fix everything forever. As the environment changes, we have to continually reinvestigate and re-test our ideas. Dewey was a meliorist, but notes that progressive development need not simply happen by accident: we can attempt to take control of it.

It is important to recall that Peirce detected *several* ways in which humans dealt with doubt (method of tenacity, of authority, etc), each of them producing a different result. This then is where Dewey's discussion of "habit" adds an interesting missing piece to the puzzle: why exactly is it that we (as individuals and as a community) deal with doubt in the ways that we do? If we keep with the idea that conduct is "interaction between elements of human nature and the environment," it becomes apparent why social structures and political arrangements matter a great deal in regard to the ways in which knowledge is produced. After all, "inquiry" itself is a form of human activity or conduct. Once we grant Dewey this position, it becomes readily apparent why radical participatory democracy is the ideal political structure. In *The Public and its Problems*, Dewey famously--and cryptically--wrote that "[Democracy] will have its consummation when free social inquiry is indissolubly wedded to the art of full and moving communication" (LW 2:351)[10]. This statement has generated a lot of interest and commentary; unfortunately, much of it has focused on the "art of full and moving communication" and not so much the "free social inquiry" part of the equation. This misses something subtle yet incredibly important, and that is what *democracy* was good for. As Hilary Putnam writes, "[For Dewey] democracy is not just one form of social life among other workable forms of social life; it is the precondition for the full application of intelligence to the solution of social problems" (Renewing 180). In other words, "Democracy" is a social

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[10] *The Public and its Problems* was first published in 1927.

and political arrangement done in the service of "free social inquiry" animated through "the art of full and moving communication." Putnam and others such as Richard Shusterman and Dewey's intellectual biographer Robert Westbrook have referred to this as the *epistemological justification of democracy*. [11]

Previous conceptions of nature, knowledge, truth, and meaning as static, given, and discoverable gave rise to political theories that aimed to deal with the world as it was understood. Dewey's radical democracy, however, was "self-correcting" in that it looked toward creative and new solutions for new problems instead of trying to solve new problems with old, worn out solutions. In short, it looked to *social inquiry*. In describing the "ideal society" in *Democracy and Education*, Dewey sets out two benchmarks for judging the quality of a society: "How numerous and varied are the interests which are consciously shared? How full and free is the interplay with other forms of association? (MW 9:89)[12]. In the first instance, Dewey claims that the best societies were marked by a quality that prevented some people as being educated into masters and others into slaves. This quality was the ability for interests to be shared by as many people as possible (MW 9:90). Thus, the first quality of Dewey's ideal society is that all in a society should be free and able to participate in understanding how their interests were interconnected with the interests of others. In the second instance, free interplay with "other forms of association" was necessary for "isolation makes for rigidity and formal institutionalizing of life, for static and selfish ideals within the group (MW 9:93). It is worth quoting Dewey at length on these points:

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[11] See Shusterman's essay "Putnam and Cavell on the Ethics of Democracy" and Westbrook's book *Democratic Hope: Pragmatism and the Politics of Truth* for further discussion.
[12] *Democracy and Education* was first published in 1916

"The two elements in our criterion both point to democracy. The first signifies not only more numerous and more varied points of shared common interest, but greater reliance upon the recognition of mutual interests as a factor in social control. The second means not only freer interaction between social groups (once isolated so far as intention could keep up a separation) *but change in social habit*—its continuous readjustment through meeting the new situations produced by varied intercourse. And these two traits are precisely what characterize the democratically constituted society" (MW 9:92, emphasis mine).

In regard to education, this sort of radical democracy demands its own system of "deliberate and systematic education." In one of the more crucial segments of *Democracy and Education*, Dewey writes: "The devotion of democracy to education is a familiar fact. The superficial explanation is that a government resting upon popular suffrage cannot be successful unless those who elect and who obey their governors are educated. Since a democratic society repudiates the principle of external authority, it must find a substitute in voluntary disposition and interest; these can be created only by education. But there is a deeper explanation. A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience" (MW 9:93). Indeed Dewey did have high hopes for deliberate, systematic, and public education, for nothing less than the success of the entire democratic society rested on its shoulders.

For Dewey, having rejected any sort of transcendent teleological assumptions of human growth and development, the development of the democratic government was largely a product of random chance. In *The Public and its Problems*, Dewey opens the third chapter noting this fact and then going on to assert that if left to chance, democracy can go away as easily as it has come (LW 2:78). It is only with our own intelligent action that we can preserve democracy and, further, use it to better the world we find ourselves in. This intelligent action aimed at turning democracy as a random form of government into democracy as a deliberate way of life was the domain of education. As Dewey

pointed out in the beginning of *Democracy and Education*, all societies utilized education for social continuity and control, but unless we could define the ideal society, all education to this end would be fruitless. Having declared his conception of the ideal society, the questions became: what sort of education would produce this sort of radical democracy and, just as important, how would this education be worthy of radical democracy?

Democratic Laboratories

It might be easiest to understand what Dewey was thinking by quickly explaining how the classrooms at the Lab school in Chicago under Dewey were run. Unlike "traditional" classrooms in which students "learned" concepts out of textbooks and manuals by rote and unlike so called "new education" classrooms based on Rousseau where students were simply allowed to do as they please, Dewey's classroom can be understood as directed inquiry. Since democracy, as Dewey understood it, was not a mere system of governance but was a way of living with others, Dewey's classroom aimed to engage students in the "mode of associated living" from the very beginning. Further, since knowledge was, for Dewey, the result of using materials and ideas to work through problems, classroom activities were organized around projects and problems that the class, as a group, had to work together to accomplish. At the heart of this was what Dewey termed "occupations." These were essentially modes of activity that in someway run parallel to something that happens in social life. For instance, discussing one group of students, Westbrook describes how "the six-year-old students in the school, building on experiences with home activities they had had in kindergarten, concentrated their work

on 'occupations serving the home.' They built a model farm in the sandtable in their classroom, and in the schoolyard they planted a crop of winter wheat." The result of doing so was that "the child's interest in a particular activity of his own (building a model farm) served as the foundation for instruction in a body of subject matter (skills in measurement and the mathematics of fractions) but also how this method introduced children to the methods of experimental problem-solving in which mistakes were an important part of learning" (Dewey and American Democracy 103). It is exactly these "problematic situations" that were key to Dewey's classrooms as they allowed students to actively engage in not only building up knowledge and interests but also sharing them with classmates, thus satisfying both of Dewey's ideal qualities of a society. Further, and perhaps more importantly, we see Dewey's key concepts of experience and habit deeply informing the classroom. While it is clear to see how experience in working through these problematic situations served as the vehicle for "learning," the role of habit was just as important. In regard to habit it, it is important that these problems were solved through conjoint activity and not individually, thus helping to solidify these ways of interactions within the students to carry beyond the classroom.

The ultimate hope was not to simply teach students "content." This was a concern, as it is in any education, but more important was a question of reproduction. Should education reproduce society through inculcating certain behaviors and habits in students? Dewey did not think so. For him, education in a democratic society was important because it could serve to reconstruct society in a continuous manner, not simply

reproduce it (MW 8:412).[13] Claims that Dewey was a gradualist liberal interested only in piecemeal change have to be measured against Dewey's steadfast commitment to making social reconstruction possible. While it was true that Dewey did not think simply replacing one social structure with another would yield revolution due to persistent habits (MW 14:77), we might ponder what might happen over the course of a single generation or so had Dewey's radical vision of education caught on. Unfortunately, as Westbrook is quick to point out, while *Democracy and Education* was uncompromising in its descriptions of education and democracy, what was lacking was any sort of political strategy for educational reform (Dewey and American Democracy 179), especially considering that the business class and industrial capitalists had already turned to appropriate education for their own purposes (MW 7:100)[14], something contemporary educators are all too familiar with.

Dewey and Composition Studies

While the name of Charles Sanders Peirce has rarely surfaced in composition studies, Dewey's name is not so unfamiliar. In general, there are two ways in which Dewey's work still appears. First, as noted earlier, Dewey's name often appears in the context of discussing a historical moment of progressiveness in the United States that is no longer relevant. However, in the past 30 years, there has been a small group of writers concerned with trying to incorporate Dewey's work into the field of composition and writing instruction. The trajectory of these "New Deweyans" as I have been calling them

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[13] Originally published as "Education Versus Trade-Training: Reply to David Snedden" in 1915.
[14] Originally published as "An Undemocratic Proposal" in 1913.

is barely visible yet, since 1980, undeniably exists. After discussing the ways in which these writers have sought to apply Dewey to composition, I will return to this concept of habit and discuss why ignoring habit prevents the "Deweyan classroom" as being anything more than an abstract concept that from time to time makes the round in the relevant journals.

In the 1980 edited collection entitled *Reinventing the Rhetorical Tradition*, Janet Emig boldly proclaims that "John Dewey is everywhere in our work" (12). While Dewey's name can be found from time to time in composition literature (after all, he was alive for the first 60 years of composition in America), little theoretical attention was paid to him until this point. Usually when Dewey's name was invoked, it was done as a nod to a not so distant past and its own progressive movement. What marks Emig's mention of Dewey as different is that she is looking at the ideas of Dewey instead of simply the legacy he had come to represent. But for Emig, Dewey's work is only everywhere in our work because of his influence on Rosenblatt's 1978 book *The Reader, the Text, and the Poem*. Emig seems to see this book as being one of the most important works in the field at the moment--a moment that would quickly fade. But it is in Rosenblatt's work that the "transactional" nature of texts and readers is explicated at length. This view point, that both subjects and languages exist within some sort of tension that changes both is something that would be durable, especially with much of the post-structuralist work that was making its presence felt in the field starting around this time. Emig was one of the first, though surely not the last, to point out that the fruits of post-structuralism created a friendlier atmosphere for Deweyan philosophy. Emig, in constructing her own tradition, squeezes as much as she can out of the "transactionalist" banner, calling up a new

tradition populated with names like Darwin, Piaget, Vygotsky, Luria, and Polanyi (14,15), ignoring much of the dissonance between all these thinkers. Nonetheless, it is this constructed "tacit tradition" with Dewey at the helm that has become the rallying cry for every single writer attempting to align composition with Dewey in the past 30 years.

It wouldn't be until the 1990s in which a group of compositionists (Stanley Fish notwithstanding here) would return to this "tacit" tradition in order to more fully explicate what it might mean. What is striking about the work of Fishman, Russell, and Jones, the three major theorists trying to connect Dewey to composition in the 1990s, and Crick in 2003, is that all of them are primarily preoccupied with the pieces left behind by the "postmodern" revolution in composition. As Jones notes, "Faigley and Berlin have proposed composition courses that emphasize the influence of language upon a writer's thought," but that "[t]hese postmodern practices [...] undermine the agency of the students and the authority of the instructor" (Beyond). Of course, for Jones, the way forward lies in the "tacit tradition" of John Dewey. Similarly, Fishman, seeking to align "expressivists" such as Peter Elbow to the Deweyan legacy, asserts that "contrary to what Bartholomae, Berlin, and Bizzell have said, the goal of the expressivists--to help students grow in their ability to understand their own experiences--is not incompatible with learning disciplinary language" (Expressivism 654). This debate, then, is the occasion for reassessing Dewey.

To run the risk of oversimplifying the debate, expressivists asserted that external impositions were to blame for hindering a writer in "expressing" their inner self through written communication. For constructivists, the problem wasn't so much that things were "getting in the way" of a writer expressing their true self, but that a "true self" did not

even exist and, further, was constituted by Discourse. As Crick would note much later in 2003 while discussing the turn away from expressivist pedagogy, "We thus turn away from an expressivism in which artistic expression represents our inner mental states and toward a constructivism in which such expression re-represents the social and discursive structures that constitute the human subject" (256). The problem, though, is that the problem isn't answered or solved by moving from an internal self to an external Discursive element. Instead, there is only a shift of terminology whereby "[t]he only difference is that expressivism posits a plurality of individual minds while constructivism posits a single, ubiquitous mind" (Crick 258). Since the question essentially remains the same, the same set of problems remain in play; namely, we still have no way to theorize and consequently understand and enact agency and social change through writing. If we are to step aside and let the students express their true inner "selves," then we are in no position to interrogate or critique what might come out. Conversely, if we understand student writing as the end result of Discourse and subject formation, it isn't the student who is writing, but rather discourses are speaking the student, yet again shutting us off from being in a position to effect change. As Crick dryly notes, "such is the state of composition as long as it chooses to remain mired in the premises of the expressivism/constructivism debate" (256).

The way out of this seemingly impossible theoretical trap was Dewey's concept of experience. David Russell: "Throughout his career as an educator, Dewey insisted that learning must begin with the experience of the student but lead toward disciplinary knowledge—the activities (habits) of the groups that the student is or may be a part of" (Beyond). Donald Jones: "The non-foundational alternative of Deweyan pragmatism

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heralds anti-foundationalism's subsequent emphasis on language without ignoring the epistemological importance of experience." Stephen Fishman: "I find that Dewey's theory of perception helps us understand students' experiences during revision as they attempt the double-task of conserving and reforming, of evaluating and building upon their familiar beliefs" (Explicating 316). Donald Jones, again: "For a composition pedagogy based on Deweyan pragmatism, student writers would learn to be agents of their ideas without imagining themselves to be the sole authors of their own thoughts. The starting point of a pragmatist writing course would be the primacy of experience" (Beyond). Nathan Crick: "The very act of communication requires an individual to give form to what had previously been formless, and in doing so changes the attitude of that person toward his or her own experiences." (270). Obviously, experience is key.

The reason for this turn to Dewey's "experience" is summed up by Crick: "the pragmatic alternative is a positive departure from the entrenched ideological binaries of the discipline; it moves discussions away from debates concerning origins and toward critical investigations of possible effects" (257). This, of course, is precisely how Dewey's "experience" works. As noted before, experience for Dewey was the bedrock of all knowledge. It was through "experience" in which we are able to not simply acquire knowledge but to utilize it. Unlike the expressivist / constructivist binary, a "composition as experience" approach (to borrow Crick's phrase) would put this front and center, experimenting with language and continually investigating it's effects in "the real world." It is here that we can understand what "agency" might actually look like: student writers continually writing and revising all while receiving feedback and input from other student writers in the classroom. Or, in other words, we should focus is on the experience of

writing and having your words read by others instead of relying on rules, conventions, methods, traditions, genres, and whatever else to justify what "good" writing is. "Good writing," after all, is a product of a certain kind of experience. This all leads Jones to conclude that "[a] Deweyan instructor can teach student writers to develop greater individual agency" (Beyond). Similarly, Fishman proclaims that "[i]deally, Dewey would say, students should leave their composition courses wanting to do more writing. And given his view that we learn best in groups of likeminded people, Dewey would also say students should leave freshman composition wanting to do more work in writing groups" (Explicating 317), something I doubt very many people would want to argue against. Ultimately, the turn to experience is a move to retain a sense of agency in regard to writing while at the same time maintaining a commitment to some form of social reform.

On one hand, we can attempt to read Jones' claim that "A Deweyan instructor can teach student writers to develop greater individual agency" in a positive light, assuming that by "teach" what Jones really means is to direct and guide students through experiences in which they can come to agency as opposed to just being handed agency and assuming they will use it. Unfortunately, though, the wording of this claim does not suggest "teach" as invitation as much as "teach" as confer. And it is here that we have a problem, for Jones is not referring to kindergarten students but fully formed adults. The question isn't whether a "Deweyan instructor can teach student writers to develop greater agency," but rather...can students learn to develop greater agency? For it is one thing for an instructor to affirm agency in writing and quite another to assume that all students are equally capable of employing it. What's missing is *habit*. Unfortunately for our purposes, though, the brand of education that most students receive is anything but what Dewey

might prescribe. After all, unlike Dewey's laboratory school in Chicago who dealt with very young children who had a high degree of plasticity in regard to their habits of interaction, we are primarily dealing with adults. Thus, the flaw in these conceptions of "Deweyan" pedagogy is they mistakenly presuppose radical educational reform where none exists. Or, in other words, the students entering the university writing classroom are, on the whole, not products of a Deweyan education. Fishman's grand pronouncement that a "Deweyan" writing class should make students "want to write more" is possible only if the students in his classroom are already beneficiaries of this sort of education. If critical strands of educational research in the past 40 years tells us anything, contemporary education is not at all what Dewey had in mind. Even in his own time, Dewey was well aware of what "education" had come to mean, pointing out that, "for the most part, adults have given training rather than education. An impatient, premature mechanization of impulsive activity after the fixed pattern of adult habits of thought and affection has been desired" (MW 14:69,70).

Partially, we might attribute this theoretical shortsidedness for confusion over how to apply Dewey's thoughts to education. From Emig to Crick, it is universally assumed that the education students have received up until the point of their entry into the university writing classroom has had little to no effect on the habits of thought for the students. This assumption that specific habits of thought in relation to how writing is conceived of and employed are not produced by the twelve or so years of previous education seems to be to be a glaring gap in understanding not only the function of education but its all important role in establishing these habits and reinforcing them. In fact, as discussed earlier, this function is precisely the reason why Dewey was so

interested in schooling and education. This is also why, when we look at how the "New Deweyans" have sought to apply Dewey to the field of composition, we ultimately see more of ourselves than we see Dewey. It is composition, not Dewey, who looks at writing as primarily a theoretical problem to be sorted out and not as an educational problem that would point to extensive research of the classroom space itself all the way down to the lowest levels of education.

The effects of this misstep are devastating. Dewey astutely points out that "whether an ability is limited to repetition of past acts adapted to past conditions or is available for new emergencies depends wholly upon what kind of habit exists" (MW 14:48). For us not to first inquire into the sorts of habits our students have acquired in their previous educational experiences is a glaring gap. Crick smartly warns that part of the problem has always been that we had been looking for the "origin" of language and this is what led us into a dead end. My question, though, is not a question of where language originates from, but rather how our previous classroom experiences, through habit, guide our use of language.

This is an easy misstep to make. So easy, in fact, that Dewey himself made this mistake. As Shannon Sullivan points out, Dewey himself underestimated his own habits when he unfortunately asserted that the "natural" reaction to the unknown (in this case, the racial "other") is fear (34). Thus Dewey's unsatisfactory explanation of racial tension is simply that white America was gripped with fear simply because black Americans were "new" to their consciousness. Dewey's solution is an "acclimation" route, blindly hoping that once white America had been in the proximity of black America long enough, this natural "fear" would eventually abate. But, one must ask, why does Dewey

assume the "natural" reaction of a white person to a black person is fear? Why not curiosity, awe, wonderment, excitement, or indifference? Oddly, and perhaps sadly, in this case Dewey had simply not followed his own philosophy closely enough, or "simplified" his philosophy too far. After all, there is no story of America sans black Americans.

Instead of seeing this response as the result of habits acquired as a white male, Dewey inscribes his own socially constructed habits as universal, thus violating much of his own thought on habit itself. While the "new Deweyans" in comp/rhet are often very good at describing how a class should work and what the end results should be, they are at a profound loss as to describing how this might actually occur, or when they do, rely on age old maxims.[15] I suspect the reason for this gap, the cause of explications of Dewey being "few and far between" is not so different than Dewey's mistake on race. The "reformist mind" has been assumed to be universal. After all, how couldn't students want to learn to write more? In short, it obscures desired outcomes and methods for reform, effectively putting the cart in front of the horse.

For example, Russell, at the end of his piece, concludes that "growth in writing means that students would move toward acquiring the genres, the habits of discourse, the voices of social groups involved in organized activities while students more and more fully participate in (either directly or vicariously) the activities of those groups and eventually contribute to and transform them—not before they participate in them." While Russell does make a gesture toward acquiring the habits of specific genres, he doesn't

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[15] For an unfortunate example of this, see Stanley Fish's essay "Anti-Foundationalism, Theory Hope, and the Teaching of Composition" in his book *Doing What Comes Naturally.*

seem all that interested in understanding (and thus possibly interrogating) the previously established habits that students might bring into the classroom. Consequently, we are left to wonder about what Russell might say if a student walks into his classroom and declares that learning to write a specific form for their work at Alliant Techsystems (makers of depleted uranium rounds for the armed forces) is what they desire. Additionally, Russell, in a rather unfortunate move, asserts that students should become full members of a group before they try to change it. The problem, though, is that Russell wants students to be fully assimilated into a group's ways of thinking before trying to change it, thus likely preserving the groups ideology since at that point change and reform would come fully from within. This is particularly troublesome as Russell makes no mention of "inoculating" students with new habits of associated living, which would imply confronting the habits students bring with them into the class.[16] Consequently, this is not Dewey, but rather Russell's own pedagogy of writing instruction inappropriately drafting Dewey's name for a program that Dewey would likely find to be troublesome.

Conclusion

There are three primary ways in which Pragmatism informs the analysis of data in subsequent chapters. First, and perhaps most importantly, Dewey's concept of *habit* is crucial in working out the horizons of possibility in the first year writing classroom. By this, I am referring to the ways in which previous educational experiences have shaped the ideas, beliefs, and values concerning "literacy" that students bring with them into the first year writing environment. My fieldwork, introduced in the next chapter, consisted of

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[16] Again, Garrison's discussion of indoctrination as a paradox in his essay "The Paradox of Indoctrination" is useful here.

going to a secondary (high school) level college preparation writing class to document one aspect of a common experience that many university students go through. However, Dewey's notion of habit is more expansive than even this. As noted before, "habits" are the sum expression of a society's prevailing norms. Therefore, any investigation of the attitudes, beliefs, and values that students pick up while in educational environments *are themselves* expression of larger social structures. These broader social structures, as I will be arguing in chapter 4 and 5, do not produce the sort of literacy practices that composition has long sought to theorize and popularize. This is no small thing, as it seriously throws composition's long standing project of expanding democratic participation into dire straits.

This leads me to the second way in which Pragmatism informs this scholarship. As noted before, Pragmatism, particularly as I have defined it above, *does* provide a justification for democracy that is grounded in the need for free social inquiry and growth. While I will be utilizing this concept to argue that not all literacy practices are equal and we can, in fact, provide a justification for preventing certain kinds of literacy practices from occurring, there is another way to utilize this *epistemological justification* for democracy. We can also run this justification backwards to suggest that a lack of certain social structures produces a climate in which literacy practices grounded in such free social inquiry and growth *simply make no sense*. This, as I will be demonstrating through data collected during fieldwork, is precisely what is occurring. This situation leads us to a fork in the road. On one hand, we can simply assent to the new social structures, recalibrate our writing practices to fit this brave new world, and continue on our happy way. However, to do so would mean to jettison a vision of a democratic

society in favor of a society ruled by "free market" ideologies and an oligarchic ruling class. This is precisely why the epistemological justification for democracy is so important, for it provides a powerful reason against doing this.

The third way in which Pragmatism informs this scholarship is grounded in the notion that ideas do not exist to be discovered, but are instead created and utilized by humans to guide their actions. One of Dewey's more radical insights was that we can endeavor to better our situation through *intelligence*. Since there is no grand march to emancipation and societies can become more democratic and less democratic over time, leaving such important elements to chance is folly. Such has been the story of the 20th century. In particular, and in regard to writing, the idea that "writing can change the world" and "language builds realities" are themselves subject to mediation through social structures. In Nancy Welch's book *Living Room*, she recalls an experience in which she had to write letter upon letter to insurance administrators to get an important form of cancer treatment for her husband. Unfortunately, though, those letters fell on deaf ears. What is devastatingly tragic about this story is no matter how eloquent, no matter how polished, no matter what voice, tone or even imagined audience was crafted into these letters, it still could not transcend the shame that is our current national health care system. Words *did not* matter. Or take, for example, the closure of the General College at the University of Minnesota. Despite several "public input" sessions and massive letter writing campaigns to save the College, it still closed. It seems in retrospect that the first decision made by administrators was to simply not listen to any dissent from the chosen course of action. Again, words *did not* matter. From a Pragmatist stand point, these examples are sad but not surprising. There is no eternal or intrinsic feature of language

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that demands that words on their own, even if carefully and correctly chosen, can cause

the sort of social change we hope that they can. Conversely, though, this does not mean

that it *should* be this way either. What a Pragmatist perspective suggests is that if we

want a world in which these moments have a different ending, moments in which writing

can change the world, then that will have to be a world *we create* and nurture. In short, to

have good writing, we need to create a world in which good writing matters.

In the next chapter, I will move into the fieldwork I conducted in order to consider

what "writing" in schools looks like in a world in which "good writing," as I have been

discussing it here, *doesn't matter*. Understanding how this plays out and *why* it has come

to be this way will comprise the remainder of this text.

Chapter 2
Welcome to College English

Introduction

In this chapter, I will be introducing the ethnographic fieldwork I carried out in a

high school level college preparation writing classroom.[1] In describing the class and

offering an analysis of what goes on in such a class, this chapter posits the major

theoretical (as well as practical) issue I encountered while collecting data: an alarming

lack of student interest, motivation, and purpose within the class. I refer to this as the

"Bartleby Syndrome."

To do so, I will be starting with a scene rich in meaning and to use it as a frame to

work backwards and re-read the class. What was this class all about and how was

"writing" conceived of by the teacher and understood by the students? How does this

class fit into not just other writing classes but larger social dynamics as well? What were

the students doing during class? What was the teacher doing during class? How did both

students and teacher think about and understand what was going on during the semester?

Throughout this chapter, I will be attempting to address these and other questions with

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[1] The fieldwork described in this and other chapters was approved by an Institutional
Review Board in 2010.

the "Bartleby Syndrome" in mind. After this, I introduce the idea that the Bartleby Syndrome is, in actuality, a specific type of *literacy practice*, as opposed to some form of lack or deficiency. I end the chapter by suggesting that a full understanding of these literacy practices necessitates an understanding of human action and activity.

Alumni Visit Day

Snow is falling outside the window and I am sitting uncomfortably on a rock hard chair in the media center, something schools used to call a library. Unfolding before me is a bizarre scene that seems to sum up everything to this point that has brought me here. Splayed out in front of me is a seemingly un-ending row of grinning, excited college students. These are the mostly victorious, the returned prodigal daughters and sons of Copper Valley High, invited back by teachers to tell tales of what it is like to actually be in college. So many have shown up, in fact, that there is no room left to sit at the table positioned at the head of the room. Others congregate to the sides of the table, extending infinitely it seems to the corners of the room. It is the last day before winter break, the last gasping sigh of exhaustion for those on the other side (I mean the high school students, but also the teachers and the staff) before taking a few days off. It is also, because I am one of a very few people in the room to know this, the last shot at redemption for quite a few students enrolled in a writing class that I am observing. Today is the culmination of six weeks of preparation--today is the due date for the research paper.

Fifteen weeks earlier I had come to Copper Valley High in an attempt to figure out a problem I kept confronting in my own role as an instructor of writing at the post-

secondary level. The resistance to any sort of reconfigured or reconstructed notion of a writing class did not come from administration, from my own colleagues, or even the "field" of composition itself. Rather, the resistance to many of the things I kept trying out came from the students. Attempts to realize in practice what I formed from theory consistently lead to confusion and even anger from students. It was like I was not just changing the rules of the game in process, but switching the game all together. I sensed that I was bumping up against an invisible yet immovable force located within the minds of my students that dictated and determined how and why a writing class ought to work. I wanted to actually see for myself where these conception of how writing classes ought to work were being formed and cemented. This is what led me to Copper Valley High and the 5th hour class called "College English." In looking for a class I could immerse myself in, I purposely avoided classes like Advanced Placement sections as well as forms of dual-enrollment offerings in which students take college credit courses embedded within high schools. Students who take these classes often times "test out" of required university level first year writing courses. I wanted to see where FYW's students were coming from. At least on paper, College English (usually referred to by the initials "CE") was this high school's solution to "prepare" students to write in college. Leading the class was Ms Stein, a teacher who believed very strongly in the value of college education. Perhaps because of this, Ms Stein was one of the main organizers behind the question and answer session with the alums. Even though anyone in the school was invited, it was perhaps not so subtly scheduled to occur during 5th hour when College English met. All the better, as it allowed her to simply bring the entire class with her to the presentation. And so here we are: the teachers frantically trying to get the microphones working, the students still in

high school slowly filtering into the media center, the chattering row of alums, the snow, and those damned wooden chairs. There is a box by the door awaiting the CE students. On the box is a handwritten note directing students to place the final draft of their research paper in it. Slowly, CE students pass by the box. Some place a stapled assemblage of papers in the box--many do not.

One student who does not place anything in the box is Sam. I started to get to know Sam on the very first day of the semester when Ms. Stein gave me a seat directly behind him. I suspect this was not random at all, as Sam (whose name is actually Salim) is a very gregarious student--not at all shy about talking to me about how he understands what goes on around him. In other words, a researcher's dream. Sam's story is that he "should actually be in CIS" (the dual-enrollment writing course) but because of attendance requirements for the advanced section, cannot. In fact, he completed an AP english course with Ms. Stein the previous year. Since students at Copper Valley have to enroll in an english course every year, Sam landed in CE. Unlike many of his classmates that had modest goals and expectations for post-secondary education (many students were planning on attending local colleges, 2 year schools, and vocational programs), Sam had his mind set on attending a major, selective east coast University and eventually going on to law school for business law. Because of this, it might seem that Sam would have a particular interest in listening to the returning alums talk about their experiences with college. Instead, while the Q&A session proceeds, Sam is hunched over a computer in the back of the room seemingly oblivious to everything else going on around him. This is even more curious given the fact that *his older sister, a junior in college, is one of the returning alums participating in the activity*. After the session ends and students begin to

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leave the media center for their other classes, I rush to catch up with Sam and ask him what he thought of everything that just transpired. Sam replies, with some measure of pride, that he didn't think much of it because he was busy starting *and finishing* his research paper during the period. I ask him how he thinks he is going to do grade wise on the project. Sam replies that he's not sure because he only handed in one and a half pages of writing--"that's all I had time for." The research paper assignment called for a minimum of 7 pages. The warning tone sounds, students evaporate from the hallways, and I scratch the following in my notebook: *The fact that Sam's sister was there talking about how to succeed in college (and she talked quite a lot) all while Sam was cementing his failure in CE is one of those ironies that cannot go unnoticed*.

Sam's story is not a singular story in this classroom, nor is it an unheard of story in the realm of composition theory. Because the great assumption of writing instruction is students will actually write, the entire process breaks down when students simply aren't writing. We as writing instructors simply have nothing to work with. However, and as I will discuss in chapter 3, most ways of understanding students not-writing have an implicit assumption that if all other constraints are removed--be it a psychological barrier, a cultural conflict, a topic the student doesn't personally care about--then writing will naturally proceed. In Sam's case, though, as well as for many others in the class, I do not believe it is so simple. The phenomenon of students not-writing in this class was far more passive, non-aggressive, and nebulous. When Ms. Stein asked her students to write, it was as though they simply responded with "we prefer not to." I refer to this as the *Bartleby Syndrome*. When essays were assigned, it was rare for many students to begin much earlier than a few days before the deadline. Many waited until the night before. A

few simply never did anything. Peer review and workshop sessions nearly always fell flat because so few students had much of anything to share. During interviews, Ms. Stein repeatedly mentioned how she had never seen it this bad. When I asked Ms. Stein to compare data from previous semesters, her sense on this was validated. In talking with students, they seemed as confused as anyone in regard to what was going on. Most attributed it to laziness or procrastination. However, and as I will discuss later in this chapter, I have good reasons for rejecting these explanations.

Before I say anything more, there are a few things I want to be very clear on when it comes to explaining this passive non-participation in writing and describing this class. First, from day one it was clear that I was in the presence of an uncommonly gifted educator while conducting this fieldwork. In fact, one aspect of my fieldwork that will unfortunately not be emphasized enough here is the incredible emotional toll this non-participation took on the Ms. Stein, both in that she cared deeply about the success of her students and the frustration that the best our field of writing instruction has to offer simply did not seem to work. Further, while it may be tempting to explain away this non-participation as a fault of the curriculum itself, the mechanics of this writing class would be immediately recognizable to a vast majority of writing instructors. In other words, this Bartleby Syndrome cannot so simply be attributed to a "bad class." Perhaps even more vexing is the confusion the students had with this. Students not writing is nothing new to composition, and we have had various ways of describing it over the years: writer's block, lack of individual motivation, resistance, or structural and cultural tensions (e.g., lack of time for students working). These elements were all undeniably present in the classroom and each of these elements at different times could help explain why many

individual students faltered so consistently at participating in the process of writing. That said, no consistent pattern ever emerged.

Welcome to College English

If you drew a picture encapsulating every cliché about suburban high schools in America, Copper Valley High[2] would be the obscure reflection of real America looking upon it. Within its school district was another larger and wealthier high school located barely 3 miles away that carried the district's name: Bright Hills High. Bright Hills had the championship football team, the nationally recognized facilities, the large and spacious campus, and was located in a noticeably more affluent area. Copper Valley was the rest. Copper Valley had more free and reduced lunch eligible students (32% of the student body), modest athletic facilities, an aging and nondescript building, and was located in an area of town surrounded by modest yet charming small family homes. Despite this, pride at Copper Valley ran high. Teachers often spoke of the number of national merit scholars their school had produced (12 finalists in 2008), talked of how their math scores were some of the highest of the state, and always mentioned how good the marching band was. I start here in describing the class I was observing because I believe that while Bright Hills High might be how we visualize America's High School, in reality it is actually Copper Valley High that is a pretty good representative of what high school is like for many people.

As I was looking for a class to observe and be a part of, I created a sort of wish list. I wanted the class to be populated primarily with seniors, as I was hoping to tap into

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[2] All places and names are pseudonyms.

students right before they make the jump from high school to college. My rationale here was that these students would have the most concrete ideas about what "writing in school" was all about, but also be close enough where I could capture some thinking about what going to college meant to them as well. I also wanted the class to be a true preparation class as opposed to concurrent enrollment courses (such as college courses offered in the high school institution) or college credit courses (high school courses that produce college credits for completion). My rationale on this was that the products of these classes more often than not bypassed the composition classroom. As such, my thinking at the time was that because composition never really encountered these students, it might lead to inappropriately fetishising about what we wish our actual students were more like. Further, I did not want a classroom in a school that was overly wealthy, nor did I want one that was in an area of extreme poverty. My rationale here was to find students who may not have post-secondary education as a family tradition but to also find students who could fathom college as a possibility. In short, I wanted to find the sort of students any instructor of a first year writing course could eventually expect to see in their classes.

Copper Valley High, and in particular its course called "College English," fit every requirement I was looking for. Its purpose was to serve as a junior/senior level class that would help students prepare for college writing. In the section I was observing, there were 30 students; 6 juniors (3 male, 3 female), 24 seniors (16 male, 8 female). The members of this class were predominately (but not exclusively) white, Christian, and middle class. Approximately 2/3 of students were active participants in sports, and many were involved in multiple sports. A few other students were involved in band, drama, and

business clubs. Leading the class was Wendy Stein, a 10 year veteran of teaching. Ms.
Stein held a bachelor's degree in English and a master's degree in education, both
obtained at the local University. By her own admission, Ms. Stein was known around
Copper Valley as the advanced writing teacher. The 5th period of CE that I was
observing was the only non-AP, non-dual enrollment class that Ms. Stein was teaching
that semester. This meant that every other student Ms. Stein was working with that
semester stood to obtain actual "college credit" by completing her classes.

I discovered quickly in talking with high school teachers about my project that the
class I had in mind might be hard to find. There seemed to be two general moves under
way. The first is that "college preparation" courses were being moved down the line to
younger students. The sort of course I had in my head was no longer a course for seniors
at many schools but rather was a course that juniors would take. The other move under
way was an increase in AP and dual-enrollment offerings. Paradoxically, as I would
discover, classes formerly known as "College English" or "College Writing" were no
longer seen as the premier preparation courses. Instead, these courses had been
supplanted by courses that, instead of "preparing" students for college, actually took the
place of college courses. Copper Valley High was no different. Within the school, there
was a very definite and noticeable hierarchy of several writing specific classes for juniors
and seniors (excluding special needs education). I asked a few students to put these
offerings in order from most institutionally valued to least. This is the order they came up
with:

1. D-E composition (dual-enrollment comp: a semester long college credit writing
   class taught at the high-school with oversight from local university)
2. AP Language/composition (semester long course using AP curriculum that
   prepares students for a test in the spring)

3. College English (semester long writing class created to prepare students for college writing)
4. Creative Writing
5. College Writing (entry level "college in the schools" course. Equivalent to University level low/no-credit "developmental" writing course. Earns college credit but does **not** fulfill freshman writing requirement at local university.)
6. General Composition (reviewing "basic skills")
7. "Focus composition" (typical vocational writing course)

What is striking about this list is that the order students created is not quite the same as how it is listed in the school's course guide. The most noticeable difference is that the students listed "Creative Writing" just behind College English. As for the courses the students listed below creative writing, most were surprised to learn that such classes even exist. When I pressed a couple students in CE to explain who takes what class, the responses were fairly predictable: creative writing was for dumb students, College English was for less dumb students, and D-E and AP were for smart students. Of the four classes, students suggested that the top three were for "college bound" students, with the top two being for students destined for selective colleges and CE being for students thinking about community colleges, vocational/technical schools, or students who "are good at other stuff but don't care about writing," as one student put it. Perhaps because of this, the reality is that only three of them seem to matter much. In fact, in talking about my project with Ms. Stein in early meetings, she noted that one of the difficulties she faced in teaching CE was that all the "higher ability" students were taken out and put into AP and dual-enrollment courses. In previous years, these high-end classes were offered rarely and were very difficult to get into, meaning that College English would still attract a sizable group of the academically motivated. By 2010, though, the range of these courses had become distorted. The top two courses were being expanded, with students increasingly being pushed to take them. College English, then, became the new "general

composition" and the other courses, because they had little to do with directly preparing juniors and seniors for college, were either forgotten or relegated to the forgotten.

As such, the official description for College English, published in the school's course catalogue, is fairly predictable. It reads:

This class is designed to expose students to the level and type of writing assignments typically encountered in college-level classes. In this class, students will review methods of argumentation and locate logical fallacies; summarize, interpret, and analyze fiction pieces as well as popular and scholarly articles and respond in argumentative and expository modes; and write essays of personal interest for an academic audience. Through the course, students will master their writing process and develop the knowledge and strategies needed for editing their own and others' work in peer critiques. This class will require students to examine essays for paragraph unity and coherence, audience, purpose, medium, elements of voice, and persona.

In reality, and perhaps because the description was written before the district started to market itself as being "data-driven," class time was fairly evenly divided over the course of the semester between grammar/mechanics activities (e.g., practice identifying parts of sentences in class), vocabulary practice / tests, and in-class discussions over readings. When possible, these three areas were combined into one activity. This is not to say that the other elements of the course description were simply absent, but rather that they were almost always enveloped within activities based on grammar/mechanics or (for stylistic elements) built into interpretive activities with the readings the students were asked to do.

This created a rather comfortable weekly routine for the semester. On Mondays, students would be given a list of vocabulary words that they were then expected to study on their own for the test on Friday. For the vocabulary quizzes, students had to both identify definitions for words as well as spell them correctly. In class during the week, students spent time doing one of two things: exercises in identifying parts of speech (often with words from the vocabulary test subtly tossed in) or discussing assigned

readings. Every three or four weeks, students would take a quiz over grammar, usually asking students to correctly identify parts of speech as well as finding grammatically incorrect sentences. The in-class discussions over readings and practice over identifying parts of speech were done to support the written assignments the students were working on during the semester. Of this, there were 4 major essays as well as a diagnostic essay at the start of the semester and a timed, in-class essay the students completed at the end of the semester. While the requirements for these essays were discussed in class, part of Ms. Stein's strategy was to relegate the actual writing of these essays to outside of class. Her rationale being that this is how college courses work. Peer-reviews and workshops happened approximately 4 times over the course of the semester. I say approximately because "peer-review" was often what the class did when a substitute teacher was present.

The essays the students worked on were "scaffolded" so that smaller essays would become the basis for longer, more complex essays. The first essay that students were asked to write was a personal narrative essay. From there, they moved onto a compare and contrast essay built off some nonfiction essays in popular magazines. After that, they worked on a slightly longer literary analysis built from short stories in a literature anthology and using "interpretive lenses" provided by the teacher in a handout. Finally, and for 6 weeks, they worked on a research paper. The basic gist of the research paper was for each student to identify a career or vocation they would like to do someday. Then, they were to "research" a conflict or controversy in that area. After that, they were to rely on two sources of data: basic "library research" data and primary research derived from an interview with an "expert" in that area. Like many other institutions, students

were required to submit their essays for evaluation through an electronic service that also checked the text for plagiarism. They would then receive comments from the teacher electronically from a website they were to upload their finished drafts for. Essays were evaluated according to a rubric of criteria, including things such as grammar/mechanics, tone, required elements (citations, etc) and overall subjective quality. In the next section, I turn to discussing the actual environment of the class itself.

Being There: Methods of data collection

As I mentioned in the introduction to this dissertation, I am purposefully avoiding referring to this dissertation as an "ethnography," especially as it pertains to "[exploring] the setting as it is viewed and constructed by its participants" (Wilcox 458). While this may have been my initial intention, I quickly discovered what I was exploring was not the immediate setting of the participants but rather broader social forces that defined the setting we were in and reacting to. That said, I relied upon several ethnographic methods of data collection during fieldwork. These included participant-observation, interviews (both formal and informal, in person and via electronic means), and document collection (assignment sheets, student texts, etc). Participant observation was conducted through sitting through class sessions while taking field notes. Initially, I had planed on going to the class every day of the week (Monday through Friday) for the first month or so. After that, I planned on going 2-3 days a week. However, I ended up going much more--often daily until mid-November--simply because I could and I found myself experiencing some sort of solidarity with the students I was observing.

To ensure my fieldwork was grounded in a spirit of collaboration, Ms. Stein and I

had several conversations regarding my role in the classroom prior to the semester. My goals were to have the ability to interact with the students whenever possible while at the same time to minimize any obstructions to the normal goings on of the classroom. I didn't want Ms. Stein to teach any differently because of my presence, yet at the same time we both agreed that it would be impossible to pretend as though I simply was not there. Eventually, we nailed down a few basic guidelines: I would generally sit towards the back to observe and take notes. During peer-peer interaction, I would join groups and interact with the students. I would not assume any sort of position that might suggest "authority" and would only offer intellectual contributions to class discussions when a question might arise that fell into an area of my own personal expertise. For example, at one point a question came up concerning how essays were evaluated in typical first-year writing courses. Ms. Stein asked for my perspective and I was happy to offer it to the entire class. However, these moments happened less than 5 times throughout the entire semester. Further, since I wanted students to feel comfortable in speaking with me, I asked Ms. Stein for my help in continually reiterating that anything a student said to me during an interview or even an informal conversation in the hallway should always be understood as confidential. This was also reinforced through the informed-consent dialogue for all students in the class.

Despite this, there were several limitations. For one, while the students seemed to accept me as a sort of tolerated outsider to the classroom circle, and were trustful enough to speak very honestly and frankly about the class itself (as well as Ms. Stein), it proved to be near impossible to gain much acceptance into the student's lives outside of school. On one hand, I attribute this to the limited amount of time I had to spend in the field: five

months is simply not enough time to earn that much trust for some students. In addition to that, the local suburban geography and architecture made it near impossible to find spaces where I could interact with the students outside of class, as such spaces simply did not exist. For example, at one exasperated point, I asked a student in the class what the hell they did when they weren't in school and where I could go to see students being social. This particular student looked at me with a quizzical face and responded that they just "hung out" at each other's houses or simply "drove around." More importantly, though, I sensed that these students, on the cusp of adulthood, were often in precarious social situations and were, as such, protective of these spheres. They were often incredibly frank, honest, and generous with their thoughts in and around the classroom. Outside of that, though, it was much more difficult to "get to know them" on a more personal level. I suspect my age may also have played a small role here, as I was close enough to their age to be an "almost-insider" yet old enough to be clearly marked as an outsider. Had they (the students) been younger or I been older, I think I may have had more success in accessing the out of school lives of these students. That said, I was able to get to know several students fairly well both in and beyond the classroom environment. I introduce them in the next section.

My overarching goal with my field notes was to produce them as a "written [attempt] to impose order on the external world of our research as well as on our personal lives in the field, to grow up through understanding the culture we are studying, to perceive the realities of the interests and motivations of those who interact with us in the field" (Ottenberg 141, in Sanjek). In this, I generally relied on composing hand-written "scratch" notes while actually observing the classroom, recording not just basic functions

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of the class (including what activities were occurring, what time they occurred at, snippets of dialogue, etc) but also to record my own thoughts and musings while I was trying to make sense of what I was seeing. Then, after I had left the classroom, I would type up longer, more probing notes concerning not just thoughts and reactions as to what I had seen in the classroom, but also to record any evolving ideas and theories I had. In addition to observing the class itself most days of the week, I also spent time observing several "classic" rituals of high school life, including going to pep rallies, attending football games and concerts, and even just walking around the community on days when I was not needed at the University.

Getting to know the students

While the entire class will figure prominently in the discussions I am about to undertake in regard to what I saw as a participant-observation, there are 5 students that served as quasi-"focal students" and as such I will refer to them by name. Because of that, I want to briefly introduce them here. The first, already discussed in the introduction to this chapter, is Sam. Sam was the first student I met in the class, as Ms. Stein (perhaps purposefully) assigned me a seat behind him. His full name is Salim, but due to his acute awareness of being Muslim in a predominately Christian community, chooses to go by "Sam" (even though nearly every student knows his full name). Early on, I noted that Sam is much like an ambassador for the school and for himself. During an interview, he described his strategy for school and social success as being modeled on marketing, and in particular, "branding." In other words, Sam saw himself as a "brand" to be built up, hoping to increase the "buzz" over his name by both teachers and fellow students.

