The relevance of Paulo Freire to the work of writing teachers cannot be exaggerated. Far from being a narrow and doctrinaire Marxist, or liberation theologian, or "Third World literacy worker," as is often charged, he is first and foremost a widely read scholar and committed teacher who has spent his life exploring the intersections of theory and pedagogic practice. His intellectual roots are extensive: Althusser, Aquinas, Buber, Chomsky, Fromm, Goldman, Jaspers, Mannheim, Marcel, and Marx, to name just a few. His travels have been no less diverse, including teaching stints in Brazil, Chile, the U.S., Switzerland, Canada, Guinea-Bissau, Angola, Cape Verde, and São Tomé and Príncipe. Not unexpectedly, then, his recent thought takes into account the poststructuralist and postmodern critiques of language and culture, and his work from the start has insisted on the historical and social situatedness of all theory and practice, including his own. Throughout his intellectual and physical journeys, however, Freire's central and abiding preoccupation has been the teaching of ways of reading and writing the world, and his work has always emphasized the central place of this activity in the life of a society.

Reading and Writing the World
Freire provides a rich rationale to support those who argue that literacy ought not be treated as a merely instrumental "skill," a useful tool in the mastery of more significant and substantive academic subjects. For Freire, to learn to read and write is to learn to name the world, and in this naming is found a program for understanding the conditions of our experience and, most important, for acting in and on them. Everywhere reminiscent of Kenneth Burke, Freire insists that language is at the center of our knowledge of ourselves and others. Language, furthermore, is a social construction, a constantly changing set of formations whose meanings emerge as people engage in written and spoken dialogue with each other. Language then is always prior to individuals, always already in place as it works to form consciousness, to shape subjects.

Freire, however, is no determinist (or poststructuralist indeterminist, for that matter) who regards individuals as mere effects of language. While
he would never deny that the concrete material and social conditions of our experience shape and limit us, he also sees in the mediating power of language the possibility for the change and transformation of these very conditions. While language indeed serves as a means of control and domination, it can also serve as an instrument of liberation and growth. Language—in its mediation between the world and the individual, the object and the subject—contains within its shaping force the power of creating humans as agents of action. Each individual occupies a position at the intersection of a multitude of discourses, which Freire, in the manner of Barthes, calls codes. These codes can define subjects as helpless objects of forces—economic, social, political, cultural—that render them forever isolated and victimized by the conditions of their experience. These discourses can also, however, form individuals as active agents of change, social creatures who acting together can alter the economic, social, and political conditions of their historical experience. The codes, scripts, or terministic screens that define individuals as helpless ciphers can be replaced by narratives that enable democratic participation in creating a more equitable distribution of the necessities and pleasures of life.

This outline can be seen as a brief defense against those who see in Freire an innocence about the poststructuralist and postmodern insistence on the indeterminacy of value and the impossibility of action. As Freire is too kind and too tactful to mention in his interview with JAC, such arguments are often very effective in maintaining existing power structures. Indeed, they are commonly offered by the organic intellectuals of ruling groups, power brokers who are quite willing to concede that, since there are no foundational principles for validating any given economic and social order, we may as well keep on dancing to the tunes we know best. That no distribution of the necessities and pleasures of life is inherently better than any other is a strong argument to stay with present arrangements, since change may simply make matters worse (although “worse” here is obviously a highly problematic concept).

Freire’s position is significantly at odds with this one. He is first of all a foundationalist, a Catholic who sees in the cruel inequities of our time a violation of the essential importance of every individual. However, as the numerous applications of Freire have shown—most conspicuously in the work of Ira Shor and Henry Giroux—one does not need theology to answer those who are politically paralyzed by the consequences of a world without certain truth value. This response echoes the oldest of reactions to this vexing question, one offered by the sophists, particularly Protagoras, some 2,300 years ago (see Havelock). If there are indeed no external validations for our actions, then we must invent them contingently as we go along. Furthermore, since no one person or group can then claim to know more about “truth” than any other, all must be allowed to deliberate and decide in freedom on the nature of these provisional formulations. Communal deci-
sion making is crucial here since any decisions about economic and social and political arrangements will affect the community as a whole. Only after all the arguments for any action are considered will a decision be made, and then it will be made by all, for all. Of course, these arguments will not be based on ontological principles, but will instead debate the consequences of decisions for that which the community has decided is in its best interests—these interests themselves being historically contingent and always open to discussion and revision. This conceptual scheme, of course, requires a utopian vision, a notion of a good and just society, “the society of our dreamed utopia,” as Freire says. But, again, this vision is continually subject to discussion, debate, and alteration. A world without certainties thus creates the need for a radical democracy and a radically open rhetoric.

