Politics, Pedagogy, and the Profession of Composition: Confronting Commodification and the Contingencies of Power

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Politics in composition studies carries overlapping and conflicting meanings that have led to confusion about the politics we enact in our teaching and about the relation of those politics to the politics of the profession and the public sphere. The conventional use of politics in popular discourse designates state and civil matters, public affairs and issues. This seemingly innocuous meaning is sullied by a second sense of politics as the pursuit of specific interests or agendas through planning. This usage can suggest something underhanded: private “scheming” for private (sectarian, personal) interests about what are, or should be, public matters. We can see both of these meanings operating in the once dominant view that politics is outside the proper sphere of women: politics is, or was, considered inappropriate for women both because of its focus on public rather than private, domestic life and because the view of humans—that is, men—as “political animals” pursuing their personal interests conflicted with the self-denying, “good girl” subjectivity expected of women.

A third sense revises these meanings by extending the reach of the political to apply to all human endeavors, both those officially designated “public” and those designated “private” or “personal” (as in “the personal is political”). This sense also revises these meanings by its presumption of human history as one of perpetual struggle over competing interests (rather than as one of harmony occasionally interrupted by conflict), with the proviso that these competing interests are not those of autonomous individuals but are socially produced (as in, of course, class struggle). In this third sense, politics is an inescapable dimension of all human life, not something to regret or attempt to escape but to engage as fully as possible. So, for example, in the preface to The Politics of Writing Instruction: Postsecondary, the editors assert that “the teaching of writing is unavoid-
ably a political act. After all, there is no such thing as value-neutral
teaching, certainly not value-neutral teaching of writing.” Therefore, “a
genuine force for positive change in the ways and means by which writing
is taught is possible only when we take stock of the politics of writing
instruction and begin to enter consciously and knowledgeably into the
political arena” (Bullock and Trimbur xviii, xix-xx). As suggested by the
reference to values, this third view of politics extends the reach of the term
beyond conventional notions of governmental rule to include ideology,
here understood not as something one can avoid or escape from (as from
“false consciousness”) but as a matter of competing sets of values, beliefs,
and ways of living.

This extension of the political to include the ideological, however, is
itself an ideology in conflict with a prevailing ideology. In this prevailing
ideology, the ideological is seen precisely as false consciousness; the
political is restricted to either statecraft or the machinations for pursuing
private interests; and ideology, politics, and power are, if sometimes
necessary, nonetheless always dirty. Unfortunately for those adopting the
(Althusserian) view of ideology as inescapable rather than something
opposed to truth, their ideology about ideology is not only not dominant;
it sometimes appears to have the effect of undercutting any (ethical)
foundation for pursuing their values. As Patricia Bizzell says about
those accepting this view, “Thus enmeshed in ideologies, [they] see
ethical commitments as just another ideological construct, ratified by
no transcendent authority or by no match with transcendent truth”
(“Marxist” 55).

Some of the confusion in the debate on politics in composition studies
arises from mixing these different notions of politics and ideology. That
confusion, however, insofar as it is ideological, is not readily subject to
simple resolution through a more precise definition of terms. Some
confusion, of course, does result from a mixing of different
conceptualizations of the terms within the same argument. For example,
in the second statement quoted above from the preface to The Politics of
Writing Instruction, which urges readers to “enter consciously and
knowledgeably into the political arena,” the editors at least imply that the
political arena is something separate from other arenas, something one
can move into (or out of). This view of the political, however, is at odds
with their more expansive sense of writing instruction as inevitably
political. Such mixing often represents, however, not just a failure of
precision but a competition between residual, alternative, and dominant
understandings of politics, ideology, and power. Such mixing of conflict-
ing conceptions has been foregrounded in attempts to address the dilemma of how to enact a feminist pedagogy eschewing claims of authority and power while operating from a position of institutional authority and power (as, say, a tenured professor). In an echo of Bizzell, Carmen Luke, for example, observes, “Feminist pedagogy, conceptualized as (maternal) nurture and distanced from claims of pedagogical authority and institutional power, leaves itself wide open to the theoretical impossibility of having a ‘foundation’ from which to arbitrate knowledges, student voices and experiences, and the teacher’s own epistemological position” (“Feminist Pedagogy” 284). This dilemma arises at least in part from a conflict between a notion of power relations as inescapable, and hence to be engaged directly, and a view of power relations as something that can and should be escaped.¹