Interestingly, Sam had already completed an AP course with Ms. Stein, and had been successful in it (by both of their accounts). Due to his strategy, Sam was able to move between various social circles and cliques with astonishing ease. For example, Ms Stein often relied on an instructional strategy which she referred to as "snaky snaky" in which after successfully answering an exercise (often on grammar), the student would choose the next person to go. I discovered very quickly that these "snaky snaky" moments were perfect moments in which I could start to understand the social boundaries of various groups within the classroom, as students would always call on someone for whom they felt "safe" (i.e., was inside their own social circle). Sam was one of two students that *any* student could call on, and consequently served as a "transfer point" between various social groups during these exercises. This social liquidity did come at a cost, though. Sam was often utilized by members of the high-popularity (and athletic) social group to "peer-review" their papers. By peer-review, it meant that they would give Sam their papers and he would meticulously copy-edit them, pointing out every grammatical and mechanical error with astonishing accuracy, as well as suggest the appropriate corrections. When I asked Sam if he felt that he was being used, he shrugged off the notion and told me that it was all part of building his brand.

While Sam's presence indicates that the class was not completely "white," Kendra was the only black student in the class. Kendra appeared very early in my notes, as she was one of the few students who not only spoke up often in class, but was also willing to challenge other students when they (often unknowingly) would say classist or racist things in class. Despite this--and perhaps because Kendra's willingness to challenge other students was met only by her quickness to smile and laugh--she was universally well

liked in class, including Ms. Stein. Often, Kendra would "shhh!" other students while Ms.

Stein was attempting to speak or admonish her classmates to "come on, let's do this"

when they were being sluggish. However, Kendra would often instigate such things when

substitute teachers were present. Kendra played basketball and was a manager for the

varsity football squad. This meant that she was one of the main members of the social

group that was comprised of other athletes in the class. While she was well liked by the

entire class, she rarely if ever participated in peer interaction with students outside of this

group.

Jack represented the biggest conundrum for me, and for Ms. Stein. While he did

not fit the outlines of my study (he was a junior, not a senior), I found it impossible to not

be drawn to his personality. Jack was the quintessential insider-outsider. Early on, in

discussing the rest of the class with me, he noted that he "knew" everyone in the class as

he had been in school with them since kindergarten, and taken many of the same classes,

but did not hang out with them. Accordingly, other students--some who have had other

classes with him throughout their schooling--would have to ask for his name (even deep

into the semester). Jack seemed to take this in stride, perhaps even revel in it. In the

classroom, Jack was mercurial. While his intelligence was unmistakable, he would often

"tune out" to the extent of simply reading other books (often beatnik literature: Ginsberg,

Kerouac and the like) or pay so little attention that when he was called on by Ms. Stein, it

would almost always cause a minor scandal. This outer turmoil was just as complicated

on the inside. One day, after submitting an essay, Ms. Stein asked the students to write a

self-reflection of their work. Jack simply sat in his desk and handed in an empty sheet of

paper. Later that afternoon, as Ms. Stein and I were walking outside to attend a pep rally,

we encountered Jack at his locker who asked Ms. Stein to forgive him for his "bullshit" (as he put it). Ms. Stein told Jack that she believed she could teach him if he'd give her a chance. Jack would continually test this belief over the entire semester. Every day that I talked to Jack, I would learn something new that would turn everything upside down. For instance, halfway through the semester while I was talking with Jack about an assignment he did not complete, he mentioned that his mother was an instructor of writing at a local community college.

Christian, a composite character[3] of two male students, would be readily identifiable within popular culture as the quintessential "jock." He was a captain of the football team, the homecoming king, and to Ms. Stein's eternal ire, a *consummate* class clown. Early in the semester, Christian sat next to me in the classroom at a table due to a recent knee surgery he had undergone. Despite not being able to play, Christian always wore his team jersey with the rest of his teammates. In this regard, Christian was dedicated and loyal to not only his team, but to his school. In the classroom, though, he was more often than not referred to as a "butt-head" by Ms. Stein (in an affectionate way—most times). Their relationship throughout the semester was complicated to say the least, mostly because Christian's intelligence was so keen that he was constantly able to stay one step ahead of Ms. Stein. He interrupted constantly, but as I began to realize very early on, his interruptions were almost always nuanced and sophisticated in the way in which they *were* responding to what the class was doing. For example, during class one day Ms. Stein was leading a discussion concerning a short story they had read in which

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[3] I recognize that the construction of "composite characters" is contentious within Ethnography. I do so here not out of a need to further disguise the identity of a particular informant / consultant, but to simply maintain a coherence within the narrative I am constructing.

the main character had witnessed a violent crime but not called for help. As Ms. Stein was trying to push the class to consider the ethics of this and whether or not the concept of "community" actually meant anything, Christian continually countered every argument Ms. Stein made with seemingly ludicrous retorts. On a superficial level, it would seem clear that Christian was simply out to push Ms. Stein's buttons. However, on a closer look at this and other exchanges, it becomes evident that the reason Christian was so uncommonly good at pushing the limits of Ms. Stein was because he was quite clearly capable of seeing the foundational structure of Ms. Stein's arguments--often at a moment's notice--and taking extreme positions against them.

While many of these students attracted my attention as an observer because of their visibility, Jennifer was the opposite. Quiet and reserved in class, she was well liked among her circle of friends and rarely spoke up during class discussions. In her schoolwork, Jennifer was mostly dutiful and as such, Ms. Stein came to rely upon her even though it was clear that Jennifer was not interested in having Ms. Stein be a close "mentor" outside the realm of school. During group work, Jennifer almost always worked with the other "misfits" of the classroom: students who didn't quite fit into the more popular social groups in the classroom. This is not to say that Jennifer was a teacher's pet. In fact, often times she would procrastinate as much as the other students, although would always seem to come through at the last minute with something to hand in. I eventually discovered that outside of class, Jennifer was a voracious writer of poems and fictional stories, often participating in online writer's communities. Additionally, I often saw Jennifer engaging in a ritual that some female students engaged in: writing on each other's cloth backpacks. By the end of the semester, Jennifer (as well as many of her

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friends) sported backpacks that were completely covered in handwritten text. This enthusiasm for writing never translated into enthusiasm for writing essays in College English, though.

I offer these brief biographical descriptions to offer a sort of "flavor" for the sorts of students in this classroom. However, I want to be careful to note that it would be impossible to reduce any single student to a "type" or an "every student." For example, while many students were athletes and the athletic culture was definitely marked by an upper-class influence, there were several student-athletes in College English that were very clearly from working class families and as such, never fully fit into any social group. Additionally, while students often times moved in particular groups with particular attributes, these groups were always fluid and contingent upon several factors, including the ebb and flow of personal, out of school relationships between students. For example, while there were definitely some social groupings that were built along class lines, these lines were often crossed when other group memberships (such as athletics) came into play. That said, the one thing that everyone seemed to have contact with was the "Bartleby Syndrome" I described earlier. In the next section, I turn directly to this phenomenon.

Dead Letters

For a few moments I was turned into a pillar of salt, standing at the head of my seated column of clerks. Recovering myself, I advanced towards the screen, and demanded the reason for such extraordinary conduct.
 "Why do you refuse?"
 "I would prefer not to."
 With any other man I should have flown outright into a dreadful passion, scorned all further words, and thrust him ignominiously from my presence. But there was something about Bartleby that not only strangely disarmed me, but in a wonderful manner touched

and disconcerted me. I began to reason with him.
"These are your own copies we are about to examine. It is labor saving to you, because one examination will answer for your four papers. It is common usage. Every copyist is bound to help examine his copy. Is it not so? Will you not speak? Answer!"
"I prefer not to," he replied in a flute-like tone.
<div align="right">*-from "Bartleby the Scrivener," Herman Melville*</div>

The students genuinely respected and liked Ms. Stein. I feel this is important to note at the start of this section, because it would be all too easy (and wrong) for readers to interpret what I am about to recount as a consequence of a bad teacher or a teacher who held no respect of their students. This happens far too often in the public conversation over the supposed failings of our educational system. There was one emblematic moment during the semester in which I realized just how much the students did like Ms. Stein. On this particular day, six weeks into the semester, I walked into the classroom to discover a substitute teacher. Ms. Stein had fallen ill that day and had left a note about me and my observation as well as instructions to let the students do the peer-review session Ms. Stein had set up. In briefly talking with the substitute before the students entered, I realized she was in a position that many other young, freshly licensed teachers were in: unable to find full time employment and as such working as a full time substitute, often going into different classrooms every day of the week. This turned out to be a disastrous recipe. While the substitute followed her directions, and the students followed theirs, a peer-review session in a writing classroom often looks like total chaos when compared to the normally locked down style of interactions that go on elsewhere in schools. After about 20 minutes, the substitute teacher, nervous at seeing 30 students having seemingly unstructured conversations, decided she had to reassert control over the classroom and started to go around to the small groups of students and demanded that they stay on task.

The students, confused because they *were* on task, continued on. At this point, I (as well as other students) began to feel a sense of anxiety creep in. The substitute dug in, telling students they had to return to their seats because "not enough work" was "getting done." Jack, sitting next to me and describing some ideas he had about the essay, became an easy target for the substitute, who ordered him to "find something, anything" to do. By this point, the students, realizing a young and inexperienced teacher was now on the defensive, reacted as though they were sharks and had just detected blood in the water. I don't care to describe what happened next, as neither the students nor the substitute teacher would be proud of the things that occurred. Ten minutes later, it was over. The substitute, now tears streaming down her face, kept asking the students "how do you think this makes me feel?" The students, quiet and somber, avoided eye contact with everyone else. I wrote the following in my field notes: "Silence. As the sounds of adjacent class rooms filter in, the victory of the sub is somewhat secured. We are reminded by the muffled noise that is now our noise of that moment of guilt and shame that always fills one's thoughts after a fight. *Damn this. Damn it all*."

The next day I met with Ms. Stein (who returned despite having lost her voice) before class for our bi-weekly interview. As the time for class to start approached, Ms. Stein had to rush off to the office at the other end of the building to grab some copies, leaving me alone in the classroom. One by one, students peeked into the window of the door and seeing only me, motioned me over. As I opened the door, several asked me if she was back yet. I indicated that she was but had to grab some copies. An immediate sigh of relief set in, as students then confidently filled into the classroom and took their seats. When Ms. Stein finally entered the classroom, she was met with a barrage of "we

missed you!" and "we're so glad you're back!," even from some of the male students who rarely if ever displayed any sort of emotion in class. This would not be the only moment like this over the course of the semester. However, even though the students were very quick to praise Ms. Stein during interviews and conversations, this often did not lead to students taking up the difficult standards Ms. Stein challenged them with. The first instance I recorded of a student not taking up the challenge happened purely by accident in the 4th week of class. Until this point, my attention as an observer had been trained on other things. For the first few weeks, just as I had been trained to do in methods courses, I had been trying to outline and make sense of the social geography of the class. My notes were filled with observations of various interactions between students of different groups, relying on activities that forced interactions to help me decipher what was going on. I had even started to try to create provisional labels and names for different groups, such as the "Buffoonery Boys," a group of mostly athletes who continually disrupted class through joking and sarcastic remarks.

It was actually while recording one of these moments in which the "Buffoonery Boys" took momentary control of the classroom (moments I referred to as "delay by chumminess") that I noticed Jack, who sat next to me, nervously fidgeting with a pen while staring intently at the clock. It was during this day that students were to bring a rough draft of their personal narrative essay so that Ms. Stein could record it in her grade book. The discussion had moved from a question about a grammar exercise they were working on to something completely unrelated. Every time Ms. Stein attempted to pivot back to the class, another question would pop up that Ms. Stein would respond to. In my notes, I noted in awe how good the students were at throwing out questions just barely

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serious and relevant enough to keep Ms. Stein biting, but to prevent her from getting back to her agenda. Finally, the bell rang and the class was suddenly over. Jack sprung up, looked at me and exclaimed "saved for another day!" and bounded out of the classroom. It wasn't until a couple days later during an in-class sharing session of drafts that I discovered Jack had no rough draft, nor had even really thought about what he might write. This suddenly explained why he was so nervously watching time run out and his sudden moment of salvation when class time was over. The time-delay strategy had not only thwarted Ms. Stein's lesson plans for the day, but had also prevented Jack's procrastination from being discovered.

At the time, I didn't see much importance in this moment. For anyone who teaches any subject (and writing is certainly no different), moments like this where students fail to submit an assignment are not rare. This was especially true given the fact that it was a "rough draft" of the essay, something students tend to be notorious at "forgetting" to do. However, the day after the final drafts of the personal narratives were to be submitted online, Ms. Stein met me at the door as I came into the classroom and informed me that twelve of the students, more than one third of the entire class, had not submitted anything. She was livid. Exasperated, she claimed that this was the first time in ten years of teaching that she was "missing papers" from students. This was a pattern that would continue in some way for the rest of the semester.

As mentioned before, I refer to this non-participation or students simply not engaging with the class as the "Bartleby Syndrome." I refer to it by this name because in general I think there are two defining features of this phenomenon. First, that this is a sort of peaceful or passive sort of non-participation. Students on the whole, while sometimes

would be frustrated or annoyed with Ms. Stein, were not in outright rebellion against her. They all respected her, liked her, and genuinely seemed to miss her when she was gone. When students had to be reprimanded or disciplined by Ms. Stein for in-class behavior issues (as was often the case with Christian), they genuinely seemed to be upset and disappointed with their actions. Second, students were absolutely capable of exerting tremendous amounts of effort on various things, but when it came to this class they seemed to just "prefer not to." I bring up this aspect because I want to outline one particularly pernicious aspect of this non-participation. Students not submitting assignments by deadlines was obviously one of the most visible ways of not engaging in the class. However, it was the not so visible attitude or "mood" of the classroom in which students chose not to work on writing through drafts and revisions over time that was the true "Bartleby" element. By this, I mean that many students preferred to not engage in the *process* of writing. Readings were not read for class, drafts were not brought for peer-review sessions, discussions over readings were treated as alienated from drafts (often, likely, because no drafts existed). So students did complete their writing assignments, but more often than not it was writing done in as little time as possible, often right before the project was due or even days (and sometimes weeks) after the deadline.

Part of this can be explained by the way in which "work" was done by students in Copper Valley High. Early in my observations, I had taken to a little game during class in which I would keep track of students who were writing notes and students who were not. Some students appeared to be writing down everything that Ms. Stein was saying. Other students were either lost in their thoughts (daydreaming), asleep, or listening to Ms. Stein but writing nothing. However, it wasn't until much later in the semester during an

interview with Kendra and Sam that I realized I had not been seeing what I thought I might have been. In talking with students during the class, and especially in finding out how difficult it was to *find* time to talk to students, I had become aware that even though a lot of work was not being done for the class, for many students it was not because they were "lazy" (even though this is a label they often ascribed to themselves). I broached the question with Kendra, who I knew was active in several extracurricular activities. As I reconstructed her daily schedule, it became apparent that most of her days started at 5:30 in the morning and then went until 10:30 at night. I asked her what I think is the obvious question:[4]

> Matthew: I mean the question I have to ask is...when do you have time to do school stuff?
>
> Kendra: school work? during school. for real. all my homework I do during school unless I have to type something up.
>
> like I will do it like if I have time between classes or during class and I'm doing nothing I'll just do my work [for another class]
>
> Matthew: mmhm
>
> Kendra: so like um, hypothetically you would be sitting in Stein's class and not having anything going on in Stein's class you would have something else for another class that you would then work on then
>
> Matthew: umm do you have like a study hall? or...
>
> Kendra: I wish, dude. that would be so great. that would be like the best thing ever.
>
> Matthew: so there are six periods of classes right [yeah] and you have an actual class all six of those
>
> Kendra yes. I had seven classes this semester though. I had to take hybrid fitness

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[4] I have deliberately chosen to retain a "verbatim" construction of interview transcriptions in this dissertation, including the fragmentary nature of spoken speech. However, because I am not relying on an in-depth analysis of the speech itself, I have not retained textual representations of pauses, tics, and so forth.

for life, which is a gym class.

Matthew: I've heard about this.

Matthew: so you don't have a study hall necessarily, you work on school stuff in school, but always during times when you can get away with it, right? [K: yeah]. how often does that happen?

Kendra: like all the time. like we're...if I'm not like doing anything or the teacher is like "work day" they don't really care what you're doing if you're not being disruptive. like, well now especially that you're older, they're not going to be like oh are you doing anything. only the subs do that, which is super freakin' annoying [M: staying on task right?] yeah, like "shut up" I'm not burning anything, I'm not killing anybody. just leave me alone

Matthew: so during the day, any given day in any class, how often would you say you have time to work on other stuff?

Kendra: maybe like an hour. like all six classes put together

Matthew: ah, but never at one shot right?

Kendra: Nah.

Matthew: so like five minutes here 10 minutes there, maybe

Later in the interview, Sam dropped by and joined the discussion. I asked Sam the same question:

Matthew: so, looking at your schedule, the question I had for Kendra, I'll ask you. when does doing school work fit in here.

Sam: my senior year I mean I speak for myself I can almost guarantee Kendra does the same thing, you develop a system in which you do whatever is due 1st period at home, and then the first period you do whatever is due the second period, and so on and so forth, so your homework time comes a period before. [Kendra laughs and agrees]

Matthew: not only do you have a strategy, you know... you have a system

Sam: the only thing you do at home are things you have to type up

Matthew: so it is kind of like a first in first out system

Sam: and then the copying...yeah.

After this interview, I began to pay closer attention to the students who were "working" in class. Whereas before I had assumed that students were writing things down from the class, it became more and more apparent that what they were writing down often had nothing to do with what was going on immediately in front of themselves. Sometimes the hints were obvious: math textbooks would be on their laps under the table, readings were out for other classes only partially obscured by grammar worksheets. Other times the hints were a little less obvious. Times in which students seemed to be completely caught off-guard by Ms. Stein's questions (such as a question on a worksheet they were working through) were now clearly visible to me as times in which students were absorbed in the content of a different class, not that they didn't necessarily know the answer or correct response to have. Paying closer attention, I even began to notice that students were continually writing things *even when the class discussion didn't seem to necessitate any writing*.

This is not to say that all students were doing this all of the time. Kendra herself, while admitting this is often what she did in other classes, claimed to be actually taking notes in Ms. Stein's class (something I can attest to, since I asked to see her notes one day). Her reason for this was not well formed, but rather predicated on a belief that this might be important to her. However, as she described it in her own words, "I just feel that this stuff might be important to know someday." That "someday" aspect of her response will be important to dwell on more in Chapter 4. For now, I will just suggest that this indicates that while Kendra did think there might be something important about the discussions and lessons in College English, she only understood the importance of such

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things in terms of things she might need to know in the future. As to how they might be important to her in the present, Kendra was not sure.

This aspect of how "work" was viewed and undertaken by students in the class is important to understand, as it suggests one important, although not comprehensive, answer as to why many "writing process" activities tended to not work in the classroom. We can think of the structural limitations in time imposed through the rigidity of the school day as a sort of rationality that determines or fixes how students are capable of understanding "writing" and how it is done. Or to put that more simply, the method of doing school work by the students is a very practical solution to the problem or question created by the time-space context of the high school itself.

In this same interview with Kendra and Sam, I tried to figure out just what students understood as the "writing process." I was interested in trying to understand what actually happened when students talked about their papers with each other. Here is how they responded:

> Matthew: So describe to me what you do when you are discussing a classmate's paper with them. What do you talk about?
> Sam: like to me when you're like editing someone's paper, you don't edit someone's paper because you care what they are writing, you edit someone's paper so that they can get a better grade on the technicalities... so like someone could be writing something and it's stupid but that doesn't matter.
> Matthew: so when you do that, you're looking for mostly technical things, but do you ever say "what you're writing here is completely wrong"?
> Kendra: you just write so that you just tell them just so they can get their main points across... so if it doesn't make sense that's one thing but you don't say "oh this is dumb or this is wrong or this is right"... you just do the technicality stuff and yeah you should add more stuff here and yeah

Matthew: so when you talk with other people about their papers, and I'm guessing for other classes as well, it's never about what's being said and like the conclusions they come to but only how they are saying it?

Sam: uh yeah...so... everyone knows that's the same thing you're doing... like when you give someone a paper you're not doing like "oh hey that's what I think about something tell me if you agree" it's more like "hey read this tell me if I forgot a comma."

Earlier, Sam offered this "philosophy" on approaching school-work:

Sam: also I think like why should we....my philosophy in life ... even in math is why does the hell does it matter how you got to the answer as long as it's right? why the hell does it matter how you got to the paper as long as it is right, as long as you can source your information right like, support it... it shouldn't matter how you got there.

The "process movement" in composition has traditionally stressed the concepts of refinement and growth through drafts and revisions. However, as Kendra and Sam's comments above suggestion, students rarely if ever had a desire to do more than to just "get it done." As Sam's statement so bluntly points out, for him "why does it matter" as long as it is correct or right. So for instance, while Christian's literary analysis paper was done (on time even!) and almost met the length requirements, what did not occur is any sort of participation in or transfer from all the activities Ms. Stein did in class to help the essay evolve.

This mood would manifest itself in other, unexpected ways. For example, Ms. Stein was stunned to learn one day deep into the semester that only a small handful of students had actually looked at the feedback on their essays that she had spent days producing. While I suspect her pride was wounded, the bigger concern Ms. Stein had was

that students weren't utilizing feedback to improve future drafts and essays. This concern would be continually validated throughout the semester. One common thread in my interviews with Ms. Stein was a frustration with the ways in which students would very neatly compartmentalize the class discussions and their own writing. From Ms. Stein's view, students saw classroom discussions as "just shooting the shit" (as she described it) and did not seem to be able to transfer classroom discussions to their writing. For example, during the period in which the students were to be working on the literary analysis paper, quite a lot of class time was dedicated to discussions of the assigned stories in class. However, when Ms. Stein finally started reading through some of the drafts, she was disheartened to discover that many of the lively discussions had simply failed to appear in the work of the students. This was deeply problematic for Ms. Stein, as it directly thwarted her own understanding of what it means to teach writing. To understand how this works, here is Ms. Stein's response to my question of what her "subject" was as a teacher. Or, in other words, what exactly *did* she teach? She started out by attempting to explain her understanding of writing through a contrast. What she was trying to place her own theory of teaching writing in contrast is the idea that writing has no "topic" of its own, and as such writing classes must be given a topic or a "theme." This is how she understood the dominant orthodoxy of how first year composition was taught at the major local university. As she explained, though:

> but if they are spending all of their time worrying about this theme of transportation, when are they spending time worrying about their writing, and the thinking about what the process means to them, and what about what I'm teaching them will carry with them to the future? I don't care if they become experts on light rail. I don't care and I don't think *they* care if they choose to zero in on something like that. That's great but I think that even thematically connecting all

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of their writing is a distraction from what we're trying to do. [I ask: which is?] Writing is thinking so I guess I really think I'm a thinking teacher: how do you organize your thoughts, how do you persuade, or cajole, or entertain. I don't know how to put in a word. My subject is...hmm I don't have a good answer for you. Writing is thinking and that's as close as I can get to it. "

The method through which this "writing as thinking" was carried out was often born out of discussion. Typically, these discussions worked as a sort of conversation between [STUDENTS] and Ms. Stein. That is, all points of discussion moved and were subsequently redirected through Ms. Stein. Students did not discuss the texts with each other (in small groups, for example), but rather they discussed it directly with Ms. Stein one at a time. In this way, individual students were put into one "super category" of [STUDENTS] and would jump in and out of the stream of conversation. What resulted from this arrangement is that it was more like a conversation between two people (with one interlocutor being comprised of many individuals) as opposed to several voices taking part at once. Ms. Stein would generally start with basic questions concerning "what" a text was saying, and would eventually move to broader, more abstract questions. This was facilitated by Ms. Stein's control of the flow and direction of the discussion. However, this control was not necessarily foolproof, as students proved to be very adept at moving Ms. Stein off of where she wanted to be (much to her consternation).

For example, as student were working on their comparison/contrast papers, Ms. Stein had them read a very short piece in which a situation was described in which a person was shot in front of many witnesses, none of whom did anything to help the victim. After some preliminary questions concerning the content of the text, Ms. Stein nudged the conversation towards a question of what ethical responsibilities members of a

community have. The students, though, seemed to have other plans. Quickly, the discussion (even though it was moving through multiple individuals), evolved in to a sort of one-upmanship contest in which the goal was to see who could come up with the most exotic argument/answer to the question of whether others should have helped or not. This invariably led to the argument being reconstructed by students into metaphors such as "a herd of antelope versus a pride of lions." The point being, with this particular example, that if a bunch of lions are around, the antelope will simply run off and not stay to help.

This was visibly causing no small amount of frustration with Ms. Stein. Further, and perhaps what made her even more frustrated, was that there *was* some sort of logic or rationality behind the increasingly abstract, bizarre, and silly yet dada-esque arguments. This semi-coherence functioned to keep students within "the game" of class discussion but also allowed them to exert control over the situation (which they very clearly accomplished). Eventually Ms. Stein was able to reclaim the direction of the conversation and steered it toward a question concerning what this means about "America" and "American culture." As students began to wrap their mind around this, and as Ms. Stein continued to draw different students in and out of the flow of the discussion, the students began to start considering how the idea of "individualism" defined "America" as a culture. While not all students were willing to give up the previous free for all (Christian's lone comment during this phase was "Go move to China if you don't like it!"--something I don't think he meant other than as a statement intended to rile up some controversy), the discussion was sincerely breaking some interesting ground. Jennifer, who rarely talked much in class, struggled to explain to Ms. Stein how "People think its so great, but they only see it from the outside, and it's not so great on the inside." This

came as a response to another student who claimed that the reason that everyone tries to immigrate to the United States is a sort of "proof" that American culture is "how it should be." Christian even stepped back into the discussion, attempting to construct an argument that, while it might not be great, American individualism is better than socialism which, as he claimed, "doesn't work." This was almost immediately explored and eventually dismantled by several students, one of who brought in a discussion from another class in which they talked about how capitalism "doesn't work, either." Christian, instead of being angry or ashamed, simply muttered to himself that "that's true I guess."

Perhaps buoyed by this success, Ms. Stein then attempted to bring the discussion back to the text by asking students to "find words that support that." Kendra, who was trying to suggest that "we just aren't as neighborly now as then" was the first to run into this trouble when Ms. Stein pointed out that the text they were reading was written some 40 years ago (something virtually no one else seemed to realize). Kendra sat in silence as her eyes glazed over the text. Jack, who up to this point had stayed out of most of the discussion, jumped in to try to "save" Kendra by suggesting that the text does this "through the tone" of the text. Ms. Stein shifted her attention to Jack and asked him "where does it show you that?" Jack, frustrated perhaps because his answer did not work as he intended it to, resorted to saying simply "it just does." Ms. Stein initially did not accept this answer, causing a tense moment in which Jacks frustration started to boil over. It is in this moment that the bells ring and the students leap up out of their seats and leave the classroom. The topic was never revisited.

Later, Ms. Stein and I would very slightly disagree over this moment. Ms. Stein, while encouraged by where parts of the discussion went, was still focused on the

inappropriateness of the dada-esque arguments that erupted and for some time took control of the classroom. I saw it more as students actually "testing out" their abilities to construct arguments, even if they were silly. Of course, my "read" on the situation was only made possible because I did not shoulder any responsibility towards the decorum of the classroom, something Ms. Stein had to be able to account for. Regardless, this moment (and others like it) stands out as important, simply because it demonstrates an ability for students to actively engage in such discussions as well as their ability to construct claims about them. It is also important because moments like these, as mentioned before, almost never translated into students utilizing them as building blocks for their assigned essays. Why, then, did Ms. Stein not focus more on directly assisting students with moving such arguments, claims, and interpretations of the text into their own essays *directly in class*? Part of the answer is that Ms. Stein was facing time-space constraints just like students (the length of class, demands of the curriculum, etc). But perhaps more importantly, such a move would have been at odds with Ms. Stein's *other* objective, which was to "prepare" students for writing in college. While this will be explored in much greater detail in chapter 4, the reason this was at odds with helping students with this in class is that it did not fit the image Ms. Stein had of how "writing" happens in college, a world in which professors would largely not spend the time to do such things. Her effort, then, to mimic such an environment precluded what may have been a necessary step in translating such discussions in the classroom into the student's actual writing. However, had she tried to do this, it most likely would not have worked anyway since it *also* goes against what many students commonly understood to be the important part of writing. Sam's charge that "why does it matter" as long as the answer is

right suggests that such a move might have contradicted *this* understanding of the purpose of writing. In the next section, I will suggest a theoretical framework that helps to work through such understandings of writing to see how this "Bartleby Syndrome" is constructed.

The Construction of Bartleby

In subsequent chapters, I will be dealing more thoroughly with pulling apart what occurred in this classroom. In particular, in the next chapter I will be developing a theoretical framework that understands "activity" and "action" in order to illuminate *why* certain things happened the way that they did. Further, in chapter four, I will be exploring the ways in which such features of the classroom were co-constructed by broader social dynamics. Most notably, I will be exploring the function of "college preparation" as well as the longer history of "literacy crises" in literacy instruction. As I will be arguing, "college preparation" is essentially a contemporary iteration of a long history of various "literacy crises" that have come and gone. To finish out this chapter, though, I want to focus squarely on building an understanding of this "Bartleby Syndrome" as I have been describing it. To do so, I first want to argue that it would be wrong to understand the "Bartleby Syndrome" as an *absence* of literacy, or as a form of illiteracy. Both of these charges (absence of literacy or illiteracy) are deeply infused with ideological baggage including spurious claims on the moral fitness of students as well as fears and anxieties over an oft-suggested general decline of western civilization. Instead, a more productive way of understanding this "Bartleby Syndrome" is as a particular type of *literacy practice*.

The concept of "literacy practices" as I am using it here draws from an arc of literacy studies that has sought to understand literacy as "ideological" as opposed to "autonomous." An "autonomous" model of literacy asserts that there is one "master" form of literacy and that it is its own force, capable of producing cognitive benefits purely from contact with it.[5] An ideological understanding, in contrast, asserts that there are multiple literacies and that the value and function of these literacies cannot be determined outside of the social forces and conditions that produced them. Or, in other words, that literacy itself does not exist outside of history. Ethnographic researchers such as Shirley Brice Heath used the concept of "literacy events" in order to isolate and and focus on situations in which literacy has some role (Protean 445). As an extension of this, the concept of "literacy practices" evolved to be able to link such literacy events to broader social and cultural dynamics.[6] As Barton and Hamilton describe it, "However practices are not observable units of behaviour since they also involve values, attitudes, feelings and social relationships. This includes people's awareness of literacy, constructions of literacy and discourses of literacy, how people talk about and make sense of literacy" (7). It is in this way that all the various "values, attitudes, feelings and social relationships" that are rendered invisible in the written text are recovered, often through ethnographic research methods.

Many theorists in this arc have grounded their understandings of literacy in the work of the social psychologist Lev Vygotsky (and in particular, his discussion of how "mind" is constituted by society and the implications that follow from it) as well as the

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[5] Goody and Watt's classic essay "The Consequences of Literacy," which I will discuss later in the next chapter, is a good example of this.
[6] See also Street, 1984, 1995, 2003

literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin and his concepts of *heteroglossia, dialogism, and chronotope*. While it is unfortunately beyond the scope of this current project to draw out a full comparison of Vygotsky and Bakhtin's work to that of American Pragmatists, there have been a few writers that have noted the striking similarities and resonances between the two, especially in regard to the work of John Dewey in the area of social psychology. It will suffice to note here that, like many in the Pragmatist tradition, literacy theorists in this arc understand knowledge as a result of social forces and not something that is simply discovered.

As such, the concept of "literacy practices" is much more useful in understanding the "Bartleby Syndrome" than something like Genre Theory, simply because the distinguishing feature of this phenomena is precisely the historically and socially situated values, attitudes, feelings, and understandings that help students understand and carry out the *methods of producing a text*. While Genre Theory (and in particular, its evolving relationship with rhetorical studies) has been slowing moving from simply describing "text types" to the social conditions that inform such text types (Bawarshi 335; Devitt 698), it still remains focused on *texts*. While the essays many students submitted were no doubt affected by the methods through which they were produced, the texts themselves conceal and render invisible the methods of production.

In the 2000 collection edited by Barton, Hamilton, and Ivanic quoted above, Barton and Hamilton introduce the concept of literacy practices by suggesting six "propositions" about the nature of literacy. Of these six, the following three are of particular interest in thinking about the Bartleby Syndrome:

- There are different literacies associated with different domains of life.
- Literacy practices are patterned by social institutions and power relationships, and

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some literacies are more dominant, visible and influential than others.
- Literacy practices are purposeful and embedded in broader social goals and cultural practices. (8)

I suggest that it is more productive to understand this "Bartleby Syndrome" as a particular type of *literacy practice* for a few reasons. Before I enumerate these reasons, I want to quickly summarize again what exactly I mean by this "Bartleby Syndrome." By invoking the Melville's eponymous character in the short story "Bartleby the Scrivner," I am drawing attention to the phenomena in which most students (and at times, all students) simply "preferred not to" engage in various "processes of writing." By this, I do not mean that students did not write anything, or did not turn any assignments in (although many students submitted assignments well past due dates and deadlines), but rather their passive refusal to participate in producing drafts, revisions, engaging in peer-review, utilizing teacher feedback, and in general treating the composition of a text as a one time event as opposed to a process over time. This is why I refer this as a *syndrome*. By syndrome I do not mean some sort of medical abnormality, but rather "a predictable, characteristic pattern of behavior, action, etc., that tends to occur under certain circumstances." Additionally, and like medical cases, my use of the term *syndrome* also is intended to draw attention to the fact that such a constellation of patterns of behavior do not in of themselves indicate a direct cause. In other words, the reasons for this passive non-participation are not immediately visible in the non-participation itself. Finally, the word "syndrome" is suggestive of the way in which this pattern of behavior seemed to be "catching" and thus seemed to actually "spread" and increase in intensity during the semester.

While it might seem logical to simply see this as students "not doing their work,"

such an explanation fails to adequately describe what was actually going on. Importantly, students *were* often able to produce *some* form of writing to be submitted at the deadlines. While these drafts were often written very quickly, often in the days immediately before the deadline, and often severely below expectations (not meeting length requirements, not fulfilling required components, sometimes not even aligning with the assigned project itself), *writing did occur*. Accordingly, it would be wrong to see this as a simple absence of writing. Also, by understanding the Bartleby Syndrome *as* its own peculiar (although not rare) type of *literacy practice*, we can at least have some sort of object to analyze. Without this, any framework of analysis would be required to rely upon some sort of contrast between "deficient" writing practices and "successful" ones. Finally, such an understanding inappropriately individualizes such non-participation, understanding it as a break down or lack of "personal motivation" which obscures the social basis to such non-participation.

With that in mind, I want to return to the Bartleby Syndrome *as* a literacy practice and to the three propositions about literacy from Barton and Hamilton. The first, that "there are different literacies associated with different domains of life" was routinely validated in my observations of the students. While the students may not have been doing much drafting and revising of their assigned essays, writing was in abundance in the classroom. For example, Jennifer and many of the other women in the classroom would often write messages to each other on their backpacks. By the end of the semester, their backpacks were completely covered with various phrases, messages, notes, anecdotes, and so forth written by other women in the class. Also, many students were active writers outside of the class. Jack, who had recently been introduced to the "Beat" writers of the

1950s, would occasionally come in with long poems and stories, sometimes written during manic writing binges that would go all night. Other students, such as Sam and Christian could be seen constantly sending text messages through their mobile telephones in class despite a prohibition against this. Outside of school, one of Kendra's jobs was to work at the local community center/library. Because the school setting itself is permeable to multiple domains of life, these other literacy practices were visible. More interestingly, though, is that every student I talked to was able to recount an experience or an occasion in which they *did* fully engage in something like the "process of writing" envisioned by Ms. Stein. Sam, most notably, told me about the speeches he wrote for his extra-curricular marketing club competitions. These speeches, often composed on his smartphone, were something that he would spend weeks agonizing over, sharing with others, revising, and re-writing. What this indicates is that the literacy practices the students engaged in in relation to the class was unique to the class (and to a lesser extent to school in general).

The second proposition, that "literacy practices are patterned by social institutions and power relationships, and some literacies are more dominant, visible and influential and others" fits the Bartleby Syndrome, particularly in the way that the rigid constraints of space-time in the school produced a way of working that undoubtedly contributed to the student's non-participation in process pedagogy activities. Further, various ideas about what counts as writing (held by both the students as well as the teacher) worked to obscure all the non-school forms of writing detailed above. When students were asked about what they like to write on the first day of class, many of them were quick to label themselves as "non-writers" and "bad writers," despite the fact that they participated in all

sorts of writing outside of the classroom. Finally, Ms. Stein's notions of college, her role as a teacher in a high school, and various demands and expectations from other teachers, administration, parents, as well as the discipline of English studies itself all patterned the various activities and assignments that were carried out in the classroom. While I will return to this in chapter four (specifically, the demands created by "college preparation" curricula), what I want to point out is that all these things created the background and expectations that students "preferred not to" engage in, thus creating the Bartleby Syndrome. In other words, the idealized "literacy practices" that Ms. Stein arranged her class with did not actually define the terms of what the actual literacy practices might be as the class progressed, rather it simply served as the yardstick through which the value of what *did* occur would be measured (typically as a "failure"), both for the students *and* Ms. Stein. This failure was felt in overt ways (grades, disciplining students, etc) as well as more subtle ways (emotional duress, confusion, etc). Again, the defining feature of the Bartleby Syndrome wasn't so much a pure and absolute *absence* of any literacy practice (although without a doubt, this did frequently occur), but rather was a feature of a deep conflict between two very different kinds of literacy practices.

The last proposition, that "literacy practices are purposeful and embedded in broader social goals and cultural practices" is perhaps the most important insight for the next two chapters. There is a danger in much of this that we might be tempted to think of "literacy" as a purely theoretical concept and that it has no direct connection to the material world we inhabit. However, as Scribner and Cole's work with the Vai suggest, literacy does in fact change the material conditions of someone's life. As they write, "this is certainly important evidence that literacy does 'count' in intellectual terms, and it is

especially important in suggesting how it counts. The consequences of literacy that we identified are all highly specific and closely tied to actual practices with particular scripts…" (85). This will be an important motif developed over the next few chapters. Just as it is wrong, I believe, to understand this "Bartleby Syndrome" as a sort of "lack" or deficiency, it is also wrong to understand it as counter-productive and non-generative. Recall Sam's "philosophy" of "why the hell does it matter how you got to the paper as long as it is right?" In this understanding, "right" or "correctness" might actually be complicated or made more difficult through the process of drafts, revisions, and so forth in which an idea might be thrown into doubt. On a much more basic level, such an emphasis might allow Sam to simply get a little more sleep. However, I also believe that there is a broader way of looking at this. One might ask, for example, why classes must be rigidly structured this way. After all, we could theoretically reconstruct education in a radically different way in which classes did not meet every day for 50 minutes. We could completely eliminate the emphasis of grammar in such a class (as Ms. Stein once admitted she longed of doing). The reasons these things don't happen, though, is because they resonate with larger social dynamics. As Brandt and Clinton note, "[w]here anyone is observed reading and writing something, it well worth asking who is getting something out of it; often that somebody will not be at the scene" (Limits 347). I do not think it is too far off to suggest that constructing the writing environment in such a way, in such a way in which the Bartleby Syndrome is almost guaranteed to happen, a writing practice is unleashed through which individuals simply cannot reap the potential critical benefits of engaging in a sustained process of writing. In very basic terms, it closes off any possibility of writing being a process of social critique, understanding, and

reconstruction. In a radically democratic world that depends on such literacies to sustain itself, the Bartleby Syndrome would be simply untenable. In a neo-liberalistic world that works only so long as such political reflection as a feature of social life is kept to a minimum, such literacy practices make a lot more sense. I will be returning to this in chapter four when I discuss "college preparation" as well as chapter five where I will explore the political implications of this more fully.

Of Wizards and Spells

I want to close this chapter with a scene that occurred long after CE had ended as a prelude to the next chapter. Late in the spring semester, I went back to speak with Ms. Stein about what had happened in the fall. It was during this follow up interview that something completely unexpected, yet deeply illuminating happened. Since I would often meet with Ms. Stein in her classroom, it was a common occurrence to be interrupted during our interviews. Usually, in these moments, the interview would immediately pause as Ms. Stein would deal with whatever issues or concerns the students had. Once the student had been dealt with, the issue resolved, or whatever else was needed, we would resume our interviews. This time, however, something completely different happened. Like other times, a student came into the classroom to ask if Ms. Stein had gotten a copy of the draft she was working on. Right away I knew something was off because Ms. Stein very quickly noted to the student that she had and that she had already emailed comments back to her. Other times, Ms. Stein would have jumped at any opportunity to discuss a student's draft with them. Our interviews would sometimes go on long pauses while Ms. Stein would enthusiastically try to help students with whatever they needed help with.

This time, it was very clear that Ms. Stein wanted to avoid some sort of confrontation with the student, as every time the student would beg Ms. Stein to indicate just what her comments were in person, Ms. Stein would simply request that the student "go read [the] comments in the email." After several rounds of pleading and back and forth, the student finally gave up and left the classroom.

As the door shut, I remarked to Ms. Stein that *that* was the sort of attitude missing from the students I had been observing in CE. Ms. Stein then let out a sigh and began to explain to me what was going on. The student who had just been in, looking for extra help in writing her essay, was working on an argumentative essay that dealt with the school's Harry Potter book club. Specifically, the Harry Potter book club was hosting a "Harry Potter Olympics" at the school in which fans of the series would partake in various physical / intellectual activities (obstacle courses, races, etc) that all had a component related to the reading of the books. In particular, one activity had students reciting various magical spells drawn from the narrative. This student's argument was that such an event should not be allowed at the school. The reasons this student had for arguing against such an activity rested upon a fairly sophisticated argument. As Ms. Stein explained to me, the student was attempting to argue that such an event would make the school an "unsafe" atmosphere for students. Therefore, the "Harry Potter Olympics" violated the civil rights of various students in that it prevented their right to a public education. As I sat there with a confused look on my face, not fully understanding how such an argument would get from A to B, Ms. Stein noted that this particular student was a member of the "Soldiers of the Light," a group of Evangelical Christians at the school She explained it thusly: "she and the group of Christians who pray around the flag pole

say we 're opening up the school to demons and casting spells [which] blurs the line between this dimension and the next and the rest of the students still have to come here again on Monday by law and we have now made this place unclean." However, what should probably be noted at this point is that Ms. Stein was the faculty sponsor for the Harry Potter book club at the school. Ms. Stein was also Jewish. And yet, this student persisted in enlisting Ms. Stein to help her write the strongest argument she could, despite the fact that, as Ms. Stein later told me, "she has even told me that she believes Jews aren't going to heaven."

Even though I am arguing that the Bartleby Syndrome is a literacy practice, this does not mean that all literacy practices are of equal value and that the Bartleby Syndrome style of literacy practice is just as good as any other. As I will argue in the final chapter of this study, there are important political implications embedded in the sort of literacy practices that students in College English eschewed. The question for now, though, is *how* did this student chose such a remarkably different literacy practice? By asking "how" instead of "why," my aim is to focus on the process of action that is fundamentally at the root of all literacy practices. Or, more simply, that literacy practices are things people *do*. If it is possible for a student to fully engage in a process of writing that deeply involves refinement and growth through social interactions as well as revisions of drafts, how then are we to understand the Bartleby Syndrome? Why did they choose non-participation over other possible forms of engaging with the class? To more fully explore this question, I will be taking up questions of both "agency" as well as "action." Specifically, I will be working to draw out a Pragmatist conception of action

and activity, relying heavily on Dewey's concept of habit and its role in human conduct

as a means to understand the social nature of human deliberation.

Chapter 3
Of Agents and Actors: A Pragmatist Account of Activity

Introduction

There is one majestic assumption that is foundational to practically every writing

environment that is undertaken in an educational context: that students will write--or that

there will be writing *somehow* and in *someway*. Because the teaching of writing is

predicated upon some sort of medium or object (i.e., student writing) that pedagogic

activity can be directed at, it is the *one* thing that must be in place before any "writing

instruction" can occur. This, then, is the starting point for understanding the instruction of

writing. Without student writing happening, there seems to be very little that the "writing

class" can do. This assumption might seem like the proper departure into asking *why*

students write in the first place, particularly in educational institutions. After all, this

question seems ripe with importance for the teaching of writing, simply because without

writing (or with students choosing to *not* write), we have serious problems. Further, this

question is something that is beyond the horizon of writing instruction itself, simply

because we are now dealing with things that occur *before* writing. How is our knowledge of "writing" able to help us understand the reasons why writing exists in the first place? What can we say about why a student might *choose* to engage in writing or *not*?

As I was conducting my fieldwork, this was precisely the question that was scrawled into practically every page of handwritten field notes: *why* were these students not writing? What was their decision making process like? How did they *deliberate* on whether or not they should work on their essays or do something else? At about the mid-way point through my fieldwork, I had begun to think of writing itself as a sort of ethical or moral *choice*. As I had thought about it, it seemed as though these students were making decisions regarding the sort of action they would engage in. They would decide, for instance, that they did not need to work on drafts, that they did not need to read the teacher's comments in order to help them make the next draft different, that they didn't need to start early and take advantage of opportunities to engage in peer-reviewing activities.

In the time since my fieldwork came to an end and the more I considered this, the more reasons I found to reject this idea. For one, as I suggested in the previous chapter, it wasn't that the students simply didn't write *anything*, but rather that they engaged in a literacy practice that was not quite what the teacher wanted. In other words, it wasn't so simply a choice of "to write or not to write," but rather a far more nuanced *shaping* of an action that would be undertaken. Two, to frame this as a "choice" seemed to me to be inappropriately individualistic. What was quite clear in talking with many of the students is that they were as frustrated and confused over the appearance of the "Bartleby Syndrome" as the teacher was. If it were simply a "choice" to be made, it would seem as

though more students would have simply made a different choice. Instead, it was quite clear that something beyond the individual was constraining and guiding "choice."