Empowerment and the College Writing Class
It requires little imagination to see that writing and reading teachers hold a central place in Freire's political thought. They are offered a unique opportunity to help make students agents of change and betterment. They can just as easily, however, become a part of a dehumanizing status quo. Schools and (especially) colleges in the U.S. have usually leaned in the direction of the latter, encouraging the banking model of education—the teacher as repository of a commodified knowledge to be deposited in the empty receptacle of students' minds. And since Reagan, this model has become nearly unassailable. One of the main institutional sites for resisting this notion recently has been the college writing class. Against the argument that writing is a matter of skills and drills, or self expression, or privatized cognitive act, social epistemic rhetorics of various hues are arguing that writing is a public and communal enactment of a political interaction. Teachers in this group point to the historical role rhetorical education has played in civic affairs—for example, in ancient Greece—as well as to the traditions of political rhetoric in U.S. schools and colleges, ranging from Fred Newton Scott and Gertrude Buck, to Warren Taylor, to Richard Ohmann and Ira Shor (see Berlin). These teachers, furthermore, take into account the encounter between politics and poststructuralism, exploring in Freirean fashion the intersections of language and power.

The large number of students in composition courses who today beg to be told in detail what to write and how to write it (an inevitable product of the banking model) are disappointed in these classrooms. They are instead asked to locate and address the conflicts and contradictions they find in their own social and political experience, presenting in their essays an account of this engagement. Here, at the point of encountering difference and discord, we can see how much Freire's pedagogical project has to contribute to the writing class in the U.S.
Literacy: Experiencing the World

The classroom in which writing and reading are considered communal performances of political behavior is preeminently participatory and democratic. It is, of course, disconcerting that a nation so conspicuously proud of its democratic and activist legacy is currently so reluctant to extend the fruits of this legacy to its schools. For example, notably lacking in the report of the 1989 governors’ summit on education was any mention of citizenship preparation. A literacy that is without this commitment to active participation in decision making in the public sphere, however, is one that cannot possibly serve the interests of egalitarian political arrangements. For democracy to function (as we are now being reminded in Eastern Europe), citizens must actively engage in public debate, applying reading and writing practices in the service of articulating their positions and their critiques of the positions of others. The inability of citizens to write and read for the public forum thus defeats the central purpose of democracy: to ensure that all interests are heard before a communal decision is made.

Freire relates this silencing of citizens through literacy education to the formation of subjects as agents. Without the language to name our experience, we are the instruments of the language of others. As I am authorized through active literacy to name the world as I experience it (not as others tell me I should experience it), I become capable of taking action, of assuming control of my environment. In more direct terms, literacy enables the individual to understand that the conditions of experience are made by human agents and thus can be remade by human agents. This process of making and remaking, furthermore, is conducted in communities, in social collections. For Freire, however, the individual must never be sacrificed to any group-enforced norm (as he underscores in this interview). All voices must be heard and considered in taking action, and the integrity of the individual must never be compromised.