Aside from mixing definitions of politics and the competition among these definitions, a third and more significant source of confusion in the debate on the politics of composition stems from the failure to understand the politics of specific acts in terms of the material conditions of their specific sites and in relation to the conditions of the larger spheres encompassing those sites. We are only beginning to question, and articulate, the political effectivity of action at one social and historical site in relation to other sites. Typically, arguments about the politics of pedagogy, the profession, the academy, or society either treat these sites as discrete or, at best, assume a relation of homology among them. Such arguments frequently invoke a dominant, monolithic, reified notion of power, a notion that undermines, by either inflating or understating, pedagogical and professional politics. Instead of viewing power as relational, power is imagined as a commodity—something some have or acquire and use on others, or else something some attempt to share with or give to others to “empower” them (see Gore 56-58; A. Luke, 322). Accordingly, those with less power in relation to those with greater power are imagined as effectively powerless, and the act of giving power becomes fraught with ethical dilemmas: the giver is ethically suspect for having power in the first place; and giving power itself is suspect for encouraging complicity with the dominant power structure. For example, Carmen Luke offers an account of the dilemma facing feminists committed to principled disregard for the institutional power that they are now authorized to wield.

This same view of power in compositional work as a discrete rather than relational force is also manifested in the perspective that holds that the politics of composition studies has to do only with the profession and
its place within the academy and society. In this perspective, the politics of composition can appear to surround, and perhaps even impinge on, without, as it were, infiltrating the site of teaching. We can see the dominance of this perspective in the devotion of the majority of the essays in *The Politics of Writing Instruction* to conflicts between various groups of its members that seem to threaten the integrity of the profession (for example, teachers versus researchers, those affiliated with the study of classical rhetoric versus others, full- versus part-timers) or to conflicts between compositionists and others (literature professors, university administrators, other departments, and society at large). Alternatively, essays on the politics of pedagogy frequently ignore such issues, restricting their focus instead to relations between the instructor and students.

Schematically, we might say that the focus on the politics of the profession rehearses a concept of politics that involves strictly "public" matters and implicitly recognizes only the exchange value of compositional work—its status within the academic and larger social realms, signaled by its degree of command over economic and cultural capital. In contrast, the focus on the politics of pedagogy accepts a view of politics as inherent in any activity but restricts itself to the political nature of the (relatively) private realm of the individual classroom or course and the use value of work conducted there—that is, the specific uses to which those involved in that work put it, regardless of the values for which it might be exchanged in the marketplace of skills and knowledge understood in terms abstracted from the circumstances of their specific use in that classroom or course. My argument, however, is that we can understand the politics of either site only by locating our work with and on the political, however it is conceived, in its specific material location, and by addressing the processes by which that work is converted in value from one site to the next. In other words, we need to examine how the politics of a pedagogy intersects and interacts with the politics of the profession, with the material circumstances of teaching and teachers' professional positioning, and with the larger material circumstances associated with the institutional and historical location of the course, teacher, and students.

This examination requires understanding both the ways in which the "politics" of compositional work is susceptible to commodification and the ways of resisting such commodification. I begin by examining the commodification of politics within the realm of pedagogy and the classroom, first as politics is understood as a topic in pedagogy, and, secondly, as it is understood as an attribute of pedagogy. Reviewing the debate over teachers' exercise of power and authority, particularly in
"critical" pedagogy, I argue that a full and differentiated sense of power as relational requires that we recognize the different forms in which teachers exercise power and students achieve real, if limited, agency; it also requires that we locate the teacher, students, and course—in short, the pedagogy—in relation to the larger institutional, material, and historical conditions of production. This examination must include analysis of the means by which pedagogical work is "capitalized"—the means by which its value is defined and exchanged in terms of the abstract skills and knowledge that it ostensibly produces and then "sells" in the marketplace of academic credentials, employment, and social status—and it must also include the contingencies affecting that capitalization and valuation. In the final section, I examine specific ways in which the politics of pedagogy and the politics of the profession may converge, and I delineate how addressing the processes of such convergences might enable us to engage more effectively the politics of our work and the work of our politics.