As the title of this chapter suggests, there are two words or concepts that I will be revolving around to work through and understand the problems posed by the Bartleby Syndrome: agency and action. The first, agency, I will define as *the capacity to engage in action*. Discussions over the theorized existence of this capacity, much like theorized but as of yet unmeasured sub-atomic particles, has been fraught with anxiety and for good reason. While human activity has been at the core of practically all philosophical thinking since the dawn of civilization, throughout various points in time theories have popped up that have thrown the idea of *agency* into serious doubt. The second, *activity,* is crucial because it points to not just being *able* to do something, but *actually doing it*. In this chapter, my goal is to undertake a theoretical reworking of where the previous chapter left off. That is, to begin with the question of *action* in regard to writing, particularly in light of the "Bartleby Syndrome." By this, I mean two things. First, I mean a broader question of simply *why* do students write at all? Second, I mean a question regarding not just why students write, but why they write in certain ways. In answering these two questions, I will ultimately be constructing a Pragmatist understanding of writing as a trans-actional activity. However, to do so, I will briefly consider other ways these questions have popped up in literacy studies as well as *why* they have been important. I will start with a brief overview of the idea of agency and how this quest for "agency" is entangled with conversations concerning not just the consequences of literacy, but how *illiteracy* is not just a state of having no literacy, but a socially defined concept that does *work*. I will then move from this overview to tackle a problem of understanding action

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and activity as situated within a context or environment. I will start by exploring Activity Theory as a means to start outlining an understanding of literacy events and practices that takes into account a *whole* picture of literacy. It is from here, though, that I will discuss the limitations of Activity Theory and, without invalidating AT, to construct a Pragmatist account of activity derived from John Dewey's work that not only extends Activity Theory, but places the "Bartleby Syndrome" within an framework of organic unity that is limitless in regard to the scope of what C. W. Mills referred to as a sociological imagination. It is from this Pragmatist account, I contend, that the political implications of specific literacy practices become most visible in regard to a reflexive relationship between society and writer.

The Need for a Theory of Activity and Agency in Literacy Studies

Within and around the field of writing instruction, there is a nearly hopeless entanglement of terms that are all grappling to define and understand the same phenomena: human action and agency. What is at stake is an understanding of the contours of how our theoretical claims make possible a view of human beings as situated and creative beings, responsive to the world around them while also creative of their environment. While the idea that literacy is something that one *does* is hardly controversial, such an understanding does not, on its own, explain the deployment or engagement in such activity. It is no surprise, then, that achieving a correct understanding of "agency" within literacy has been a major theoretical concern, particularly against theoretical and philosophical stances that sometimes veer too close to an understanding of the world as deterministic. This quest for agency is not misguided for the very simple

reason that the existence of "agency" is something that, to borrow the phrasing of

William James, we do not doubt in our hearts. That said, I do not think it is too

controversial to point out that the concept of "agency" itself has and remains to this day a

nebulous concept that is elusive in the realm of theory.

What *is* clear are a couple things. First, our contemporary notions of "agency"

cannot be divorced from the philosophical, political, and economic trajectories of

Western rationality. It was, after all, the great figure in Liberalism of John Locke who

necessitated a view of the *individual* as the locus of all social action and analysis. As

these conversations twisted and turned (sometimes violently) throughout the years,

different shades of a concept of agency have appeared. Regardless, my point here is that

the concept of agency itself is *historical*. Second, the concept of "agency" itself exists in

some sort of balance with terms like will, motivation, intention, purposefulness, self-

hood, self-efficacy, choice, freedom, liberty, power/empowerment, and creativity.

Within the field of writing instruction itself, many of these terms have taken up a

central place in many theories of writing and writing instruction. Further, we have

augmented them with concepts of our own. Consider, for example, the concept of

"voice." In the opening pages to *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work*, Donald Graves

famously provides this stark assessment of "traditional" writing classes:

> Children want to write. They want to write the first day they attend school. This is
> no accident. Before they went to school they marked up walls, pavements,
> newspapers with crayons, pens or pencils . . . anything that makes a mark. The
> child's marks say, `I am'.
> `No, you aren't,' say most school approaches to the teaching of writing. (3)

In this telling of the scene, we see the child as endowed with some sort of indomitable

will, a sheer brute force that cannot be contained. *Writing*, in this example, becomes the

vehicle or vessel for some expression of voice, some affirmation of self, some unbridled sense of power and purposefulness in making a mark on the world around the child. Without writing, there is no expression, no voice, no will, no self, no agency. It is this, above all, that must be protected against the forces that say "no, you aren't." It is here that two poles of theoretical concern are visible. The first is an understanding of what is at stake with literacy. In Graves's scene, what is at stake with writing is an ability for a child to make a mark on the world that says "I am." The second thing is a recognition of the limits of individual freedom and will. The "No, you aren't" represents the structural limitations of agency, a supposedly external force that provides the framework from within activity occurs. It is through these two poles--the consequences of literacy (or, why it matters) and the imbeddedness of literacy within structure--that much scholarship of literacy weaves itself around.

In regard to the "why literacy matters" aspect, the theorized bounds of what literacy means to humanity are nearly limitless. For example, in the summary and conclusion to Goody and Watt's 1963 "The Consequences of Literacy," the authors note that "recent anthropology has rightly rejected the categorical distinctions between the thinking of 'primitive' and 'civilized' peoples," but goes on to say that these rejections have gone too far and turned into "diffuse relativism and sentimental egalitarianism" (344). At stake is the reality (problematic as it may be) that some cultures have produced more technological advancements than others. For Goody and Watt, this is an anthropological question that demands some sort of understanding as to why we have such a difference between "civilized" and "primitive." If we are to avoid "diffuse relativism" in which we would simply refuse to compare cultures, how can we account

for the fact that western culture progressed in the way that it did while other cultures were stagnant and never "progressed?" Writing. At least, for Goody and Watt, the answer is to be found in the fact that "the urban revolution of the Ancient Near East produced one invention, the invention of writing" (344). It was because of writing that we were able to think differently, to operate differently, to do more, to rationalize more, to critically understand more than simple oral cultures could do.

It is worth quoting them at length here to understand how seductive and commonsensical this argument is to us:

> In oral societies, the cultural tradition is transmitted almost entirely by face-to-face communication; and changes in its content are accompanied by the homeostatic process of forgetting or transforming those parts of the tradition that cease to be either necessary or relevant. Literate societies, on the other hand, cannot discard, absorb, or transmute the past in the same way. Instead, their members are faced with permanently recorded versions of the past and its beliefs; and because the past is thus set apart from the present, historical enquiry becomes possible. This in turn encourages skepticism; and skepticism, not only about the legendary past, but about received ideas about the universe as a whole. (344)

We're so used to this story that it is indeed one of those "master narratives" that we are highly prone to being lulled into taking for granted. This, however, sets up some troublesome assertions. As Goody and Watt conclude, "A consideration of the consequences of literacy in these terms, then, throws some light not only upon the nature of the Greek achievement but also upon the intellectual differences between simple and complex societies" (345). It is here that a full outline comes into focus of why literacy, and in particular writing, "matters." This understanding of writing is so pervasive that no small amount of theoretical attention is given to moments in which such a desire for agency through writing vanishes. In these moments, our understanding is that something is wrong or unnatural when students don't write, when "illiteracy" is present, or when the

words just don't simply come out fast enough. Depending on the theoretical traditions writers are working from, we have described these moments as writer's block, lack of individual motivation, resistance, or structural and cultural tensions (e.g., lack of time for students working). Regardless of the theoretical tradition these concepts come from, they are typically unified by an understanding that only if such barriers are removed, be they cognitive barriers, social or cultural barriers, or barriers of the will, then writing will once again flow and students will be proclaiming "I am."

It is worth noting that Goody and Watt's work underscores one of the primary levers of inquiry in literacy research: difference. That is, we encounter different forms of literacy (either in a qualitative or ontological sense) and are forced to consider the causes and effects of this. Through this, the consequences of literacy are highlighted. In setting up a comparison between "primitive" and "civilized" peoples as an effect of literacy, the stakes are immediately raised in that the continuity of civilization depends upon the successful transmission of literacy. Goody and Watt are, of course, setting this mechanism up between two different cultures. However, the same question is often transposed to the internal production of a culture in that poor literacy skills might feasibly lead to an overall decline in that particular culture. Thus, the anxiety over "illiteracy" becomes the focus of much work in literacy education. This has lead to an investigation of not only the causes of "illiteracy," but what to do about it.

Nowhere is this tension more evident than in Mina Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectation*. In what has become a classic in the field, Shaughnessy provides a guide for helping to not only deal with "basic writers" in the university who are underprepared but also to critically examine the relationship between "errors" and our own "expectations" of

student ability in writing. What is more important to understand with Shaughnessy's work are the historical conditions surrounding her work. As she notes in the introduction, the City University in New York adopted an "open admissions" policy in 1970 following years of political upheaval and protests whereby thousands of students who normally would not have been able to enter the University were suddenly granted access. Prior to this point, admissions standards would have prevented these "underprepared" basic writers from entry, thus providing a rather homogenous student body in terms of writing abilities that would help solidify expectations as to what a "prepared" writer might be. In other words, social and political factors in regard to access to college determined how "literate" was to be understood.

Similarly, it was social and political factors that produced the "basic writer" in CUNY in 1970. When these "strangers in academia," as Shaughnessy called them showed up, tensions that remained invisible were suddenly placed in the spotlight. Shaughnessy's description is worth repeating: "Not surprisingly, the essays these students wrote during their first weeks of class stunned the teachers who read them. Nothing, it seemed, short of a miracle was going to turn such students into writers. Not uncommonly, teachers announced to their supervisors (or even their students) after only a week of class that everyone was going to fail" (3). As Shaughnessy very importantly points out, most of the teachers who were responsible for these writing classes were trained to "analyze the belletristic achievements of the centuries" and not to handle "remedial" duties (3). The point I want to highlight is that in this situation that we see how *both* illiteracy and literacy are produced in multiple ways within a social and historical context. For instance, an instructor with a different understanding of language (William Labov's work comes to

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mind) might not see these students as illiterate in any sense of the word. Consequently disciplinary conventions and training form a backdrop of beliefs concerning what a good writer is and isn't. Further, cultural standards and dominant ideologies concerning who is and isn't a college student no doubt contributed to marking these new students as "strangers in academia." Lastly, social inequalities along class, gender, and race lines that deeply penetrate primary and secondary schooling options played a very strong role in the construction (not production) of these "underprepared" writers.

The point here is that this sort of inquiry into literacy suggests that social conditions, not internal biological differences, are responsible for the construction of what counts as "literate," and thus also produces "illiteracy" as its binary. The result of a rupture in these conceptions of literate/illiterate results in, similar to Goody and Watt, an examination into the nature of literacy itself. As Shaughnessy recommends, "rather the teacher must try to decipher the individual student's code, examining samples of his writing as a scientist might, searching for patterns or explanations, listening to what the student says about punctuation, and creating situations in the classroom that encourage students to talk openly about what they don't understand" (40). Shaughnessy's move here is a generous one. Refusing to see these students as "ineducable," she instead describes them as "beginners and must, like all beginners, learn by making mistakes" (5). For Shaughnessy, it is understanding the nature of student "errors" that is the first step in developing pedagogical strategies to helping students overcome them (73).

In her work, while Shaughnessy is generous in trying to attain a deeper understanding of where student errors originate from, her ultimate aim for doing so is to stamp out these errors and to create homogeneity where diversity exists in regard to

literacy practices. The picture this paints is that "illiteracy" is in fact the natural state and "literacy" is the refined, civilized state. Or, in other words, we start out illiterate and, through various civilizing procedures, attain literacy.

However, as Shirley Brice Heath's long term ethnography in the Piedmont clearly demonstrates, this is simply not the case. In *Ways with Words*, Heath provides an in-depth account of two communities in the mill industry area in the Piedmont: predominantly black Trackton and predominately white Roadville. As Heath notes, "Both Trackton and Roadville are literate communities and each has its own traditions for structuring, using, and assessing reading and writing" (230). However, while much attention has been given to this assertion that both communities are "literate" (even though neither does particularly well in school), what is more interesting is the intensely deep connection literacy has to the environment of each community. As Heath writes, "The receipt of mail in Trackton is a big event, and since several houses are residences for transients the postman does not know, the children sometimes take the mail and give it to the appropriate person. Reading names and addresses and return addresses becomes a game-like challenge among all the children,as the school-age try to show the preschoolers how they know 'what dat says'" (190). While different, yet similar forms of literacy occurred in Roadville (such as adults constantly asking children questions geared toward awareness (127) It is observations like this that have lead many literacy researchers to understand that, much like breathing, how much "literacy" is simply a result of a person transacting with an environment that is deeply embedded with "the symbolic." The concept of "transaction," a concept rooted in Dewey's inquiry into

inquiry, is a familiar one to many literacy researchers and theorists.[1] Under this understanding, the practice of young children helping to sort and deliver mail (which requires not only the ability to decode text, but to also know what to do with mail) is not something that is necessarily "taught" directly in a decontextualized way, but rather is a function of living in a world where literacy exists.

This view, though, necessitates an understanding of the social context and structures that literacy practices occur in. As Heath notes, "Encapsulated in an almost totally human world, Trackton babies are in the midst of nearly constant human communication, verbal and non-verbal" (75). The problem then is not of either community being illiterate, but why both communities do not fare well in the urban schools. Heath builds a case by describing certain forms of "literacy practices" in each community that come in to conflict with various forms of schooled literacy. For instance, Heath observes that "Children do not expect adults to ask them questions, for, in Trackton, children are not seen as information-givers or question answerers" (103). Of course, being an "information-giver" is something that is heavily identified with success in school. The assumption here is that children in Trackton and Roadville do have "literacy" but that these particular literacy practices are simply not wanted nor validated in the schools. The difference, then, between the students who do well in school and those who do not can be traced back to the community environment and, often, the families. As Brian Street claims, "parents in middle-class homes are indeed frequently concerned about structuring learning for their children in the ways legitimized by the school" (Social Literacies 117). The reasons for these parents to do so was to avoid the

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[1] See especially Rosenblatt's *The Reader, The Text, The Poem* and Rogoff, et al. "Development through participation in sociocultural activity" (1995).

perceived consequences of not having the correct form of literacy. As Street writes, "Children were learning to participate in the achievement culture that their parents saw as essential if they were to reproduce the parents' life-style and avoid the horrors of poverty of which the nearby city provided such stark evidence" (119). One might take this as suggesting that the way to solve this problem is to change the early proto-literacy events in each child's life to better align them with what will be expected in schools. However, Heath seems to be suggesting something different than this. As she notes in the latter parts of her work, "Of what use might be the detailed ethnographies of communication in Roadville and Trackton be in enabling teachers and students to bridge their different ways? The answer to this question depends on finding ways to make accessible to teachers an understanding of the differences in language and culture their students bring to their classrooms" (265). Consequently, she arrives at a point not so different than Shaughnessy's call to "know thy students" in order to understand the social root of their errors. The danger in this, though, is that it does not necessarily entail a critique of the educative institution that is responsible for selectively validating certain literacy practices.

The consequences of this are noted by Deborah Brandt in her *Literacy in American Lives*, a survey of several generations of people and how they came to have various forms of literacy. In it, Brandt points out that the social value of various literacies flourish and diminish depending on prevailing social conditions. In one instance, Brandt paints a comparison of two women in the rural upper mid-west. One woman, due to the various realities of rural life including a rural agricultural magazine boom, was able to secure a position as an editor for one of the magazines in the first half of the 20th century.

By the time the second woman was born in the same area in the second half of the same century, these avenues of literacy had all but ceased to exist. As Brandt writes, "Although it is too soon to predict the full life and literacy trajectory of Hunt, it is clear that many of the local cultural assets that subsidized Day as she made her way into adult literacy either are not available to the younger woman or simply are no longer with as much in her society" (41). This suggests that what "counts," something different than literacy itself, is constantly shifting due to larger forces. One such force is race and racism. As Brandt points out, "Basic literacy rates among African Americans rose from 30% in 1910 to more than 80% by 1930 to over 95% by 1970" (106). However, these numbers are misleading if we don't take structural inequality into consideration. Brandt again: "African Americans who attained high level literacy and advanced education often found that their skills did not have the same status and tradable value as those of the white population" (106). In fact, in an earlier piece, Heath herself notes that for residents of Trackton, literacy could enable the opening doors but did not in any sense guarantee admission (Protean 464). Consequently, shaping the environment of young children with specific forms of literacy practices that might be helpful in school might not always work because what forms of literacy practices are valued are constantly shifting and contingent upon other unrelated social forces (race, gender, etc).

While many literacy theorists have made much of the fact that we are prone to focusing on schooled literacy without paying due attention to diverse forms of literacy that happen outside of schools, what the scholarship I have been discussing suggests is that the primary function of schools, as an element of structural limitation, is not to produce literacy skills but to rather engage in the production of illiteracy. This "illiteracy"

suggests a lack of agency on the part of students, ranging from an inability to work within mainstream institutions to acquire benefits from them to an inability to foster a critical perspective that would allow students to undo ossified hierarchies of power. Interestingly, schools function to also demarcate other forms of literacy, regardless of where they occur, as valid or invalid, literate or illiterate. This means that schools possess a function through which all forms of literacy are somehow related, sorted, and valued, *even in areas where schooled literacy has no official place*. As Harvey Graff writes, "Modern societies tend to stress the importance of literacy without defining or understanding it. Consequently, literacy by itself is overvalued and taken out of meaningful contexts, creating pressures that increase the difficulties of learning useful skills. Shame and awareness of inferiority are two products of a racially and class-biased educational and social system. In this way, the very high social emphasis on the importance of literacy becomes counterproductive for many individuals" (393). J. Elspeth Stuckey, in her 1991 book *The Violence of Literacy*, takes this viewpoint to a tragic (yet honest) extreme. I might add that while this is counterproductive for many individuals, it is incredibly productive for maintaining and reproducing various forms of structural inequality. This insight has been shared by many other theorists of literacy, that these counter-productive and violent elements of literacy discussed in an attempt to understand activity and agency are not accidental, mistakes, or aberrations. To address this theoretical need to understand the relationship of activity and action to larger social structures in order to understand how something like "agency" occurs within these structures, many people in literacy studies have turned to or drawn heavily from Activity Theory. In the next section, I take up an account of Activity Theory to suggest some of the ways it might overcome these

barriers as well as provide a foundation for understanding the data presented in the previous chapter. Further, I will discuss what I see as the limits of Activity Theory to pave the way for a *Pragmatist* understanding of activity and agency.

Origins of "Activity" in Theory:

My purpose is not to provide an exhaustive overview of activity theory, nor an exhaustive historical account of its development. However, I do want to briefly provide an account of what "activity theory" is and some features of its development simply to provide a background to a more pragmatist account of human activity as well as a justification for that account. On one hand, the origins of the concept of "activity" in both Activity Theory as well as Pragmatism share a common lineage. Both are continuations in philosophical discourse concerning change and motion in existence. Further, they both travel the Hegelian detour in this conversation. On the other hand, though, it is where they move "post-Hegel" that largely defines the differences between the two.

The question of not just what *is* existence, but what *causes* existence is perhaps one of the oldest questions in Philosophy. It is worth considering Aristotle's "four causes" as a precursor to the concept of activity. As one may recall from Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, the four causes are the material cause (the raw material out of which something is formed), the formal cause (the patterns or forms or "genres" through which things form into and that we can recognize by its universality), the efficient cause (the thing that, through the exertion of energy, molds or forms matter into something...like a painter, a sculptor, *a writer),* and the final cause. The "final cause," which Aristotle saw as the most important, referred to the *telos*--the purpose, goals, or ends--of an object. The final cause

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held an important place because none of the other causes could be realized without it. It was, in a sense, the cause that gave meaning to the other three. This idea of the *telos* of an object being prior to other forms of causation will return in both Activity Theory as well as Dewey's pragmatist account of activity.

In Hegel's work, the concept of *Geist* or "spirit" unifies these four causes. "Geist for Hegel," as Bernstein helpfully explains, "is Reason or *Nous* as characterized by the Greeks, but *Geist* is not 'abstract' understanding, it is not *Verstand;* it is Reason (*Vernunft*) fully actualized in the world" (Praxis and Action 17). It is here that Hegel is able to move from the subjective mind to "reason" that is wholly characterized by some sort of connection to reality. In other words, we don't just "think," we think *about* things. However, it is Geist's location within the non-material realm of reason (and thus its "idealism") that would prove as the departure point for both Marxism and Pragmatism. In regard to Marxism, Marx would famously seek to turn Hegel's idealism right side up, and to locate the dialectical tensions that produced history within modes of production, hence Marx's foray into political economics as an attempt to "scientifically" understand history. In regard to Pragmatism, as noted in the first chapter, the move was to "naturalize" Hegel's idealism, drawing very heavily on the work of Darwin. In both traditions, though, the central problem was to understand the way in which change not only transformed nature, but the individual as well. For Marx, it was labor itself that accomplished this. For Pragmatism, it was "experience."

I will reserve further discussion of Dewey's conception of human activity for a later section in order to focus here on "Activity Theory" itself. One way to work in to the concept of AT is to start with some of the basic problems AT seeks to address in the post-

Hegelian landscape in thought. For example, in *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, Voloshinov sums up some of the major points he has been arguing. One of his points is that "The laws of the generative process of language are not at all the laws of individual psychology, but neither can they be divorced from *the activity of speakers*. The laws of language generation are sociological laws" (98, emphasis mine). It is here that we see the three most critical assertions about language that have formed the bedrock of much scholarly work that follows in this tradition, including Activity Theory. The first is a challenge to the "autonomous" way of thinking about where language comes from. Voloshinov is rejecting the notion that it is internal structures of individual thought (psychology) that are responsible for how we form language. That is that there are intrinsic or essential qualities about the "self" from which language flows. The second charge is that even if language does not emanate from the individual, autonomous mental structures, it still is somehow related to "the activity of speakers." This is crucial as Voloshinov is pointing to the fact that how we are living in the world says a lot about the sort of language we use. In other words, language use is situated in our everyday actions. Finally, Voloshinov asserts that "laws" of language generation, that is, the "rules" behind how language work are in fact sociological and not based in some sort of non-social, ahistorical realm. This is probably the most critical element as it directly challenges the notion that somewhere there exists a "perfect" language and all other forms of language can be measured by how close they come to this form. In short, for Voloshinov, language is social, situated, historical, and subject to conflict and struggle. We can compare that to a more structuralist view of language in which language governs its own "generative laws;" that is, there are "rules" of language that are not subject to social and historical

forces.

However it is in this oft-quoted passage that we see one of the enduring

conundrums. This sociological aspect of language presents a problem, namely of

understanding the nature of *how* exactly the "sociological" aspect itself fits into language

generation. In other words, language is sociological, but is not divorced from the

individual's "activity" either. In Vygotsky's famous formulation, individuals are always

acting upon objects, but never do so directly. Instead, they do so through *tools* or *signs*

(see *fig 3.1)*. These objects, though, serve as a "mediating" substance. It is through this

concept of mediation via tools or signs (including language) that the bridge between the

individual and the social, the internal and the external is created. Engeström explains this

further: "Mediation by tools and signs is not merely a psychological idea. It is an idea that

breaks down the Cartesian walls that isolate the individual mind from the culture and the

society [...] The traditional division between social sciences and psychology has created
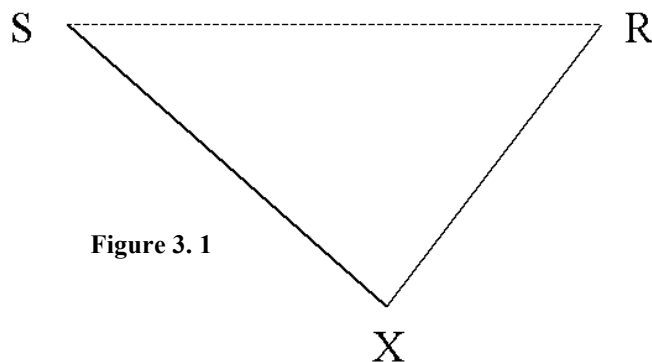
the still prevalent dichotomous notion according to which humans are controlled either from the outside by society or from the inside by themselves" (Activity Theory and Individual and

Figure 3. 1

SocialTransformation 29). This move allowed Vygotsky to theorize the ways in which

something like "agency" occurs. As he noted in *Mind and Society*, "Because this auxiliary

stimulus possesses the specific function of reverse action, it transfers the psychological

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operation to higher and qualitatively new forms and permits the humans, by the aid of extrinsic stimuli, to control their behavior from the outside" (40). More simply, humans are able to direct and control their actions "from the outside" by precisely through using these tools and signs of mediation. This served as the impetus for analyzing "activity," or as A. N. Leont'ev described it, "[...] the main question is what these processes are that mediate the influences of the objective world reflected in the human brain. The basic answer to this question lies in acknowledging that these processes are those that realize a person's actual life in the objective world by which he is surrounded, his social being in all the richness and variety of its forms. In other words, these processes are his activity" (Activity and Consciousness). As Davydov noted in 1999, "Activity is a specific form of the societal existence of humans consisting of purposeful changing of natural and social reality. In contrast to the laws of nature, societal laws manifest themselves only through human activity that constructs new forms and features of reality, thus turning the initial into products. Any activity carried out by a subject includes goals, means, the process of molding the object, and the results. In fulfilling the activity, the subjects also change and develop themselves" (39). In short, Activity Theory has sought to understand and analyze the dimension of the "activity."

This project is the context through which more contemporary definitions of "Activity Theory" can be understood. For example, as Rogoff noted, "The use of 'activity' or 'event' as the unit of analysis - with active and dynamic contributions from individuals, their social partners, and historical traditions and materials and their transformations - allows a reformulation of the relation between the individual and the social and cultural environments in which each is inherently involved in the other's definition. None exists

separately" (Observing 140). It is out of this that we can start to come to a concrete

understanding of Activity Theory (of as it is sometimes referred to as: "cultural historical

activity theory" or simply CHAT). As Roth, et all describe it:

> Social analyses in terms of cultural historical activity theory focus on what people
> (participants) actually do, the objects that motivate their activity, the tools they
> use, the community of which they are part, the rules that pattern their actions, and
> the division of labor they take in activity [...] In an activity-theoretic approach the
> power to act (agency) is a fundamental characteristic of human beings; it allows
> individuals not merely to react to, but, of importance, to change their material and
> social worlds [...] Identity refers us to the question of who is the agent in an
> activity system. From an activity-theoretic perspective, identity is a product and
> byproduct of activity. That is, through their agency, the people in an activity not
> only produce material outcomes, but also, in the process, produce and reproduce
> themselves and others qua participants in the relevant community (Re/Making 50-
> 51).

In order to help understand the dimension of "activity," there is a reliance

upon triangles that can be seen in many articles and books utilizing "activity theory."

These triangles are rooted in Vygotsky's original formulation of the "mediated act" that

sought to displace the linear stimulus-response process (see Fig. 3.1). Here we can see

that the straight path between stimulus and response is complicated with the introduction

of "x" or the mediated tool or sign. Also important to note is that in this model, the uni-

directional nature of the stimulus-response process is replaced with a bi-directional nature

in which transformation of both the environment *and* the individual can occur.

From this model of the mediated act, theorists sought to clarify the relationship of

"actions" to "activity." As Engeström, drawing from Leont'ev, noted, individual action

was incoherent "without consideration of the overall collective activity [...] what

distinguishes one activity from another is its object. According to Leont'ev, *the object of*

an activity is its true motive. Thus, the concept of activity is necessarily connected with

the concept of motive" (Learning by Expanding). Leont'ev himself stated that "actions

are not special 'units' that are included in the structure of activity. Human activity does

not exist except in the form of action or a chain of actions" (Leont'ev 1978, 64. qtd in

Engeström). We might see this as an instantiation of the old Aristotelian notion of the

final cause that aligns all other causes through some sort of *telos*. This *telos*, though, is

historically culturally

situated.

Engeström

represents the

movement from the

"animal form of

activity" to the

"structure of man" (a

transitional
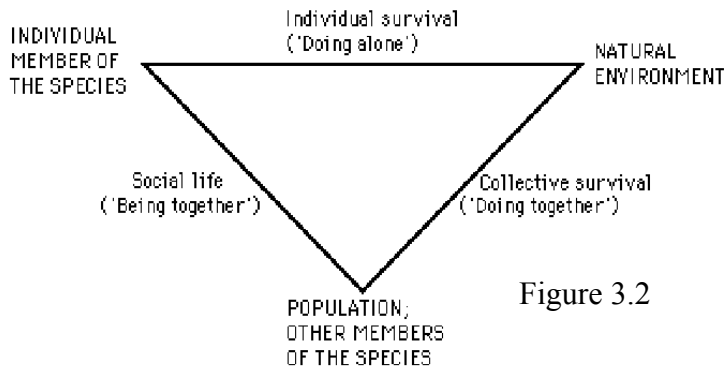
Figure 3.2

representation) in figures 3.2 and 3.3[2]. As he notes regarding this evolution, "The
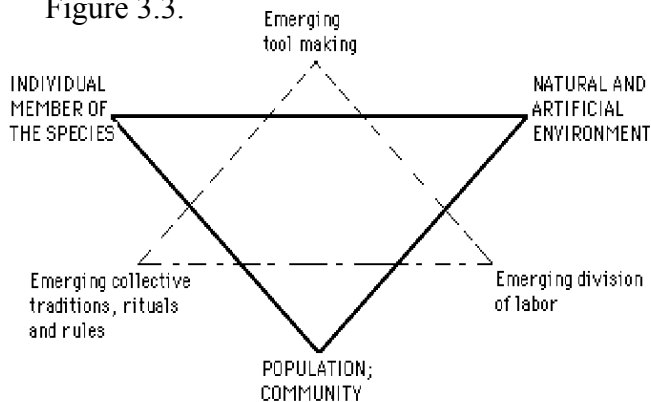
breakthrough into human cultural

evolution - into the specifically

human form of activity - requires

that what used to be separate

ruptures or emerging mediators

become unified determining

factors. At the same time, what

used to be ecological and natural

Figure 3.3.

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[2] Figures 3.2 and 3.3 are taken from Engeström's *Learning by Expanding*.

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becomes economic and historical" (Learning by Expanding). This brings us to the final,

and very familiar triangle of figure 3.4.

What should be noted about the triangle is that it is an attempt to represent a

dynamic function. All 6 points in the triangle are set in contradictory tension with other

points, representing the dialectical nature of the whole system. It is these tensions

between

nonidentical

points that

provides the

dynamism and

thus motion

through time.

Once all

tensions are

resolved, the

Figure 3.4

objective is "accomplished." However, such an end to tensions results in the creation of

new tensions, so that such dynamism is perpetually changing in nature. As Roth notes,

though, such contradictions exist not only *between* points, but also *within* points, and one

entire system exists within a contradictory tension with other systems (Activity Theory

and Education 5). Roth provides an example of what AT can ultimately offer in regard to

education and schooling:

> If participation in activity changes the identity of the subject, what are the effects
> of the alienating structures of schooling (change of topics in 45-60-min intervals,
> confinement to chairs, mandatory silent activity, etc.)? If the two aspects of the
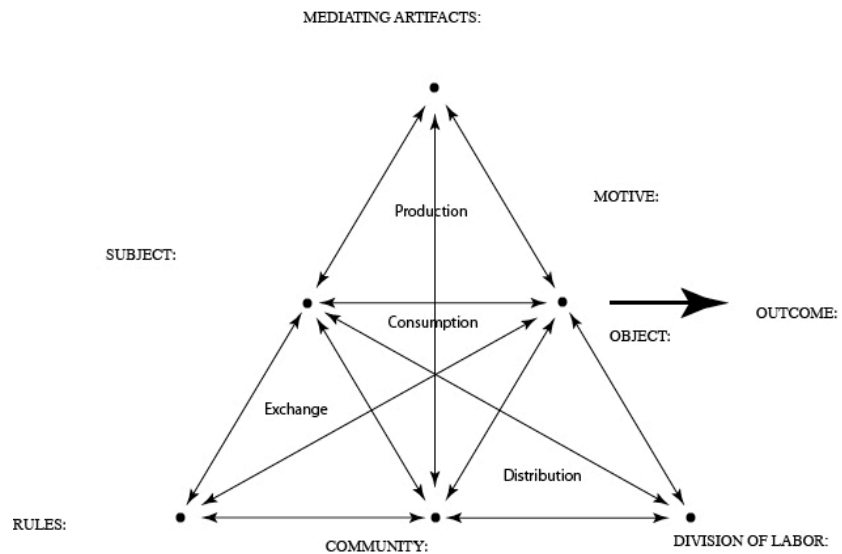> object {Gegenstand and Objekt) cannot be separated, what can educational

testing, which divorces the subject from normally accessible tools, division of labor, and social relations, tell us about the competence of an individual across activities characterized by very different objects? (4)

Theorizing Bartleby and the Limits of Activity Theory

As I want to show in this section, Activity Theory provides a rather potent way to understand aspects of the "Bartleby Syndrome" described in the previous chapter. I also, however, want to push AT to where I feel its limits exist as a means to suggest where Pragmatism, and in particular, a more Deweyan system can be of use. I want to note before I start, however, that in large I do not feel AT *fails* as a theory, simply that a Deweyan system offers a different, and potentially better way of bridging the internal/external divide that AT seeks to bridge. I will return to this critique at the end of this section.

In order to dip into an analysis, I want to start by attempting to understand the "activity systems" in play in the classroom I was observing. As Leont'ev (1978) noted, "The main thing that distinguishes one activity from another [...] is the difference of their objects." Leont'ev makes this point, not so dissimilar than Peirce's point about the *result* of knowledge as being the primary location of difference, to call attention to the fact that there may be many differences within types of activity in regard to how they are carried out, the form they realized, and so forth. In any situation, there are *numerous* activities going on at any time, particularly so in any classroom. This is why it is helpful to start with the "object(ive)" (borrowing David R. Russell's term) in order to delineate precisely which activity system I am working with here. So what is the overall "objective" of the writing classroom? Well, on a very basic level it is "writing for evaluation." However,

within the activity system other forms of "objective" emerged.

I want to pause at this moment to consider "objective," simply because, according to AT, it is the critical component that separates one system of activity from another. There are two examples I want to use to highlight this. The first is an email exchange I had with Jennifer not long after the class had ended. I had wanted to know a little bit more about something she had said during the semester during a discussion concerning the motivations students had for doing "good work." Jennifer had noted that her motivations had changed as she got older. When I asked her about why this occurred, she told me that a particularly good report card earlier in her school career elicited such a good response from her father, that she started to covet good grades in order to continue eliciting such responses from her father. In this instance, then, the "objective" of the writing classroom was writing to be evaluated. For Jennifer, however, it was also to make her father proud of her.

The second example came during a "peer-review" session in class. I noted that Sam was working in a group with several of the athletes in the class, who were also quite clearly the students who had the most power in regard to their "popularity" in the school. One by one, he would give their papers a quick read through and very quickly identify sentence level errors for them. None of the other students did this for him, nor did any of them actually have any sort of discussion or conversation about their texts. Later, when talking to Sam, I asked about this moment. I was genuinely curious if Sam felt he was being exploited, especially given the one-sidedness of the interactions I had observed. Sam flatly rejected this idea, noting that he was simply helping "his friends" out. While Sam would no doubt disagree, I might suggest that Sam was leveraging his "people

skills" in this instance, performing a favor for those with social power in the likes that he might somehow obtain some of this power. Regardless, in this instance, while we can still see the objective of "writing for evaluation" present in the class, we also see how various actions within this serve a different objective for Sam: helping his friends out and perhaps increasing his own social standing.

Regardless, for the most part, objectives were somehow related to the submission of a written text for evaluation and it was through this nexus that all actions in the classroom focused on. The outcome in the class was by and large defined simply by "grades." I should take a second to point out that "college preparation" was understood through the obtainment of a passing grade in this class, not necessarily in the successful completion of college level work.

To start, we can now move into the other 5 points on the triangle and to start filling them in: subject, tools/means (or sometimes listed as mediating artifacts), rules, community, division of labor, and object. What will become evident as I do this is the presence of contradictions throughout the triangular representation. As Roth and Tobin note, "Contradictions may exist (a) within each of the nodes of an activity system (tools, object, etc.); (b) in the relation between two nodes; (c) in the relation between the object of one activity system and the object of another, technologically more advanced, system; or (d) between the nodes of different interconnected activity systems" (50). Keeping this in mind, I will start with what often appears to be the most basic level of writing instruction: the student writing in the classroom. In this regard, this triangle then is a representation of the "idea" of writing instruction in the classroom I was observing.

- To start, I will identify the "subject" of this very first and rudimentary triangular representation as simply "a student." Obviously, this in itself is a contradictory

category itself, as any universalized conception of "student" is immediately problematic. As a contradictory point in this triangular representation, though, we can assume such internal contradictions. For example, multiple expressions of identity are present within any group of students, and such plural identities are present even within individual students themselves that overlap and are even sometimes in conflict with each other.

- In regard to the mediating artifacts in the writing classroom, we might point to things such as basic "tools" like paper, writing utensils, the texts students were assigned to read, the computers some students used to compose on, and even things like forms of electronic communication (email, text message systems) that students used to send and receive questions from Ms. Stein. Further, we might point to the "signs" present as mediating artifacts; things such as ideas and instructions contained in the writing assignments and other various handouts, the meanings and concepts contained in the texts the students were to read, and even the posters hanging on the walls in the classroom.

- In regard to the "rules," we have things like conventions of writing, grading standards (via the teacher's rubrics), the rules of the school in general. Additionally, though, we have to include implicit things such as the rules of how to perform "student" in the classroom, rules concerning behavior and interaction with others as well as the teacher, and in general rules pertaining to "playing the game" of school.

- Within the community, there is obviously the immediate "community" of the classroom which includes the teacher. However, smaller communities would also appear within the classroom in a fluid matter. For instance, many of the male members of the classroom who also played sports comprised a sort of "community" on their own that served as a constant source of "class clowning" that was defined, in large part, through both behavior as well as activities outside of class.

- Finally, for the division of labor, there is an obvious understanding that "students" do the writing for the "teacher" to be evaluated. However, divisions of labor were even found among students. For example, some students readily and actively

participated and kept discussions moving while other students, to use an extreme example, slept.
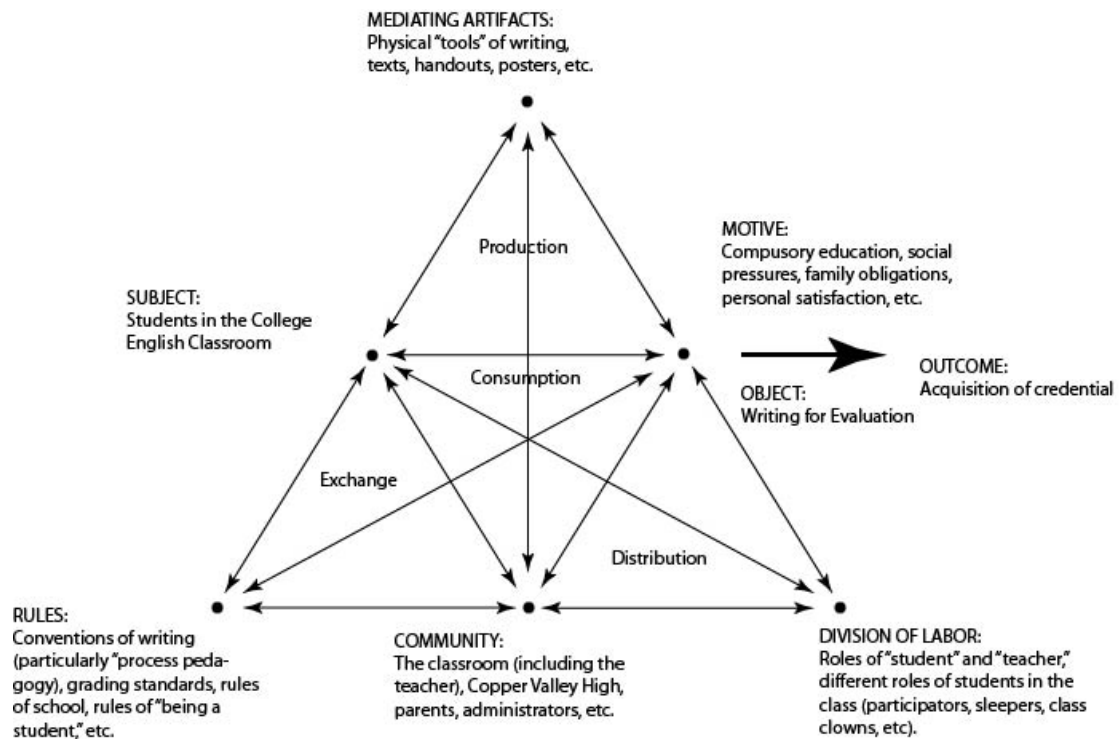
Figure 3.5

I have placed these components in the familiar triangular representation of activity in *figure 3.5*. One question that needs to be dealt with at this point is a question of *practice.* Specifically, how does "practice" fit into AT? This is an important question, as I have previously defined the "Bartleby Syndrome" as a very particularly type of "literacy practice." By this, I simply mean the ideas, values, beliefs, and so forth that guide literacy acts such as reading and writing. The actual writing itself is, within the terminology of Activity Theory, an *action*, but not *activity*. But what can AT tell us about *practice*? Where do "practices" exist within "activity?" Can we speak of "literacy practices" as "activities?" Or, are "activities" somehow part of a "practice?" On one hand, it would seem that "activity" and "practice" are fairly synonymous and could be used

interchangeably. In fact, Engeström seems to use the term *practice* interchangeably with

activity at times, whereas other times he tends to save the term "practice" for something

broader than activity at a local level. As Cole (1995) warned,

> I have come away from this exercise worried about treating activity, practice, and
> context as if they were synonymous, especially in light of the fact that these terms
> often go undefined [...] In some cases, practices appear to be parts of activity
> systems; for example, distinct literate practices can be seen as elements in a
> variety of activity systems (as part of a bar mitzvah, the weekly shopping, or a
> courtship). Activity systems can also be seen as elements in a practice (the term
> "practice of law" implies involvement in courtrooms, boardrooms, libraries, and
> private conferences, all of which are analyzable in activity theory terms). (Supra-
> individual 116)

Part of this conundrum comes from the terms *activity* and *practice* coming from different

traditions in different disciplines, both aimed at bridging the social/individual-

structure/agency divide. At the same time, though, both of these traditions (activity

theory and social practice theory) owe a great deal of debt to Marx's usage of the two

terms.

It is not my intent to make additions to AT here nor to open a conversation with

social practice theory. However, because an integration between concepts of "practice"

and "activity" in the respective traditions of social practice theory and activity theory

remains elusive, I will work with a provisional link between the two terms. *Practices,*

when conjoined with motivating forces toward a specific objective within a defined set of

time, become activity systems. This explains why, at different levels of analysis in AT, we

see elements of *practice*. Practices can be their own mediating artifact, are a quality of

the subject, proscribe the division of labor, guide the actions taken, add shape and

meaning to the "rules," and so on and so forth. Further, as activity systems and *through*

activity, they are reconstructed and redefined. Accordingly, practices are both precursors

as well as results of activity. Also, practices *as* activity explains the way in which *practice* has been theorized as a major lever of social change as well as cultural reproduction. When an objective is satisfied and an activity ceases, it is *practice* that remains as the residual memory of the process of activity. Importantly, *practice* as such serves as the bridge between systems of activity separated by time as well activity systems at different levels.

Returning to the distinction between literacy events and literacy practices is useful in clarifying this muddy mess. As we can recall, Barton (1991) defines the distinction as thus: "Literacy events are the particular activities in which literacy has a role: they may be regular repeated activities. Literacy practices are the general cultural ways of utilizing literacy that people draw upon in a literacy event" (5). Literacy practices, then, without an occasion or an "event" through which they can be realized, are empty. They exist as potentiality in the absence of a realizing event. Such motivating elements of literacy practice have been theorized, such as Deborah Brandt's concept of "literacy sponsors."[3] Further, the plural usage of the term "practices" denotes that there are *many* kinds of literacy practices, and that often the context of the event itself, *including all the aspects that AT seeks to address*, have a major role in defining *which* practice people "draw upon."

Indeed, from *figure 3.5* we can begin to see where Bartleby emerges as a form of literacy practice within College English. The first major tension that jumps out, and is probably the most important one, is quite simply the outcome itself: writing for evaluation. This point exists in a great deal of tension with the "rules" of the classroom

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[3] See especially Brandt's "Sponsors of Literacy," 1998

itself, which was designed by Ms. Stein to follow many principles from process pedagogy. These "rules" defined by process pedagogy are also, obviously, in tension with the division of labor in the classroom which designated the fixed roles of student as producer of text and the teacher as the evaluator of such text. While AT focuses a lot on contradictions within any activity system, resonances and harmonies seem to be important as well, particularly in this case. Because of this, while "process pedagogy" was the stated system of rules in place for the production of texts, it was *not* the actual system of rules that was realized in the class. This points to one danger of visually representing such complex systems. Within the triangle itself, it is hard to determine exactly how--and more suggestively, *why*--the mechanism for which particular rules are actually realized. I will return to this very shortly later in this section, but will simply suggest here that Activity Theory has sought to address this by introducing *other* systems of activity into the picture.