Freire has come to stand for a position many of us in English studies have been forwarding for quite some time: in teaching people to write and read, we are teaching them a way of experiencing the world. This realization requires that the writing classroom be dialogic. Only through articulating the disparate positions held by class members can the different ways of experiencing the world and acting in it be discovered. These differences organize themselves around class, race, gender, age, and other divisions, and it is the responsibility of the teacher to make certain that they are enunciated and problematized. At the same time, those of us who have experienced the dialogic classroom know how reluctant many students are to engage in public debate. Years of enduring the banking model of education have taken their toll so that, like the unschooled peasants that Freire tells us about, our students often refuse to speak. They would rather sit quietly and take notes that they later will reproduce exactly for the exam. When pressed to active dialogue, they frequently deny the obvious social and political conflicts they
enact and witness daily. For example, the majority of male students I have encountered at Purdue have in our first discussions assured me that race and gender inequalities no longer exist in the U.S. and simply do not merit further discussion. Any inequalities that do remain, they insist, are only apparent injustices since they are the result of inherent and thus unavoidable features of human nature (women are weaker and more emotional than men, for example), or are the product of individual failure (most homeless people refuse to work hard and so choose to live in the street).

It is at the moment of denial that the role of the teacher as problem poser is crucial, providing methods for the questioning that locates the points of conflict and contradiction. These methods most often require a focus on the language students invoke in responding to their experience. The teacher attempts to supply students with heuristic strategies for decoding their characteristic ways of representing the world. Here we see why the literacy teacher, the expert in language, is at the center of education in a democratic society (and in this case not because English studies has historically been used in U.S. schools to reinforce hegemonic ideological positions). The methods of questioning that the teacher poses are designed to reveal the contradictions and conflicts inscribed in the very language of students' thoughts and utterances. The teacher's understanding of the structuralist and poststructuralist assertions about the operations of language in forming consciousness here comes to the fore. At the minimum, this involves an examination of the various hierarchical binary oppositions on which the key terms in any discourse are based, the various connotative levels on which these terms function, and the larger narrative patterns of which the terms form a part. The movement is thus from the concrete and specific conditions of the student's experience to the larger economic, social, political, and cultural systems into which these conditions coalesce. A student's attitude toward women in the workplace, for example, is often a part of a larger conceptual formulation regarding reproductive responsibilities, the family, work in the community, and the realities of economic conditions that govern our lives.

The relation of the teacher and students is of course crucial at this point. Although, as I have pointed out, the classroom is to be democratic and participatory, this does not mean that the teacher surrenders all authority. As Freire here points out, the authority of the teacher is never denied. On the other hand, it should never be exercised so that it destroys the student's freedom. The teacher must resist the obvious institutional constraints that in the typical college classroom make the teacher the center of knowledge and power and that deny the student's active role in meaning formation. In the Freirean classroom, the teacher shares the right to dialogue while never relinquishing the authority to set certain agendas for class activities. Certain matters are always debatable—for example, all positions on issues, whether the teacher's or students'—but certain others are not—the participatory and
dialogic format, the search for contradictions, the analysis of codes. As Freire says, the teacher must be “patiently impatient,” displaying neither complete passivity nor complete dominance in discussion. From my experience in the writing classroom, I know that the successful use of the problem posing and dialogic method usually leads to increasing participation by students. Often, by the middle of the course, students are themselves problematizing the assertions of their peers, the teacher becoming only one of many problem posers in the classroom.

I will not deny that my students at Purdue have demonstrated resistance of various kinds. What Ira Shor calls “desocializing students”—that is, making them conscious of the concealed conflicts in their language, thought, and behavior—is never pursued without some discomfort. This resistance has as often taken the form of passivity as it has of active and open opposition to locating dissonance in our coded responses to such areas of discussion as schooling, work, play, and individuality, and their relation to class, race, and gender formations. Working together, the graduate student teachers in my mentor group and I have developed devices for dealing with this resistance. One of the most effective is to explain at the outset that the course will involve writing about the contradictions in our cultural codes. Since this will require that students participate in disagreement and conflict in open, free, and democratic dialogue, the students are asked to draw up a set of rules to govern members in their relations to each other. These rules are then published and made available to students. The device has had the salutary effect of including students in the operation of the class from the very start, thus averting passivity as well as inappropriate reactions.