Politics in Pedagogy

There exists a seemingly innocuous place for politics in pedagogy: as the assigned subject matter on which students are to write (abortion, pro or con; gun control, pro or con; and so forth). The theory behind this long-standing practice would seem to be that students need lively topics on which to write, topics that will somehow inspire them to do more than rote work. But then, typically and significantly, the point of assigning such topics is not to learn more about them, or even to learn what students' opinions are, but to produce fodder for lessons on the skills of writing formal arguments. And so long as students are judged not for what they write (or think) but how they write (with correct or incorrect spelling, say), no "political" controversy need ensue—hence the lack of public outcry over the practice. The innocuousness of such a practice derives from the commodification of both politics and the teaching of writing. In such pedagogies, both the positions taken and the work of producing them are commodified, removed from the circumstances in which the actual taking of those positions and the work of adopting and advocating them have immediate use value. Instead, such pedagogies use assignments as a means of producing the abstracted skills of argumentation (and, sometimes, research). The choice of assigned "positions" remains a matter of indifference.

The crucial role that abstraction and the commodification of political topics and argumentation plays in the acceptability of such a composition
pedagogy is illustrated by the counter-example of the reception given the proposed English 306 course, "Writing about Difference," at the University of Texas, Austin. With the goading of the conservative National Association of Scholars, opponents of the course inferred from its title (many getting even that wrong) a pedagogy of political indoctrination (Brodkey 248, 251). The choice of subject matter on which students were to write, that is, seemed to stem from the instructors' sense of what was, and was not, an issue meriting discussion and thus was taken to be understood not in the abstract, as mere fodder, but as a focal point of the course—oppression, say, or social difference. Had the "topic" of the UT-Austin course been seen as clearly subordinate to a focus on acquiring abstract rhetorical skills—for example, had the title of the course been, say, "Writing Arguments," rather than "Writing about Difference"—the story of English 306 may have been very different, since for mainstream culture, composition's proper focus is precisely such "technical" matters (see Brodkey 247-48). Both the arguments written in such a course and the topics addressed would then be understood as having no use in themselves; rather, the value of the course would reside in the abstract skills of writing acquired and made available for exchange.

Of course, the distinction between topic and pedagogy is not so easily maintained, as demonstrated by Brodkey's own experience and the occasional outbursts in debate-team activities and courses in argument writing. The fragility of this distinction is also suggested when no outbursts occur. James Seitz, for example, argues that having students write on topics conventionally recognized as "political"—topics of state or civil issues of current, public debate—can in fact encourage the production of a highly restricted, conventionally political discourse: arrogant, repetitive, predictable, banal, and ultimately oppressively boring (7-8).² That is, such topics have been so commodified that they seem inherently abstract to students rather than something that they may find immediately relevant to their lives—and thus worth addressing. As a response to this phenomenon, and in recognition of the "ubiquity of 'the political,'" Seitz argues that the political should be taught not through invoking conventionally political discourse but through addressing the politics—which he renames the rhetoric—of all discourse:

Since "the political," broadly conceived—in the form of assumptions, biases, selections, and repressions—runs through all writing, teachers and students must surely attend to the political influences at play in any texts examined in class. . . . The political . . . emerges along the whole
spectrum of discursive practices, from diaries, letters, interviews, stories, biographies, plays, journalism, criticism, theory, and so on, as well as from essays that argue explicitly for the correctness of a certain public agenda. [Thus] there is no reason to limit student writing to issues of politics in order to do justice to the political character of language. (10)

This is a very tempting argument. First, it allows teachers to claim to practice what Seitz, borrowing from Roland Barthes, terms a “discreet” politics in their teaching while offering the possibility of avoiding the fate of Brodkey, her colleagues, and English 306 (Seitz 7-8). Second, it is more consistent with the view of the ubiquity of the “political,” a view to which many writing teachers subscribe. Third, it increases the likelihood that attention is given to issues that are not already demarcated by the dominant as political but whose political effects are often felt by the marginalized. As Carmen Luke observes, “For many women, substantive political problems often are private and not the same as those deemed as public, common interest” (“Feminist Politics” 36). The political sphere, like the public sphere with which it is associated, is one defined and controlled by the dominant group and hence is likely to exclude consideration of the politics of what the dominant group has defined as “private.” Thus, focusing on the politics in all discursive practices makes it possible to address how what is commonly defined as the personal is, indeed, political. Finally, this strategy may be more promising pedagogically (in that it engages students in the politics of writing) than a course devoted to the topic of social oppression, conventionally understood, since conventional political topics may encourage a highly restricted and conventional political discourse. Seitz reports that students taking a course about social oppression—many of them victims of such oppression—ended up complaining about the restricted nature of that discourse, pleading, “Aren’t we going to deal with anything besides oppression?” (9). Conversely, a course addressing the politics of discursive practices conventionally defined as apolitical may enable students to see the use value of their explorations of discursive practices.