Additionally, one thing that is noticeably absent in this diagram are the actual "actions" themselves. As noted above, actions are a part of, but not a complete aspect of activity. We might consider all the various actions a baseball player might go through over the course of a game, including fielding balls, swinging the bat, sitting on the bench, and so forth. On their own, these individual actions do not equal the *activity* of baseball playing. However, put together within some unifying objective, *activity* starts to emerge. In responding to this issue, Engeström has suggested that action is located somewhere between the objective and the outcomes (see figure 3.6). In this diagram (from Enriching 257), where "action" is finally located, we can start to see how Activity Theory not only points out the issue, but also illuminates its own limits in another way. It is between the

"objective" and the "outcomes" that we see where things break down in regard to Bartleby. In other words, what happens when the "outcomes" are so markedly different than the "objective?" A breakdown of action. Why and how does this occur? The arrows in this figure are misleading, as we can remember that the entire activity itself happens *in time* and co-evolves with the objectives and outcomes themselves. It is *not*, in this regard, linear in which the triangular elements simply "produce" the outcome. Because of this, the "actions"

Figure 3.6
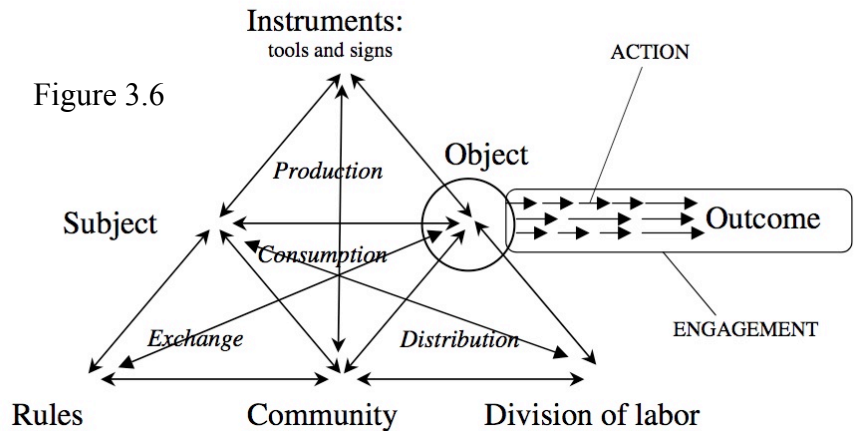
themselves that are the supposed bridge between "objective" and "outcome" are not predetermined and thus in play as well. As a consequence of the entire system itself, they represent one of the most critical tensions in the whole system.

Other research utilizing AT to understand the writing that students do has picked up on this. As Wuori noted in his 2009 dissertation that explored writing in an elementary level classroom: "In this study, it was interesting to find that when students were engaged in activities motivated by their own interests, they rarely extinguished the activity prematurely, but when goals did not seem to be perceived by the students as worthwhile or when they did not understand the purpose or where not interested, the activity was almost always extinguished rapidly" (166). This led him to conclude that "Activity is extinguished upon goal attainment. This can happen quickly and to the detriment of the

teacher's instructional objectives, particularly when students feel no purpose, investment or interest in the activity" (168). This suggests that a sort of action or *practice* related to the overall activity comes into view and exists until it is not needed anymore. In other words a "practice" or a constellation of actions serves as a sort of guide in resolving the contradictions throughout the triangular representation toward the objective, and is extinguished when the "object of this need" is satisfied. I am thinking of nothing less than Bartleby here. As Leont'ev notes, "Up to this point we were talking about activity in the general collective meaning of that concept. Actually, however, we always must deal with specific activities, each of which answers a definite need of the subject, is directed toward an object of this need, is extinguished as a result of its satisfaction, and is produced again, perhaps in other, altogether changed conditions" (Activity and Consciousness). However, while this suggests some sort of explanation for Bartleby, it also suggests other unresolved issues. What I mean here is that, as I argued in the previous chapter, the Bartleby Syndrome *as* a particular type of literacy practice is not a lack or deficiency. The extinguishment of a process in writing in this activity system, therefore, is actually a component of *other* activity systems. In other words, it might represent the end of something for the student, but for others in other activity systems, it is a fully functional component of activity on a collective scale. It is useful to note here that this sort of literacy practice of the students in which the main objective was to simply get it done was seen by her as a failure. The Bartleby Syndrome was a marker of something gone wrong. Further, students *were* allowed a great deal of latitude (although not complete freedom) in working out topics for their writing. The concept of letting students choose their own topics has long been understood to be an important component in realizing agency in

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writing classrooms. Still, though, this minor freedom did not necessarily equate to something that would have ignited a different sort of literacy practice.

One way to think of the danger here is to see such extinguishing of actions as *tragic* and not *comedic*. In other words, this might be the extinguishment of literate activity on a personal level, but may also be, on a different level, precisely what some "activity" is meant to do. Engeström noted that "People face not only the challenge of acquiring established culture; they also face situations in which they must formulate desirable culture. In order to understand such transformations going on in human activity systems, we need a methodology for studying expansive cycles." (Activity Theory and individual and social transformation 35). This has lead to a sort of "third-generation" understanding of Activity theory that tries to understand the ways that "all activity systems are part of a network of activity systems that in its totality constitutes human society" (Roth and Lee, 100). This has constituted a new horizon of theorizing in Activity Theory. As Davydov noted,
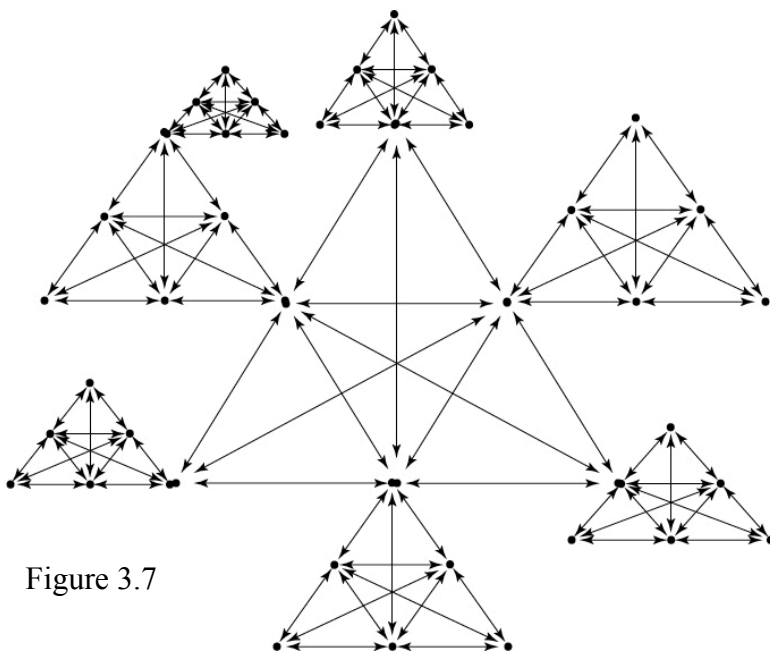
Figure 3.7

> For a long time, social scientists refused to discuss the existence of the activity collective subjects. Only recently has this term begun to be used. Lektorsky (1984) stresses that, in a certain sense, the collective subject exists outside

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particular individual subjects and reveals itself through external, objective-practical, collective activity rather than through individual consciousness. (44)

This has lead to a more complex visual model, in which not just one triangle is presented, but numerous and multiple triangles, which are all connected through various points or nodes (see figure 3.7). While this has lead to a more expansive understanding of "activity," it also leads to what I think of as the limits of Activity Theory. I take this up in the next section.

Activity Theory or Pragmatism?

As we can see with the third generation of AT, the complexity of collective activity systems within a larger network increases exponentially at each level of analysis. As we keep adding triangle upon triangle upon triangle, things stand a fairly good chance of getting out of hand. While I think this third generation of AT makes a great deal of sense, and points to a necessary extension of earlier iterations of AT, I am also concerned about the ability to maintain some sort of *sociological imagination* concerning actual human beings lost in this sea of complex triangular representations. Quite simply, there is a good chance of losing sight of what matters: people and their lived experiences. As AT increases the sophistication and complexity of what it seeks to theoretically analyze in regard to activity, strains and tensions within AT itself become increasingly visible.

Davydov, in 1999, lists eight questions or concerns he has about AT. I want to focus on three of these concerns as a departure point for returning to Deweyan Pragmatism. The first concern has to do with understanding "transformation." As Davydov notes, "Many changes of natural and social reality carried out by people affect the object externally without changing it internally." (42) What is unclear is how, exactly,

we are to understand the nature of such changes if and when they actually occur within AT. Davydov's second concern deals precisely with collective activity. "If the collective subject is external to particular individuals," Davydov asks, "can it be imagined in the form of some totality or group of persons, and in what exact sense does it exist outside the particular individuals who form this group? Further, what must be the essential features of a group of persons who carry out the joint activity so that this group may be defined as a collective subject? What characteristics can help to distinguish collective and individual subjects?" (44). Third, Davydov questions the ability for all aspects of "activity" to be theorized. According to Davydov, "[...] the main question is how to relate this general activity structure to such psychic processes as perception, imagination, memory, thinking, feelings, and will. Can these be considered as components of the general structure of activity, along with motives, problems, and actions? Or should they be considered as independent kinds of activity"(45)? In other words, how do we textually represent something that is so complex without leaving something out? And, if things must be left out, how do we trust the results?

Extending these concerns, James Garrison takes activity theory to task for what he sees as a return (or manifestation) of many binaries that remain unresolved, thus resulting in all sorts of needless complexities and confusions in trying to account for things such as "inner/outer," "social/individual," etc. For Garrison, the concept of "mediation" itself is suspect, as it appears to be a conceptual crutch to help rectify a notion of "outer" with something "internal." Ultimately, Garrison argues for an account of activity built primarily from Dewey's concept of trans-action, contained in *Knowing and the Known* as a means to suggest how Dewey overcomes such binaries when Activity Theory cannot

(Introduction 278). Not all activity theorists have agreed with Garrison's critique (many of whom are scholars with an utterly amazing depth of knowledge in regard to Dewey's work). For example, in a paper titled "Is Dewey's philosophy a philosophy of cultural retooling?," Reijo Miettinen disagrees with Garrison and suggests that "In my understanding, the concept of mediation of activity implies the idea transaction or reciprocal causal interaction: subjects, means and object are interactively constituted or co-evolved in activity." Ultimately, what Miettinen concludes is that the major difference between pragmatism and activity theory is found in what "[...] what they draw from the Hegelian legacy. For Dewey's pragmatism it is the idea of organic unity, and for activity theory it is objectification of the activity into cultural artifacts, signs and tools."

I tend to agree with Miettinen here, although Garrison's criticisms still hold weight for one very simple reason: the description of activity from the perspective of Hegel's "organic unity" that pragmatism works out --while not at all incommensurable with Activity Theory's focus on "objectification of the activity into cultural artifacts"-- simply provides a better way of understanding activity without getting lost in some of the minutiae that unfortunately can be found when Activity Theory considers anything beyond the level of local, individual action. This alone suggests that, particularly in regard to *collective* systems of activity, a Deweyan system of understanding activity holds greater explanatory power simply because complex systems of collective activity simply outstrip the ability for *any* methodological system to adequately name and describe every constituent factor. Quite simply, as more triangles are added to represented increasingly complex networks of activity systems, at some point we reach a vantage point in which the edges of the triangles start to fade and what we see is nothing

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short of this *organic unity*. While I will leave it to others to decide if one is "better" than the other, I do not think any formulation of Activity Theory--at this level of complexity--can better Dewey's system.

Beyond this, though, there is another reason for turning to Pragmatism in describing activity, and this deals with the political implications of how we understand activity. As James Wertsch has argued, "it is often impossible to understand or interpret Soviet studies without an appreciation of the theoretical foundations that underlie them" (Concept of Activity 3). These foundations are rooted in Marxism-Leninism (8). Wertsch's point is that translations of Soviet work in sociocultural psychology to Western ears often leads to problems, simply because not everyone has taken the time to fully understand the implications of these theoretical foundations. Zebroski has made similar points here, too. However, Wertsch's argument illuminates a second problem with Activity Theory (and Soviet Psychology in general), and this problem becomes more visible when we consider the political implications of such scholarly work. Put very simply, in order to distill any sort of normative political implications from scholarship in Activity Theory, one would need to work backwards not only through the theoretical foundations of Marxism-Leninism, but also backwards through Russian and Eastern European history itself in order to finally attempt to transpose any significant meanings on to contemporary Western contexts. While it may be a bold claim, Pragmatism, particularly in the way it has developed and evolved alongside North American history, does not face similar barriers.

I should be clear what I am and what I am not claiming here. I am not claiming, for example, that Activity Theory's association with Marxism-Leninism is a fatal flaw

simply because I have some sort of a moral qualm with Marxism-Leninism itself. Personally, I am of those neo-pragmatists who think Marxism and Pragmatism are far closer than what post-war Western Philosophy has tried to convince us of (See also James Livingston here). I also see both Marx and Dewey as fundamentally connected through the broader Hegelian tradition, as many has noted (see especially Bernstein here). That said, there are important differences between Marx, Dewey, and "Marxism-Leninism" that have important ramifications. These differences could be understood as differences among individual philosophers in only a minimal way. Rather, what should be understood is that each of these philosophers and philosophical systems were deeply embedded in different social, political, and historical environments. (I might note, though, that we could also understand similarities between the two traditions through noting that "capitalism" has a global reach, as does science).

Fortunately, the theoretical traditions that AT rests upon--namely, Vygostky's work and the extensions of it by Leont'ev--share a common methodological criticism of non-Marxist mainstream western psychology with Dewey's pragmatism. Since we've already covered much of that ground in describing AT, I will move directly into Dewey's understanding of human conduct, action, activity, and this *organic unity*.

Building Human Activity from the Ground Up: Dewey's Live Creature

Toward the latter half of the 19th century, there was a great amount of interest in studying and measuring the reflex-arc, or the "stimulus-response" pattern. The "reflex-arc" referred to a supposed channel or "arc" through which sensory stimuli eventually made their way to the mind. Essentially, research subjects were asked to wait for a

stimulus (such as a light that would turn on) and then respond in some manner (such as pressing a button). The amount of time between the stimulus and the response would be measured. This was thought to be the proper way to understand the psychological concept of "attention." As William Mackenzie noted in the 1971 edition of Dewey's Collected Works, the cause for such interest in these experiments is that it was thought to be a "a scientific alternative to the traditional dualism" (EW.5.xvi). Basically, it was thought that the measurement of the "arc" was nothing less than measuring some sort of connection between body (represented by the stimulus) and the mind (represented by the response). In the process of conducting these experiments, however, an interesting quirk was discovered. Research subjects who were asked to focus on pressing the button were able to "respond" to the stimulus a fraction of a second faster than those who were instructed to focus on the stimulus itself. A veritable cottage industry of research labs popped up to study and measure these differences based on what the research subject was asked to concentrate on.

At the University of Chicago, where Dewey was on faculty at the time, the experiment was repeated. As Louis Menand explains of what the results confirmed, "individual times varied according to skill and experience, but after sufficient practice concentration on the physical response rather than the sensory stimulus generally yielded the faster times" (327). This lead two of Dewey's colleague to suggest an explanation for what was going on. Louis Menand, again: "For most of the subjects in the experiment, picking up a stimulus becomes habitual more readily than producing a physical response, which is the real explanation for the tendency of the people focusing on their hands to get faster times: they're directing attention where it's most needed. Attention is functional. It

is not a process measurable from the outside; it is something that falls 'inside' the complete act. And the complete act is not composed of discrete units; the act *is* the unit" (328). Building upon this insight, Dewey wrote a short and very technical piece titled "The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology" --an essay that, according to Menand, is "the key to his [Dewey's] thought" (328).

In this text, Dewey painstakingly breaks down the reflex-arc concept, ultimately finding that it simply errs in understanding the relationship of the stimulus to the response. As Dewey complained, "The sensory stimulus is one thing, the central activity, standing for the idea, is another thing, and the motor discharge, standing for the act proper, is a third. As a result, the reflex arc is not a comprehensive, or organic unity, but a patchwork of disjointed parts, a mechanical conjunction of unallied processes" (EW.5.97)[4] "What precedes the 'stimulus'" Dewey wrote, "is a whole act, a sensori-motor co-ordination. What is more to the point, the "stimulus" emerges out of this co-ordination; it is born from it as its matrix; it represents as it were an escape from it "(EW.5.100). Essentially, the stimulus is a result of the whole act, not the other way around. In short, Dewey claims that the entire reflex-arc concept is a product of the historical or psychological fallacy. In Dewey's words, "A set of considerations which hold good only because of a completed process, is read into the content of the process which conditions this completed result" (EW.5.105). As Menand further explains, "Analytically speaking, the response actually *precedes* the stimulus--that is, we label the seeing a 'stimulus' because we have already labeled another part of the act, the reaching, a 'response'" (328). This move to a prior wholeness that is only later broken into parts

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[4] "The Reflex-Arc Concept in Psychology" was originally published in 1896.

analytically is something that is unique to Dewey. As Menand points out, Dewey had already been making arguments along similar lines to other areas long before he applied it to the reflex-arc. Further, this move is not found in William James nor Peirce's work. The source for this concept was very simply Hegel's concept of *Geist*, stripped of the absolute and instead biologized (329).

This insight would have far reaching implications for Dewey's work, and can be seen underneath practically everything Dewey did. In regard to the reflex arc, Dewey ultimately concluded that "We ought to be able to see that the ordinary conception of the reflex arc theory, instead of being a case of plain science, *is a survival of the metaphysical dualism, first formulated by Plato*, according to which the sensation is an ambiguous dweller on the border land of soul and body, the idea (or central process) is purely physical. Thus the reflex arc formulation is neither physical (or physiological) nor psychological; *it is a mixed materialistic-spiritualistic assumption*" (EW.5.105, emphasis mine). As Menand points out, this would become Dewey's go-to strategy in dealing with virtually every problem: "We think that a response follows a stimulus; Dewey taught that there is a stimulus only because there is already a response. We think that first there are individuals and then there is a society; Dewey taught that there is no such thing as an individual without society. We think we know in order to do; Dewey taught that doing is why there is knowing" (330). Some of Dewey's biggest moves were predicated very simply on this sort of thinking. For example, in the first chapter of his *magnum opus* on the subject of experience, *Experience and Nature*, he painstakingly outlines what he sees as the chief defect of most philosophical reasoning: "[a] conversion of eventual functions into antecedent existence: a conversion that may be said to be *the philosophic fallacy*"

(34, emphasis mine). We can see how it is practically identical to the case Dewey made against the reflex-arc.

However, it is when Dewey applied this logic to life itself do we see the full realization of this *organic unity*. As he claimed in the first pages of *Experience and Nature*, "Life denotes a function, a comprehensive activity, in which organism and environment are included. Only upon reflective analysis does it break up into external conditions--air breathed, food taken, ground walked upon--and internal structures--lungs respiring, stomach digesting, legs walking" (LW 1:9). It is from within this emphasis on unity that we can now fully contextualize Dewey's concept of *experience* that was discussed in the first chapter. It is worth recounting Dewey's discussion of what it means to "have *an* experience" in his major work on aesthetics, *Art as Experience*. For Dewey, having an experience was very different than having experienced something. We continually experience things, but that in of itself does not constitute *an experience*. The difference between the two is quite simply that *an experience* has a quality that denotes that which was before and what was after. "There is that meal in a Paris restaurant," describes Dewey, "of which one says 'that was an experience.' It stands out as an enduring memorial of what food may be. Then there is that storm one went through in crossing the Atlantic—the storm that seemed in its fury, as it was experienced, to sum up in itself all that a storm can be, complete in itself, standing out because marked out from what went before and what came after. (LW 10:44) For Dewey, what makes these instances qualitatively different and important is both *unity* and *transformation*: "An experience has a unity that gives it its name, that meal, that storm, that rupture of friendship. The existence of this unity is constituted by a single quality that pervades the

entire experience in spite of the variation of its constituent parts" (LW 10:45). This conception of experience, on the surface, starts to approximate the concept of "activity" discussed earlier, particularly in the emphasis on *transformation*, as in the movement from "a storm" to "that storm."

This transformation, though, can easily be misunderstood as a feature of the individual mind. That is, *an experience* results in some sort of qualitative change in the understandings a person possesses, but does not necessarily have anything to do with the environment in which it occurred in. Dewey, at many points, belabors his explanation of the *unity* inherent not just to experience, but to the environment itself. As he notes in the first chapter of *Art and Experience*, "[...] life goes on in an environment; not merely in it but because of it, through interaction with it. No creature lives merely under its skin; its subcutaneous organs are means of connection with what lies beyond its bodily frame, and to which, in order to live, it must adjust itself, by accommodation and defense but also by conquest" (LW 10:19). Earlier in his career, he makes a similar point in *Human Nature and Conduct*, explaining that, in regard to habits, "Breathing is an affair of the air as truly as of the lungs; digesting an affair of food as truly as of tissues of stomach" (MW 14:15). Dewey's point in *Art and Experience* builds from a rather revolutionary insight: the existence of experiences themselves, something "art" depends upon, is a function of a particular type of environment that oscillates between the precarious and the stable. "There are two sorts of possible worlds," as Dewey explains," in which esthetic experience would not occur. In a world of mere flux, change would not be cumulative; it would not move toward a close. Stability and rest would have no being. Equally is it true, however, that a world that is finished, ended, would have no traits of suspense and crisis,

and would offer no opportunity for resolution. Where everything is already complete, there is no fulfillment" (LW 10:20). Again, we can see how Dewey has effectively naturalized the dialectical nature of Hegel's *Geist*. Some sort of idealistic, extra-material entity that was constantly splitting and reconstructing itself was not needed, the natural world itself was more than capable of that task.

Dewey runs the implications of this position to startling conclusions. In *Experience and Nature*, this naturalization of *Geist* allows Dewey to reconstruct understandings of not just natural things or animalistic tendencies, but of human ideas and meanings themselves. For example, Dewey describes the evolution of the concept of "God" itself as such:

> It is an old saying that the gods were born of fear. The saying is only too likely to strengthen a misconception bred by confirmed subjective habits. We first endow man in isolation with an instinct of fear and then we imagine him irrationally ejecting that fear into the environment, scattering broadcast as it were, the fruits of his own purely personal limitations, and thereby creating superstition. But fear, whether an instinct or an acquisition, is a function of the environment. Man fears because he exists in a fearful, an awful world. The world is precarious and perilous. [...] The voice is that of early man; but the hand is that of nature, the nature in which we still live. It was not fear of gods that created the gods. (LW 1:44, 45)

Like Dewey, I am belaboring this point for a fairly important reason: the isolation of elements into separate objects in the course of theorization and analysis is an *artificial* step. It isn't that things are *connected, related,* or *networked* through some sort of ecological apparatus, as the concept of "connected" assumes some sort of separation to be bridged by other elements. Rather, what we often times understand as different or separate are, in actuality, *continuous* within this organic unity. As Dewey remarked toward the end of *Experience and Nature,* "The world is subject-matter for knowledge, *because mind has developed in that world;* a body-mind, whose structures have

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developed according to the structures of the world in which it exists, will naturally find some of its structures to be concordant and congenial with nature, and some phases of nature with itself" (LW 1:212, emphasis mine). Like the anatomical substance of lung tissue making no sense without air from the environment, neither do the acts and actions of humans make any sense when divorced from the social, political, and economic environment--or *context*--in which they occur in. They are not connected; they are continuous. Even further, the realm of the "natural environment" is not somehow connected or related to the realm of human ideas, *the two are continuous* as well.

With this, we can now see a very rudimentary account of activity within this framework predicated upon organic unity. To start, this framework of organic unity indicates that activity is constant. If we mistakenly understand various parts and elements comprising the whole, we fall into a trap in which we must find some sort of actuator that has the capability of putting those elements into motion. Instead, as Dewey suggests, if the whole precedes the parts, and the whole is itself active and in motion, the parts themselves are also constantly in motion. Consequently, it is erroneous to think of things as static and simply waiting for something to nudge them into action. Rather, as Dewey describes in his textbook on ethics,

> [...] the organism is already active, and stimuli themselves arise and are experienced only in the course of action. The painful heat of an object stimulates the hand to withdraw but the heat was experienced in the course of reaching and exploring. The function of a stimulus is—as the case just cited illustrates—to change the direction of an action already going on. Similarly, a response to a stimulus is not the beginning of activity; it is a change, a shift, of activity in response to the change in conditions indicated by a stimulus. (LW 7:290)[5]

However, while the live creature is already in a state of constant activity, the continual

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[5] This revised version of Dewey's earlier textbook on Ethics was published in 1932.

ebb and flow of *everything* give shape, meaning, an guidance to the transformations taking place. For Dewey, this is what is meant by *impulsion*.

We can see shades of Dewey's insight into the reflex-arc in his description of impulsion in *Art as Experience*: "Every experience, of slight or tremendous import, begins with an impulsion, rather as an impulsion. I say 'impulsion' rather than 'impulse.' An impulse is specialized and particular; it is, even when instinctive, simply a part of the mechanism involved in a more complete adaptation with the environment. Impulsion designates a movement outward and forward of the whole organism to which special impulses are auxiliary" (LW 10:60). Impulsion, though, is not a property of the live creature, but rather a characterization of some movement that is qualitatively distinct in regard to some sort of consummatory coherence. Impulsion is a rather critical concept in understanding activity. However, over the course of Dewey's long career, there is some fuzziness over terminology he uses. On the surface, it would seem as though Dewey saw "stimulus" and "impulsion" as the same thing. This, I think, is somewhat accurate. However, as Dewey noted in *Experience and Nature*, "The consciousness of stimuli marks the conclusion of an investigation, not an original datum; and what is discovered is not the stimuli to that act, the inquiry, but to some other act, past or prospective, and it marks the conversion of de facto stimulus into potential means" (LW 1:254). In other words, an impulsion is not something that exists within the awareness of the live creature. However, in a move that is probably reconciling his own terminology with his own philosophical precedents, Dewey moved to define "stimulus" as something that can only really be known as a result of some inquiry. This is not unimportant, though, as in *Democracy and Education,* Dewey provides this highly suggestive definition of stimulus:

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"In general, every stimulus directs activity. It does not simply excite it or stir it up, but directs it toward an object. Put the other way around, a response is not just a re-action, a protest, as it were, against being disturbed; it is, as the word indicates, an answer. It meets the stimulus, and corresponds with it. There is an adaptation of the stimulus and response to each other. [...] To some extent, then, all direction or control is a guiding of activity to its own end; it is an assistance in doing fully what some organ is already tending to do" (MW 9.29). It is here that we begin to bring not just changes in the environment into the picture, but the attempt at controlling or directing activity.

So far in this account, the role of "ideas" and "knowledge" have been absent. As mentioned before, for Dewey concepts such as "ideas" and "knowledge" were just as much a part of this organic unity as anything else. Dewey, in his collection of essays titled *Essays in Experimental Logic*, added this expanded and incredibly suggestive definition of knowing in the after notes:

> [...] knowing is literally something which we do; that analysis is ultimately physical and active; that meanings in their logical quality are standpoints, attitudes, and methods of behaving toward facts, and that active experimentation is essential to verification. Put in another way it holds that thinking does not mean any transcendent states or acts suddenly introduced into a previously natural scene, but that the operations of knowing are (or are artfully derived from) natural responses of the organism, which constitute knowing in virtue of the situation of doubt in which they arise and in virtue of the uses of inquiry, reconstruction, and control to which they are put. (MW 10:367)[6]

Dewey would build on this to craft an important definition of "intelligence." For Dewey, change was constant. However, when thinking was applied in an attempt to modify conditions or direct the already occurring changes, this "added type of interaction is intelligence. The intelligent activity of man is not something brought to bear upon nature

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[6] *Essays in Experimental Logic* was first published in 1916.

from without; it is nature realizing its own potentialities in behalf of a fuller and richer issue of events. Intelligence within nature means liberation and expansion, as reason outside of nature means fixation and restriction" (LW 4:172)[7]. In a more practical sense, Dewey defined intelligence as "operations actually performed in the modification of conditions, including all the guidance that is given by means of ideas, both direct and symbolic" (LW 4:161) and further, that intelligence "is associated with judgment; that is, with selection and arrangement of means to effect consequences and with choice of what we take as our ends [...] In the large sense of the term, intelligence is as practical as reason is theoretical" (LW 4:171).

It is here that Dewey is able extend this account of activity to humans, and in particular to things like culture and politics. Unlike other systems that see a sort of "evolution" of these so called distinctly "human" aspects that tacitly assume that the realm of culture has *replaced* the natural, Dewey never gives up the natural realm that might lead into some sort of idealism (or *intellectualism* as he sometimes called it). As he noted in *The Public and its Problems. An Essay in Political Inquiry,* "For ideas belong to human beings who have bodies, and there is no separation between the structures and processes of the part of the body that entertains the ideas and the part that performs acts" (LW 2:8). Dewey does not stop there, though, for the ideas that belong to human beings who have bodies *also belong to a context or environment*. In the same text, Dewey utilizes this insight as a means to root out what he sees as the chief defect of most political theory. Where political theory gets into hot water is to associate "wants, choices and purpose"--undoubtedly things that are located in "single beings"--with something that

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[7] Originally published in *The Quest for Certainty* in 1929.

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is "purely personal." Dewey rejects this view. As he pointed out, "Even if 'consciousness' were the wholly private matter that the individualistic tradition in philosophy and psychology supposes it to be, it would still be true that consciousness is of objects, not of itself. Association in the sense of connection and combination is a 'law' of everything known to exist. Singular things act, but they act together. Nothing has been discovered which acts in entire isolation" (LW 2:22). For Dewey, even the concept of an "individual" was only understandable through an understanding of the whole. As Dewey pointed out in many times in many ways, it is only through a particular social structure do we even come to have an idea of an "individual." In his revised textbook on ethics, Dewey wrote that "Society as something apart from individuals is a pure fiction. On the other hand, nothing in the universe, not even physical things, exists apart from some form of association; there is nothing from the atom to man which is not involved in conjoint action. [...] Human beings are generated only by union of individuals; the human infant is so feeble in his powers as to be dependent upon the care and protection of others [...] Apart from the ties which bind him to others, he is nothing" (LW 7:323). Dewey's manner of characterizing such a position evolved over the course of his life. By the 1930s when he wrote *Experience and Education*, he characterized it as such: "[...] control of individual actions are effected by the whole situation in which individuals are involved, in which they share and of which they are co-operative or interacting parts" (MW 9:53). Eventually, though, he moved beyond the term "interacting"for what he felt was a more appropriate concept: transaction.

In what would be his last major work, *Knowing and the Known*, Dewey and Arthur Bentley describe three stages of action (or more specific to the context of the

work, *inquiry* or *ways of understanding the phenomena of action)*: self-action, inter-action, and trans-action. The concept of self-action simply referred to an understanding of action as being guided by an indomitable will, when things are viewed as being the cause of their own action. Dewey, like Activity Theorists, had long rejected this view as omitting the environment, culture, context, history, and so forth. The concept of "inter-action," then, refereed to an understanding in which two separate "things" that were fully formed and definable would somehow and in some way exert some affect or influence on each other. As Dewey and Bentley defined it, inter-action referred to an understanding of action "where thing is balanced against thing in causal interconnection" (LW 16:101)[8]. The problem here, though, is that this understanding was subject to the same flaw that Dewey saw in the reflex-arc. It had no way of understanding the ways in which each "thing" was not pre-formed prior to action, but was a consequence *of* activity. To describe *this* conception of action in which the parts were also actively forming *through* the process of activity is to understand action as *trans-action*. As Dewey and Bentley explain,

> If inter-action assumes the organism and its environmental objects to be present as substantially separate existences or forms of existence, prior to their entry into joint investigation, then— Transaction assumes no pre-knowledge of either organism or environment alone as adequate, not even as respects the basic nature of the current conventional distinctions between them, but requires their primary acceptance in common system, with full freedom reserved for their developing examination. (LW 16:114)

As noted in the first chapter, Dewey's exploration of *habit* in his work *Human Nature and Conduct* represents the fullest development of Dewey's thought on the function and role of this *organic unity* when it came to understanding the realms of

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[8] *Knowing and the Known* was originally published in 1949.

human activity, culture, morality, and *will*. To briefly recap, the concept of "habit" for Dewey represented some sort of consummatory synthesis of individual and environment that served as a guide or basis for action. Habits are born out of *experience*, but extend beyond the immediate experience. Because of this, *and unlike involuntary physiological functions*, Dewey saw habits as being acquired. "Habits are like functions in many respects," Dewey pointed out, "and especially in requiring the cooperation of organism and environment. Breathing is an affair of the air as truly as of the lungs; digesting an affair of food as truly as of tissues of stomach" (MW 14:15). Because to have *an experience,* in Dewey's terminology, denoted some sense of transformation, *habit*s carried with them the resonances of some sort of complete transformation. For Dewey, this temporality is achieved through imagination. As he pointed out, "A hungry man could not conceive food as a good unless he had actually experienced, with the support of environing conditions, food as good. The objective satisfaction comes first. But he finds himself in a situation where the good is denied in fact. It then lives in imagination. The habit denied overt expression asserts itself in idea. It sets up the thought, the ideal, of food" (MW 14:39). Dewey is very clear of two things in setting up this example. First, that thought is not a "pale bloodless abstraction," but has "its source in objective conditions." Second, in moving to other, new objective conditions, this ideal carried in imagination "works to secure a change of environment" so that what is imagined can be realized.

What is perhaps more important here, though, is that Dewey does not constrain this mechanism to pure biological needs and desires. As he notes, "The analogy with morals lies upon the surface. A habit impeded in overt operation continues nonetheless to

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operate. It manifests itself in desireful thought, that is in an ideal or imagined object which embodies within itself the force of a frustrated habit. There is therefore demand for a changed environment, a demand which can be achieved only by some modification and rearrangement of old habits" (MW 14:39). It is precisely here that we can see how Dewey's life-long attention to "democracy" comes not out of a sentimental attraction to the idea, but rather as an extension of his philosophy. For Dewey, "democracy" simply entailed "a means of stimulating original thought, and of evoking action deliberately adjusted in advance to cope with new forces" (MW 14:48). However, in asserting this, Dewey was careful to note that "democracy" in his times was "still so immature that its main effect is to multiply occasions for imitation. If progress in spite of this fact is more rapid than in other social forms, it is by accident, since the diversity of models conflict with one another and thus give individuality a chance in the resulting chaos of opinions" (MW 14:48). " What I need to emphasize here is that such action guided by habit has its roots in something experienced, something real and objective. "Thought which does not exist within ordinary habits of action" Dewey noted, "lacks means of execution. In lacking application, it also lacks test, criterion. Hence it is condemned to a separate realm. If we try to act upon it, our actions are clumsy, forced" (MW 14:49). This was one of the enduring problems Dewey wrestled with, particularly in his works more focused on education. As he seemed to be clearly aware, the separation of thought and action that produced "clumsy, forced" actions was no accident. "Those who wish a monopoly of social power," warned Dewey, "find desirable the separation of habit and thought, action and soul, so characteristic of history. For the dualism enables them to do the thinking and planning, while others remain the docile, even if awkward, instruments of execution.

Until this scheme is changed, democracy is bound to be perverted in realization. With our present system of education—by which something much more extensive than schooling is meant—democracy multiplies occasions for imitation *not occasions for thought in action*" (MW 14:52, emphasis mines). I will return to this point in the next section when I discuss a pragmatist critique of Bartleby.

The final aspect of Dewey's conception of activity I want to discuss in this section has to do with the separation of the immediate action to the ends of action. In considering the notion of "ends" and "means" in theories concerning moral and ethical deliberation, Dewy notes that

> [i]t has been pointed out that the ends, objectives, of conduct are those foreseen consequences which influence present deliberation and which finally bring it to rest by furnishing an adequate stimulus to overt action. Consequently ends arise and function within action. They are not, as current theories too often imply, things lying beyond activity at which the latter is directed. They are not strictly speaking ends or termini of action at all. They are terminals of deliberation, and so turning points in activity. (MW 14:154)

Dewey makes this point to contrast himself with other theories of morality which place these ends beyond action. Under this understanding that Dewey finds to be flawed, these ends that are placed beyond action serve "as something necessary to induce action and in which it terminates" (MW 14:154). For Dewey, this is an unfortunate hold over of earlier philosophies that held that "fixed ends existed for all normal changes in nature." Darwin's revolution removed this view from the naturalistic sciences, yet it remained in theories concerning human action. The result of this was an inability to utilize ethical and moral deliberation in an *artful* manner that was able to bring *inquiry* to bear on problems (See especially Fesmire's discussion here). Importantly, for Dewey, "Ends are foreseen consequences which *arise in the course of activity* and which are employed to give

activity added meaning and to direct its further course" (MW 14:156, emphasis mine). Again, we can see shades of Dewey's insight into and critique of the reflex-arc concept earlier in his career. This leads Dewey to conclude that "[h]aving an end or aim is thus a characteristic of present activity [...] In a strict sense an end-in-view is a means in present action; present action is not a means to a remote end" (157). From this point, I will now turn back to the writing students were doing (and not doing) in College English.

Bartleby from a Pragmatist perspective

Many conceptions of writing have stubbornly maintained some sort of concept of "mind" that, while connected or related to the context/environment somehow, is still somehow apart or different from it. This understanding, mistaken as it is, exists simply to help maintain another mistaken idea: that despite an environment that is hostile in every way to the sort of writing we as composition theorists envision, the *mind* is able to transcend such limitations if it truly desires it. This may be a politically expedient hope, but does little to help us understand writing within educational institutions. Unfortunately, this is the operating assumption under all educational courses predicated upon some concept of *preparation*. In this framework, the idea is that "college," or more specifically, the ability to go to college, serves as an adequate force of activity for students to engage in productive activity. In other words, if students want to go to college badly enough, they will do whatever they must to be ready for it.

However, building from a Pragmatist account of activity discussed in the previous section, college preparation itself cannot be an "ends-in-view" for activity (like, writing) simply because it is purely speculative for the students. This can only be something that

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is an end-in-view for the teacher or other non-student stake-holders, as they are the only one who has actually experienced college itself. For the students, then, being unable to utilize "college" as an ends-in-view, other things that are far more immediate stand in here. As Dewey points out, "The in-viewness of ends is as much conditioned by antecedent natural conditions as is perception of contemporary objects external to the organism, trees and stones, or whatever. That is, natural processes must have actually terminated in specifiable consequences, which give those processes definition and character, before ends can be mentally entertained and be the objects of striving desire" (LW 1:87). Recall that an end-in-view is a means in *present action*. Or, in other words, ends-in-view come out of present activity, which is the student's lives as they are living them at the moment, *not* some imaginary life they *might* be living sometime in a distant future. Of course, we may say the exact same thing about education as job training in the schools, something Dewey had a lot to say about as well. It is here that Activity Theory is incredibly helpful in showing us what exactly constitutes the "present activity:" it is not writing, but rather *schooling*, and in particular, the acquisition of a credential that marks the individual student as "prepared" for whatever the next level might be.

Indeed, as I noted in the previous chapter, one thing I was particularly struck by was how limited the students were in having an understanding of "college." In this light, then, much of what the students actually did in regard to actions and practices related to writing, made perfect sense considering the environment of schooling in which the objective is simply to "pass." In Pragmatist lingo, the consummatory meaning that is the result of *an experience* is relegated *not* to the activity of writing itself, but rather to the activity of school going. It is without question that writing *of some sort* was a part of this

"school going" activity, but in regard to the assigned writing, it was certainly not an *experience* itself. Instead, much of what I saw can better be understood as an extension of the student's lives as immediately experienced by them as opposed to a *preparation* for something yet to come. The hours the seniors spent decorating the hallways for homecoming, the incredible rigidity of the school day itself, the sometimes insanely complex daily schedules the students worked under, the jockeying for friends and relationships, the anxiety over having to become some sort of adult, and the endless waiting for and anxiety over whatever is next constituted the array of experiences the students worked under. In this regard, the "schooled writing" the students were asked to do was completely cordoned off from these centers of impulse.

In short, what has occurred is that "college" is assumed to be a fixed aim for all students. Aims, or "ends-in-view," though, cannot be fixed, as they are a result of a process of activity. If we really wanted "college preparation," then what we're doing is a particularly bad way of going about it. Why? The idea of "college preparation" *itself* seeks to simply ignore *present conditions* in regard to the writing that students do. Dewey is very clear on why this doesn't work: "An aim not framed on the basis of a survey of those present conditions which are to be employed as means of its realization simply throws us back upon past habits. We then do not do what we intended to do but what we have got used to doing, or else we thrash about in a blind ineffectual way. The result is failure" (MW 14:160). In the context of the College English course I observed, what results is not so much a "failure" of college preparation or a failure of writing, but does go a long way in understanding the ways in which many students did "fail" to live up to the idea of writing as a process that is so pervasive in composition theory.

While it is dangerous to invite comparisons of one student's writing to another, the story I ended the second chapter with of the student attempting to prevent the Harry Potter event from happening serves as an excellent illustration of this. As I noted, this student *was* engaging in a "process" model of composition, seeking out opinions and working through drafts in a very serious attempt to produce the most effective writing she could. The most important feature of this student's activity can be seen in the *immediacy* of all aspects of her activity in regard to writing. Her "ends-in-view" were not focused on something far off in the future, but were inextricably bound to a present situation she found herself in that demanded some sort of movement. This situation or context was not of her own making, but was the result of a volatile mixture of the environment, traditions she was a member of, an impulsion to do something, and a situation in which *writing* emerged as the means toward an objective located in the present. In short, the writing that this student was undertaking was *not* something that was simply preparing for a reality that *might* be realized in the distant future. Writing, for this student, addressed a present situation in an immediate way.

This idea, that writing turns into something interesting when it is bound with the immediate context in a meaningful way, is nothing new for composition. The by now old call for an "authentic audience" in composition instruction has a tacit recognition of this. A diverse array of post-1968 composition theory, ranging from Peter Elbow's dictum that "college is short, life is long" to even the critical pedagogy of Ira Shor and his "problematizing" method of instruction has an understanding of this and seeks to tap into the possibilities of writing within the present. However, many theories of writing as a process are limited to focusing on the process of writing itself only once it has begun.

Take, for example, Janet Emig's classic text *The Composing Process of 12th Graders*. What is strikingly absent from Emig's discussion of writing is anything prior to the actual act of writing itself. Emig's brief consideration of *stimuli* is one of the few places in which she looks prior to the writing process. Here is her explanation of the role *stimuli* plays in the writing process:

> The first dimension of the composing process to note is the *nature of the stimulus* that activates the process or keeps it going. For students, as for any other writers, stimuli are either self encountered or other initiated. Either the student writes from stimuli with which he has privately interacted or from stimuli presented by others--the most common species of the second being, of course, the assignment given by the teacher. Both kinds of stimuli can be nonverbal or verbal, although it is an extremely rare and sophisticated teacher who can give a nonverbal writing assignment. (33)

From Emig's description, what we can see here is a picture of the writer as *potential* but in a moment of stasis waiting for some sort of external push. Again, like the idea that "college preparation" is in itself a fixed aim *prior* to writing that all writing bends toward, what is problematic in this understanding is that a "stimulus" exists prior to the act and is responsible for initiating activity.

Dewey's point regarding the reflex arc again suggests the problem here. Aims, or stimuli, are not dead ends or points of termination, but rather are *instrumental* in regard to action. They are things *used* in the course of activity and, as such, are transformed over the course of activity. As Dewey fairly clearly warns, "[...] there is a difference between future improvement as a result and as a direct aim. To make it an aim is to throw away the surest means of attaining it, namely attention to the full use of present resources in the present situation. [...] Deliberately to subordinate the present to the future is to subject the comparatively secure to the precarious, exchange resources for liabilities, surrender what is under control to what is, relatively, incapable of control" (MW 14:183). However,

Dewey is also aware that an understanding of aims or stimuli as fixed and prior to action has an instrumental function itself. "The great trouble," Dewey noted, "with what passes for moral ends and ideals is that they do not get beyond the stage of fancy of something agreeable and desirable based upon an emotional wish; very often, at that, not even an original wish, but the wish of some leader which has been conventionalized and transmitted through channels of authority" (MW 14:162). The ease at which this idea can be applied to the typical writing environment within schools is chilling.

Why have theories of writing fallen into this trap? Dewey's discussion concerning morality is highly suggestive:

> We see only consequences which correspond to our habitual courses. As we have said, men did not begin to shoot because there were ready-made targets to aim at. They made things into targets by shooting at them, and then made special targets to make shooting more significantly interesting. But if generation after generation were shown targets they had had no part in constructing, if bows and arrows were thrust into their hands, and pressure were brought to bear upon them to keep them shooting in season and out, some wearied soul would soon propound to willing listeners the theory that shooting was unnatural, that man was naturally wholly at rest, and that targets existed in order that men might be forced to be active; that the duty of shooting and the virtue of hitting are externally imposed and fostered, and that otherwise there would be no such thing as a shooting-activity—that is, morality. (MW 14:159-160)

So it goes with writing, in which the situation becomes inverted so to speak. We see students "writing" as something that only happens when they are directed to do so. Worse, though, it suggests that we have assumed a stable and fixed environment or context in which a literacy practice that sees writing as a process persists. What has been forgotten are the particular, historical contexts and situations in which these practices of literacy developed and then assumed them to be an aspect of all writing itself. This sets up an expectation that is often deeply at odds with the possibilities and limitations found in present situations.

To say this more boldly, the sort of literacy practices envisioned in process pedagogy have universalized some sort of experience of a few in a specific historical time to *all* situations. A Pragmatist critique of activity shows how such practices are built upon present situations and means and are *not* directed at future goals or aims. However, drawing from the concept of organic unity, these present situations and means are themselves not accidental, for we could envision a sort of classroom in which "preparation" was defined *by* the full and complete utilization of the environment students find themselves presently in. In other words, the "Bartleby Syndrome" may represent a local failure rooted in a contradiction between the expectations of process pedagogy and the realities of the lived experiences of students, but it may also fit into a broader purpose. As Bowles and Gintis note in their 1971 work *Schooling in Capitalist America*,

> The free school movement and related efforts to make education more conducive to full human development have assumed that the present school system is the product of irrationality, mindlessness, and social backwardness on the part of the teachers, administrators, school boards, and parents. On the contrary, we believe the available evidence indicates that the pattern of social relationships fostered in schools is hardly irrational or accidental. Rather, the structure of the educational experience is admirably suited to nurturing attitudes and behavior consonant with participation in the labor force [...] As long as one does not question the structure of the economy itself, the current structure of schools seems eminently rational. (9)

While it may seem contradictory on the surface, we can start to see how the result of "college preparation" in a writing classroom is at once a "failure" to prepare students for college as well as a success in producing habits or practices of writing that do participate to a particular type of society.