Freirean Pedagogy in the U.S.
The success of Freirean teaching in the U.S., as in Brazil or Guinea-Bissau, depends on teachers knowing their students. The critics of Freire are right in arguing that the teaching materials used with Brazilian peasants are not appropriate for U.S. college students. They are wrong, however, in presuming that Freire ever suggested otherwise, as his emphasis on the role of teacher as ethnographer indicates. The teacher must understand the unique economic, social, and cultural conditions of his or her students in order to arrive at the appropriate form and content that dialogue will assume. Extensive knowledge about the students’ backgrounds enables sound planning about the topics, questions, and comments that are most likely to set a meaningful encounter in motion. The aim of the course—enabling students to become active, critical agents of their experience rather than passive victims of cultural codes—is the same in all situations; but the “tactics,” to use Freire’s term, are always open to change.

And so the final purpose of the course is to develop citizens who are actively literate, that is, critical agents of change as social and political activists—in this way realizing the highest democratic ideals. This concep-
tion of the writing class has been under fire lately. At the University of Texas at Austin, for example, a majority of English department members voted in 1989 to restructure the required freshman composition course as a class in writing about cultural differences, including race, gender, class, and ethnic designations. Despite the strong support of the English department for this offering, a vocal minority of faculty members within as well as outside the department protested, enlisting the support of former Texas students in pressuring the university president and college dean to ban the course. Much to everyone’s surprise, the president and dean capitulated to their protests, ordering that the course be put on hold for this year. Furthermore, as of this writing (December 20, 1990), its status for next year is still uncertain, and this despite the fact that recently a majority within the English department again voted to offer it. The nation that prides itself on being the most free and democratic country in the world (as Reagan repeatedly reminded us) has somehow spawned a group of intellectuals who balk at the idea that a course in rhetoric might encourage students to exercise actively their rights and responsibilities as citizens in a democracy.

Despite a heritage that from Jefferson to Emerson to Dewey has insisted on education as first and foremost a preparation for active citizenship, many professionals somehow find subversive the notion that reading and writing might be taught by focusing on public discourse in a democracy. Ironically, these same intellectuals are fond of citing historical practices in support of their position. Yet, most educational precedents established by democratic states, from ancient Athens to twentieth century U.S. public schools, directly contradict them. Freire, who smiles at the conception of a cultural literacy in the U.S. that would ignore the most obvious facts about its South American neighbors (the language of Brazil is Portuguese, not Spanish), would find the Texas scandal equally absurd, although not unfamiliar. After all, his pedagogy has been forbidden more than once by regimes who could not tolerate critical literacy in their midst. However, these governments, unlike ours, made no commitment to democracy and freedom of expression, or to being the “melting pot” of the world. And so Freire is installed as Secretary of Education in São Paulo, democracy is established in much of Eastern Europe, and a course in cultural differences at the University of Texas is postponed—indefinitely. The more things change abroad, the more they remain repressively the same at home.

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Notes

1 Counterparts in the public schools can be found among the advocates of the whole language approach.
2 Two excellent examples of the work of this group are the essays collected by Patricia Donahue and Ellen Quandahl, and by Mark Hurlbert and Michael Blitz.
3 In passing, I should mention that those who have found Freire suspect in his response to feminism should be encouraged by this interview, particularly in his separation of gender struggles from class struggles.

4 For examples of this kind of activity, once again see the collections by Donahue and Quandahl and by Hurlbert and Blitz.

5 In the Hurlbert and Blitz collection, C.H. Knoblauch and Cecilia Rodríguez Milanes have each reported similar experiences.

Works Cited


A Note to *JAC* Readers

**Janice M. Lauer**

One of the recent developments afflicting our field is the tendency to form impressions of a person's position based not on reading his or her work but on brief and reductive secondary characterizations. Such a depiction occurred in *JAC* (Fall 1991) in an endnote to an article by Phillip Arrington, mentioning *Composition Research: Empirical Designs* by W. Asher and me. Arrington implies that my coauthor and I emphasize empirical research, particularly "comparison studies," over other kinds of inquiry in rhetoric and composition. This insinuation doesn't square with the statements in chapter one of the book advocating multi-modality, a dialogic interaction among modes of inquiry, nor with arguments I make in several other places, including "Composition Studies: Dappled Discipline" (in *Rhetoric Review*), "The Place of Doctoral Studies in Rhetoric and Composition" (with Andrea