There is a danger in pursuing the “discreet” politics of this strategy, however—a danger that arises from the dilemma posed to those who do accept the ubiquity of the political. Like those who accept an Althusserian view of ideology, that view can appear to preclude teaching any particular politics or ideology, whether espoused in writing or enacted through its rhetoric. That is, the discreet politics of this pedagogy may remain “discreet”—that is, something that students and teachers do not directly
engage. Instead, those accepting this view of politics may resort to teaching and learning just politics and ideology in general rather than the discreet politics practiced in the discourse of teaching and writing. Discreet politics thus may become an "apolitical" politics of laissez-faire pluralism (see also Jay and Graff 206).

Seitz's own pedagogy appears to lapse into just such a politics. He recommends assigning a variety of roles for students to play, the goal of which is not to teach "a particular rhetorical maneuver, such as arguing for a political position, but to teach rhetorical maneuvering itself, how to shift from one discourse to another as occasion demands" (11). To do this, he assigns students particular fictional roles so that they can "absorb the conventions of this particular role in order to appropriate or revise them for their own ends." What those ends might be, however, appears to remain unavailable for critique. So, while in one sense this pedagogy may teach students "to locate the political even in writing that appears distant from politics," it does not have students address their politics, or the politics of the pedagogy itself, only politics in the abstract (12). The use value of the work students accomplished in their writing thus may be made subordinate to the exchange value of the skills of learning how, and when, in the abstract (future), to take a particular stance.

One alternative to the distantiation from politics to which this pedagogy is susceptible is to insist not simply on exploring the rhetorical politics of adopting a particular position but, as Min-Zhan Lu has argued, to insist on "the politics of assigning and assuming particular points of view and not others," to insist on "each individual's right and need to deliberate over decisions about where and how to position oneself in relation to diverse cultures" ("Representing" 131). Lu makes an argument for reclaiming, through redefinition, "PC" pedagogy as one focused on "power and conflict, politics and commitment." Her pedagogy thus aims at teaching not a "politically correct" position but that "no position, textual or otherwise, can be taken in isolation from the power relationships among diverse cultures with conflicting political interests." Rather than assuming the ubiquity of the political, this strategy takes that ubiquity as its explicit focus. Furthermore, such a focus grounds analysis of the ubiquitous political dimension of writing in the specifics of history and culture in which students and professors live and therefore may avoid the abstraction of politics and the descent into laissez-faire pluralism effected by rhetorical role play.\(^3\)
In “Representing and Negotiating Differences,” Lu suggests that we have students confront the politics they enact through the kinds of positions they take and the ways in which they take them. She is not concerned with the inflections of the specific power relations of the institutional roles of teaching and learning in the composition course, nor does she address the location of the politics that students enact in the material conditions of their enactment—in, for example, a required composition course. In that essay, that is, she does not address the power relations between teacher and student, or the institutional power relations that require students to enroll in composition courses: the politics enacted by teachers and institutions. (She addresses such matters, for example in her contributions to Horner and Lu’s Representing the “Other.”) Her position contrasts with much of the debate on the politics of pedagogy, which concerns itself almost exclusively with the relations of power between teachers and students. Many of the attempts to address those relations, however, have been limited by treating power, authority, and pedagogy as commodities, a treatment that undermines efforts to view teaching and learning as located in the material social process. That is, such attempts treat teacher-student politics in a way that isolates political relations from the larger context of the courses and conditions in which they are enacted. To illustrate this phenomenon, I want to turn to Elizabeth Ellsworth’s account of her attempt to enact critical pedagogy in a curriculum and instruction course (C&I 607: Media and Anti-Racist Pedagogies) at the University of Wisconsin, Madison and to the debate on issues raised by that account. This debate demonstrates both the dominance of commodified notions of power and pedagogy and the need to confront the commodification of the work of composition pedagogy in our teaching and writing.

What makes Ellsworth’s account troubling is the way in which she treats critical pedagogy as a commodity only to condemn it for failing to deliver as a commodity. Ellsworth reports that in her course she aimed to practice key concepts of critical pedagogy—empowerment, student voice, dialogue, and so on. Her efforts, however, seem to have led to relations of domination, the very opposite of critical pedagogy’s expressed aims (298). She expected her critical pedagogy to lead students to engage in open dialogue; establish egalitarian democratic relations; experience individual freedom; have their race, class, and gender positions affirmed; and so forth. She found, however, that the experience of the students as well as her own experience in her course failed to conform to these
abstract "myths." Consequently, she rejects critical pedagogy as "repressive," calling instead for a "pedagogy of the unknowable" (318-24).