Conclusion

To return to the concept of agency, I want to point out a couple observations built from this Pragmatist account of activity. The first is that a pragmatist account of agency starts by noting that the divide between structure and agency is, *in the first place*, an *artificial* divide. In fact, we may reconsider the binary of structure and agency in a different way--that agency is *structured* and *structures* are a consequence of agency. In a related manner, Alan Luke has noted that in regard to literacy, "these models [of empowerment] have tended to rely on concepts of free will and individual difference, explaining difference in terms of 'aims', 'intents' and 'choice'; power in terms of concepts of 'status' and 'role'; cultural and sociopolitical constraints in terms of 'rule', 'norm' and 'convention'. In so doing, they have theorized a social self in ways that view agency first as an individual property: neither collective or intersubjective, nor necessarily connected with political ideology or cultural hegemony" (Genres? 311). For Luke, what happens then is a diffusion into different political projects centered around different notions of agency. In the "genres of power" concept, agency is defined or limited by mainstream institutions through which the mastery of a particularly type of discourse is thought to provide the ability to operate within that institution, and thus to benefit from it somehow. This constitutes the second thing I want to point out, and that is that the ways in which "literacy matters,"--the consequences of literacy--are not inherent to literacy itself, but are instrumental in various ways within various contexts.

The sort of literacy practice I have defined as the Bartleby Syndrome, as a result of college preparation itself, is not a deficiency or a lack on the part of students. Nor is it

an aberration within the broader social contexts that "college preparation" is a part of. An understanding of the nature of college preparation itself, why it matters, where it comes from, in short the qualitative dimension of this movement, are *continuous* with the literacy practices produced in writing environments within schools. It is to an exploration of this, then, that I move to in the next chapter.

Chapter 4
College, Crises, and Discontent

Introduction

In this chapter, I will be exploring the function and role of college preparation and how it fit into the classroom I conducted my research in. Ultimately, my purpose in this chapter is to set up a claim that broader social dynamics--the prevalent social relations of our times--is deeply at odds with the ways that writing instruction has long theorized its own project. To do this, I will be reading these elements against a background of scholarship–some old and some new–that has sought to shape the meaning of "college" in lower schools through what I refer to as the scholarship of discontent. By this, I very simply mean scholarship that emulates from a position of discontent within people in post-secondary environments and beyond in regard to the work being done in lower schools as well as the resulting abilities of students coming out of them. As I will demonstrate, a reading of the literature concerning the jump from high school to college will reveal three main "genres" of discontent. The first locates the problem in poor or lax educational practices, most often placing the blame on teachers themselves for ineffective and poor teaching. This genre is most often found lurking beneath right-wing, corporate

reform calls for "accountability" and "standardization." It is not exclusively of this domain, though, as often times the "blame the teacher" genre subtly bleeds into other areas. The second locates the problem in a lack of communication between post-secondary institutions and high schools. The operating understanding here is that if only those in colleges could more clearly communicate the expectations and demands of college writing, high school teachers would be better able to prepare students for such demands. The third genre locates discontent within the methods of schooling, often with a very particular attention paid to standardization.

It is against this backdrop that I will return to the College English classroom at Copper Valley High. Specifically, I will be looking at four moments that occurred during the semester that are rich with meaning and significance. It is through these vignettes that I will demonstrate one overarching deficiency with these genres of discontent: they do not envision a connection between classroom practice and broader social dynamics. Because of this, the scholarship of discontent sees particular classroom problems as an aberration, not as something purposeful and in line with the socio-cultural milieu we currently live within. Instead, through these vignettes, I will demonstrate that the work of "college preparation" actually does generate something, and should not be understood as a "lack" or a "deficiency." What the concept of college preparation produces is an educative environment through which the potential consummatory meaning in writing is forever deferred, and as such not only strips the potential significance of writing for the students at the moment, but fixes habits of the writing process that then are carried forward in time. It is here that I am referring specifically to the Bartleby Syndrome discussed in previous chapters. This fixing of the writing process is no mistake. As

discussed in the previous chapter, one of the cornerstones of human activity that Dewey suggests is the ability for current situations and contexts to be utilized in constructing "ends in view." These ends-in-view not only generate the impulse to act, but also serve as a guide through which the qualitative dimension of action is discerned. More importantly, though, these ends-in-view are themselves thoroughly cultural and arise through experiences within an environment. As I will be arguing, it is precisely this dimension that scholarship concerning the transition from high-school to college writing has been missing.

Policing the Crisis of Writing

In the public discourse, and even within the professional discourse, the notion that we are in the midst of a (yet another) great literacy crisis concerning the abilities of college bound students has been accepted as factual by many. As Steve Graham and Dolores Perin note in the abstract of their 2007 article on writing instruction and adolescent students, "There is considerable concern that the majority of adolescents do not develop the competence in writing they need to be successful in school, the workplace, or their personal lives" (445). In the beginning of the essay itself, they expand further on this claim, writing that: "[...] too many youngsters do not learn to write well enough to meet the demands of school or the workplace" and that, according to a report produced by an education reform group lead primarily by Fortune 500 executives, "[...] college instructors estimated that 50% of high school graduates are not prepared for college-level writing demands." Further, they point out that a 2004 report commissioned by the CollegeBoard advocacy group that "American businesses spend $3.1 billion

annually for writing remediation" (445). After surveying the scope of such discontent

with adolescent writers, Graham and Perin point to the obvious: "One possible reason

why students' writing *is not what it should be* is because schools are not doing an

adequate job of teaching it" (446, emphasis mine). The phrase "not what it should be" is

telling, as it indicates what student writing *should* be is something that is pleasing (or

appeasing) to those surveyed in the studies mentioned: college instructors and business

leaders.

In a lengthy passage, Graham and Perin produce a litany of reasons as to why any

of this might matter:

> Adolescents who do not learn to write well are at a disadvantage. In school,
> weaker writers are less likely than their more skilled classmates to use writing to
> support and extend learning in content classrooms. Their grades are likely to
> suffer, especially in classes where writing is the primary means for assessing
> progress (Graham, 2006b). Their chances of attending college are reduced,
> because universities increasingly use writing to evaluate applicants'
> qualifications. At work, writing has become a gateway for employment and
> promotion, especially in salaried positions (see reports by the National
> Commission on Writing, 2004, 2005). Employees in business as well as
> government (local, state, and federal) are expected to produce written
> documentation, visual presentations, memoranda, technical reports, and electronic
> messages. In the community at large, as E-mail has progressively supplanted the
> telephone for the purpose of communication, adults who are not able to
> communicate in writing may be unable to participate fully in civic life. (445)

The four dimensions of a literacy crisis that puts *students* at risk in this passage are

interesting due to the causal connection and thus linear expansion of the consequences of

bad writing. Bad writing leads to bad grades, which leads to decreased chances of getting

into college, which leads to an inability to get hired or, if hired, an inability to get

promoted. The odd dimension out here, though, is the final one: civic participation, which

doesn't seem to have much of anything to do with schools and schooling. However, this

sort of civic participation seems to mostly be focused on mere communication, not

necessarily *participation* in community life. Later in the essay, they return to this familiar refrain:

> To reap the benefits of literacy in an advanced technological society, adolescents need to develop strong writing skills. Unfortunately, a majority of adolescents in the United States do not achieve this critical goal. These youngsters' future aspirations are at risk, because strong writing skills are needed to be successful at the postsecondary level, to obtain more than menial employment, and to participate fully as an adult member of the community (464).

Again, what is worth noting here is the causal/linear progression of the crisis, not so unlike a snowball rolling down a hill.

The reason I am devoting so much space to this is two fold: first, the occasion for the crisis is primarily one of *discontent*. This discontent, though, is one that is externally imposed. By this I mean that the crisis is one that emanates from outside of the students, by those who need or want the student to be able to do various things and in specific ways. I am referring precisely here to two main groups that seem to be the wellspring of this discontent when it comes to the abilities of high school students: employers (primarily) and college instructors. This dynamic is somewhat bizarre, as most employers surveyed in these studies are not hiring students directly out of high school. Precisely *who* the college instructors are is left ambiguous as well (one might note that tenured faculty rarely teach freshman level courses). Conspicuously absent from these discussions are students themselves, although the absence of high school teachers is troubling as well.

The second reason is rather simple: crises are occasions for action. In the wake of a crisis, whether internal to one's individual or something much broader, a great deal of effort usually follows in which the problem brought in line with understanding and changes in behavior/action is sought. In other words, crises are the lever of reflection and

change. However, and this is crucial, the qualitative dimension of the crisis itself says an awful lot about the sorts of changes that are sought in response to it. Unfortunately, there is much danger in the moment in which the qualitative constitution of a crisis is overshadowed by the effort poured into resolving it. In quite simple terms, once we have agreed that there *is* a problem, we often forget *why* it was ever a problem in the first place (and *who* it was a problem for) when we seek to resolve it. As Addison and McGee claim, research into writing instruction has kicked into overtime recently. They see this as promising on one hand, but troubling on the other hand because such research "point[s] to the persistence of major concerns as well as a shift away from a focus on writing instruction in K-12 classrooms [...] Now more than ever, there is an urgency to demonstrate the value of writing across the curriculum and local and national levels" (148). They then mention the "current fiscal crisis" and its affect on instruction (larger classes, bigger teaching loads, elimination of core requirements). This is used as a sort of urgency of efficiency to be able to maximize our knowledge with the "new normal" of reduced resources. This is not "why writing matters" but more, why knowing about writing matters. We need to be able to maximize the "bang for our buck" due to the erosion of funding and support for public education.

My purpose here at the start is to discuss three major categories that seek to address and resolve the discontent over writing instruction in high schools (of which there is a lot), but to do so it is important to understand where this discontent originates from (of which there is actually not much). In other words, there is more material out there seeking to solve a problem than there is material out there that demonstrates a problem exists. One major source of material suggesting there is a problem that is

referenced in solutions to this discontent (when anything is referred to at all) is the National Commission on Writing. Founded in 2002 as an extension of the College Board (the group that is responsible for the SAT), the NCW has released several widely discussed reports on the state of writing and writing instruction in the United States. In their own mission statement, they describe their purpose as such: "The decision to create the Commission was animated in part by the Board's plans to offer a writing assessment in 2005 as part of the new SAT®, but the larger motivation lay in the growing concern within the education, business, and policy-making communities that the level of writing in the United States is not what it should be" (Neglected R, 7). Their 2003 report *Writing, the Neglected R* indulges in this concern and has been frequently mentioned as proof that something is deeply amiss in regard to writing and writing instruction.

In this report, the Commission opens by reciting many of the familiar tropes concerning the value of writing: writing contributes to democracy, writing facilitates learning in the subjects, writing "sustains American life and popular culture" (10) and--of course--it doesn't hurt to write well if you want a job. Once the value and importance of writing has been established (something that is interestingly buttressed by displaying letters penned by children in response to the bombing of the WTC towers in New York on 9/11), the report moves to comparing NAEP data (National Assessment of Educational Progress, or commonly referred to as the "nation's report card" of schools) against the value of writing outlined in the beginning. Unsurprisingly, they find a large gap between the two in many areas, ranging from time spent writing, to the types of writing assigned. The report then addresses several steps needed to bring the two into agreement with each other.

However, what is striking about this report is not so much what it *does* say (and is, in many regards, is delightfully subversive and enlightened), but for what it does not say. In particular, the report on its own lacks any sort of evidence or proof that the means of measurement we have can adequately measure that which they see as important. Without this connection, we essentially have two hermetically sealed and circular sets of heuristics that do not overlap. For example, the report claims that writing "[...] has helped transform the world. Revolutions have been started by it. Oppression has been toppled by it. And it has enlightened the human condition" (10). The report, though, does not venture any suggestions as to which revolutions have failed to materialize due to poor writing, what oppressors have yet to be topped, and where precisely the human condition is suffering from a lack of un-enlightenment. This is not to say the report avoids specific and concrete connections between writing and the consequences of poor writing. "More than 90 percent of mid career professionals," the report notes, "recently cited the 'need to write effective' as a skill 'of great importance' in their day-to-day work" (11). They continue on:

> The world in general, and advanced societies in particular, now demonstrates a nearly voracious appetite for highly educated people. To respond to it, fully three-quarters of American high school graduates enroll in an institution of higher education immediately after graduation from high school, probably because they understand that college-level skills are the key to employment security in a fast-changing world. (11)

Later, in discussing the importance of writing to education, the report boldly claims "American education will never realize its potential as an engine of opportunity *and economic growth* until a writing revolution puts the power of language and communication in their proper place in the classroom" (14, emphasis mine). It is in moments like these that a direct connection between poor writing and the

consequences—primarily economic consequences—become directly visible, through the very same causal line of consequences we saw before.

I point this out merely to indicate the ways in which such documents stating the existence of a crisis are often enthymematic. For example, in the section titled "What the Assessments Tells Us," they report offers this stark claim:

> Despite the neglect of writing instruction, it would be false to claim that most students cannot write. *What most students cannot do is write well. At least, they cannot write well enough to meet the demands they face in higher education and the emerging work environment.* Basic writing itself is not the issue; the problem is that most students cannot write with the skill expected of them today. (16, emphasis mine)

They then proceed to support this claim with evidence from the NAEP report. However, what is left unstated here is the assumption that the goal of education is to prepare students for higher education and the "emerging work environment." This claim falls into a long and deeply contested terrain concerning what exactly education (and in particular, "high school") should do and in what ways it should do it. For example, other ways of describing and defining the function of high school might be focused on a "custodial" function that addresses "problems of youth," or even a "progressive" function that seeks to prepare students for life and not necessarily just the next step.[1] These reports claiming a crisis, then, should never be understood as ideologically innocent or neutral.

To further illustrate this, the next year (2004) saw the publication of a report from the NCW titled "Writing: A Ticket to Work...Or a Ticket Out." In this report, the NCW surveyed some 120 major corporations through their human resources departments in an attempt to discern the importance of writing in the ability of students to be employed and

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[1] For a fuller historical discussion, see Angus and Mirel's *The Failed Promise of the American High School, 1890-1995* and Kliebard's *The Struggle for the American Curriculum, 1893-1958*

promoted. The ominous sounding title comes from a comment made by one respondent. While desperately trying to hedge their work by noting that "Opinions, even those of high-level corporate executives, should never be the sole basis of policy" (19) the report nonetheless seeks to utilize the opinions of hiring managers to support previous assertions made in the original *Neglected R* report. Notably, the unsurprising finding that writing has something to do with work in a corporate environment is used to justify the claim that "individual opportunity in the United States depends critically on the ability to present one's thoughts coherently, cogently, and persuasively on paper" (5). In this, the report outlines three conclusions to be drawn from the survey. First, that "writing appears to be a "marker" attribute of high-skill, high-wage, professional work." Second, that writing is a gatekeeper for not just work, but salaried employment. Third, when surveyed, "corporate leaders' comments equating clear writing with clear thinking were impressive" (19). Therefore, presumably, it must be the case that clear writing equals clear thinking and that clear thinking is the gateway to a salaried life of high-skill, high-wage professional work. If I am being somewhat caustic with this study in particular, it is because of how patently obvious it is that *who* writing matters to is of a select group: corporate leaders. Despite the disclaimer noted above, the NWC did not and has not conducted a study of anti-war protestors, anti-globalization protestors, or even "Occupy" protesters to understand the way in which written communication is important in interrupting various dimensions of the status quo. This omission is not meaningless, as the continued and repeated claim that writing has something to do with civic participation takes on a whole new light in regard to what *wasn't* asked.

Three Genres in the Scholarship of Discontent

Once the crisis of literacy has been established—and this is something that is perpetually being re-established—the question of what is to be done takes center stage. The particular "flavor" of the crisis currently is one that is curiously defined by a perceived disconnection between secondary writing instruction and college expectations and demands. This is seen as a crisis because, as the argument runs, students who are not adequately prepared for college work in high school either fail to gain entry to post-secondary education, flunk out if they get there, or (worst) cause massive expenditures in so-called "remedial" education (of which first year writing should be considered a part of). This is undoubtedly being driven by perceived connections between technical and scientific knowledge and the so called "new-economy." The actual reasons for this connection are likely far more complex, and include such factors as unavailability of work/employment for young adults, psychological anxieties of middle-class children for attaining "professional status," and even simple yet persistent and powerful narratives concerning upward mobility and education.[2] Regardless of the causes, this current iteration of the eternal literacy crisis has produced three interrelated yet distinct strategies for identifying the real problem and suggesting what is to be done. As noted in the introduction to this chapter, these three genres of "discontent" are as follows. The first locates the problem in the poor quality of instruction that high school students receive. The second locates the problem in a breakdown or failure to adequately communicate expectations of college. The third genre laments in the culture of schooling in the secondary schools, typically in building from a critique of standardized testing and the

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[2] See especially Aronowitz's *The Knowledge Factory* and Ehrenreich's *Fear of Falling*.

rigidity of the curriculum.

In its most vulgar form, the "blame the teacher" genre is most often seen in right-wing and corporate reform calls for standardization and accountability, both of which seek to take the teacher out of the equation all together by placing decision making, curricular choices, and assessment options within the hands of administrators, legislators, and the like.[3] It is also frequently seen in thinly veiled attacks on teacher unions, the argument being that the power of teachers unions prevents bad teachers from being fired and lowers the bar for all teachers. As Dennis Baron very succinctly puts it, "The perennial complaints about the inadequacy of earlier stages of education all seek to assign blame: after all, the claim goes, the literacy crisis is real, so it must be somebody's fault" (CCC Symposium Exploring 425). Teachers, because of their proximity to the moment of the learning, become that "somebody" whose fault it must be. However, this is not to say that the "blame the teacher" model is exclusively a feature of the right-wing and of corporations interested in reforming education. It also quite often makes an appearance in the writing of theorists and researchers who might define themselves as in opposition to the usual suspects of "blame the teacher." For example, in a 2009 article conducted by Kiuhara, Graham, and Hawken, researchers conducted a nationwide survey of teachers that asked about the type of writing assignments they did as well as the preparation they had to teach writing. They asked three "groups" of teachers for the study, language arts teachers, social studies, and science. Among the findings they came up with, they noted that "the most common writing activities used by teachers were short answer response to

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[3] This should be seen as a recent manifestation of a much older move within education: the obsession over efficiency. For a sobering history of this movement, see Callahan's 1962 book *Education and the Cult of Efficiency*.

homework," then journal type assignments, and finally "writing step by step instructions and five paragraph essays" (140). Findings like these, then, support their hunch that the sorts of instruction students are receiving do not match up to the immense importance they see in writing in schools (primarily based on the idea that writing supports learning). Further, the authors of this study point out that much is actually known about what produces better writing, and that there are several "evidence-based writing practices" available--and often known--to teachers. However, "although teachers indicated that they applied evidence-based writing practices and made many adaptations for struggling writers, they did neither of these things frequently." They turn this around and argue that "high school teachers need to apply evidence-based practices as well as adaptations for struggling writers more often. It is equally important that these procedures are applied with integrity (*as closely as possible to how they were implemented in studies where their use was validated*)" (154, emphasis mine). The fairly explicit assumption here then is that experts in education have, through empirical research, discerned the appropriate (and effective) classroom techniques that will, *if only* actually carried out correctly by teachers, produce the desired results.

This is one of the more gentle versions of the blame the teacher genre. As the researchers in this study argue, a major problem stems from the ways in which teachers are prepared through their own education and through the support they receive as teachers. Of the teachers surveyed, "Seventy-one percent of them indicated that they received either no or minimal formal preparation to teach writing in their college teacher education program" (153). Even among language arts teachers, 61% of the respondents indicated they received "minimal to no preparation" (154). They end their article with a

series of four recommendations. Of these four, the first three are linked in a sort of causal chain. It is worth quoting the entire passage simply to underscore how much of their analysis utilizes the teacher-in-the-classroom as the nexus of action and possibility:

> One, the process of composing longer text should become a more common activity in high school classrooms in general, and students should spend more time in engaging in writing that involves analysis and interpretation. Two, teachers should apply evidence-based writing practices and make adaptations for struggling writers on a regular basis instead of periodically. In addition, these teaching practices should be applied with fidelity. Three, teacher education programs and school districts should do a better job of preparing teachers to teach writing to high school students. Four, the first three recommendations should be tailored to meet the needs of each major discipline. (155)

While obviously this approach is far more high-minded than the more vulgar criticisms of teachers as simply ineffectual, lazy, and worse, it still places the burden on teachers themselves for the writing of students. There should be no doubt that it is a major problem that teachers are so ill prepared to think about the teaching of writing. Still, there is a tacit assumption that if only *teachers* were better prepared, better educated, or better developed professionally, the ills of student writing would simply vanish. In other words, the focus of discontent is still the teacher. What it does *not* do, however, is inquire as to *why* teachers are prepared in such ways. Further, it also builds a connection, one that we will see is problematic in a moment, between *quality instruction* and *quality writing*.

The second major genre of discontent locates the problem in a lack, deficiency, or outright breakdown in the ability to communicate expectations across institutional boundaries. For example, in David T. Conley's "Rethinking College Readiness," he claims that "A key problem is that the current measures of college preparation are limited in their ability to communicate to students and educators the true range of what students must do to be fully ready to succeed in college" (3). Conley proceeds to enumerate

several cognitive strategies, academic and knowledge and skills, and academic behaviors that he claims are necessary for success in college. After all that, Conley's conclusion is this: "Clearly, far fewer students are truly ready for college when measured against this multidimensional model than when judged by the conventional standard of courses taken and grades received in high school" (11). He concludes that "By adopting the four-part conception of college readiness presented in this chapter, high schools and colleges can use the same language to communicate what it takes for students to be ready for postsecondary education" (12). So the solution here is an alignment of language or discourses that accurately describe what is expected.

While it doesn't critique the inabilities of current models of educational measurement (i.e., grades and grading) to adequately measure the perceived important attributes of a student prepared for college, the "Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing" produced by the Council of Writing Program Administrators, the NCTE, and the National Writing Project takes a similar approach. In keeping within the genre of discontent, this document starts with the normal ritualistic incantations of writing: "The concept of 'college readiness' is *increasingly important* in discussions about students' preparation for postsecondary education [...] The ability to write well is basic to student success in college and beyond [...] Students' abilities to enroll in credit-bearing, college-level courses are increasingly associated with the idea of 'college readiness'" (1-2, emphasis mine). What is critical to note here is the precise location of the bar in regard to defining "college-preparation:" being able to bypass remedial college courses, which often--although this is not stated--refers to basic or developmental writing courses.

This, then, is where the "Framework" comes into view. As the report defines

itself, "This document, written and reviewed by two- and four-year college and high school writing teachers nationwide, describes habits of mind and experiences with writing, reading, and critical analysis that serve as foundations for writing in college-level, credit-bearing courses" (2). Their hope in assembling these "habits of mind" is very explicit. As they write, "[t]his Framework thus seeks to connect expectations across educational levels and institutions" (2). However, much of what is put forth in this document simply condenses the current state of composition studies into an easily digestible format. For example, one of the most central concepts behind the curriculum that they recommend is writing for authentic audiences, something composition as a field has long argued for as the basis for "good writing."

In this sense, the experience of reading through the Frameworks document is eerily familiar. Most working in the tradition of composition studies will recognize some aggregated vision of the field itself in the recommendations they make. Because of this, there really isn't much to be argued against in what they recommend. For example, in the section on "Experiences with Writing, Reading, and Critical Analysis," the report identifies the following "experiences" that are crucial to student writers developing the ability to not have to take remedial college writing courses: developing rhetorical knowledge; developing critical thinking through writing, reading, and research; developing flexible writing processes; developing knowledge of conventions; and composing in multiple environments. The implicit project here, though, is not so much as to propose or advance any radically new or revolutionary method of teaching writing, but rather to take the best of what we ("we" meaning experts in what it takes to write in college) know, condense it, and package it in such a way in which it can easy digested by

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high school teachers of writing. Unlike the "blame the teacher" genre, though, this document does not presume to know what teachers are or are not capable of as teachers; rather, the assumption here is that they may simply may not know, or have a way of talking about, what is expected in a college-level writing environment. The project in response to the crisis of literacy is simply to codify expectations and make them widely available and known.

An obvious drawback of such a method is that the *interpretation* of such frameworks can never fully be fixed or regulated. One solution to this danger that much can be lost in translation is to simply transpose the "expectations" of college-writing within the high school itself through rigid curricular programs that must be taken as a whole. There are multiple ways that this is currently being accomplished. Among them are AP courses and so called "dual-enrollment" courses whereby students are able to directly earn college credit in a high school course. In the AP environment, while teachers may have some leeway in how day to day activities play out, the test at the end of the course to which everything is aligned is simply beyond the teacher's control. In so-called "dual-enrollment" courses, a simulated college environment is created by adopting a version of the college level writing course and having high school teachers carry it out in the high school. In both of these approaches, the expectations of college are communicated through the actual structure of the courses themselves (for example, "dual-credit" courses often utilize attendance requirements similar to college courses). However, what should perhaps be pointed out is that ultimately, the real mechanism through which these courses "count" is the way in which it allows students to avoid taking a writing course in college through "taking care of business" prior to college. This

is precisely in line with what many other "solutions" to the crisis have noted: the goal is not to be "remediated" in college. Or, more bluntly, what makes you "prepared for college" in regard to writing is not having to take freshman composition. It is also worth pointing out that this fixes what it means to be college educated: accumulating credits, hours, or other various tokens and or badges.

Another way in which "college expectations" can be communicated and brought into the high school classroom is through direct collaboration with college level evaluators. For example, one interesting approach is detailed in Acker and Halasek's 2008 article "Preparing High School Students for College-Level Writing: Using ePortfolio to Support a Successful Transition." In this pilot program, an "ePortfolio" system was devised in which high school students would submit a portfolio of their writing, where it could then be assessed by both high school teachers and faculty from a local university. This was done through creating a common rubric and having "faculty [assess] the draft and final essays submitted by students on a five-point Likert scale using a rubric adapted from the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory" (6). In the actual implementation of this program, though, the authors discovered that the methods of response to student writing differed significantly between the different levels. The authors of the study understood this as a different "*emphasis*" of response. High School teachers, they claim, created responses that were informed by primarily "current traditional rhetoric" type concerns geared toward a universalized, generic, ahistorical conception of "good writing." College evaluators, however, looked more toward how the writing fit into or diverged from various genre conventions of different contexts, often built from disciplinary expectations (7). The method of evaluation, in other words, is

where they understand the split between college and high school. High school teachers evaluate according to an adherence to "global features" whereas college evaluators bring a more "rhetorical" focus to evaluating writing. Another thing they also discovered was a major split on the concept of "voice" between secondary/post-secondary instructors: "[...] high school teachers typically encouraged students to create a voice in personal essays (e.g., personal narratives or opinion pieces) but *discouraged them from using that same "voice" in more academic pieces* (e.g., research papers). The distinction was not one generally made by college teachers, who encouraged students to create voice in all of their academic writing" (9, emphasis mine).

Somewhat problematically, they end their work by claiming that "unless institutions actively support ePortoflios systematically and across educational boundaries, students will not enjoy the developmental benefits of ePortfolio" (10). Beyond tautological considerations, one major flaw of their conclusion is rooted in the voluntary nature of the program. For their study, they solicited students for participation, meaning "buy-in" was already accomplished. What is not known, nor really discussed, is what would happen in a universalized version of this program. Are the effects they see from the ePortfolio system wholly located within the program itself, or is it also something that can be contributed to the fact that the students who participated in the program have already bought into the idea of college, the necessity for their lives, and a commitment to some of its ideals. In a sense, it confines the discussion to students who feel they should already be in college, and by providing them with a "college type" experience in grade 12.

This move (of which I am skeptical of the efficacy), points to a tension that the

third genre of discontent seeks to illuminate. This tension is located not within the teachers in high schools, not within a lack of communication over what matters in college writing, but within the function, purposes, and culture of *schooling itself* at the secondary level. This discontent with the culture of schooling opens the lens the widest. In Fanetti et al's 2010 article "Closing the Gap between High School Writing Instruction and College Writing Expectations" they note that two factors "strongly affect the transition of writers from high school to college." One of these factors concerns itself with the "avenues of communication" between the two levels. The second, though, is quite different: "the circumstances and contexts of high school and college writing classes are very different, and those circumstances and contexts strongly impact pedagogy" (140). What exactly are these "circumstances and contexts" that mark the two as different from each other? On a very surface level, Fanetti et al note the stereotypical, often romantic caricatures of the two: high school is about standardization and memorization, college is about abstractness and open mindedness, etc. However, they continue on this line, noting that

> We think of successful high schools in terms of statistics: comparatively high average test scores, consistent adequate yearly progress percentages, etc. Because success is measured against standards set locally and nationally and based on anonymous student averages, *high school instruction is designed, first, to optimize performance on the assessments that provide the statistics*. Less quantifiable aspects of the learning experience are subordinated. (78, emphasis mine)

Conversely, "college students learn that there are no rules—or, better, that the rules change daily. Instead of the detailed rubrics, repeated drilling, and objective testing they knew in high school, college students find themselves largely autonomous and left to figure out what's expected of them on their own" (78). Due to the drastically different contexts of each, students leave high school "decidedly unprepared for college [...] When students learn test writing well, their high schools show it in statistics, but the students

come to college and have to unlearn before they can learn. And teachers on both sides of the gap protest" (78). This observation is important, as the authors of the text note that this larger constraint that demands standardization and adherence to testing metrics subverts the attempts of teachers who might try to employ process orientated pedagogies. Thus, this genre of discontent illuminates how it is not so simple to just better train teachers (train them to do what, exactly?) or to simply communicate better what is expected (even if they didn't know what to do, it is not simply a case that teachers can simply do what those in expert positions dictate). Rather valiantly, the authors conclude with this suggestion: "We suggest that the gap we've fathomed here can be narrowed or even closed by rethinking the purpose of high school entirely [...] No longer can we think of high school as its own end. We must begin to think about it as preparation for the next educational step—college—and we must calibrate our instruction, and our assessment, with that in mind" (83). Of course, the entry point for such a project is to take the open-endedness of college, and use that to replace the rigidity of standardized testing in high schools.

While this argument for increasing the alignment between the two institutions is intensely problematic for reasons I will discuss shortly, I want to use this third genre of discontent to pivot to the overarching inadequacies of all of these solutions to the "crisis" of literacy. All three of these genres of discontent and their accordant solutions posit some sort of pure, unmediated pedagogic activity in the classroom. By this I mean that they all seem to work with a concept of "activity" in the classroom that can be easily controlled, directed, fixed, and manipulated. However, as discussed in the previous chapter, "activity" is never simply the domain of singular intents, positions of power and

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influence, positions and structure of labor, and rules concerning structure. More importantly, though, the ends of activity, *whether individual or collective activity*, cannot simply be fixed and controlled from outside the process of activity itself. This theorized concept of what pedagogic activity constitutes presumes to be able to do just this: unilaterally fix or regulate the ends of such pedagogic activity. Consider the "blame the teacher" genre, even in its most high-minded format that takes aim at teacher experience, retention, professional development opportunities and the like. The implicit assumption here is that *if only* teachers were better, all of our problems would be solved. However, this also carries with it an implicit conception of the teacher as a heroic figure in the classroom, able to transcend the collective pressures focused on the classroom, able to rise above the "ongoing, historically conditioned" circumstances of education itself, and able to implement some pure version of what experts have determined "works."

Actual research, though, points to a far more problematic reality. As Addison and McGee discovered, what teachers do (and think they are doing) is not at all the same thing as what students experience. As they discovered,

> While 30% of high school faculty report "always" requiring multiple drafts, only 16% of high school students report "always" writing multiple drafts. And while 31% of high school faculty report "always" conferencing with students on papers in progress, only 12% of high school students report "always" discussing their writing with their teacher [...] These results and others suggest that even when faculty do engage in best practices for teaching writing, many students do not engage in best practices for learning how to write, calling attention to the need to find ways to encourage greater engagement among students for best practices in learning how to write. (159,160).

This phenomena makes itself apparent in other ways. From the recent NCTE collection of essays titled *What is College Level Writing*, high school teacher Kittle describes the motivation behind teaching methods: "One of the most common of these myths involved

correctness: 'College professors' I would intone to my students, 'will give you an F if you make more than three errors in a paper.' This particular belief was widespread in my school; *every English teacher used it as something of a cudgel to motivate students to proofread carefully*" (137, emphasis mine). Perhaps even more chillingly, though, is how Kittle describes his reliance on teaching the "five-paragraph essay:"

> I taught the five-paragraph essay because it was easy to teach, *not because I thought it was the best way to teach writing*. I marked papers for grammatical errors because it was easy to see and circle those mistakes, *not because they were the most important aspect of my students' writing*. I admit this not with pride, but at least with honesty; *expedience and efficiency matter tremendously when facing five classes a day, with over thirty students per class*. (138, emphasis mine)

What I think is quite clearly evident in this passage is that it is not so simply the case that teachers are simply uneducated as to the "better" way to teach writing, but rather are constrained by other forces.

The idea that expectations have simply not been communicated effectively enough runs into the exact same problems. As the data from Addison and McGee suggests, concepts such as pre-writing, conferencing, and the like are not unknown nor un-practiced in many high school writing classrooms. The problem, yet again, is that these expectations represent but one of many pressures and intentions present in any classroom activity. Even *if* such expectations were completely known, there is no reason to assume that they could be successfully implemented in some sort of pure, unmediated form. Further, even when such expectations are communicated through top-down curriculum demands as seen in dual-enrollment courses, these "expectations" often get lost in translation. As Farris points out,

> Rather than create actual opportunities themselves that socialize students in the university's habits of mind, teachers of concurrent enrollment classes, perhaps more familiar with "college prep" courses, may resort instead to 'brokering'

(Sperry) for the university, having students write more for the purpose of admonishing them about the expectations of future college professors, who undoubtedly will grade harder and care less" (CCC Special Symposium 439).

In a sense, then, what cannot be overcome is the environment of high school itself, and this environment through which activity occurs is where ends, purposes, aims, and motivations themselves are created.

Finally, while there is undoubtedly much to agree with when Fanetti et all claim that "Standardized testing, then, has 'caused' more writing in high school, but at the expense of actual writing instruction and experience. Students are learning longhand test-taking, not real writing" and that "When students learn test writing well, their high schools show it in statistics, but the students come to college and have to unlearn before they can learn. And teachers on both sides of the gap protest" (78), these assertions rest on a dangerous pedestal. That is, if we simply got rid of standardized testing, things would return to normal. The problem, though, is it does not inquire into the reason standardized testing is so deeply entrenched in the first place. If you take away the tests, the social structure from which it came from and the broader socio-political dynamics that are at the root of standardized testing in the first place will still very much be in place. Removing such tests may make high school *seem* a little more like college, but this would be an illusion. As Doug Hesse proclaims, "I'm wary of those who would imagine high school as proto-college, who seek to reproduce 'college writing' instruction in a setting hugely unlike college, among students cognitively and circumstantially different from college students." (CCC Special Symposium 420). I agree, and I can show why, although for different reasons. What needs to be addressed is the larger nature of society, of which schools are an expression of. As the WPA/NCTE "Frameworks" document

claims, "This document takes as a central premise that teaching writing and learning to write are central to education and to the development of a literate citizenry" (2). The question, though, when we widen the lens beyond individual hopes and desires, is whether or not a "literate citizenry" is *actually* the desired product.

A Very Brief History of Crises, Discontent and Writing Instruction

What I will be arguing in the remainder of this chapter is that when we understand "college preparation" as the result of transactional social activity (much like "writing" itself was discussed in the previous chapter), what results is a picture of a *discursive space* through which broader social relations manifest themselves as individual acts through guiding regulating the results of pedagogic activity. In other words, "college preparation" takes place within a social-political environment and that the two are continuous or within a "trans-active" relationship. However, to give a broader context through which these social relations operate in regard to literacy instruction, I first want to briefly note some important historical features of writing instruction at the post secondary level.

To say that these discourses of crisis and the discontent over student writing have never been far from writing instruction is a gross understatement. Writing instruction owes its existence to such crises. Adams Sherman Hill, the director of the first writing program at Harvard in the latter parts of the 19th century, explained the situation as he saw it in 1879:

> We can all remember a time when our schools and colleges gave even less instruction in the art of writing and speaking the English language correctly than is given at present, and that too without much complaint from any quarter. Children who learned their ABC's under the old system could call the letters in a

world by name, but were often unable to pronounce the same word, or to understand its meaning. Boys and girls who were well on in their teens could talk glibly about 'parts of speech,' 'analyze' sentences, and 'parse' difficult lines in Young's "Night Thoughts" or Pope's 'Essay on Man,' but could not explain the sentences they took to pieces, or write grammatical sentences of their own. (Brereton, 45-46)

The solution to this crisis was a tightening of direct instruction in the English language, a project that was itself a fairly recent movement. However, one of the major drivers of this movement was an increasing alignment with high schools (themselves only recently coming into focus) and college. Part of this must be understood as a consequence of the industrial revolution in that required an increasingly skilled workforce. Another part of this should probably be understood in changing theories concerning the purpose of education as well as the emerging field of English studies. Regardless, the perceived needs as well as the perceived deficiencies of students was often a focal point over highly contentions debates concerning the function of schools in America.

In 1892, a committee was convened with the purpose of preparing a report on the alignment between high school and college. This "Committee of Ten" was one of the major touchstone moments in the formulation of both High Schools and their relationship to postsecondary institutions (as well as a major site of historiographical disagreements over the actual effect of this moment). The group itself was populated primarily by college presidents, with only one member being of the "high school" level. The group set up several sub-committees to investigate several subject areas, English being among them. While their recommendations were wide ranging in this regard, the committee was fairly unequivocal when it came to the relationship between the two levels of schooling:

The secondary schools of the United States, taken as a whole, do not exist for the purpose of preparing boys and girls for the colleges. Only an insignificant percentage of the graduates of these schools go to colleges or scientific schools

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> [...] A secondary school programme intended for national use must therefore be made for those children whose education is not to be pursued beyond the secondary school. The preparation of a few pupils for college or scientific school should in the ordinary secondary schools be the incidental, not the principal object. (Committee of 10 Main report)

Despite this recommendation, though, the actual curriculum in high schools--both private college preparatory academies as well as public high schools--was in a perpetual tension with the demands and expectations of colleges. In fact, those in the colleges were very much aware of this and sought to leverage this in a bid to rule the roost of who had control of what was taught in schools and for what reasons. In regard to writing, Adams Sherman Hill described the project in no uncertain terms in 1879 when he described an entrance exam for incoming freshmen: "Each candidate will be required to write a short English composition, correct in spelling, punctuation, grammar, and expression, the subject to be taken from such standard authors as shall be announced from time to time. The subject for 1874 will be taken from one of the following works: Shakespeare's Tempest, Julius Caesar, and Merchant of Venice; Goldsmith's Vicar of Wakefield, Scott's Ivanhoe and Lay of the Last Minstrel." More importantly, though, is Hill's understanding of what this examination was to do:

> It was hoped that this requirement would effect several desirable objects,--that the student, by becoming familiar with a few works holding a high place in English literature, would acquire a taste for good reading, and would insensibly adopt better methods of thought and better forms of expression that teachers would be led to seek subjects for composition in the books named, subjects far preferable to the vague generalities too often selected, and that they would pay closer attention to errors in elementary matters; *that, in short, this recognition by the College of the importance of English would lead both teachers and pupils to give more time to the mother tongue, and to employ the time thus given to better advantage* (Brereton 48, emphasis mine).

Later, Hill is even more direct in who is at fault if students are not able to succeed at the collegiate level:

On the whole, the examinations makes a poor showing for the schools that furnish the material whereof the university which professes to set up the highest standard in America, has to make educated men. If she does not succeed in giving to all her graduates the one mental audition deemed by her president the essential part of education, the fault is not altogether or mainly hers. For her to teach bearded men the rudiments of their native tongue would be almost as absurd to teach them the alphabet or the multiplication table. *Those who call for 'more English' in the colleges should cry aloud and spare not till more and better English is taught in the schools*. (51, emphasis mine)

Hill was certainly not without his critics, though. In 1911, Thomas Ranseford Lounsbury leveled this charge against the Harvard writing program that Adams Sherman Hill had instituted. Lounsebury's chief grievance is not so much with the project as a whole, but how it was carried out:

There is a prevailing belief in the whole country that it is absolutely essential to the intellectual salvation of every growing youth that he should write themes. No sooner does the child enter primary school than this particular task looms before his eyes. It is, indeed, the one requirement from which he never escapes during the whole of his educational career. It follows him to the high school, it pursues him to the college. There are those who sorrow for him who has to learn Latin. But no voice is lifted up in behalf of the unfortunateness who are asked not to master a distasteful subject, but to perform the infinitely harder task of writing, not because they have something to say, but because they have to say something. For the great American community clings firmly to the faith that anybody and everybody can be taught to use the language with clearness and precision, to say nothing of effectiveness. Any failure to attain the result is imputed to wrong methods of instruction, any distrust of the feasibility to the stupidity or intellectual depravity of the doubter (Brereton, 280)

We might see this as one of the earlier instances of the scholarship of discontent that is still very much endemic to composition scholarship today. However, there is a deeper level to these criticism, as Hill was more of what we might call a "rhetorician" and Lounsbury understood "writing" through an Arnoldian conception of literature as high culture. The divide, though, goes even deeper when Lounsbury attacks the compulsory nature of such instruction. Whereas Hill might have defended his themes as necessary for helping students learn to navigate "rhetorical situations" of writing, this would seem to

imply some sort of fidelity to a concept of civic participation in which the (increasingly) non-elite yet college educated citizen would be asked to be part of the decision making apparatus. However, this was not (and perhaps still is not) a full reality for most. Hence Lounsbury, not seeing the need for such civic participation through writing, saw the compulsory nature of theme writing as completely nonsensical.

Regardless, composition's long and tenuous association with various forms of literacy crises has understandably led to sporadic moments of resistance. In response to yet another round of literacy crises in the late 1980s, Andrew Sledd assessed the situation as such: "My first contention will be that there is no such crisis, that both the crisis and the means to resolve it have been manufactured in order to serve purposes of which teachers should not be servants." (Readin' 495). This historical dimension of such literacy crises, whether it was the crisis of the mother tongue in the late 19th century, the mid 1950s crisis of Sputnik and Arthur Bestor's notion of "educational wastelands" as well as Rudolf Flesch's "Johnny Can't Read" diatribe, to the crisis of literacy precipitated by the open admissions movement in the 1970s, to the "Nation at Risk" panic of the 1980s and the calls to a return to basics, suggests that the question is not really *how bad are students* but rather *why* we're complaining about them this time around. Or, for lack of a better terminology, what precisely is the occasion for anxiety over a perceived lack of literacy skills today? Sledd, perhaps capturing the lack of patience with such crises, quipped that "literacy has been declining since it was invented; one of the first ancient Sumerian tablets deciphered by modern scholars immortalized a teacher fretting over the recent drop in students' writing. There will always be a literacy crisis, if for no other reason than because the old never wholly like the young" (496). Of course, and as Sledd

himself later explores in the essay, the reasons go far deeper than that.

However, and while I agree with Sledd that the crises of literacy are manufactured for nefarious ends, what I want to suggest is that there *is* in fact a deeper crisis that is often hidden or obscured by ones focused on literacy. The purpose of the manufactured literacy crisis is nothing short of the maintenance of the crisis, while the *real* crisis is allowed to carry on largely unknown. As Appleby and Langer noted, despite the nearly frenetic timbre of the current literacy crisis, the last time teachers were asked about their writing practices was 1998 (14). The first question that should perhaps come to mind is simply *why* aren't we asking these questions? That this is not really a part of "educational reform" is not surprising, because such educational reform does not really care much about writing and in particular, the "civic participation" part. It hasn't *wanted* to know because actual solutions to the problem are not the actual goal. That said, it is far too simplistic—and naïve—to simply say that since such crises are manufactured, all is well and nothing is wrong. Nothing, though, could be further from the truth. To illustrate what I mean, I will now return to the concept of college, except to return to it as an idea that had a generative force in the classroom, and through the idea of college, something rather troubling emerged.

The Construction of a Function of College

Scholarship directed at understanding and solving the discontent of many in regard to the writing that high school students are capable of have been chasing the wrong rabbit. They have attempted to describe what college level instruction, expectations, and writing *looks like*. What they have not done, though, is asked *what*

"college" *does*. By framing it this way, I want to proceed by first considering college as a "belief," not an event. Beliefs, as discussed in chapter one and two, are the foundation of action. They are the ideas, values, and understandings that "[do] not make us act at once, but puts us into such a condition that we shall behave in some certain way, when the occasion arises" (CP 5.373). The formation of belief is a crucial component with the establishment of *habits*, especially as beliefs come in line with environmental (and thus, *cultural*) contexts. The formation of beliefs, though, is not an atomistic and individualistic moment; it is an activity that is socially, culturally, politically, and historically mediated. As Dewey argued, the customs of any society were its prevailing habits. Further, Dewey argued that individual "minds" were, in fact, the product of customs and not the other way around. As such, when we talk about *college* as a belief that serves as a priming agent for action, I am not referring to individual beliefs and ideas, but rather a manifestation of the prevailing customs of our times congealed around some form of discursive space. As mentioned before, this is what I am thinking when I use the concept of "pragmatist critique."

These beliefs are the cornerstone of all action in humans. As we can recall from the previous chapter, action itself is something that is already always present, it is a condition of the "live creature" that Dewey describes in *Art as Experience*. Activity, or movement, is *not* something started by an impulse, as many understandings of human activity have assumed. What such environmental impulses *do*, though, is continually shape, guide, and inform the qualitative nature of action. The results of such activity, such as writing an essay, cannot be fully understood apart from the environment from which it occurred in. As Dewey noted (in what is a common refrain), "We may shift from

the biological to the mathematical use of the word function, and say that natural operations like breathing and digesting, acquired ones like speech and honesty, are functions of the surroundings as truly as of a person" (LW 10:16). This unity is one foundational concept in Dewey's work. As he wrote in the early pages of *Experience and Nature*, "Life denotes a function, a comprehensive activity, in which organism and environment are included. Only upon reflective analysis does it break up into external conditions--air breathed, food taken, ground walked upon--and internal structures--lungs respiring, stomach digesting, legs walking" (LW 1:9). Composition theory's longstanding (and tenuous) relationship with literary studies as well as "rhetoric" as a discipline has made such insights difficult. The vast majority of work done in literary studies as well as rhetoric positions the *text* itself as the primary nexus of scholarly investigations and insight, resulting in the exact same condition that Dewey describes. Thus, it is of little surprise that many answers regarding what "college-level work" entails is often hyper-focused on finding ways to have students produce writing that is textually similar to what one might see (or desire to see) in a collegiate situation. However, the reliance on the text as the primary focus of the scholarly gaze has unfortunately obscured the ways in which "college" itself, as an idea or belief, shapes the conditions through which students are required to produce texts.

To illustrate what I mean here, I want to briefly consider a rather amazing essay, written by Don Rickett, a high school teacher, in a 1982 issue of the *Journal of Teaching Writing*. In this article, he sets out to walk readers through his solution to two primary goals: one; "[to] allow each student to develop confidence in his or her writing ability" and two; "The establishment of a program in which fifty percent of my students would

attain the ability to be exempted in some fashion from at least one freshman college

English course and the other fifty percent to receive a grade of no lower than a "C" for

any freshman English course in college" There are two things of note here. First, note

how "success" and "college preparation" is actually conflated quite simply as the ability

to test out of a college writing course. The second is that it is so focused on the FYW

course, which is itself a peculiar thing. Regardless, in trying to figure out what standards

he should aim for, Rickett discovered that "for the most part, the ultimate evaluation of a

finished product was limited to the textual: form and syntax" (172). This, even though it

is somewhat tragic, is an assertion that isn't very controversial. However, it is where

Rickett goes next that is astonishing. Noting that it would be practically impossible as a

single high school instructor trying to prepare students for "the varied pedagogy of *all*

college composition instructors" (172), he decides that his understanding of preparing

students for college is to "get my students to a point where they could easily adapt to any

professor's philosophy of composition." He primarily defines this as a binary: content-

orientated vs. structure-orientated instructors. In doing so, he simplifies his project to a

rather basic maxim: figure out which is "easier" and then focus on the more difficult one.

Without much surprise, Rickett decides that the professor who focuses on "content" is

easier to produce work for; therefore, his responsibility is to prepare students to handle

the professor who "stressed above all else language conventions" (172). This meant the

majority of attention would be spent preparing students to write for someone who cared

about the correctness of language above the content. Also of note is that Rickett utilizes a

course focused around writing various "themes." By this I do not mean a course with a

single topical "theme," but rather "themes" in the sense of pre-formed prompts and

writing genres that students work through weekly. Why? Rickett's process here is also rather amazing: he contacts his former students to see what they've done, and from this distills a "14 theme course" designed to expose students to what they might be prepared to expect.

What might we say of the texts that Rickett's students produced? Rickett claims that "When I finish my theme program, my students know what their strengths and weaknesses are in writing. They have confidence in those strengths, and they know how to overcome any weaknesses that they may have. My students also know how to write the various types of themes, and they have an example of each type. Finally, my students know exactly under what type of college English evaluation they will best perform." (176). But is this "college writing?" At best, what Rickett has accomplished is something more like asking a person to look at a description of college they have heard from someone else, and then to draw it from memory a few days later. However, what Rickett has really accomplished is codifying current-traditional rhetoric into his curriculum. This occurs because, as he noted, he aimed for those who "stressed above all else language conventions" simply because he figured that was the more difficult course to do well in. Further, it is highly problematic how singularly focused his course is on preparing students to survive freshman composition, although this is right in line with a problematic understanding that the ability to pass freshman composition (or test out of it) means one is a "college writer"--an understanding that persists to this day. Also missing is a consideration of *who* is teaching these freshman composition courses, an omission that has severe consequences given the perpetually poor state of labor conditions within writing instruction. As such, Rickett, in trying to prepare students for a very narrow

understanding of a "college composition" class, actually prepares them for "current-traditional rhetoric" type classes. So students, when they hit college classes, are consequently habituated into understanding writing as defined within such CTR, and the feedback loop intensifies. In this example, what the idea of "college" does is not prepare students for college, but prepares them to write in current-traditional rhetoric.

My purpose in pointing this out is that "college" is not merely something that has to be interpreted and repurposed for curricular ends. In the classroom, especially secondary classrooms, "college" does not exist as some objective, Platonic form that simply needs to be mirrored in lived reality. Nor, however, is "college" simply an idea or concept completely detached from material reality. Even Rickett had to contend with constraints placed upon his teaching by considering his course's position within the experience of others (and himself). Beyond the actual spaces and buildings of post-secondary institutions themselves, "college" is, like all "beliefs," *an interpretive--and thus transactional--activity*. However, the implications of this need to be handled very carefully. As discussed in the previous chapter, the emergence of patterns in the outcomes of such transactional activity is very easily mistaken as the fruits of interactional activity in which the constituent parts are fixed and known. In other words, familiar outcomes are presumed to be caused by familiar inputs (what Dewey would term *inter-action*). This mistake occurs because of a persistent binary between internal thoughts and external reality. Because of this binary, methodological concepts must be brought in to explain the transposition of the external to the internal, mainly the idea of "mediation." Once this binary is abolished, we see that internal activity (including thought, motivation, intent, etc) is *continuous* with external environments, which

obviously includes the sum of social relations. The external is not "reflected" in the internal, nor is there some sort of meditational step through which one is filtered into the other. Rather, the external and the internal are one and the same.

Still, what are we to make of the emergence of current-traditional rhetoric as the result of Rickett's process of designing his curricula? More broadly, what *are* we to make of the emergence of patterns that seem to mirror larger social relations? After all, as Bourdieu noted, "[...] analysis of the transformations of the pedagogic relation confirms that every transformation of the educational system takes place in accordance with a logic in which the structure and function proper to the system continue to be expressed" (95). Such observations aren't to be taken lightly. In the situation at hand, it isn't that the "crisis" outlined above, especially when we consider the qualitative "crisis" of college preparation, is reflected in the outcome of pedagogic activity; it is that the entire social, cultural, historical, and political dimension of the crisis is also continuous and fully present in the activity of individuals comprising any pedagogic transactional activity. It is because of this that when we look at the actual results of pedagogic activity, what we see is precisely what we saw in the discussion of the crisis of college preparation above. Because the global and the local are present in any immediate environment, though, we also see shades of variance. In the next section, I examine four moments in the classroom in which the transactional nature of "college preparation" is fully evident.

College in "College English"

In this section, I will be presenting four "vignettes" that are highly illustrative of "college" as a transactional activity. These moments that occurred during my fieldwork in

Copper Valley High are, I believe, important to pay attention to simply because they present a different perspective on what "college preparation" actually produced in the class I was observing.

"And then you die."

Throughout the semester the students executed a maneuver in which they would turn the teacher's lesson on its head and talk about things that were important to them. As noted before, I referred to these sorts of moments as "chumminess" in my field notes. Ms. Stein, who valued these moments, often helped the students along once they started. This particular conversation in class centered on why students did or did not do well in school. They first started off by discussing grades, and how many students felt grades were simply a form of punishment. Then, the conversation moved towards what school was all about. Ms Stein, trying to actually help the students get somewhere with this conversation, asked them this question: "What will doing well in school do for you?" The first student who responded to this question said "Good grades are supposed to get you into a good college, which will get you a good job, and that will get you a happy life." The next 7 minutes or so consisted of other students either agreeing with this or amending this sentiment. The teacher then pointed out that nearly all of the responses the students were giving focused on attaining a good job. A student responded with: "yeah, but you will be so busy working that you can't have that happy life until you retire!" A third student jumped in and said "so basically we are just building our lives up for retirement?" To which Jack, in a cynical voice, put the final exclamation point on the conversation: "yeah! and then you die."

It would be convenient to say Jack got the last word here, but as if on cue, the infernal "tones" that signaled the rigid beginning and end of each class rang out. Instead of letting the blood of this conversation flow unabated, the rigidity of the environment itself clamped down hard as students threw books in their bags and filtered out of the room. As happened many times over the course of the semester, the memory of the conversation was all but extinguished by the next class period.

"I'm fucked"

This interview occurred well after the deadline for the research paper but before the students received a grade or feedback on it. Knowing that neither Sam nor Kendra did well on the research paper, I eventually broached the subject with them.

> Matthew: talk about this research paper
> Kendra: I'm fucked
> Salim (Sam): I didn't like it. I thought it was stupid
> Kendra: I thought it was dumb too. cause, okay. one, I think we already talked about this, but like how I mean some people have an idea what they want to do and maybe that's like that's what you think you're going to do now but who knows like a year or two from now like you don't know and I just think it's dumb to pick a career that you might want to do and tell people about it like I don't know it's not everyone's main goal to be financially great and like have like a nice career... that's not my goal in life....so I thought it was kinda dumb
> Sam: I thought it was stupid

The basic idea of the research paper assignment boiled down to two steps: step one, identify what career or vocation you envision yourself doing in life and; step two, identify a problem or controversy within that area. The research itself, then, was aimed at understanding that problem or controversy within each student's self-selected career direction. Ms. Stein had some reservations about the way the assignment was constructed, but nonetheless believed it could be molded into a project in which the

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students were allowed to self-select something that would be meaningful and important to their own lives. This interview moment held particular interest for me, as about 2 months earlier I had met with Kendra to discuss the class as well as her plans for after high school. Earlier that week in class, Ms. Stein had students discuss some of their ideas as to what their research projects might be about. Because of the nature of the research project, this meant that students also had to be prepared to announce what sort of career or vocation they were thinking about pursuing after high school. The actual prompt that Ms. Stein gave the students was to think of what they want to be doing in 5 or 10 years. When Kendra was called upon to talk about her ideas, she at first wavered. Eventually, though, she indicated that one thing she was interested in was dental hygiene. I discovered more about this moment during our interview, but not in a direct manner. I had been asking Kendra what it might mean to her to go to college, and what it might allow her to do. She responded that:

> Kendra: it sounds so lame...I sound like one of those people who are like...world peace, but I really want people to just be happy... but you don't need all the money in the world to be happy. So I want to be able to support myself but at the same time not be so wrapped up in financial stuff because once you die your accomplishments financially... and as a business person aren't going to matter. It's going to be the relationships you create with people that will be remembered. I want to be independent but not so where its like...whoa, she has a big house and a nice car and all that.

It was here that I asked Kendra if she had thought more about the research paper and what she was going to do with it. She said that she had been thinking about it, because, "the schools I'm torn between have something to do with careers, because I can study one thing here but another thing there so its like kinda like where I get accepted and not." This was a dilemma, because the choice between careers was going to be determined, in part, by where she was able to go to college. While I knew dental hygiene was obviously

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something she was interested, it was at this point that I learned there was another choice. As she explained, what she was torn between was dental hygiene and teaching. When she said this, I exclaimed "those are really different!"

> Kendra: yeah! If I was a dental hygienist, I would just want my work to be my work, so I could do other things in my time. But if I was a teacher I could really make a connection with people, change people's minds for the better or just change their minds so they can think for themselves. If people can think for themselves, I swear they'd make the right decisions and other people wouldn't be influencing them in negative ways all the time.

I then asked Kendra when she started thinking about these two directions. As she explained to me, she started thinking about it during middle school. At the time, she thought it would be a nice way to have summers off. However, she then described how this dream of being a teacher had changed and matured over the years. As Kendra developed a desire to do more than just earn a lot of money, "teaching" had evolved into a potential outlet for that sort of life.

"You know what I don't get?"

Early in the research project unit, Ms. Stein had planned a class in which students would continue to work through the various grammar exercises geared to help them on the end of semester test over parts of speech. This consisted of a thick packet Ms. Stein had distributed some weeks earlier that contained various exercises in identifying parts of speech as well as correcting incorrect sentences. Every now and then (usually once a week or so) students would do what Ms. Stein called a "snakey-snakey" in which students, one by one and in order of where they sat, would be responsible for correctly answering one of the problems. However, this time (like most times), the students seemed to have other plans. As Ms. Stein asked the students to pull out the packet of grammar

exercises, a few students raised their hands to ask questions about the research project. The first student asked how they were supposed to find the "right" person to interview for their research project. Other students chimed in with "yeah!" and "I'm confused about that, too." This quickly turned into a minor roar in the classroom. Ms. Stein then asked how many people were confused about where to start with their primary research. Practically every hand went up. This caused Ms. Stein to temporarily shelve the grammar exercises and to start offering some ideas as to how to start. Part of the "primary research" of the research paper was for each student to identify someone in the field they are interested in and then interviewing this person. Many students were unsure whom they could contact, as well as how they should go about doing this. Ms. Stein patiently discussed with students various things that would be good to think about in regard to selecting a person to interview. For example, she suggested that if a student's research paper was about being an elementary teacher, then they shouldn't ask a college professor to do an interview. This eventually led to me directly, as Ms. Stein suddenly realized that I might be able to offer something to this discussion. She asked if I could speak about why I came to Copper Valley High in particular, and what considerations I took into account when selecting my site. As I was talking about the various factors I was interested in and what I was looking for, I mentioned that I had compared several school districts in regard to their "free and reduced lunch" rates as a rough indicator of the socio-economic position each institution was in. When I mentioned this, a student asked, "What does free and reduced lunch mean?" Ms. Stein took over for me, explaining that some students, due to the financial situation of their parents, were eligible to receive assistance in helping to pay for lunch at school. It was at this moment that Christian sprung to life

(who, not 5 minutes earlier, I had noted in my field notes that he seemed to be fast asleep in his chair), and exclaimed, in a nearly excited voice, "you know what I don't get?" Since others were still talking at this moment, Christian had to repeat this a couple times before Ms. Stein eventually, (and in a good nature) yelled back "What?" Christian continued, "You were saying stuff about how some kids here get free lunches. You know what I don't get? They get a free lunch and then last week I forgot my wallet and they said the only thing I could have was a peanut butter sandwich. I was like, I'm just as hungry as those other kids!"

This seemed to resonate with the rest of the class. Murmurs and side discussions erupted. Some students laughed at Christian, telling him he was a "butt-head" (a term Ms. Stein often used on her students in an affectionate way). Christian, though, persisted: "I'm serious! Why do they get free lunches and I don't?" At this point, Ms. Stein stepped back into the conversation and promptly shut it down, "Seriously Christian? I mean, *seriously?*" She then went back to her original plan for the day and asked students to pull out their exercise sheets, telling them that "We have to get through this stuff" and that there wasn't enough time to pursue Christian's question. Not long after this, I noted Christian yet again motionless in his chair, likely asleep.

Building a Better Brain?

Toward the end of the semester, the students had to take a timed essay test as part of the class. For this test, students were to read a short article discussing whether or not brains can be "built up" like a muscle. The article was written for a popular audience, and the class spent a few days going through the argument and learning a few different ways

they could respond to it (challenge, extend, etc). Time and time again, Ms. Stein

reminded teachers that she didn't care *what* they argued in their response, but rather cared

only about *how* they went about doing it (supporting points, evidence, and so forth).

While the students were obviously familiar with the text, they were not given the prompt

they had to address ahead of time. It is here that Ms. Stein, trying to do double duty with

the test, threw the class a sort of curveball. The prompt the students had to respond to

during the test was *Do you agree with the following statement: College English helped*

me to build my brain.

There are two things to consider while reading through some of the responses

below. The first is that, again, Ms. Stein spent no small amount of time telling students in

preparing for the test that she didn't care about *what* they said, only *how* they said it.

Second, many of the sentiments echoed here were echoed in "official" end of semester

evaluations that Ms. Stein had the students do, *which were anonymous*. I follow each of

these segments with a few thoughts:

> "The papers you have to write in College English have the biggest impact on your
> grade, & for good reason! They are multi-step ~~hell-holes~~ processes that challenge
> every inch of your reasoning & creativity. There are so many different kinds of
> academic writing styles & ways to fashion your creativity & reasoning around
> such. The class not only challenges you in a way that will build your brain, but
> also give you the tools to keep your brain at its highest potential."

What is of note in this response is the phrase "They are multi-step ~~hell-holes~~ processes"

that gives a much fuller sense of meaning for the rest of the paragraph. In this small

phrase, the student utilized the "strike-through" font to signal a more "true" sentiment that

they also know is not, perhaps, appropriate. There was nothing in the computer program

stopping them from simply deleting the phrase "hell holes" and the student, in a rather sly way of creating a secondary meaning to the text, included it in such a way that it was still very much readable. The result is a complex essay that, due to this section, now reads as a blistering satire of a "timed essay response."

> "In conclusion the statement, "College English helped me to build my brain" is true. Every tenet of intelligence was talked about in class and I believe I am a stronger person both mentally and academically. I feel prepared to go to college and write a research paper or find faults in sentences. I can reason through topics and discussions and feel good about learning new things."

In this snippet, we see a direct answer of what "college preparation" has produced in the mind of this student. Very simply, what it means to be "prepared" to write in college is to "write a research paper *or* find faults in sentences." A skeptical reader might approach this as a text written simply to satisfy what they *think* the teacher is fishing for. Such a reading is not only plausible, but given the context of this writing, likely. That said, even if this is simply an impression of the author's understanding of the context, it still says an awful lot about the how the context of college preparation is understood. Very simply, regardless of the authenticity of intent (a spurious concept to start with), the author seems to have a clear understanding of what "college preparation" is supposed to be about.

> "College English has taken my skills and numbed them. I have not been challenged in the class and therefore my brain has been doing the same processes with no changes, while my mentality has become more negative. In no way am I blaming the class itself, the class achieves everything that it is meant to achieve; it's just that the class is not meant for a student like me. Yes, I am aware that this is the time to work hard to hone my skills, but where's the motivation after 13 years of directed instruction, especially when what is being taught is something that I have already taken, and learned? The structure of a class to me is an introductory course for English; it honestly does not seem like a college level

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class."

What makes this paragraph interesting is both the admission of what the student did not do--use it as "time to work hard to hone my skills," presumably to get ready for college-- but the suggestion that it was not "college level" but rather a continuation of "high-school." In this, we see the student constructing a concept of "college" and "high-school," where high-school is defined as "13 years of directed instruction" and college as being something else (although what that "something else" might be is not discussed here). Also of note is the student's claim that this isn't the fault of the class, but that the class "achieves everything that it is meant to achieve." In one sense, this segment might be a way in which the student (who remember, is not anonymous to the teacher) is seeking to shield the teacher from responsibility for the student's take on the class. By saying "the class is not meant for a student like me," they are absolving the teacher of what the student feels has resulted. However, the student seems to be pretty direct in claiming that the inability of this class to match expectations of college is the root of their personal failure.

> "Learning was another big part of this class and it was worked on through grammar practice. Grammar was a big part of the class, we slowly worked into it and kept applying new grammar concepts to the ones we had already learned in order to learn how to speak and write using proper grammar once you got to the college level. Though out the year my grammar has improved greatly and I now understand all the basic concepts that I did not understand before. I believe that this class has made me a better learner due to the countless hours spent working on grammar."

Again, it is hard to tell how satirical this should be read, or if this should be read as a statement that seeks to merely pander to what the author thinks the teacher wants to see. However, what IS clear is the centrality of "grammar" to this student's understanding of

the class as well as how it related to "college preparation." Further, it places "grammar" as the central mechanism of "learning" in a writing class. That is, what is learned in a "writing" class (and presumably, what it means to learn to write) is to learn grammar.

> "Creativity is not used so much in College English because I have always been given my prompt, or the structure of writing I must complete for a grade. Giving me the prompt is not expanding my creativity at all. I may have to be creative in the way I write, but I am not being creative in what I am writing about. College English has given me hoops to jump through by creating the prompts and types of papers I am assigned to write. Without creativity my brain is not expanding its horizons. My brain is not growing at all without creativity it is just jumping through hoops to get a grade."

I save this one for last simply because it may be the most troublesome of all the responses. For one, it is troubling as this was precisely the situation Ms. Stein continually hoped to avoid in the way she taught her class, the assignments assigned (for what was within her power to assign, at least), and the activities conducted during class time. It is also troubling in the way that the student *does* see a certain amount of creativity in "the way [they] write," but that this is not what really matters, which is the ability to be creative in regard to what is written about. What is troubling about this is not the student's perception--I think they are right to lament here--but is troubling because we can see here a definition of what it means to prepare for college writing: "hoops to jump through by creating true prompts and types of papers" students are assigned to write.

Unpacking the vignettes:

In these moments, we can see both how "college preparation" sets up an environment where the action of students is shaped by the concept of preparing for

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college *as well as* the qualitative nature of this shaping that produces a result continuous with the broader social environment in which these scenes happen. For example, we can start with the ways in which the *students* utilized their understandings of "college." As noted earlier, one thing I was struck by in speaking with students in the class was the incredibly nebulous understandings they had of what "college" entailed. Before the semester, I had been working on an assumption that students had *some* notion of "college" and that this was somehow operative in the work they did in class. This hypothesis died a quick death during fieldwork. In talking with students, many simply could not visualize college, could not imagine what would go on there, what sorts of work they would do, and were unable to even fathom basic ways their lives might change beyond simple things like reading more and sleeping less. However, this is not to say that the students had *no* conception of college, because what they *did* have was an incredibly keen and sophisticated understanding of *how* college fit into society.

In the first vignette ("And then you die"), what erupted in class echoed what many students, both in formal interviews and informal conversations during class, seemed to understand: school was based on some sort of linear preparation for work, which itself was basically preparation for retirement and finally death. First grade existed for second grade, which existed for level after level that finally secured the ability to do work. But what should be pulled from this is that work itself was simply preparation for retirement, where the non-economic aspects of a good life might finally be investigated and realized. Of course, the tragedy here of this understanding is that this phase is finally reached right before death. To return to the discussion in the previous chapter, what is painfully obvious here is that the ends of writing, as students understood them, somehow fit

directly into this linear progression. Where, we must ask, is the democratic sphere in *this* vision that the students held? As mentioned in the second chapter, it wasn't that these students didn't *know* how to "work" or "apply effort" towards writing, it is that the environment they find themselves thrown into provides little to no meaningful outlet for such action in a public setting, both immediately as well as in any sort of imagined future. Moments where such effort is expended, then, are reserved primarily for private endeavors defined through economic security. The notion of writing we commonly imagine as writing instructors, the precise notion of writing that is thrown into contrast with the Bartleby Syndrome where students simply prefer to *not* "write" in that way, makes no small amount of sense given the way "writing" was aligned to "college," and what "college" was aligned with in the student's minds.

Further, the discussion I had with Kendra in the second vignette ("I'm fucked") further illuminates the way that "college," at least in the immediate environment of the class, is understood as something to do with advancing a career and little to do with imagining a future in which meaningful work is undertaken. In this regard, Kendra's assessment of the assignment itself is very telling in two important ways. First, she sees an emptiness and futility in attaching meaning and importance to something that is years in the future. As Kendra points out, the future is always nebulous at best and will undoubtedly change. We might recall Dewey's warning about what happens when present means are ignored for the sake of something far off in the future: activity loses purpose, meaning, and importantly, the *means* become muddled. Second, and perhaps more importantly, basing meaning on the economic choices Kendra sees in the future are ultimately unfulfilling when compared to other ways of thinking about what the future

might hold. Part of what Kendra is responding to when she says "it's not everyone's main goal to be financially great and like have like a nice career... that's not my goal in life" is the way her and her classmates often select a career direction. For nearly all students I talked to about their topic, their selection in a career area was guided by information they obtained on job growth (security) and income potential. This is why choices like pharmacy technician, actuarial science, dental hygiene, and nursing were some of the most common career areas students envisioned themselves entering. However, the insight Kendra sees in all this is that job security and income does not necessarily lead to things like fulfillment, purpose, and meaning from one's career, or what we might refer to as un-alienated labor. This alone, though, does not necessarily explain why students were struggling to care about the other assignments in class, all of which had virtually nothing to do with jobs or the economy that students were about to enter.

So why didn't Kendra say "teaching" in that moment during class in which students were asked to describe what they would be doing in 10 years? Unfortunately, I can only speculate here, as Kendra had no real answer to this question (and I did not have enough foresight to press her on this). Yet, I still think an answer starts to become visible if we look again at why Kendra was so frustrated with the research paper around the deadline: "[...] I just think it's dumb to pick a career that you might want to do and tell people about it like I don't know it's not everyone's main goal to be financially great and like have like a nice career... that's not my goal in life." It is here that we can see how Kendra clearly understood the research project to be about describing a "career," and that this, to her, was very clearly connected with being "financially great." This also meant, though, that her other option--teaching--did not fit into this at all, especially in how

"teaching" was very much connected to a sort of "save the world" vision, a vision that Kendra often times seemed to be somewhat bashful of.

In the third vignette ("you know what I don't get?"), we can see the way in which "college preparation" itself serves as a barrier to the inclusion of immediate meaning and purposes in the act of writing. We could envision a different scenario, where Christian's quite real and sincere question, a question born out of a contradiction that caused doubt in his mind and had opened the door to the possibility of inquiry into the matter, was utilized itself as the starting point for the activity of writing. Instead, though, the function of preparing for college closed off this avenue. In other words, the qualitative dimension of the crisis discussed above in regard to college level writing ability is continuous with the results of "college preparation" in the classroom: in this instance, the availability for a space to be opened up in which a critical examination of these dimensions is effectively shut down in the name of preparing for college. Spaces in which the process of writing *could* matter in the immediate lives and experiences of students are removed. The act of writing, then, is prevented from being anything more than a mere hoop to jump through. These are troubling moments indeed, because these were moments in which students were entering a moment in which ends-means were about to be consummated, and instead that unity was violently disrupted by something so far removed in the future that "action" was simply rendered muddy and confused.

It is worth contrasting this moment with how Ms. Stein, in a pre-semester interview, described her vision of "college." This particular exchange came, interestingly, in a discussion we were having over the value of "testing" in writing courses. Ms. Stein explained her ambivalence toward the tests she was required to administer this way:

"sometimes what tests test is a student's ability to play school well, and that's fine, it's a valid skill but its not what I want of them in this classroom and *I don't think it's what colleges want of them*. But, as you said before, 'my mythical idea of what college is' [pause] but I don't know how accurate it is" I then asked her what she *did* want. She replied:

> Ms Stein: I want them to think. I want them to stop [pause] producing things just for the hoops they're jumping through, but to start caring about their word choice because it's freaking awesome when you have good word choice, and to start thinking about the length of your sentences and the patterns of your sentences [so] it doesn't feel like a Dick and Jane book anymore, because it's its more exciting to read and it's easy to get lost in if the author puts in more work than the audience has to do less to follow. And [pause] to make them realize--and this sounds awful--but you can BS a teacher if your writing is flashy enough, you can not know your subject as well if you know how to manipulate language. [long pause] I see writing as subverting the system and I see teaching as getting kids to think and getting kids to think about oh partly voting and partly civic responsibility and partly to just think that, there's so much going on in the world today. We're 'The best lack all conviction, while the worst. Are full of passionate intensity.' I don't care where they stand politically as long as--for a change--they can build an argument that has reasons and support, *and that's what we do in this class*."

A little later in the interview, Ms. Stein described a situation in a previous class in which a student started to "fact-check" everything Ms. Stein said in class, often coming with facts and figures of their own. As Ms. Stein described it, "we would just duke it out and it was fantastic." However, one day this student found Ms. Stein to be in error, and Ms. Stein admitted to the class the next day that she had been wrong, and gave them whatever she had misquoted earlier. When the student told Ms. Stein that they wouldn't report to their parents what had happened, Ms. Stein told the student that she wasn't ashamed to be wrong, and that more importantly, *that was what the classroom space was for*. As she explained, "I thought that was empowering and I think helps for kids to realize the class is a safe space to be wrong, a public space to be wrong and it's okay."

What Ms. Stein describes in this anecdote about a previous class (which was not a "college preparation" class like CE), is a classroom space in which *provisional ideas* are brought into the classroom space to be discussed and considered by the members of the class itself. Because the emphasis was on "finding out" and not simply "being right," the classroom as a "safe space" for "being wrong" is a critical component of this. Except, this vision wasn't what occurred with Christian's question. This helps to illustrate the way that "college preparation" functions as a transactional activity in which the sum or the whole of the environment is continuous in regard to the individual and particular aspects within it. It is because of this that we can see how action and activity, while not predetermined, are guided in various ways that are, to borrow again Bourdieu's language, in accordance with a logic that extends beyond the immediate scene. Equally important, though, was that the students themselves didn't question this either. There were no calls to pursue the question (despite many students silently indicating that it was something they wondered, too). If habits of being a student and various beliefs and values concerning the function, role, and purpose of writing are things that are born out of experience, the fact that the students (and the teacher herself) didn't think much of this moment suggests a lot not only about "schooling" but the cultural environment itself that schooling is a part of. As Ivanic notes in her 2004 essay "Discourses of Writing and Learning to Write,"

> Policy, practice and opinions about literacy education are usually underpinned, consciously or subconsciously, by particular ways of conceptualising writing, and by particular ways of conceptualising how writing can be learned. These different ways of conceptualising literacy lie at the heart of 'discourses' in the broadest sense: recognisable associations among values, beliefs and practices which lead to particular forms of situated action, to particular decisions, choices and omissions, as well as to particular wordings[...] The ways in which people talk about writing and learning to write, and the actions they take as learners, teachers and assessors, are instantiations of discourses of writing and learning to write. (220)

Using Ivanic's term of "discourses," we can see how "college preparation" is able to produce such discourses concerning writing instruction. In her piece, she lists 6 discourses of writing instruction. They are:

1. A Skills Discourse
2. A Creativity Discourse
3. A Process Discourse
4. A Genre Discourse
5. A Social Practices Discourse
6. A Sociopolitical Discourse

In CE, the function of "college preparation" was to shape the environment so that only #1 was viable, even though writing in CE was often theorized as 3, or 5, or even 6.

The final point I want to make about the series of responses students gave to the timed essay prompt is that they clearly indicate the results of "college preparation" are actually manifestations of the environment students were currently in, which had very little to do with "college" itself. As discussed in the previous chapter, this makes a lot of sense from within a Pragmatist understanding of activity. Means, within this understanding, are always found within the present situation. Further, ends-in-view, or aims, purposes, or goals, are themselves developed along with the means found in the present situation. Because of this, an incredibly distant relationship between "aims" (college preparation) and the present situation (the high school environment) produces a result that is only tangentially related (at best) to the "aim" of activity. Problematically, though, these understandings of what "college writing" is all about, understandings that are forged in a very different environment and for very different reasons, are embedded into habits or practices that *are* actually carried within students when they go to college. If we define "college writing" as simply the sort of writing a college student does, in *this sense*, "college writing" is being produced. In other words, we can see the way in which

"college writing" is in the process of being redefined by these forces. The problem,

though, is that this version of "college writing" is deeply at odds with what composition

theory has tried to understand as "writing."

As a very brief illustration of this, consider the following message sent out over

the Writing Program Administration email list (WPA-L):

> "But I (and a number of my colleagues who 'believe in' revision as another word
> for the real work of "writing") find that the vast majority of our students resist the
> drafting process altogether. They regularly avoid workshop classes (despite a
> strict absence policy, which they see as about presence, not engagement). Or if
> they do attend those classes, most students will do so without drafts, even though
> part of each workshop class is a 'mini-lesson' on an aspect or element of writing to
> help them revise further or edit. (I typically focus workshops on content first--
> including thesis development and overall structure, then integrating sources and
> overall coherence, then sentence control. And "process" drafts are required--just
> as, I tell them, calculations are required to support answers in math classes.) Most
> of my students just want that grade, and then (so it seems) they will decide what
> they need or want to do to raise it--not to improve their writing, but to improve
> their GPA. And they'll want to know what precisely they need to do--what
> specific changes they need to make--in order to get the grade they want. I have
> students every semester who repeatedly ignore assignment descriptions, goals,
> guidelines as if to say, 'This is all I'm going to do for this assignment; take it or
> leave it,' until, that is, they see the grade. (Miecznikowski email)

This, of course, is a fairly good description of the Bartleby Syndrome, except that this is

in reference to college students, not high school students. In this example, though, we can

see how composition theory itself has *also* assumed certain aims, purposes, or goals as

fixed and prior to writing itself. In short, it has assumed a world in which this sort of

writing makes sense. As I have suggested before, it has detached the specific conditions

and circumstances in which these ideas have been created within, and then assumed them

to be present for all instances of writing. However, what is also telling is how this email

focuses on the *students* as the center of the problem. This is not altogether off the mark,

as it is the expectations and practices the students carry with them that ultimately define

the way they approach writing. However, such sentiments typically falter in asking *why* students have developed such habits in the first place. As I have been trying to show in this chapter, "college preparation" itself, and the continuity it has with the contemporary literacy crisis, provide a deeper understanding into how and why the beliefs and habits that students have are formed.

Conclusion

The distance between the expectations of instructors in regard to the ways writing will be done in class, and the actual writing students do presents not only a problem, but illuminates a final level of analysis in understanding the complete "environment" in which writing takes place. The problem it presents is that this distance is often understood as the measure of success in a writing class. However, it also suggests a final level of analysis that asks *why* such practices of writing are continuous within *what* sort of environment. The argument I will be working through in the next chapter builds on a conversation around *liberalism*. As I will suggest, it is a particular type or flavor of *liberalism* that provides the broadest context for collective activity. It is an understanding of this type of liberalism--*neoliberalism* as many have referred to it as--that removes all contradictions surrounding things like college preparation, the crisis of literacy focused on college readiness, and the Bartleby Syndrome. In short, these things, while contradictory on their own, *make sense* within a neo-liberal society.

Pragmatism does several things here. The first is that it helps to understand the way in which different versions of *liberalism* become the axis upon which these things turn. While John Dewey has been described as a philosopher of many stripes (of

education, of experience, of democracy), one thing he is often not seen as is a philosopher of *liberalism*. However, as I will explore in the next chapter, Dewey's place within the tradition of liberalism not only helps to extend our contemporary understandings of neo-liberalism, but Dewey also suggests an alternative liberalism that finds its justification in other various strands of pragmatist philosophy. This is important to work through, as one might take a more relativistic stance to suggest that *all* forms of literacy are equally worthy and thus, what should change is our expectations. Or, in other words, the solution here is to acquiesce to the environment, to welcome our neoliberal future, to accept this new normal as a normative goal. While many people have sought to condemn and smear Dewey as a philosopher who takes this position, I will be working against this interpretation of Pragmatism to offer a version of Pragmatism that, while often over looked, is still viable. It is in this form of pragmatism that such relativism is not seen as the solution, but as the problem to be over come through intelligence. Or, to return to the very first chapter, to look to *inquiry* itself as the foundation for a democratic vision.

What would the ideal preparation for college entail? The answer I am cultivating goes something like this: the best preparation for college is a purposeful and meaningful curriculum for the students that does not sell out to the future, but takes the students where they are at and cultivates them as inquirers into their present conditions. We can think back to Christian's question of "you know what I don't get" as a sort of yearning for this sort of work. Students have questions, have doubts, have all the impulsive ingredients needed to spur learning and growth. That is enough to work with, and college preparation enough to guide students through ever deepening abilities to deal with the world they have. Why must we learn rhetorical models for college when we can learn rhetorical

models that might help us understand social divisions such as race and class, particularly as it pertains to the lives students currently inhabit? Composition theory has long echoed such sentiments. However, the other sentiment composition has long echoed is that this is the road we continually do not take. How are we to understand this paradox? To this, I want to offer this lengthy quote from Bernstein that captures, I think, the essence of the project for Pragmatist philosophy in the 21st century and one that is highly suggestive of what the Pragmatist tradition offers composition studies:

> To believe, for example, that it is possible to bring about reconstruction of all social institutions through educational reform is to be completely unrealistic about the extent to which our schools are and will continue to be a reflection of a larger society in which they function. No capitalist society will tolerate a school system that is design to overthrow it. A Marxist critic would claim that all this might have been known if Dewey had a correct understanding of the dynamics of existing society. If one wants further confirmation, we need only look at the failure of Dewey's ideas to be effective and their impotence in light of the basic conflicts in society. The social conflicts that even Dewey perceived have not been ameliorated, they have been worsened. Where in American society can one find evidence of the growth of creative intelligence and the realization of the ideal of a democratic community of shared experience? Despite the influence of Dewey, our school system is even more chaotic and confused in its practices, aims, and objectives than it was during Dewey's lifetime. If Dewey was alarmed about what was happening to our social and natural environment during the first half of the 20th century, look at the rapid deterioration since then. Even science has not become, as Dewey hoped, the beacon for intelligent activity, but a terrifying means for destruction. And the esthetic quality of our daily lives continues to be degraded and dehumanized. These are strong indictments. I believe they are essentially correct in the deficiencies they highlight and in the charge that Dewey was unrealistically optimistic about what could and would be achieved by social reform.
>
> Even granted the thrust of these and other related criticisms, it would be disastrous if we discarded what stands at the center of the pragmatic tradition. This tradition, especially in the central position that it assigns to the theory of inquiry, has developed a critical understanding of the norms by which any idea or hypothesis is to be tested and evaluated. [...] Marx called for the radical criticism of all existing social institutions. But it is the pragmatists who have perspicuously and forcefully delineated the norms of critical inquiry (Praxis 228-9).

My task, then, for the rest of this project is to understand what "writing" and writing instruction has to do with this critical inquiry that Pragmatists assert as the crucial apparatus in working against such forms of literacy that are not sustainable, just, or worthy of our lives.

Chapter 5
Bartleby Redux: Composition, Liberalism, and Inquiry

"For problems [in high schools] do not arise arbitrarily. They come from causes, and from causes which are imbedded in the very structure of the school system—yes, even beyond that, in the structure of society itself. It is for this reason that mere changes in the mechanics of the school system, whether in administration or in the externals of subject-matter, turn out mere temporary devices [...] any adjustment which really and permanently succeeds within the school walls must reach out and be an adjustment of forces in the social environment. " (Dewey, MW.1.286)

[...]a decent education ought to be creating free, independent, creative human beings [...]And it would be part of developing a free and democratic society of real participation. But of course that runs counter to elite interests. It's worth remembering that the United States was not founded to be a democratic society and elites do not want it to be a democratic society. It's supposed to be what political scientists sometimes call a "polyarchy," a system basically of elite decision and public ratification. And if you had the kind of educational system that Dewey spent his life committed to, you wouldn't be able to sustain that. People would become active, involved, engaged, and would try to create a truly functioning democratic society which would, as Dewey also pointed out, require an industrial democracy. That means democratizing production, commerce, and so on, which means eliminating the whole structure of capitalist hierarchy. [...] I was lucky as a kid to be sent to a Deweyite school. It was quite, quite an exciting experience." (Noam Chomsky, 2003 interview at Stony Brook).

Introduction

There are two unresolved problems this final chapter will address. The first

addresses an understanding of the "Bartleby Syndrome" that college preparation produces as something purposeful and harmonious within a broad sphere of social analysis. In other words, my goal here is to widen the lens to the point in which aberrations and contradictions at local levels are no longer aberrations or contradictions. As Dewey suggests in the first epigram to this chapter, it is the "structure of society itself" that is the ultimate root of many problems embedded in educational institutions. Crucially, and something that receives little attention, it is the term "structure of society itself" that points to an area of Dewey's philosophy that gets overlooked: *liberalism*. For Dewey, in addition to whatever else "liberalism" was, it was also a conversation centered on an investigation into the ultimate purposes of human lives and an experiment in ways to organize society to best realize those purposes. While it may seem odd that Dewey's major statement on political theory and liberalism wouldn't be published until 1935 as *Liberalism and Social Action*, many of the major concepts and ideas that coalesce in this later work can be seen evolving and, in no insignificant way, undergirding some of Dewey's earliest work. This includes his early work in psychology and education. In fact, as C. Wright Mills pointed out in his dissertation on Pragmatism[1], one of the first courses Dewey ever taught at the collegiate level at the University of Michigan was in political theory and philosophy (295). Dewey is rightfully termed a philosopher of education, of experience, of growth, of democracy, of nature, and of organic unity. However, it may be as a philosopher of *liberalism* that the full implications of Dewey's oeuvre blossom.

Of course, Dewey's take on liberalism only goes so far, as he died in 1952 and is,

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[1] Later published as *Sociology and Pragmatism: The higher learning in America.*

as such, 60 years removed from our present situations. However, the framework that

Dewey constructs to discuss liberalism provides a potent backdrop to a discussion of

what contemporary theorists have termed *neo-liberalism*. Additionally, as one might

expect, the *liberalism* Dewey worked up was not your garden-variety form of liberalism.

It is in this reconstructed, this *renascent* liberalism (as Dewey described it) that the full

importance of education, democracy, and inquiry--themes Dewey had elucidated at

length in earlier works--start to hang together in some comprehensive philosophical

project. This is where Dewey's work on *liberalism* is important: it not only provides a

broad socio-political framework of understanding institutions like schools and schooling,

but also points the discussion toward how things can be changed at such broad levels.

This, then, is the second issue this chapter will address. It is at this second level, a

Pragmatist critique of *liberalism*, that more contemporary "neo-pragmatist" conversations

come back in to view. I will return to these discussions and the renaissance of

Pragmatism's interest in "democracy" in the second half of this chapter.

In order to set up this chapter, there are a few preliminary arguments and

positions I need to stake out. One thing I have consciously avoided to this point is a

discussion of so called "progressive education." I don't do this to slight the major tenants

and practices of the progressive movement in education, things that Dewey had no small

part in fermenting. At a very deep level, I, like Chomsky's quote in the epigram to this

chapter, feel there's something fundamentally correct about the spirit in which the

progressive project was undertaken in education.[2] The problem occurs when the methods

of progressive education become unhinged from the social and political theory that it

emanates from. I suspect this is the occasion for Dewey's ambivalence about his

connection to progressive education. Regardless, my project here is not to suggest best

practices, because I don't think that's the problem. I suggested in the previous chapters

that the best preparation for college is a purposeful and meaningful education in high

school. I should add to this now that it isn't that we don't know how to do this, but that

rather we *don't*. This itself, though, is not a new or novel concept. Paul Goodman, writing

in his 1962 book *Compulsory Mis-Education*, summarizes his understanding of where

progressive education inevitably failed to live up to its promises:

> […] this theory [of Dewey's] was entirely perverted when it began to be applied, either in private schools or in the public system. The conservatives and the businessmen cried out, and the program was toned down. The practical training and community democracy, whose purpose was to live scientifically and change society, was changed into 'socially useful' subjects and a psychology of 'belonging.' In our schools, driver-training survives as the type of the 'useful'. (43)

Of course, half of a century later and even driver-training has been privatized in most

schools. Goodman suggests the direction I will be taking here when he noted that

"Fundamentally, there is no right education except growing up into a worthwhile world"

(59). The question is thus one of understanding *how* teaching, and in particular, the

teaching of writing, has something to do with fostering a worthwhile world.

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[2] My usage of the term "progressive education" is admittedly problematic here. As many have noted, the idea of "progressive education" was contentious the moment it came into existence, and was a term that Dewey himself eventually sought to disassociate from his work. My usage here is intended to refer to the ideas originating in Dewey's work, *not* the eventual transformation the term would take when it was put into practice in the 1930s through the early 1950s. See Kliebard (2004), and Sharp et al (1975) for fuller discussions of the evolution of "progressive education."

This leads me to the second position I need to claim for this chapter. Like the perpetual "crisis" in literacy, any reading of the history of education at any level reveals a history of reform, struggle, and lament. As such, it might be tempting to read *any* claim concerning inadequacies of the status quo *as* the status quo itself. I fear we are weary of these conversations over what is wrong and how things should be. However, as I have been suggesting and hinting throughout, I *do* see the current situation, particularly in the way in which "college preparation" guides and regulates the writing environments within classrooms, as deeply problematic. My first objective in this chapter is obviously to construct a broad framework of understanding the sociopolitical situation we are currently in. However, while I will join the chorus of voices who declare problems to exist, my main objective is to give us a framework and justification for *not* being satisfied with the way things are. I believe Pragmatism offers a powerful conversation from which we can begin conversations over what's wrong and, more importantly, *why*.

There is one last claim I need to assert before I start this project. As I noted in the introduction, my aim in this work is focused on post-secondary writing instruction. It is not my intention or goal to suggest better practices, theories of writing, or even strategies for reform in the secondary level. Such things are important and necessary. However, they are beyond the scope of my project here. Instead, I will be working to clear the theoretical decks, so to speak, in a way that would allow those of us in post-secondary writing instruction to play our part in this conversation. After all, we *could* declare that "good writing" at the college level is writing that actively seeks to create a better world, writing that does *not* contribute to discourses of exclusion or discrimination, and writing

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that can effectively critique the world as we know it now. In short, we could utilize this alignment of all writing instruction to "college" for different purposes (and this would mean redefining "college" away from its current iterations). In doing so, we could join (and not *direct*) educators *at all levels* in resisting forms of education that move us further away from some vision of schooling for democracy. Doing so, though, requires dealing with theoretical impasses that are rooted in the western tradition of liberalism that make such work difficult to undertake.

I will start this work through discussion of liberalism itself via Dewey's historical account of liberalism. In doing so, I will continue Dewey's work and connect up with contemporary discussions concerning *neo-liberalism*. Importantly, it will be here that I will locate the literacy practice I have been referring to as the Bartleby Syndrome as purposeful within this context. At this point, I will turn to the major commitments and one contradiction that lie at the heart of Western liberalism. One manifestation of liberalism I will explore is what I refer to as the imperative to "honor thy student" and the influence it exerts in thinking about writing instruction. As I will demonstrate through a re-reading of two major debates in composition theory, this "honor-maxim" has been one of the major axis upon which theorizing writing instruction at the post-secondary levels has turned as well as a serious impasse. In addressing the question of how to move beyond this impasse, I will be catching up to contemporary Pragmatists such as Robert Talisse and Cheryl Misak who have turned not only to Dewey, but to Peirce and his conception of *inquiry* as a major missing piece in how we think about getting out of the conundrums of liberalism that all of education, and especially writing instruction, finds

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itself mired in.

What is Liberalism? A Preliminary account of two commitments and one contradiction

Within colloquial speech, the term liberalism generally denotes center-left partisan politics, typically associated with the Democratic party after the New Deal legislation. This conception of liberalism is typically contrasted by the term conservatism and its accordant base within the Republican party. This colloquial usage of liberal and liberalism is not what I will be referring to throughout this chapter. Instead, as Dewey and other Pragmatists use it, *liberalism* is a set of traditions, values, beliefs, and guidelines that serve as the ground rules from which human beings can make sense of the world around them as well as determine how they must interact with that world. It provides particular meanings to words, supplies concepts to philosophies, and in general orders and arranges our existence. Liberalism, then, is a world-view, a conceptual framework, a *discursive ideology*. More importantly, liberalism has been the basis for nearly all political, social, ethical and religious theorizing in western cultures for the past 400 years. As such, it is the *dominant* worldview of most western cultures. It is so dominant, in fact, that many assertions, claims, and commitments of liberalism are understood as "common sense" or "natural" for those within this framework. As Robert Talisse writes, "Liberalism [...] denotes a distinctive collection of philosophical claims about how a state must be ordered if it is to be legitimate" (16). I would extend this statement beyond legitimation of the state to a larger discussion that liberalism seeks to theorize: the ultimate purpose of human life and how to organize societies to realize this

purpose. In this, as Dewey points out, the larger project of liberalism is a continuation of a conversation within political philosophy that stretches all the way back to Plato in *The Republic* (and perhaps beyond) (LW 11:7). What makes liberalism distinctive and different from, say Aristotle's understanding that the polis is prior and generative of individual *eudaimonia*, is liberalism's unwavering claim that the individual is the primary unit of social analysis, action, and morality.

This assertion, the root of liberalism, was articulated by John Stuart Mill in the introduction to his classic work *On Liberty* when he wrote that "[t]he only freedom which deserves the name, is that of pursuing our own good in our own way" (14). While Mill was not the first person to come up with this idea, his simplistic maxim captured two of the most important aspects of liberalism. First, that each *individual* should be free to decide what is "good" for themselves. Second, that each individual should be able to decide what was the best way to go about obtaining this good. These two assertions went beyond simple freedom from restrictions to actually assert a "positive freedom." This asserted that each individual was free to discover their own conception of what was good as well as to seek out ways to realize this good in their lives. The primacy of the individual underscores liberalism's ability to upend and transform virtually all human understandings of reality.

To 21st century minds, this idea is so commonsensical that it might seem quaint. While I will discuss this at length in the next section, what should be remembered is that at the time liberalism was taking center stage, questions over what is "good" for an individual and how that good should be obtained were dominated by powerful,

centralized forces in society. Instead of individuals being allowed to "pursue their own good in their own way," centralized forms of power like the Catholic Church and monarchical governments decreed what these "goods" would be and how subjects should pursue them. Seen in this light, liberalism was a radical and potent revolutionary idea that sought to undermine the power of centralized state power. After all, what power would a king have over his subjects if the subjects had the freedom to decide for themselves how to live? While "democracy" and "liberalism" are not one and the same, the modern form of Democracy we are familiar with arose as a response to how to govern a society once such centralized state power was destroyed.

With this we can start to pull apart a more specific, more technical definition of "liberalism." Stemming from Mill's statement, the first thing we can say about liberalism is that it places the *individual* at the center of all social theorizing. By this, liberal thinkers assert that no group membership can ever fully capture the "essence" of who or what a person is. Or, in other words, we cannot understand someone by looking at what "group" they are a part of simply because every individual is at all times a member of multiple groups. Because of this, we cannot appeal to a person's membership in one group or another as a means to decide what is best for them and how they should live their lives. This brings us to the second thing we can say about liberalism: what is good for an individual is always prior and more important than what is good for a group. This second assertion has been hotly debated, but even in instances where a person "gives their life" to a group or an organization (such as joining the military, participating in a religion, etc), this is always done on a voluntary basis within liberalism. Or, in other words, no one is

ever "forced" to do these things; they do it as a "choice."

We have now two major commitments of liberalism: 1, the individual is the primary unit of social understanding; and 2, the good of and for the individual is always prior and more important than the good of any group. Hidden within these commitments is a rather major contradiction that has served as *the problem* that liberal theorists have sought to work around. Interestingly, John Stuart Mill articulated this contradiction with uncommon clarity *in the very same sentence that he articulated the crux of liberalism*. The full sentence alluded to above goes like this: "The only freedom which deserves the name, is that of pursuing our own good in our own way, *so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs, or impede their efforts to obtain it*." We can state this contradiction in a slightly different way: how are we to adjudicate between two conflicting conceptions of what is "good?" Liberalism, in emphasizing the individual, gives us no way to say that person A has the right idea and person B has the wrong idea, especially when those two ideas come into conflict with each other. For example, one person might decide that what is best for them is to be as wealthy as they possible can be. However, to obtain this wealth, this person must prevent other people from realizing the same goal. And here we have the conflict that Mill cautioned us against. As long as conflicts don't happen, there's no problem with individuals each deciding what is best for them. However, in complex modern societies, conflicts are an unavoidable fact of life. Attempts to resolve the contradiction of conflict in liberal societies has been at the heart of almost all political, ethical, moral, and religious theorizing in the past 300 years, including educational philosophy, pedagogy, and indeed, the major warrants under much

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(if not all) thinking about writing instruction. To understand how Dewey and Peirce point toward a way out of this contradiction, we first must step back and read "liberalism" through the eyes of Dewey.

Dewey's History of Liberalism

As a recent special issue in *Radical History Review* demonstrated, it is important to trace the origins of contemporary economic-political-philosophical movements in order to fully understand their nature.[3] Without such narratives or histories of ideas, the social, political, and historical contexts from which they develop cannot be taken into account, effectively creating a situation where critique and resistance is hamstrung. At stake in this particular issue is "neo-liberalism," the name often given to describe the current state and nature of liberalism. As the authors in this special section note, how exactly we are to understand "neo-liberalism" is far from settled. This shifting terrain and subsequent search for solid explanatory ground has been echoed by many other writers from many different areas, from Wendy Brown to David Harvey to Henry Giroux. Dewey was no different, and had produced his own account of "liberalism" in a historical account in an attempt to distill just exactly what it was, what it meant, and what relevance it might have. As such, Dewey opened his 1935 *Liberalism and Social Action* by describing the fall from grace that "liberalism" had experienced. As he noted, while once a term that was one of praise, it had become one that was called "mealy-mouthed, a milk-and-water doctrine" (LW 11:6). This, for Dewey, sets up the project:

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[3] See in particular Bockman's essay "The Long Road to 1989: Neoclassical Economics, Alternative Socialisms, and the Advent of Neoliberalism" for fuller discussion.

It is hardly possible to refrain from asking what liberalism really is; what elements, if any, of permanent value it contains, and how these values shall be maintained and developed in the conditions the world now faces. [...] I have wanted to find out whether it is possible for a person to continue, honestly and intelligently, to be a liberal, and if the answer be in the affirmative, what kind of liberal faith should be asserted today (LW 11:7).

From here, Dewey sets up his method: to not necessarily account for the differences that various versions of liberalism have had over its history (of which, Dewey is quick to note, are sometimes contradictory with each other), but to discern the *similarities* such iterations of liberalism have had.

Dewey begins this project by tracing the roots of liberalism back to John Locke. Like Thomas Hobbes thirty-eight years before him, Locke understood the formation and legitimacy of a government as being a function of some sort of agreement, arrangement, or social contract. Additionally, Locke agreed with Hobbes that without a government, there was too much danger of conflict between people and further, any form of organized government was a sort of necessary evil. However, very much unlike Hobbes, Locke worked to refute the idea that there is such a thing as a single person that is ordained by God itself to rule as an absolute monarch. Further, Locke parted ways with Hobbes by describing the "natural" state of humans as being one defined by "perfect freedom" and the qualities or "rights" that existed prior to the formation of a government. Among these natural rights were, of course, "life, liberty, and estate."

This distinction is absolutely crucial. Since Hobbes had a very pessimistic view of human nature, he focused mostly on ways to repress it. Consequently, for Hobbes, the only reason for a government to exist was to protect individuals from harming each other.

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Therefore, other than performing this function, there were no limits or restrictions on what monarchs could do to their subjects. Government, then, was a sort of necessary evil or an imposition brought on by the nastiness of human nature itself. Since Locke understood the state of individual human nature prior to government as being inherently perfect (yet logistically problematic), then the only legitimate role of a government was to protect the natural rights humans had prior to the formation of a civil society. Consequently, there were now limits to what a government could and could not do: namely, to protect the specific individual natural rights of life, liberty, and property. In this framework, the sole legitimate purpose of government was to safeguard this individualism. When governments failed engage in this safeguarding (or worse, worked against it), a government was to then be considered illegitimate. The implications of this were far reaching. Not only did these ideas fuel the "Glorious Revolution" of 1688 which saw the transition of Britain from an absolutist monarchy to a parliamentarian monarchy as we know it today, but these ideas were later recycled by a group of artisans and merchants in the American colonies to form what we now know of as the American Revolution.

We can describe Locke's philosophy as a sort of fairy tale story: Mankind enters the world as an individual, and this individual is perfect, ideal, and endowed with "natural rights" from a higher power. However, these natural rights become threatened when individuals are forced to deal with other individuals. Therefore, mankind institutes a "government" to ensure that these natural rights are protected. When a government fails to adequately protect these natural rights, then it is the responsibility of the individuals to

reject that government and form a new government. Therefore, this form of liberalism

stands for the freedom of the individual that is protected by a government that is

answerable to that individual. Or, in other words, government "belongs" to and is

responsible to the individual and not the other way around. Prior to this, governments did

not have to answer to the individual and could (and often did) impose taxes without

representation from those it was taking taxes from. If this sounds very familiar, it should.

As noted before, it is this exact flavor of liberalism that went on to influence the fathers

of the American Revolution that ultimately set up the United States of America.

It is here that Dewey starts to pull together an understanding of "liberalism" as

defined by the historical and political conditions that Locke was responding to. As he

notes:

> The whole temper of this philosophy is individualistic in the sense in which
> individualism is opposed to organized social action. It held to the primacy of the
> individual over the state not only in time but in moral authority. It defined the
> individual in terms of liberties of thought and action already possessed by him in
> some mysterious ready-made fashion, and which it was the sole business of the
> state to safeguard. Reason was also made an inherent endowment of the
> individual, expressed in men's moral relations to one another, but not sustained
> and developed because of these relations. It followed that the great enemy of
> individual liberty was thought to be government because of its tendency to
> encroach upon the innate liberties of individuals. (LW 11:8,9).

What emerges from Dewey's interpretation of Locke's philosophy is a theme concerning

the relationship of "individualism" to "organized social action." It is not too far off the

mark to notice how similar this is in regard to the *agon* between "agency" and "social

structure" that was explored in the third chapter. Not to foreshadow too much, but the

moves Dewey will make here will be remarkably similar to what we saw in the third

chapter. Regardless, Dewey suggests that tied up in this early form of liberalism are a few

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things that are rife with implications for how "liberalism" would subsequently change and evolve.

In this form of liberalism, the function of government was to protect the freedom of the individuals. But what do we mean by "freedom" here? Locke had a fairly specific answer. First was "life." That is, humans had a right to not be killed by other humans. In other words, a monarch could not arbitrarily decide to cut off someone's head simply because they felt like it. Second was "liberty." By "liberty," Lock referred to the right of an individual to not be coerced by force into thinking or doing something against their will. Third was estates or "property." By property, Locke referred to the right to "own" anything that was the product of an individual's own labor. In other words, when an individual took raw material and made something out of it, it became their property. Interestingly, Locke also had in mind that the entire life of an individual could be considered "property" as well. Lastly, in Locke's view, since the individual is inherently ideal and perfect, it exist in an antagonistic relationship with any form of organized social life (which Locke thought threatened to encroach upon individual rights). Or, more simply, organized social action was, in Locke's definition, automatically less ideal than the individual unit. As Dewey is careful to point out, Locke's deep resentment and distrust toward government has to be understood within the historical context in which he was writing. At this time, power was located within one individual (the king or queen) who claimed authority of rule through God itself. Power was absolute, beyond question, and above all, answerable to no one but the monarch themselves. To openly question authority in such times was often punishable by death. In this environment, as Dewey

pointed out, Locke's immediate purpose was to uphold tolerance and reason in an era saturated with intolerance and blind faith in authority (LW 11:8).

It is in this last aspect of "freedom" that Locke mentions--estate--that sees the critical turning point upon which Liberalism evolved. As he noted in regard to "estate" and Locke's theory of value, "The importance attached to the right of property within the political area was without doubt an influence in the later definitely economic formulation of liberalism. But Locke was interested in property already possessed. A century later industry and commerce were sufficiently advanced in Great Britain so that interest centered in *production* of wealth, rather than in its possession" (LW 11:9). Dewey sees three important results of this. The first is the final dissolution of old feudal laws and systems that denied any sort of decentralized monetary system. In a sense, what was a static economic system morphed into a purely dynamic system. However, and this brings us to the second important result, to be dynamic meant that any sort of rigidity in laws, customs, and regulations had to be done away with. That is, for a market to function in a dynamic way, any sort of static rule was to be seen as the enemy and removed. This is the impetus behind theories of laissez faire economics. Essentially, in this view, a market best functions when it has total freedom to evolve as it needs to. As Dewey points out, the philosophy of Adam Smith--while not advocating laissez faire--suggested a very different notion of "freedom:" "the activity of individuals, freed as far as possible from political restriction, is the chief source of social welfare and the ultimate spring of social progress" (LW 11:10). This, then, is the third important result of this shift from possession of wealth to production: rights of freedom and liberty were extended from

human beings to decidedly non-human economic forces.

It is from this stage that Dewey moves into a lengthy discussion of how "liberalism" as an economic and political philosophy, also became a sort of cultural philosophy, moving into areas such as ethics, morality, public policy, and even religion. By the 19th century, as Dewey pointed out, "Natural law was still regarded as something more fundamental than man-made law, which by comparison is artificial. But natural laws lost their remote moral meaning. They were identified with the laws of free industrial production and free commercial exchange" (LW 11:11). In other words, the concept of individual liberation from outside control had become, for the most part, subjugated to the liberation of economic markets from regulation and control. In somewhat of a reversal, many (Adam Smith, David Ricardo, John Stuart Mill, Thomas Malthus, etc) believed that a free and uncontrolled economic market would, on its own, provide for the liberation of the individual. The way in which this would ideally occur is not readily visible and takes some theoretical magic to get from A to B. In its hyper-idealistic form, the market is a space in which commodities are exchanged. Commodities come to have value based on what they can be exchanged for. Because there are many commodities in the marketplace, the value of each individual commodity is dependent on a complex network of factors which are all contingent upon each other including one central concept: competition. In other words, value cannot be declared prior to a commodity's entrance into the market and is dependent on what else is going on in the market at a specific point in time. This mechanism of determining value was deemed to be superior to all other methods of determining value simply because the effects of

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"competition" drove values (i.e., prices) to their natural levels. This is where concepts such as "supply and demand" as well as "value, use-value, and exchange-value" all come into play. What is important for us is the way in which the market was believed to be decentralized, self-correcting, and free from human bias, much like the scientific method was heralded in a very similar way. As Dewey notes in discussing the French physiocrats, their "underlying philosophy was the idea that economic laws are the true natural laws while other laws are artificial and hence to be limited in scope as far as possible" (LW 11:11). This relied upon the historical situation in which *land* was the primary focus of economic production. However, as Dewey notes, it wasn't all that difficult to transpose such concepts onto *labor*, something the burgeoning industrial revolution made necessary. The result was a search for the "natural laws" of labor, something requiring a conception of "laws of *human nature*." Dewey points out that for Adam Smith, two things were thought to be the foundations of all human nature: sympathy and self-interest. Crucially, as Dewey notes, "In individuals, the exercise of sympathy in accordance with reason (that is, in Smith's conception, from the standpoint of an impartial spectator) is the norm of virtuous action. But government cannot appeal to sympathy. The only measures it can employ affect the motive of self-interest. It makes this appeal most effectively when it acts so as to protect individuals in the exercise of their natural self-interest" (LW 11:12). This leads Dewey to Bentham and, importantly, J.S. Mill, whose formulation of "liberty" was discussed in the previous section.

While Dewey is careful to note that Bentham, Mill, and others "were [not] moved by hope of material gain," he nonetheless points out that "the constant expansion of

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manufacturing and trade put the force of a powerful class interest behind the new version

of liberalism" and that those behind this version of liberalism "might have been as voices

crying in the wilderness if what they taught had not coincided with the interests of a class

that was constantly rising in prestige and power" (LW 11:13). Dewey, though, is not

content to simply throw the baby out with the bathwater. His assessment of Bentham's

utilitarian doctrine points to the position Dewey will ultimately appeal to in his own

vision of liberalism. As he points out, most of what Bentham advocated for in regard to

legislation were "negative," or to remove things that might stand in the pursuit of

pleasure. Regardless, and importantly, Dewey notes that "there was nothing in

[Bentham's] fundamental doctrine that stood in the way of *using the power of government*

to create, constructively and positively, new institutions if and when it should appear that

the latter would contribute more effectively to the well-being of individuals" (LW 11:14,

emphasis mine). In short, what Dewey is pointing toward is a shift from individualistic

liberalism to collectivistic liberalism.

If we go back to the original iteration of "liberalism" as a means to "liberate"

individuals from kings and queens who ruled with absolute and unchecked authority, we

can understand the common thread that ties these different forms of liberalism together.

While the "liberation" of the economic market was the next step of this original idea, over

time the market itself was seen by many to have taken the place of the kings and queens

of earlier generations. Eventually, by the early parts of the 20th century, and what Dewey

is pointing toward, the concept of "liberalism" evolved to mean the liberation of

individuals from the tyranny of the free market. In a sense, Dewey, like many others who

had witnessed first hand the horrors of the other side of the industrial revolution, saw classical liberalism as replacing absolute monarchs with a similarly tyrannical force: the free market itself. It is worth recalling that a major formative moment in Dewey's intellectual development was his very direct encounter with the 1894 Pullman Strike in Chicago. However, as Dewey suggests, the answer to unchecked and absolute power was the same: to control it. To do this, though, this new form of liberalism in the twentieth century took a very different position towards organized social action and government. Unlike previous forms of liberalism that saw the individual as needing to be protected from government, this new form of liberalism might see government, labor unions, and other forms of collective social action as the ideal mechanisms *through which* the conditions for individual freedom could be created and protected from other forces, including the free market itself.

From this point on, more and more of Dewey's work starts to cohere within this tradition. As he writes, "Bentham himself urged a great extension of public education and of action in behalf of public health. When he disallowed the doctrine of inalienable individual natural rights, he removed, as far as theory is concerned, the obstacle to positive action by the state whenever it can be shown that the general well-being will be promoted by such action" (LW 11:18). It is worth considering Dewey's earlier work in education and democracy in light of his claim regarding the collectivistic liberalism he described as the most recent evolution of the tradition. For example in describing the faults of reading instruction in his essay "The Primary-Education Fetich,"[4] Dewey

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[4] First published in 1898.

pointed out that "It is futile to try to conceal from ourselves the fact that this great change in the intellectual atmosphere—*this great change in the relation of the individual to accumulated knowledge*—demands a corresponding educational readjustment" (EW 5:258). "This great change" that Dewey refers to is mirrored in his understanding of how *liberalism* itself was changing, particularly in the locus of the "individual" at the center of social analysis. As he wrote some 37 years later, these thoughts were still present in his thinking on education: "Only by participating in the common intelligence and sharing in the common purpose as it works for the common good can individual human beings realize their true individualities and become truly free" (LW 11:21). The question for Dewey, then, was not so much whether the state *could* engage in positive action, but rather *how* it might best do so.

At the end of Dewey's assessment of liberalism's origins and the current state of it in 1938, he noted that a split had developed within the tradition. On one side were

> those who call themselves liberals who define liberalism in terms of the old opposition between the province of organized social action and the province of purely individual initiative and effort. In the name of liberalism they are jealous of every extension of governmental activity [...] they are the confirmed enemies of social legislation (even prohibition of child labor), as standing measures of political policy. Wittingly or unwittingly, they still provide the intellectual system of apologetics for the existing economic regime, which they strangely, it would seem ironically, uphold as a régime of individual liberty for all. (LW 11:22)

Dewey, perhaps unrealistically optimistic, suggested this group had run out of steam and that "the majority who call themselves liberals today are committed to the principle that organized society must use its powers to establish the conditions under which the mass of individuals can possess actual as distinct from merely legal liberty" (LW 11:22). Of course, he was wrong about this, and the pendulum would swing decidedly far away from

where Dewey thought liberalism might go. Despite this, his understanding of this "older" liberalism is incredibly helpful in understanding the contemporary reiteration of it: *neo-liberalism*. It is from this vantage point that the contradictions in literacy education--and in particular the Bartleby Syndrome as result of college preparation--resolve and can be fully explained. I move to a brief discussion of this in the next section.

Bartleby the Writer: a neo-liberal story

We can see an incomplete vision of Dewey's form of liberalism that picked up steam in the late 1880s and 1890s and was in full bloom by the New Deal policies of the Roosevelt administration of the 1930s. Forms of organized social action (government, labor unions, etc) were seen as a space through which the conditions for liberation could be created and maintained. While this may seem like a complete departure from Locke, remember that part of what Locke saw as a fundamental right was the liberty to improve the quality of one's own life. When modern capitalism failed to provide for this on its own, writers and thinkers began to suggest a different way of thinking about organized social action. Another part of this reversal from government as the enemy to government as the solution must be understood by the advancement of 20th century theories of democracy. The problems with absolutist monarchies as well as the "free market" were located in their manifestly undemocratic natures. That is, government wouldn't be necessarily evil if it was truly controlled by mass society (aka, "popular sovereignty"). Only when "government" served the interests of the few (or even an individual) did it

become a barrier to realizing individual liberation. Of course, this meant that governments had to be under the control of mass society and not a few individuals, thus necessitating modern inventions like mandatory mass education and a freedom of the press. Ideally, in this formulation, while government may prohibit certain freedoms of individuals (such as not allowing the freedom for business owners to employ children), this was acceptable because everyone was allowed to have a meaningful role in coming to this decision. In practice, though, this been a problematic idea to realize.

Regardless, and as I mentioned before, this is how Dewey's work in education and democracy (two things that should never be disassociated from each other) should be understood. For example, Dewey's laboratory school at the University of Chicago from 1895 to 1905 was not *just* an experiment in education, it was an experiment in finding the best ways to produce the democratic mind via fixing habits of inquiry within individuals. The point? Creating the necessary institutional conditions for this new form of liberalism to work--and by work I mean to have validity, legitimation, and a self-correcting mechanism of inquiry-focused democracy at its core. Consider Dewey's book length response to Walter Lippman's broadside salvo against participatory democracy fired in Lippman's *The Phantom Public*. In *The Public and its Problems*, Dewey recognizes that Lippman is fundamentally correct in his assertion that the omnicompetent citizen does not exist and that the individual cannot possibly be able to respond intelligently to all problems in modern life: things are simply too complex. Dewey faith in democracy, though, remains unshaken. The problem with Lippman's reliance on experts, as Dewey points out, is that they *cannot* know what is best for those they represent. As Dewey, was

fond of pointing out, "The man who wears the shoe knows best that it pinches and where it pinches" (LW 2:365). Dewey's work was to create the conditions in which a reliance on expertise, at least in regard certain non-technical problems--namely, ethical and moral problems of contemporary life--was minimized or done away with.

I'll return to Dewey's method for doing this later in this chapter. However, as we know in 2012, history took a different route. As Christopher Newfield points out in his *Unmaking the Public University*, post-war politics and economics in the United States faced a rather stark choice. In the rear view mirror were two painful events that no one was keen on reliving: the Great Depression and World War II (27). In the first instance, the Great Depression was widely seen as the result of a completely un-regulated market economy. That is, there were no protections or safeguards built into a system to prevent it from completely failing. Once things started to go bad, there were few if any ways to stop it. While the Second World War was largely responsible for shocking stagnant economies into movement (mostly through controlling war economies through centralized institutions of power), the horrors of war and the crimes committed by totalitarian governments (e.g., Germany, Japan, Italy, etc) were seen as something else to be avoided at all costs. The question was how to avoid the extreme of a completely un-controlled market while at the same time avoiding a completely totalitarian / authoritarian government. This post-war arrangement, heavily influenced by the theories of British economist John Maynard Keynes, placed the economy as an element subject to larger social goals. These larger social goals were then the domain of government to be controlled through democratic action. In other words, the market would be shaped and

directed by government (via mass society) for certain ends.

The result of this arrangement, something known as embedded liberalism, upheld the workings of the market while making sure the market was used for socially desirable goods (Harvey 12). For a while, this arrangement appeared to deliver exactly what it promised. It produced affluence and wealth while at the same time avoiding many of the pitfalls that earlier unregulated markets experienced. Additionally, the mass affluence this arrangement produced made possible several social movements (Newfield 27). Among these movements was the civil rights movement as well as the open admissions experiment in higher-education. Eventually, though, the dramatic growth experienced in the post-war years began to drop off. While the actual reasons behind this decline of growth are hotly debated by historians and economists, what is important for us here is that this crisis lead to the movement that we now refer to as neo-liberalism.

Neo-liberalism refers to both a political and economic theory as well as a social theory. The prefix neo refers a form of liberalism that is a re-introduction of a previous form of liberalism. This liberalism that neo-liberalism returns to is classical liberalism. However, *unlike* the classical liberalism of the 19th century, neo-liberalism relies upon a strong government to promote and protect the interests of the markets. If we put this on a very crude historical timeline, it will look something like this:

- Lockean liberalism (1689-1817): protect the natural rights of the individual from governments
- Classical liberalism (1817-1928): protect the natural rights of the market (and thus the individual) from governments.
- Progressive liberalism (1929-1968): protect the natural rights of the individual from the market through using government.
- Neo-liberalism (1970s-present): The modern re-emergence of beliefs based on classical liberalism that protects markets via a strong (often undemocratic)

government.

"Neo-liberalism" then, is a term used to describe a very particular social, cultural, political and economic philosophy in contemporary times based on classical liberalism. It is also a term used to describe the impact of that philosophy on modern life. As Marxist geographer David Harvey chronicles in his *A Brief History of Neoliberalism,* in the late 1970s and early 1980s, major political players in several countries (Ronald Reagan in the US, Margaret Thatcher in the UK, Deng Xiaoping in China) unleashed a series of economic and political reforms that were claimed to help reverse the sagging global economy of the 1970s. These reforms centered on removing many of the restrictions on corporations and businesses introduced during the embedded liberalism arrangement of the post-war years. This was done in the belief that if business owners, corporations, and other forms of commerce were freed from restrictions and regulations, they would be "free" to be creative and find new ways to bring the economy back on track. This was seen as a necessary condition for a utopian society. In very simplistic terms, the idea was that if corporations could be free from restrictions, they would flourish and thus make money for the upper class. Eventually, because the economy would be expanding, this prosperity would eventually "trickle-down" to the rest of society, thus resulting in betterment for all. Underneath these reforms was a conviction that any form of collective social action was axiomatically inferior to market based solutions to problems. Therefore, any sort of "public" or "collective" force in society was to be dismantled. This includes labor unions, corporate regulations (e.g., regulations on the airline industry), and important to our concerns, public education. Replacing these public and collective

institutions were to be private institutions that were fully subject to market forces.

While much of this was a simple return to ideas developed by 19th century classical liberal theorists, there was one very important difference. Unlike classical liberalism, this brand of liberalism sought to exploit the power of the state to bring about these changes. This was made possible by co-opting the bureaucracy developed in the embedded liberalism era of the post-war years and using it for a different purpose. In this, a sort of government known as the "neo-liberal state" came into being. Harvey identifies several very specific roles of this neo-liberal government (79-81):

- To prevent regulation and to actively disassemble any forms of public (democratic) control over the market
- To maintain free markets and if no market exists, to create one
- To create and maintain a structure of trade for consumers through monetary policy
- To create and maintain a form of exchange, like money, that is guaranteed by the state to be used in the market.
- To create and enforce legal structures that protects private property (that is, things that exist beyond the reach of democratic control).

As mentioned above, these changes were instituted under the idea that they would revive the world economy and eventually bring prosperity to everyone. The actual result of these changes weighed against the belief that they would bring prosperity to the masses, though, has been nothing short of disastrous. They have been so disastrous, in fact, that many theorists now see neo-liberalism *not* as a way to help revive the economy, but rather as a way for the traditional elite ruling classes to reclaim much of the power they lost to the middle-classes in the 1960s and 1970s. For example, from the 1970s and on, the relative share of the top 1% of society has dramatically increased to about 20-25% of the total wealth in America. If we look at total assets instead of mere "income," the

numbers are even more skewed: the top 1% possesses a whopping 35% of all assets in the US. More shockingly, the percentage of wealth the top 0.1% possesses has risen from 2% in the 1970s to around 6% in the late 1990s. However, this increase in wealth for the top income earners in the US did not come from a massive increase of production. Instead, what has occurred is a phenomenon referred to by Harvey as *accumulation by dispossession* (160-164). In other words, for the top income earners to increase their wealth, assets were redistributed from other portions of society. Since the bottom 40% of America is in so much poverty that they can, frankly, go no further down into poverty, much of the wealth acquired during this time for the top 1% came at the expense of those who came in between 40-80%--that is, the "middle class." This "middle-class squeeze" is one of the defining features of neo-liberalism, and another reason why theorists see the rise of neo-liberalism to in actuality, be the restoration of elite class power at the expense of the burgeoning, increasingly highly educated middle-class.

Once a majority of voters accepted the basic premises of neoliberalism (often while not understanding the implications), the rise and dominance of neoliberalism was secured. For example, while Ronald Reagan, a socially conservative Republican, was the first truly "neoliberal" president, *all presidents* of the United States since then have adopted the basic premises of neoliberalism both in economic and political areas. This includes Democrats Bill Clinton and Barack Obama. In other words, outside of a few very rare exceptions, and to borrow a phrase from Nixon, *we are all neoliberals now*. It is also here that we can see another dimension of neo-liberalism. As Wendy Brown notes, neo-liberalism is not *just* a "a bundle of economic policies with inadvertent political and

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social consequences" (38). Rather, "neo-liberalism carries a social analysis which, when deployed as a form of governmentality, reaches from the soul of the citizen-subject to education policy to practices of empire" (39). I do not think it is too controversial at this point to argue that, to slightly modify Bowles and Gintis's insight that the structure of capitalism can be seen in schools, that *as liberalism goes, so goes education*.

In the realm of education and literacy instruction, neoliberalism has dramatically changed the landscape in two primary ways. First, the push to privatize all areas of society have lead to decreasing levels of public funding and support for education. The rise of private charter schools and an increasing dependency on tuition at public universities are two high profile examples of this move. In regard to the rise in student tuition, this is done under the belief that it is the responsibility of each student to pay for their education (tuition) as opposed to society as a whole to help foot the bill for education through taxes. Charter schools are claimed to be superior to public schools because they, unlike public school systems, respond directly to economic markets.

The second major shift currently taking place within education concerns the ultimate purpose of education itself. Each iteration of "liberalism" has entailed a specific role and function for education. The rise of public education in the United States in the 19th century coincided with the period of classical liberalism. One of the main reasons for the establishment and rise of public education was to ensure that students who could not afford private academies (namely, immigrants) were taught to respect and obey the

basic tenants of classical liberalism.[5] In particular, teaching immigrants to respect "private property" was a major concern of early educational reformers in the United States, who were afraid that massive influxes of immigrants would upset the traditional ruling order of the United States. During the era of progressive liberalism, and where Dewey's work in education reaches its zenith, the belief that mass society would be responsible for directing and controlling the economy for the benefit of society required a highly educated base of citizens who were each capable of informed decisions through democratic means. The demands of this arrangement necessitated producing students who were capable of responding to a wide variety of challenges through public participation in politics. In very practical terms, this meant an emphasis on wide areas of knowledge (liberal arts education) that citizens would be able to draw upon when called to help formulate social policy. Or, more bluntly, students were educated to be part of the decision making process in society. Dewey's concept of the ideal school *as* associated living itself where students didn't just prepare for adulthood, but *lived* adult circumstances in a guided environment is a consequence of this need.

Under neoliberalism, however, the market is seen as the primary mechanism through which decisions should be made, since it is theoretically free of individual bias and thus how it seeks to attain legitimation by sidestepping individual antagonism (Harvey 65). This arrangement demands *not* citizens as well-informed decision makers but rather requires citizens to enter into the market as buyers and sellers. In other words, neoliberalism demands mass society to be consumers while reserving a few seats at the

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[5] See in particular Reese's *The Origins of the American High School* for further discussion

top for the "captains of the industry" to organize market forces. One highly visible shift in education has been an increased connection between education and instrumentalist aims on the part of students. Or, to put that another way, that students see education as a means to successfully enter the marketplace through learning job skills that can later be "cashed in" for gainful employment after college. This stands in stark contrast to the view of education as a "humanizing" endeavor, or even education as preparation for civic participation. Further, because of the near dominance of neoliberalism, students who wish to pursue education for other means are often forced into this instrumentalist mode simply because the structure of society necessitates it.

In the realm of curriculum, the rise of standardized testing within education (most visibly seen in the landmark No Child Left Behind legislation) has corresponded with a brand of education that emphases memorization and mastery of skills (measured by performance on tests) over creativity and critical thinking (things which cannot be fully measured on standardized tests). In particular, the NCLB legislation was touted as a way to increase personal responsibility and accountability for schools, conditions seen as necessary for increasing
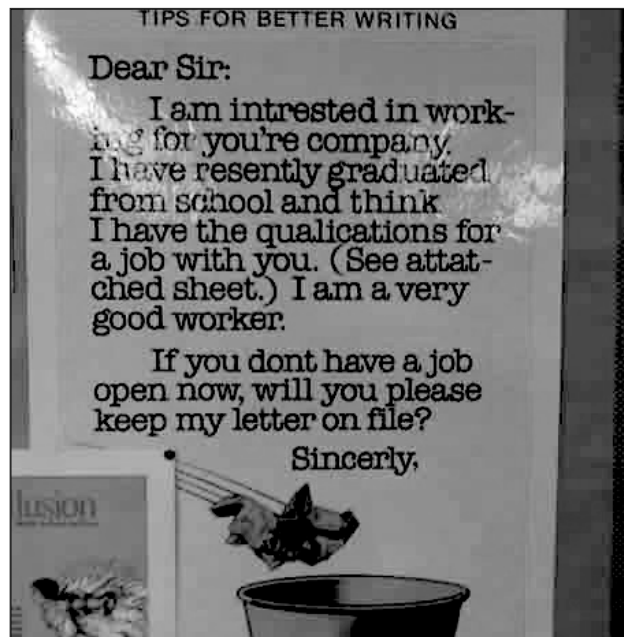

Figure 5.1

school efficiency and productivity, all of which fall under the aegis of neoliberal thinking.[6] The drive to measure student performance according to standardized tests and objective measurements has lead to a renewed emphasis on grammatical / mechanical correctness, basic writing "skills," and knowledge of market friendly genres. This has all come at the expense of writing instruction concerned with the actual content of student writing. Since decisions over the purpose and direction of the economy are, in neoliberal thinking, best left to the market itself, writing instruction has increasingly focused on preparing students to "write well" within the confines of the workplace, as opposed to writing well for the purpose of civic participation (see figure 5.1).[7]

Enter Bartleby. As I outlined in the very first chapter, there is an undeniable democratic element in various forms of writing, particularly in various process and workshop models of writing instruction. The *idea*--while problematic in some ways--that the most important part of writing is the *process* through which ideas, meaning, value, and purpose might be born out of an environment of associated living simply cannot be sustained under a system of neoliberal social analysis and rationality. In fact, neoliberal rationality is antithetical to the idea that *human intelligence* should be nurtured, as opposed to the utilization of markets. In other words, one way we might sum up the non-economic aspect of neoliberalism is that it *defers* rather than *deploys* human intelligence. Of course, this is a highly spurious claim, as what is really going on is that the utilization of intelligence is reserved for a very select few who control the markets that other people

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[6] Of course, this appeal to "efficiency" itself has a very long history within education, as chronicled in Callahan's *Education and the Cult of Efficiency*.
[7] I snapped this picture of a poster in a junior high English classroom in 2006.

then utilize instead of intelligence.

This is what is lost with the Bartleby Syndrome. In creating environments in which the *process* of writing is alien to the activity of writing in schools--where it simply makes no sense to do anything other than "get it done"--writing is *still* produced, but the byproduct of experiences through which meaning is produced through associated living is shed. This is no small matter. As discussed in the first and the third chapter, such experiences form the basis of *habits*. As Dewey used the term, though, *habits* did not mean mechanistic habits, but was rather a sort of guide or framework through which events and circumstances can be understood and responded to. As such, *habits* were not bad (as we often think of mechanistic habits), but rather *necessary*. The Bartleby Syndrome as a sort of literacy practice, not only fixes the ways that the production of text is understood (the "literacy practice" part), but also, in a broader sense, fixes a sort of *habit* in regard to inquiry itself. This particular habit, though, eschews the participatory and deliberative part of associated living simply because such elements are not necessarily needed or required when the objective is simply to "get it done" for grades. To put it bluntly, these are not democratic habits; these are market habits.

As such, when viewed from a very broad perspective on the "organic unity" that such writing environments are a part of, the Bartleby Syndrome as a literacy practice makes sense. While it may seem contradictory at a lower level that such writing instruction, such preparation for college produce things that many do not recognize as "college readiness," such contradictions resolve rather quickly when placed within a neoliberal society. Students *are* being prepared for college--"college" being whatever

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students do with the spaces we call post-secondary education-- and this Bartleby Syndrome as a literacy practice is very much a meaningful part of that. In short, the Bartleby Syndrome is continuous with neoliberalism, especially in the way that the environment of neoliberalism itself produces practices and habits that maintain some sort of neoliberal stasis. What is excised from the act of writing--reflection, discussion, deliberation; or, in short, growth-- are precisely what would be needed for any sort of sustained critique of the status quo.

As mentioned before, it is not my project at hand to suggest fixes or solutions. My reason for doing so is that such fixes and solutions already exist and have existed for some time. Dewey's own educational model that was actually in existence for a short while at the University of Chicago Laboratory School is one such example. While far from imperfect, Dewey's lab school responded to a political, economic, and social condition that is, in some regard, remarkably similar to today. While assertions from theorists such as Wendy Brown that neo-liberalism is more than just a return of classical liberalism are important to pay attention to, there is, I believe, enough *similar* in that continuing the project of rediscovering Dewey's educational models makes as much sense now as it ever has. Of course, Dewey was in a right-time/right-place situation at Chicago.[8] However, even though the alignment to post-secondary education produces all sorts of unintended consequences, it *also* creates interesting possibilities that *could* conceivably be leveraged against such moves. For example, such dual-credit/dual-enrollment programs in effect produce an *idealized* "university space" within secondary

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[8] See in particular Tanner's 1997 history of Dewey's Lab School in *Dewey's Laboratory School: Lessons for Today.*

institutions. These spaces *could* be occupied strategically ("occupy high-school?") and focused around something those in colleges and universities have long stood for: freedom of inquiry. These spaces may in fact be able to actually *realize* this ideal of freedom of inquiry, something that has been difficult to accomplish in post-secondary environments themselves. Further, these spaces *could* serve as unstable elements through which the continual feedback loop might be interrupted[9]. These spaces *could* be spaces in which Christian's sincere doubt and questions concerning why some kids received free/reduced lunches and he didn't were taken up *as* the work of writing itself. Composition in the post-secondary environment has long looked at its position in academia horizontally; it *could* look at it vertically, including not *just* what comes after college, but also what comes *before*.

　　This is my answer to the Bartleby Syndrome. However, there is one simple thing preventing this that must be dealt with. Quite simply: why? With what justification might we utilize to say the prevailing winds are wrong? This is a greater problem than it seems, for even *if* theorists within composition (and there are a great many) find no love for the neoliberal status quo, there remains a contradiction deep in the heart of liberalism itself that, as long as it remains unresolved, seals off all attempts at true revolutionary pedagogies. To explain what I mean here, I want to recount a remark made by an audience member of a panel presentation I was a member of some time ago. Our panel, in a broad sense, was collectively arguing for a conception of writing that was more

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[9] Dewey himself, as early as 1896, noted that "As this intermediary, it [the high school] has operated to reflect back into the lower grades as much as possible of college ideal and method, thus solidifying and elevating the intellectual possessions of the public which never sees the college doors" (EW 5.272).

socially, political, and economically aware. After fielding the usual assortment of questions typical of academic conferences, an audience member contributed this to the discussion: "I don't think we're really honoring our students by defining writing the way you are defining it." I refer to this sentiment of "always honor thy student" as the honor-maxim. What I believe this audience member was getting at is that our emancipatory, critical pedagogy informed discussion of how we might teach writing is often (and perhaps always) fundamentally at odds with what our students desire and or want from their education. The question implicit in the honor-maxim, then, is what role or, dare I say, what *right* do instructors have to challenge these students on what they think is good or best for their own lives? Those who throw this maxim out are (mostly) sincere in wanting to understand what the actual position or role of the instructor should be in the classroom. Their fear or anxiety of not honoring our students is one that is tinged with concepts such as indoctrination, coercion, symbolic violence, abuse of power, and so forth. In other words, it implies serious business.

This contradiction runs deep in the veins of composition theory. Consider, for example, Nancy Welch's recent College English essay, "We're Here, and We're Not Going Anywhere": Why Working-Class Rhetorical Traditions Still Matter." In this essay, Welch aims to recover the possibilities working class rhetorics could hold for our students. I strongly believe that where Welch ends up, that is, the actual practices of teaching writing Welch offers here and in other places (see especially her book *Living Room*), are some of the most dignified, important, and, quite frankly beautiful descriptions of the possibilities of a writing classroom that composition as a discipline

has seen in a very long time. However, there is something missing here, something still lacking from this discussion. The awareness and inclusion of working class rhetoric in composition classes is the solution only if one accepts something within composition as a problem. We have the answer, but what exactly again is the problem?

What is lurking within this conversation, and what the honor-maxim frets over, is exactly this question of whether composition ought to participate in fermenting social change, even if it is against the wishes of our students. This is bigger than a problem of competing pedagogies or the appropriate role of the instructor in the classroom, as it is ultimately a question of justification for a particular social arrangement and the role and function education has within that framework. In other words, how do teachers know these radical conceptions of justice or democracy are in fact better than other systems of social organization? If we don't know, or can't move beyond a mere belief or sentimentality, the honor-maxim becomes an impasse for educators seeking to disrupt the neoliberal status quo. Accordingly, arguments such as Welch's (and indeed nearly all flavors of critical pedagogy) become ensnared in a pretty straightforward case of *petitio principii* and as such run afoul of the honor-maxim. By this, I mean that educational practices infused with the political often assume an *a priori* justification for ideological values that their practices aim to produce. Begging the question is not necessarily fallacious, however, especially depending on what your epistemological schema is (Rorty, for example, who has little place for "truth" in his philosophy, would never need to worry much about it). It does, though, create vulnerabilities, and those vulnerabilities have been the locus of criticisms over critical pedagogies.

My project in the rest of this chapter, then, is to work through the problems implied by the honor-maxim, and to consider what grounds educators committed to emancipatory and critical pedagogies could stand upon. Critical to this discussion is a particular strand of American Pragmatism that adds something crucial to this debate, and that is a solid justification for a particular kind of deliberative democracy. Instead of simply saying "I just believe in my heart Democracy is better and that's that," Pragmatist philosophers and theorists following Peirce and Dewey have put in play a coherent constellation of concepts that don't just position deliberative democracy as a nice ornamentation to western civilizations, but place it as a mandatory arrangement for the continuation of social inquiry aimed at social amelioration. As noted in the first chapter, this is referred by Hilary Putnam as the *epistemological justification for democracy*. Consequently, Pragmatism provides us with a very rich tradition and history of thinkers, theorists, and educators that have sought resolve (or, more appropriately, dissolve) the problems implied within the honor-maxim. Additionally, the philosophical critiques Pragmatists have made against major tenants of Western thought provides an incredibly rich tapestry through which to re-read some of composition's most tenacious debates. A Pragmatist critique of these debates will show that there are old problems and then there are old problems. The imperative to "honor our students" is, as I will show, a manifestation of a very old problem in composition studies that has never reached a full resolution (and thus keeps coming back). It cannot reach any satisfying resolution because, while the two sides of this problem have exhaustively rehearsed, strengthened and tightened their positions, very little has been said on the actual similarities in these

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debates. It is these similarities in this ongoing family feud that link up an old problem in composition to a very old problem indeed--old as in as old as human thought itself. Pragmatism at once illuminates the impasse as well as suggests a different route to be taken forward.

Composition as an enterprise of liberalism

Nancy Welch's announced purpose in "We're Here, And We're Not Going Anywhere" is to "seek to repair that bridge by which we can link the history of working-class rhetorical action to needs and possibilities today" (225). In order to repair this bridge, Welch employs two major arguments: 1), that composition is not an exclusively "middle class" enterprise and 2), we do not live in a so called "new economy" in which the "working class" has little to no meaningful role (and thus power) (224). This argument, while cogent and persuasively argued, doesn't on its own answer the second part of Welch's title for this piece: why working class rhetorics still matter. After all, a reclamation of working class rhetorics is only necessary if there is a justifiable reason for reclaiming them. Welch, though, is too smart to beg this question so blatantly. The most eloquent answer as to why working class rhetorics still matters comes at the very end (indeed the very last sentence) of the essay: "Whether today's students go on to working- or middle-class jobs, the security of those jobs and the equality and justness of the society they live in may depend on their finding and exercising such a voice" (239). However, this assertion relies upon knowing that, for these students, their needs are in peril and working class rhetorics are their remedy. In a refrain that we will soon see is familiar, the

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first question one might ask is "but how do you as the teacher know what is best for students?" In other words, we are caught within the throes of the honor-maxim.

The anxieties in Welch's argument are symptomatic of a larger theoretical conundrum that has plagued mature democracies: how to handle the internal contradictions of liberalism. Put simply, the internal contradiction of liberalism focuses around what to do with plural beliefs on what the good is for each individual. This pluralism of beliefs is at once a consequence of liberalism and a major stumbling block. It is a welcomed consequence of liberalism's strong defense of the individual to, as Mill wrote in an oft-quoted passage, "[pursue] our own good in our own way" (13). It is a major stumbling block because this position gives liberalism no means to adjudicate between different understandings of what good is to be pursued and in what ways, especially when these pluralistic beliefs come into conflict with each other. Accordingly, any attempts by a state or a community (or a teacher) to choose between competing and conflicting individual conceptions of the means and ends of individual goods violates liberalism's most cherished assertion. When competing conceptions of the good are adjudicated, depending on who wins, we come to decry these moments as injustice, oppression, and worse. This is exactly the root of the anxiety behind the maxim to honor our students.

It is now possible to trace the effects that liberal anxiety over the honor-maxim has on Welch's argument. A close examination shows Welch treads very carefully when defining exactly who and what her students are in order to reconfigure what "honoring" them might look like. In this, I count three distinct moves on Welch's part. The first move

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is to deftly avoid the honor-maxim by subtly limiting and qualifying who exactly working class rhetoric is for in the classroom. In introducing her argument, Welch writes "*Students of public writing and rhetoric*, concerned with how ordinary people can claim and hold a platform from which to speak and be heard [...]" and later in the same paragraph writes "It also provides *students of social justice movements* with a model to contrast with those forms of civil disobedience that seek to advance an argument through momentary rather than sustained disruption" (223, emphasis mine). Welch makes similar moves in other places, too. For example, in discussing the teaching that could be inspired by a sit-down strike, Welch writes "But although a text such as the Republic sit-down has much to offer *any class concerned with how individuals with meager economic means and slight political weight still have the persuasive resources* to rival the Goliaths of our society" (224).

Welch's second move is to qualify what students are and does this in two steps. First, Welch provides labor data that breaks down who exactly has and who does not have some measure of control over their means of production. Welch finds that the "middle class," despite the conceptions of most students, is not actually the majority: "The assumption, then, of a middle-class majority in our composition classrooms, particularly in public colleges and universities, is some distance off the mark" (226). Second, Welch uses this point to pivot and assert that if our students aren't really members of the middle-class, then "middle-class rhetoric" is not "the rhetorical education that best supports students' aspirations for economic security and social voice" (226). Consequently, Welch perceptively sees a counter-argument claiming that not many (or

not enough) students fit the description she provides after her first move of qualifications and responds by saying that students are misinformed or have been mislead as to who exactly they are in the economy and what strategies they really need for securing the things they want.

This leaves one final move left for Welch, and that is to turn from looking at who our students are to considering what "honoring" them might entail. As Welch writes, "But I do think there is a chance for composition as a field to consider much more fully the practices and stances that students will need in order to, as Brandt puts it, safeguard civil rights and ensure a just distribution of public resources" (236). In other words, Welch's move here is to reconfigure her project through some deft maneuvering as a project of honoring her students. Welch, at the end of the day, argues that it is actually working class rhetoric that honors her students more fully. Ultimately, what was wrong with composition as a middle-class enterprise is that it never actually honored the true needs and desires of students, something which Welch presumes to know or assumes she can create. We are now right back where we started.

Going back, we can see where the internal contradiction of pluralism in liberal societies fails to be resolved. For instance, while Welch qualifies who her students are, what about students that aren't concerned with how ordinary people can claim and hold these sorts of platforms or aren't concerned how they might obtain persuasive resources to rival the Goliaths of our society? What of the students who *aren't* students of social justice movements but are rather just students who find themselves in a required, first year writing course? Perhaps most controversially, what about our students who actually

are (or will be) the "Goliaths of our society" that Welch speaks of? Since demarcating who these students are is limited, Welch shores this up by working hard to (rightly, in my view) argue that students aren't as "middle class" as they actually think they are and much talk of this "new economy" stuff is, at the end of the day, smoke and mirrors. However, saying students occupy a position within the economy according to an economist's heuristic is quite different than suggesting a student's own conception of their identity is wrong. This strategy, then, encounters a fatal flaw when exposed to the post-modernist skeptic's question of "how do you know?" This is a problem I will investigate at length later in this essay. It will suffice to say right now that this move does not directly address or attend to the tension between a student's system of understanding and belief and the instructor's.

The deeper problem, though, is a couple of key assumptions that allows Welch to dance around the problem of pluralism. First, Welch's strategy of qualifying who students are suggests or assumes that students have already made the choice to be the students Welch envisions in the "We're Here" part of the title. Accordingly, the honor-maxim is effectively voided by simply removing any tensions over what students expect and what instructors do. If we wish to teach critically, then the way we can do this and still honor our students is to seek out students who want us to teach critically. This strategy works for the other corners of writing instruction that don't receive as much attention as they probably should: freshman seminars, upper-level rhetoric and writing studies courses, advanced composition courses, etc. The solution is often as simple as writing "Working class rhetorics" into the course title itself. Then we can assume students have made a

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choice to be in that class, and whatever we do from that point on will, axiomatically, honor them. This is unsatisfactory for me because I am not terribly concerned with these boutique offerings of composition and rhetoric, as interesting as they are. Instead, I am concerned with the meat and potatoes of composition: the required first year writing course in which students often have little to no choice in either taking the class or which section they will sign up for. This assumption, which is silent on the question of whether composition ought to participate in fermenting social change, holds little value when these questions are applied to the required first year writing course.

It is exactly this question of whether composition ought to participate in fermenting social change, even if it is against the wishes of our students, that the second assumption seeks to resolve. When Welch moves to qualify what students are by arguing they are more working class than they realize, she is actually assuming that antagonisms or conflicts within communities (in this case, a community of students in a class) are not antagonisms or conflicts at all. This assumption works by asserting that something greater than or transcendent to the classroom community has been located and can be known, therefore apparent conflicts or tensions are simply mirages. Welch, like many other composition theorists in the past several years,[10] have located this transcendent thread in appealing to the (assumed) commonality within students to have a particular instrumentalist aim. It is saying, in a sense, look, you may think we disagree but if you look a little deeper, you will see that we actually share the same concerns. Since there is potential here, I will take up this move in the third section of this essay. For right now

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[10] See also Lu and Horner's "Working Composition and Rhetoric"

though, I want to point out one difficulty in this move. To put it bluntly, it's problematic to assume that all students want a just distribution of public resources. Some students, the future Goliaths of society perhaps, would actually lose the benefits accrued to them through the mechanisms of structural inequality. Consequently, the move to find a priori consensus through the creation of a social unity within the classroom is immediately problematic because it is precisely this social unity that is a result or effect of the classroom.

As I have just argued, the honor-maxim has its roots in the liberal anxiety over adjudicating between conflicting and competing claims on individual means and ends towards the good. To avoid coercion or oppression, the liberal state (and its agents) must assume a position of neutrality when it comes to conflicting pluralistic beliefs. This is all well and good if you are capable of accepting this neutrality. I have already indicated that I, like Welch and other educators committed to political informed teaching, am not. For one, this sort of neutrality within the classroom is mythical as there truly is no view from nowhere. More importantly, though, apolitical forms of teaching remove the possibility of teaching "good writing." By this, I mean that it is not possible to be neutral and expect to produce writing that is not just mechanically and organizationally "good," but writing that is truly good in all senses of the word, including ethically/morally good. Not accepting neutrality when it comes to conflicting claims on the means and ends of the good shifts the problem from a political problem to an epistemological problem of justification. The epistemological problem boils down to a very simple question: *how do you know?* What looks like a simple question, though, has plagued educators of the

critical ilk both from criticisms from the outside as well as from the inside. This very

question of how do you know has served as the canvas upon which some of the most

heated debates in composition's history have played out. In the next section, I go through

two foundational debates in composition's history to trace the effect of liberalism in how

the field has defined itself.

Two Debates

> James Berlin: You know what? I don't think I'm preparing them for the really
> good life. I mean they're going to have breakdowns. They don't understand that 50
> percent of them are going to wind up divorced for instance, right? I mean, that's a
> statistic. The odds are that that's what's going to happen. In other words, we're not
> preparing them for this wonderful glorious future. I mean, it's not really that good
> of a future anyhow, if they're going to be unhappy, right?
> Stephen North: I don't think 'right' is so simple answer there, actually.
> Berlin: What?
> North: Is it right they're going to be unhappy? I don't think that's such a, I mean-
> Berlin: I want them to know what's in store for them! I mean, they have
> narratives--
> North: You're like an image broker. Here's a picture of poor people, here's a
> picture of unhappy rich people.
> Berlin: Why? Because they're not going--alright, their notion is that they're going
> to find peace and fulfillment and happiness, alright--
> North: *are you sure?*
> (Composition and Resistance 137, emphasis mine)

Debates in and around leftist pedagogies have probably, in some sort, been

present since the beginning of writing instruction in America. However, I like to start the

epoch as we know it with Louis Kampf's CCCC address in 1970. In a moment of candor

now rare in polite academic discourse, Professor Kampf (that incorrigible radical from

MIT) charged that "Composition courses should be eliminated, not improved: eliminated,

because they help support an oppressive system" (248). Lest anyone think Kampf's

assertion was a sort of outlier, Harvey Irlen leveled this charge in the first issue of CCC in 1970:

> I should state my bias at the beginning: the traditional approach to freshman composition, no matter how we patch it up, does not work. It does not work in the opinion of the graders of English proficiency tests for graduating seniors. It does not work in the opinion of the assigners of papers beyond the freshman year. It does not work in the opinions of most who take it and many who teach it. And all the protests that it should work, that it used to work, do not alter the fact that it does not work now. (35)

Something was definitely in the water that year and that something was the social and political upheavals of the late 1960s. Prior to this, it was often enough for those in academia to rely on a belief in the intrinsic goodness of the educational mission of the university. When Kampf, who had earlier been nearly arrested by the FBI for anti-war activities at the '69 C's, saw little if anything to salvage from composition as we knew it, he was signaling a new era in which unexamined assumptions of why composition (or school in general) even existed at all were simply no longer tenable. If composition was going to be offered and taught, we now had a responsibility for having reasons for doing so and if we could find none, our only choice was to abandon the endeavor entirely. This left those committed to the continuation of composition scrambling for justification and legitimacy for their work and would in large part define what thereafter composition as a discipline would take up as its raison d'être.

This scramble for justification opened up a few different strategies. One was to find shelter behind disciplinary and scientific knowledge. This strategy worked by essentially excising the student from the equation all together by relegating the biological student as a problem to be handled instructionally. Within this strategy, the student's

needs, experiences, and backgrounds didn't actually change the body of knowledge composition had, but only mattered in figuring out how best to deliver that knowledge to the student. As Sirc notes, this strategy was first outlined as a sort of counterpoint to Kampf at the 1970's C's by Robert Heilman and his call for an "objective body of material" and would come to engulf composition as a discipline in the second half of the 70's and most of the 80's (Never Mind 12). Outside of a longstanding but eroding belief that grammar and mechanics could provide this objectivity, the increased obsession with acquiring an objective body of knowledge from which to teach made for rather strange bedfellows. Donald Murray's introspective and unapologetically expressivist goal to study the composing process of real writers had an awful lot in common with those who attempted to tap into traditions of academic discourse and what we "knew" from that, who in turn had a lot in common with the cognitivists such as Linda Flower and others who sought to understand the cognitive aspect of writing. All three projects of inquiry sought to shift composition's locus away from the pluralist conundrum of individual students by appealing to something transcendent to or outside of the classroom itself. Their arguments, then, were not so much against each other as much as they were battles to see which conception of the objective would come to rule the roost of composition. The success of these projects was to effectively render student pluralism a non-issue, as it really didn't matter much who students were or what they believed. We had knowledge to impart on students, and that knowledge was not contingent upon the students themselves. What is more interesting, and more pertinent to my discussion here, is what these different positions were and are attempting to avoid: justification for adjudicating

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between plural beliefs in the classroom and the anxiety that comes from having no such justification.

To see this anxiety in full display, there are two "seminal" debates or arguments I want to give a quick reading of. James Berlin's 1988 essay "Rhetoric and Ideology in the Classroom" is an appropriate place to start, as Berlin tended to be at the epicenter of some of composition's fiercest disagreements in the 80's and 90's. In this well known (and oft written on) essay, Berlin continues his project of hierarchizing a triad of "rhetorics" that he saw as attempting to supplant current-traditional rhetorics: cognitive, expressionistic, and his preferred category social-epistemic. What is of particular interest in this essay is Berlin's strategy for placing his social-epistemic rhetoric as the ideal rhetoric. It's worth looking at the construction of Berlin's encapsulated argument against cognitivist rhetoric in full: "the rhetoric of cognitive psychology refuses the ideological question altogether, claiming for itself the transcendent neutrality of science. This rhetoric is nonetheless easily preempted by a particular ideological position now in ascendancy because it encourages discursive practices that are compatible with dominant economic, social, and political formations" (478). Berlin, then, doesn't so much seek to challenge cognitivist psychology on its claim on transcendence but rather on a weaker challenge on cognitivist psychology's inability to share Berlin's own leftist commitments. More importantly, though, Berlin cannot challenge any other system on these terms because it is a move that he himself will turn to in order to erect his own definition of social-epistemic rhetoric as the heir-apparent of composition praxis. While he claims an anti-foundationalist stance, he does not shy away from making metaphysical claims on methods of knowing. For

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instance, he offers this claim in support of his social-epistemic rhetoric: "For social-epistemic rhetoric, the real is located in a relationship that involves the dialectical interaction of the observer, the discourse community (social group) in which the observer is functioning, and the material conditions of existence" (488). While this claim may not stake its validity on objectivity, it is still a claim. We might inquire, for example, just how far Berlin is willing to go down this rabbit hole? Would Berlin concede, perhaps, that even this claim is contingent and may no longer be "true" 25 years later?

Even more curiously, Berlin shifts from making metaphysical claims on knowledge to making claims concerning political outcomes of such rhetorics when he writes "In short, social-epistemic rhetoric views knowledge as an arena of ideological conflict: there are no arguments from transcendent truth since all arguments arise in ideology. It thus inevitably supports economic, social, political, and cultural democracy" (489). John Schlib, in response to this essay, noted that "I'm puzzled even more when Berlin goes on to claim that what he labels 'social-epistemic rhetoric' inevitably supports economic, social, political, and cultural democracy. Again, I wonder how Berlin can speak with such prophetic authority about the future incarnations and consequences of a theory--why he thinks the discipline of history should exist at all if theories are 'inevitably' as well as 'inherently' such and such" (Reply 769). In essence, Schilb paints Berlin into a corner in which Berlin cannot move without losing. We can think of it this way: if Berlin's social-epistemic rhetoric does produce a particular social arrangement as an outcome, then how does he know with certainty that this is the best possible outcome, especially if it conflicts with other claims on what the outcome should be? If it doesn't,

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then with what justification does Berlin assert in teaching this way in the first place? He's damned if he does, damned if he doesn't.

Berlin, in his response to Schilb, *misreads* what Schilb's major challenge was, and that was an epistemological challenge, or, rather, a challenge on how Berlin knows with certainty that his social epistemic rhetoric produces his desired political arrangement. The epigram to this section, then, can be read with a heavy tinge of irony when Stephen North challenges Berlin the same way Berlin had sought to challenge Flower and Hayes. The challenge of *how do you know*? is most powerful when directed at one's enemies and least powerful when directed at your own theory. Challenges of this type are maddening precisely because there are very few things the skeptic's razor cannot undercut. This, coincidently, is exactly the same weakness that Maxine Hairston presses on.

Four years later in her article "Diversity, Ideology, and Teaching Writing," Maxine Hairston identifies and defines her opposition. Her target, our familiar social-epistemic rhetoric, "[Is] a model that puts dogma before diversity, politics before craft, ideology before critical thinking, and the social goals of the teacher before the educational needs of the student" (180). Those are fighting words, indeed. It is how Hairston picks her fight, though, that is deeply illuminating. While Hairston uses "diversity" as her concept of leverage, a closer look at her argument indicates that it is actually something else she's worried about: "Distressingly often, those who advocate such courses show open contempt for their students' values, preferences, or interests" (181). Much later in her essay, she tips her hand and fully explains what she's driving at when she writes that:

But I fear that we are in real danger of being co-opted by the radical left, coerced into acquiescing to methods that we abhor because, in the abstract, we have some mutual goals. Some faculty may also fear being labeled 'right-wing' if they oppose programs that are represented as being "liberating." But we shouldn't be duped. *Authoritarian methods are still authoritarian methods, no matter in what cause they're invoked.* And the current battle is not one between liberals and conservatives. […] Make no mistake-those on the cultural left are not in the least liberal; in fact, they despise liberals as compromising humanists. (187 Emphasis mine)

To put that in terms that are more familiar to this essay, Hairston is invoking the liberalist "honor thy student" maxim. She is very careful to express outrage at the social, political, and economic injustices of her time, and is at pains to indicate that the ends she desires are not so different than those she argues against. It is the method, though, that she cannot stomach--a very important aspect we will see again shortly. Her charge is essentially that social-epistemic rhetoric offers no satisfactory way to avoid adjudicating between conflicting conceptions of "the good" between students and teachers should they arise. As she writes in the spirit of *reductio ad absurdum*, "By the logic of the cultural left, any teacher should be free to use his or her classroom to promote any ideology. Why not facism? Racial superiority? Religious fundamentalism? Anti-abortion beliefs? Can't any professor claim the right to indoctrinate students simply because he or she is right? The argument is no different from that of any true believers who are convinced that they own the truth and thus have the right to force it on others" (188). However, Hairston is no vulgar relativist either, for one might suitably ask what Hairston might say when a student indicates their preference to simply not write at all. Exactly like Berlin, Hairston must consequently make an appeal to something transcendent to avoid the liberal anxiety. That element for her is writing: "students' own writing must be the center of the course.

Students need to write to find out how much they know and to gain confidence in their ability to express themselves effectively" (186). Hairston's strategy, then, is to try to remove any possibility that a discussion concerning *eudaimonia* might occur; something that would very likely lead to a situation in which competing notions of the good would come into conflict with each other.

As should hopefully be clear when we see Hairston's argument in this light, she is absolutely not advocating for an apolitical conception of the classroom, as many from different directions (including, perhaps, Hairston herself) have charged. Rather, her position is deeply political in the sense that it is liberalism itself that she is using as the political and ethical foundation of her argument. Interestingly, it is perhaps only because liberalism is itself so naturalized that it might seem, on the surface, as politically "neutral." Consequently, Hairston isn't so much responding to the critical pedagogy straw men that populate her essay, but rather the one and very same internal contradiction of liberalism that animates practically every other position out there: the anxiety over knowing. Further, Hairston's strategy here is actually illusory, as it fails to realize that the classroom, the project of writing instruction, and even the University itself still generate such conflicts between individual conceptions of the good. I will return to this observation in the final section, as it suggests the real problem is not how to avoid adjudication between conceptions of the good but rather what to do with such conflicts.

This very same issue would return with a vengeance less than a decade later. In his 2001 *JAC* essay "Private Satisfactions and Public Disorders: Fight Club, Patriarchy, and the Politics of Masculine Violence," Henry Giroux starts with a fairly standard

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enunciation of the leftist critique of neo-liberalism. However, after noting that neo-liberalism "not only consolidates economic power in the hands of the few, it also aggressively attempts to break the power of unions, decouple income from productivity, subordinate the needs of society to the market, and reinterpret public services and amenities as unconscionable luxuries" he makes a startling turn and writes that "[...] it does more. It thrives on a culture of cynicism, boredom, and despair" (3,4). For Giroux, this culture of neo-liberalism is one that precludes public discussion of social problems as social problems, and instead re-locates such intellectual work as directed toward the individual, personal self. It is here, then, that Grioux finds the movie *Fight Club* to be particularly dangerous, for while it seems to "offer a critique of late capitalist society and the misfortunes it generates out of its obsessive concern with profits, consumption, and the commercial values that underlie its market-driven ethos" it instead "defines the violence of capitalism almost exclusively in terms of an attack on traditional (if not to say regressive) notions of masculinity, and in doing so re-inscribes white heterosexuality within a dominant logic of stylized brutality and male bonding that appears to be predicated on the need to denigrate, and to wage war against, all that is feminine" (5). The rest of the essay is dedicated to an expanded reading of *Fight Club* along these lines.

Giroux's stated purpose in offering such a reading is to demonstrate how "such films function as public pedagogies by articulating knowledge to effects, purposely attempting to influence how and what knowledge and identities can be produced within a limited range of social relations" (6). His broader purpose, though, is to suggest that it is precisely this sort of reading that can be brought into the classroom to help "shed critical

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light on how such texts work pedagogically to legitimize some meanings, invite

particular desires, and exclude others" (24). Consequently, while Giroux notes several

times that multiple interpretations of *Fight Club* are possible, he is arguing for a

privileging of this sort of reading in the classroom for his stated purpose. It is this right

here, then, that invites the honor-maxim response with Geoff Sirc performing the honors.

In his response essay, "The Difficult Politics of the Popular" Sirc starts with a retelling of

the infamous 1971 performance art piece "Shoot" in which young artist Chris Booden

had a friend literally shoot him in front of a small audience. Sirc opens with this as a

cautionary tale, noting that "[s]hoot became a kind of Rorschach test, with critics reading

whatever meanings they wanted into the artist and his act" (421). Not to be outdone, Sirc

then produces his own reading of *Fight Club* that expresses no small amount of disgust

for, among other things, the film's violence, vulgar consumerism, and aesthetic

shortcomings. However, Sirc finds this to be problematic because

> [s]o many clever readings are possible, after all. I resist it because my students
> loved this film. I teach first-year developmental students, young men and women
> of a wide range of colors. Except for one young white woman who was bored by
> the film (because the guys in the dorm watch it twice a week), all my students had
> very positive, interesting things to say about it. I resist my reading, then, because I
> like my students, and I don't value them only to turn around and do a wholesale
> refiguring of their culture according to my preferred ideology (in the name of
> 'critical literacy'). (424)

In this exchange we see our familiar anxieties on full display. Giroux, for his part, seeks a

strong platform on which to condemn what the movie *Fight Club* represents in his

reading and to take that reading into the classroom. Sirc, the liberalist in this exchange,

challenges this position by appealing to a plurality of morals that he sees in his writing

students. In other words, Sirc inquires as to how Giroux can know that *Fight Club* is

offensive to his students. After all, if a plurality of meaning and morality is an ontological

fact, Giroux must be able to demonstrate that his meaning and morality in interpreting

Fight Club is transcendent and consequently objective. If he cannot, and this is precisely

Sirc's challenge, then we have no basis from which to adjudicate between Giroux's

interpretation and the interpretations of Sirc's students. The danger here for Sirc is "that

academic revulsion over the popular can become yet another reason to deny validity to

noncanonical, possibly transgressive materials." (428) What is striking here is what

exactly Sirc is aiming to honor. His students, Sirc claims, are "comfortably in the post-

symbolic, and so the popular culture they prefer—a hodgepodge of sound and vision,

sometimes cool, sometimes clunky—rings truer, in its complexity of excess, than the

traditional political" (432). In this light, we see that Sirc engages in a shift from honoring

instrumentalist aims of students (a la Hairston, perhaps) to honoring the aesthetic aims of

his "post-symbolic" students. While this is a horse of a completely different color, what is

important to note here is that Sirc still relies upon a position of epistemological

skepticism to block any attempts to interfere with Liberalism's foundational belief that

the individual is the primary unit of reflection over the good. In other words, how can we

know that the ideas of one person are better than someone else? In the next section, I

turn to the philosophical tradition of Pragmatism to reconsider how we might navigate

these vexing conundrums.

More than a feeling: justifying democracy, knowing democracy

So far, I have argued that at the center of debates concerning the role of the instructor and the nature of their authority over students is an un-resolvable contradiction at the heart of political liberalism. This contradiction, very simply, works as follows: political liberalism creates a pluralism of ideas concerning "the good" while at the same time preventing any means of adjudicating between those conceptions when and where they conflict with each other. In the classroom, I refer to this allegiance to protecting the capacity for individuals to decide for themselves what "the good" is as the honor-maxim. Since political liberalism is so deeply embedded in our collective thinking about social and political life, any threat to this first principle of liberalism produces anxiety over facing the unsavory task of adjudicating between convicting conceptions of the good. This anxiety is epistemological in nature, for how can we know who is right and who is wrong? In the field of writing instruction, this has been the thorn in the side of attempting to reconcile the act of writing with political life. It is necessary to pause for a moment and consider what is at stake here.

As I wrote above, it seems to me that the most controversial question to be faced is simply this: ought we in composition work to utilize our classes to disrupt the status quo, even if it is against the wishes of our students? After all, the shocking (and rapidly increasing) inequality of wealth in America has, sadly, not been news for a long time. What might be less apparent, though, is how bad things are for our students. By the fall of 2010, unemployment figures for holders of a 4 year college degree, regardless of age, had doubled from their levels prior to the catastrophic economic downturn starting in 2007.

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Worse, unemployment figures for 20-24 year olds with college degrees--supposedly those in the best position to obtain employment due to their "fresh" education--went from 3.4% in 2007 to a staggering 9.6% by September of 2010 (Konczal). Further, these numbers do not take into account the level of under-employment (having a job but only working part time) nor inquire into the qualitative aspects of contemporary work--that is, how fulfilling might this employment be? Worse (and yes, it gets worse), while we have weathered economic recessions plenty of times before, the defining feature of this economic downturn is debt. For our students, the steep increases in the cost of post-secondary enrollment has hit them particularly hard. This creates what can only be considered as a perfect storm of forces conspiring against our students. First, post-secondary education of some sort is considered necessary for participation in the contemporary economy. However, this comes as state support for education is declining, meaning that students must increasingly shoulder the cost of this education themselves as individuals. Tragically, though, just as students are acquiring debt to obtain this education, the sort of employment they will need to repay this debt dries up. Is this not reason enough to say yes, we have to join the struggle directly?

Sadly, no. This reality is not and will not be enough to change the minds of many instructors, administrators, and theorists. While things are definitely bad for everyone (save the very upper classes), having a terrible economy does not on its own resolve a larger epistemological conundrum of justification. In a broader sense, this problem has its roots in the split between objectivism and relativism, something that Richard Bernstein notes "has been with us ever since the origins of Western philosophy, or at least from the

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time of Plato's attack on the Sophists and on Protagoras's alleged relativism" (Beyond 8).

It is worth quoting Bernstein at length here simply to illustrate just how closely this

epistemological question aligns with the political/ethical/moral conundrum discussed

above:

> The objectivist maintains that unless we can ground philosophy, knowledge, or language in a rigorous manner we cannot avoid radical skepticism. [...] The relativist not only denies the positive claims of the objectivist but goes further. [...] *For the relativist, there is no substantive overarching framework or single metalanguage by which we can rationally adjudicate or univocally evaluate competing claims of alternative paradigms*. (8, emphasis mine)

Perhaps even more pertinent to our task at hand is Bernstein's conception of what is at

stake. As he writes, "With a chilling clarity Descartes leads us with an apparent and

ineluctable necessity to a grand and seductive Either/Or. Either there is some support for

our being, a fixed foundation for our knowledge, or we cannot escape the forces of

darkness that envelop us with madness, with intellectual and moral chaos" (18). The

anxiety of the objectivist, then, is the quest for certainty as the triumph over madness and

chaos. The relativist frets over the possibility of stifling and oppressive authority. It is

easy to see both of these positions and their attendant fears in full display in the previous

section.

It is here that one strand of Pragmatist philosophy suggests a way out of this

conundrum by claiming that while objectivity is impossible, it is also not needed in order

to avoid the madness and chaos of pure relativism. In other words, while it may be the

case that "truth" is always a product of human intellect and is inherently fallible, it is still

"good enough" to use as "truth." Our beliefs are, in essence, "truth-apt" and as such we

need not be brought to our knees by the skeptic's question of "how do you know?" What

is lacking in the objectivist/relativism split is inquiry and its relationship to experience and belief, precisely the sort that was outlined in the first chapter. To briefly recall it, the very short version works like this: Once thinkers like C.S. Peirce rejected the spectator conception of knowledge and denied the Cartesian concepts of deep skepticism and introspection, experience became the crucial linchpin of all knowing. Their model for this was the scientific revolution and the way in which, instead of ideas having to correspond to authoritative traditions or personal / private reasoning, ideas were evaluated by a community of inquirers against a shared outer-world or "experience." Or, as Cheryl Misak helpfully puts it:

> The core of the pragmatist conception of truth is that a true belief would be the best belief, were we to inquire as far as we could on the matter. We shall see that 'best' here amounts to 'best fits with all experience and argument,' not the kind of 'best' that other pragmatists, James and Rorty, for instance, have flirted with-- consoling, best for our lives, or most comfortable. A true belief, rather, is a belief that could not be improved upon, a belief that would forever meet the challenges of reasons, argument, and evidence. (49)

We might think of this as a sort of continual spiral in which a belief is brought into doubt due to the precariousness of lived experience. The decay of belief then spurs a mode of thinking aimed at reconstructing belief: inquiry. This inquiry continues until a reconstructed belief emerges that is able to withstand this doubt. This brings us back to the start: belief, but a different belief than what we originated with.

Returning to the problem at hand, the prohibition against adjudicating between conflicting conceptions of the good is built upon an assumption that there exists no "objective" truth that is transcendent to the conflicting ends that could serve as a point of evaluation. In other words, we are always vulnerable to the fatal question of how do you

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know? However, as Pragmatists will point out, such an objective, eternal and ahistorical "Truth" is not needed; local, slightly less grand "truths" produced through social inquiry work well enough. Once we rid ourselves of that faulty assumption, it becomes apparent that we can in fact engage in inquiring as to whether one person's conception of the ends of life are indeed better or worse than someone else's, especially where they come into conflict with each other. Putnam uses the example of female circumcision here, noting that some might "reject the idea that we can criticize traditional societies even for such sexist practices as female circumcision" and that "traditional societies are viewed by these thinkers as so superior to our own societies that we have no right to disturb them in any way" (183). Putnam describes it this way: "what I think we are seeing is the revival of the myth of the noble savage" (183). The problem with this idea is that it ignores the possibility that women living in societies that practice female circumcision would want to know about alternative ways of thinking about the practice and are incapable of deciding for themselves which might be better. In short, the "noble savage myth" blocks the path of inquiry. Similarly, James Garrison notes that the anxiety or fear over "indoctrination" via education is misplaced simply because it assumes a passive instead of active mind. The active mind, one that is capable of inquiry, is not a mere receptacle of information to be delivered hypodermically. Thus, since indoctrination is inevitable in the process of education, the real solution is "inoculation," or rather teaching students to utilize inquiry so that further attempts of "indoctrination" are never accepted wholesale (Paradox 267-8). In this way, the resolution of liberalism's contradiction is not to be found in simply avoiding pluralism, but to utilize pluralism as the necessary raw material needed to

sustain inquiry into political and ethical matters. When faced with the question of how do you know, we can respond that we know because beliefs generated through inquiry grounded in experience are good enough to use as "truth."

A writing classroom grounded on the search for warranted assertability (to use Dewey's favored term for "truth") through social inquiry yields an alternative viewpoint of the debates in the previous section. For example, while Hairston's defense of each individual student's own right to their ideas is laudable, what is lacking from her assessment is a realization that such beliefs of individual students are themselves products of inquiry and could be further developed. In this way, a writing classroom that embraces the political need not be "authoritarian" but could actually be useful in helping students articulate such individual beliefs through social inquiry. Concepts such as "ideology" might prove to be crucial for helping students engage in sustained critiques of problematized beliefs for the purpose of inquiry. Further, if we want to be a little more pointed--and I feel we should in the classroom--we might genuinely invite students like Sirc's to ask how their own favorable readings of *Fight Club* are, to quote Tyler Durden once again, "working for [them]?" Giroux's reading of *Fight Club* as public pedagogy could be terribly enlightening for Sirc's students. The contours of human intellect are complex and it may be conceivable that students might retain an aesthetic and visceral appreciation of *Fight Club* while also rejecting aspects of the film that may work against the students having a worthy and dignified place in the world. Respecting the experiences of students does not entail accepting them a priori. At the same time, respecting the experiences of students also means that they should never be taken for granted or

dismissed simply because they do not confirm our own theoretical viewpoints. Inquiry, when working well, favors only what best aligns to the experiences of the community, and it is more than possible that the instructors stand to gain just as much as the students. To return to the comment that sparked this essay, "honoring" a student by denying them the opportunity to grow intellectually is no honor at all.

In the hyper-local view from the classroom, this notion of inquiry is really not that far off from what composition in its best moments already attempts. However, as theorists of composition, we're also responsible for the entire field of practice of writing instruction at the post-secondary level. From this vantage point, the notion of "inquiry" takes on a very different imperative, for the question is not just what are students learning in classes but for what reasons are they learning them? It is here that the political implications of inquiry, most fully articulated by John Dewey, become important. While the notion of "democracy" is without a doubt important in Dewey's work, what is often missed is why it is so important. Dewey lends himself no favors here, as the connection is rarely made visible in his prose. That is not to say that it is not there, though. In *The Public and its Problems*, Dewey famously--and cryptically--wrote that "[Democracy] will have its consummation when free social inquiry is indissolubly wedded to the art of full and moving communication" (LW 2:350). This statement has generated a lot of interest and commentary; unfortunately, much of it has focused on the "art of full and moving communication" and not so much the "free social inquiry" part of the equation. This misses something subtle yet incredibly important, and that is what democracy was good for. As Hilary Putnam writes, "[For Dewey] democracy is not just one form of

social life among other workable forms of social life; it is the precondition for the full application of intelligence to the solution of social problems" (Renewing 180). In other words, "democracy" is a social and political arrangement done in the service of "free social inquiry" animated through "the art of full and moving communication." Putnam and others such as Richard Shusterman and Dewey's intellectual biographer Robert Westbrook have referred to this as the *epistemological justification of democracy*.

Going back to Berlin's assertion that social-epistemic rhetoric "supports economic, social, political, and cultural democracy," we can now finally see how exactly this might be justified. To start, we have to reverse the order of Berlin's assertion: economic, social, political, and cultural democracy supports social-epistemic rhetoric. This re-ordered assertion is something I'm in favor of, as inquiry focused on the intersections of language usage and broader social dynamics works better when situated in a University that has a diverse community of inquirers as its student body. The current privatization of the public research university is a direct threat to any such endeavor, as well as a death knell to the state of inquiry in our society (something that is already on life support).

It is with this last point that I believe we can finally begin a conversation on why our system of writing instruction and education in general that is responsible for the Bartleby Syndrome must be changed. It must be changed because it creates a situation in which *inquiry* itself is brought to a standstill. Because of this, the cultural problems of our times fail to be resolved. As I have noted before, it is *inquiry* itself as a focus of writing instruction that would directly address the Bartleby Syndrome. The epistemological

justification for democracy provides us with a way to justify such forms of writing instruction. We require this as a society not simply because we are sentimentally attached to some romantic notion of "democracy," but rather because we have very strong reasons based on experience that suggest that the more voices we have in a democracy, the stronger we are able to continually find new solutions to old problems. New solutions to old problems is something we need now perhaps more than ever.

Conclusion

The Pragmatist alternative I have described above provides a very compelling solution to a problem that has haunted those who attempt to reconcile the political with writing instruction. What this Pragmatist alternative shows us is that the skeptic's question of how do you know as well as the honor-maxim are grounded on problematic assumptions that we need not assent to. Those who would remove the political from the classroom have long relied on the relativist's position. This Pragmatist solution to providing justification for belief and "truth" when pure objectivity is a dead option radically changes the conversation, for we can turn the question around and ask with what evidence do those in favor of an apolitical classroom argue that such pedagogies contributes to a better world, especially in light of our current predicament. This conversation will not be easy, but it will at least be productive. Personally, I believe that the sorts of inequality we see in society today prevents us from producing "good student writing." Some may disagree with this, but I am genuinely curious as to how they might defend such a viewpoint. If "honoring" the students isn't really the issue here, then what

exactly is? My suspicion is that lurking behind the honor-maxim are spurious class allegiances that do not favor the majority of our students. This, though, is something we as a field will need to seriously discuss.

For now, my rather modest hope is that others will agree with me that there is great potential here and will be persuaded to explore what Pragmatism can offer us. The project for composition in this next decade will not be to solve problems through reinvention of the proverbial wheel, but to ask why the worthy and intelligent solutions we have developed simply never seem to take hold. Certainly the labor structure of higher-education is one of the biggest obstacles we face, and there is no shortage of scholarship in that area. Beyond that, though, I also strongly believe that we have inherited certain philosophical legacies (liberalism, objectivism, relativism, etc) that severely limit the capacities of writing instruction. Pragmatism's long and rich tradition of working and re-working these ideas should appear on our horizon as a field far more often than it does. Should we need justification not just for a required first year writing class, but writing classes *at every level* that binds the act of writing to social and political life, then Pragmatism offers a compelling vision. It shows us that the forces of inequality prevalent today were not handed down to us from God or nature herself. Humans with unjustifiable power have written these laws, these rules, these policies, these philosophies--*but we are writers, too*.

Conclusion

With any project of this size, there is an inevitable mess of material left on the editing room floor: arguments left behind, discussions abandoned, research discontinued. As a writer, I have agonized over these elements, knowing not everything that must be said can be said in one project. Much work remains to be done. My purpose in this dissertation has been to demonstrate the relevance and necessity of a Pragmatist perspective on problems facing post-secondary writing instruction. Part of this work has been to bring the work of Dewey and Peirce in line with contemporary problems we as literacy educators face. However, it is undeniable that another part of this work has been to reconstruct and re-imagine the ways in which Pragmatism can be of relevance to the teaching of writing in schools.

In pursuit of these two pieces of the project, I have taken up the question of college preparation and the effects it has on students as well as writing instruction at the postsecondary level. I have demonstrated that a Pragmatist orientation, as outlined in the first chapter, allows a critique of writing in schools that places the outcomes of such work as *continuous* within a larger environment (including social, political, and economic aspects). This Pragmatist insight is important, as it shifts the discussion over the teaching

of writing *away* from individual students to an examination of the world itself that we live in. In short, as I have argued, to have good writing we first need a world in which good writing matters.

This critique was inspired and sustained by the real experiences I encountered while conducting qualitative research in a high school level college preparation classroom. It was while absorbed in this environment that I first sensed and felt the questions and problems worked out in this dissertation. The Bartleby Syndrome as I have referred to it, has served as the point of departure into a re-examination of just what college preparation does, why it does the things it does, and how we might understand the mechanism beneath it. While I have sought to understand these things, my work should not be seen as a statement on life in high schools, an exploration of the lives of students, or even a suggestion concerning best practices. Rather, it has served as a clarifying medium from which I could ground the theoretical work carried out here in some sort of actual experience.

From this fieldwork, I have worked through a Pragmatist critique of writing in schools at three different levels of analysis. The first concerned the actions and activity of individuals themselves, particularly in regard to understanding *why* some literacy practices happen (the Bartleby Syndrome, for example) instead of others. I then moved to a broader view by working through an understanding of "college preparation" as the context through which activity in the writing classroom happens. I ended by exploring the broadest context, *neoliberalism*, as a level of understanding through which many contradictions finally resolve. It is here that I have suggested Pragmatism's political

agenda, rooted in a concept of inquiry as the crucial component of democracy, provides

not only justification for working against the status quo, but the method for outlining

alternatives.

In focusing this way, there are several other discussions that have been given too

little space to develop. As a final part of this dissertation, I will give a nod to them here.

The first concerns "Pragmatism" itself. Pragmatism as a contemporary philosophical

tradition is, as Dewey would have wanted it, flexible. Richard Rorty's pragmatism, for

example, is something I have consciously avoided in this work simply because it is not

the sort of "Pragmatist Philosophy" that is what the problems of our times in 2012

require. I have consciously shaped my discussion of "Pragmatism" to place it back closer

to where I see its original roots: within the tradition of left Hegelianism.[1] Claims from

Rorty, Hickman, and others, that the works of Dewey and other pragmatists will be

waiting at the end of the long post-structuralist road, or are amenable to a post-modern

world, are suspect to me. That said, this work, particularly in regard to disentangling

Rorty's influence (and much of post-modernism itself) from Pragmatism, is very much in

its infancy. While it may still be a minority opinion, even among Pragmatists, I feel this

reassessment of post-modernism and an eventual move away from it will be the next

movement within the Pragmatist tradition.

Along with that, Dewey's history with Liberalism, while a major part of the final

chapter, still demands more attention. My move in placing Dewey's oeuvre within his

outlook and understanding of liberalism is far from a mainstream conversation within

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[1] See especially Timothy Brennan's book *Wars of Position* for further elucidation of "left Hegelianism"

those who study Pragmatism. Outside of a few debates among Pragmatist political philosophers (for example, Festenstein, Talisse, etc)[2], Dewey's work as a whole is still situated as something to be understood through the lens of works such as *Experience and Nature* or *Art as Experience*. While these are indeed important statements by Dewey, the direct political implications of Dewey's philosophy is obscured. In reclaiming some form of positive political maneuverability for Pragmatism, such historiographical work would yield important results.

In regard to liberalism and neoliberalism, I have consciously avoided retracing much of the important work already done with these topics in education. This is not to slight writers such as Giroux, Rikowski, Apple, Anyon, and others. In fact, deep in the recession and as I was conducting my fieldwork, it was these writers I turned to for inspiration. My project in this dissertation, though, has been an attempt to understand *how* and *why* neoliberalism, viewed from a perspective of organic unity and continuity, impacts writing instruction in very particular ways. My sense is that further explorations between political / social theory and literacy instruction will continue to yield useful insights.

Also, one thing alluded to in this work are the various ways composition as a field has sought to understand "not-writing." There is much more potential here for a more thorough investigation of composition's own understanding of what it means to not write. Additionally, one area I have chosen to side-step in this project is a discussion of psychology (and in particular, educational psychology) that has worked to understand the

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[2] In particular, Matthew Festenstein's book *Pragmatism and Political Theory* is an excellent departure for these discussions.

psychological concept of "motivation" in education, particularly in how it relates to the act of writing.[3] Jim Garrison's book, *Dewey and Eros,* particularly in its treatment of desire, suggests there may yet be fruitful engagement between the two.

Finally, I have not delved much into the work already commencing in the area of dual-credit enrollment situations. Recent edited collections as well as recently written dissertations on the subject suggest an incoming wave of scholarship in this area. Additionally, further exploration of the association of writing instruction at the postsecondary level with the movement and development of "democracy" is also needed, simply because this history is a sort of "subconscious" of the field that might be useful in a tactical sense in employing/deploying such courses. While I have asserted that Composition as a field of practice cannot be understood apart from the social, political, and economic "left," a further exploration of this association is needed to fully understand the role that writing instruction might play in establishing a vision of the University that is worthy of having other forms of education align to it. To this, I have added but a flavor of scholarship out there that seeks to understand the evolving nature of the University itself in society.

When I was first starting my graduate work, a professor of mine suggested that the *real* question academics must eventually face is simply this: who are you responsible to with your work? As a teacher myself, I have challenged my own students to consider who *they* are responsible to as writers and as members of the academic community. It thus seems appropriate to end this text with a consideration of that question. Recently, at

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[3] For example, see Boscolo and Hidi's work on "motivation" and writing.

a national conference for the field of composition, I encountered a whiz-bang

technological gadget that projected, in hologram form, the text of Twitter "tweets"

against a wall in the outline of people walking by. I grew fond of watching, from a

distance, conference goers stand in awe of this gadget, seeing their shadows digitized and

textualized against a beige wall--as if the technology had simply purified the human body

into a clean, readable form. Many were simply agog with this delight. And yet, while

walking around the morning before I left, I spotted a camp of homeless individuals

underneath an interstate overpass not far from the convention center. Such contradictions

are not hard to find. The hope placed in technological fixes, or market solutions, often

merely mask the "old problems"--hunger, joblessness, discrimination, oppression,

violence--that were never really solved in the first place. That we can project our

thoughtless tweets but can't figure out what to do with rampant inequality is, perhaps, one

of the cruelest ironies yet inflicted upon ourselves. My work as a scholar is responsible to

those caught in this cruelty. The modest contribution I have hoped to make with this

dissertation is to join the project of creating the necessary conditions through which these

"old problems" of how to live together in worthy and dignified ways can be addressed.

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