This account is troubling because the "failure" of the course seems simultaneously inevitable and therefore indisputable and yet beside the point because that failure arises from her treatment of critical pedagogy as a commodity. Having reduced critical pedagogy to a commodity isolated from the material circumstances of its specific enactments, she then critiques it for its failure, as commodity, to address just such circumstances. That she expected critical pedagogy to operate as a commodity is apparent in the ways in which she introduced it into her teaching. For example, she explains that when she was asked by her students what she meant by "critical" in her syllabi descriptions of critical pedagogy, she simply "referred them to answers provided in the literature," as if such a pedagogy were monolithic and fixed in meaning and effect (299). Noting, for example, that whereas "the literature on critical pedagogy implies that students and teachers can and should engage each other in the classroom as fully rational subjects," she complains that "students and professor entered C&I 607 with investments of privilege and struggle already made in favor of some ethical and political positions concerning racism and against other positions," thus precluding the purely rationalist, analytical dialogue at which critical pedagogy aims (301). And she finds, "Acting as if our classroom were a safe space in which democratic dialogue was possible and happening did not make it so" (315). In other words, she is shocked to discover that the actual historical realities of the students, herself as professor, and C&I 607 failed to match the ideal to which critical pedagogy aims. But rather than concluding with a recognition of the need for both students and teacher to rework the meaning and substance of critical pedagogy anew in each historical instance of its practice, as one might expect, Ellsworth uses the inevitable gap between the aims of critical pedagogy and the lived experience of the C&I 607 course to condemn the pedagogy for its failure, by itself, to close that gap. Like an angry consumer, she rejects critical pedagogy as repressive rather than liberatory, as a commodity that does not "work" as advertised.

In keeping with this treatment of pedagogy as commodity, power and authority in her argument are treated as if they were identical. Attributed to the pedagogy alone, power is not relational but becomes an essentialized entity acting through the teacher on the students, its exercise always inevitably repressive. Thus, she ends up rejecting the possibility of the
"emancipatory authority" of the critical teacher because, following her logic, any exercise of "authority" is complicit with "authoritarianism" and so cannot be emancipatory (307). Indeed, she rejects the possibility of any ethical exercise of teacherly authority altogether: how, she asks rhetorically, "does a teacher 'make' students autonomous without directing them?" (308). In such statements, Ellsworth implies that since by definition any actual use of authority is problematic, all exercise of authority must be ruled out. The problem of authority is grounds for its rejection (see also McLaren 71-72).

Much of the criticism of Ellsworth's view has focused on her limited conception of possible or actual power relations between teachers and students in their institutional roles as teachers and students. That criticism insists on a more differentiated or relational view of power that would grant, or acknowledge, a degree of agency to students and qualify the totalized understanding of the effect of power that Ellsworth seems to fear. While such criticisms complicate the picture of politics operating within the classroom, they typically do not address the relation of such politics to the larger material circumstances in which such politics take place.

For example, Patricia Bizzell argues that teachers need to differentiate among the ways they can exercise power. Bizzell identifies Ellsworth's experience as exemplary of the impasse created by teachers such as herself who "want to serve the common good with the power we possess by virtue of our position as teachers" but who nonetheless remain "deeply suspicious of any exercise of power in the classroom" (54). To break through this impasse, Bizzell argues, we need a more differentiated notion of power (54-55).

Bizzell herself differentiates three types of power: "coercion," "persuasion," and "authority" ("Power" 56-57). While coercion involves A's exercise of power over B without the consent of B, persuasion is the exercise of power only with both parties' consent and only in ways that change both. For Bizzell, persuasion represents the kind of power ideally exercised in dialogic or collaborative, non-hierarchical teaching. Authority, in contrast, is exercised when A acts instrumentally over B without having to persuade B that the actions will serve B's interests; no "persuasion" is required. However, authority differs from coercion in that B must first grant A the right to exercise such power over B by being persuaded that this will be in B's best interests. Thus, in this third type of power, "once B has been persuaded to grant authority to A, their relationship changes to a less dialogic one. B empowers A to direct their course of action without A's having to exercise persuasion at every step taken" (57).
Bizzell accounts for the failure of Ellsworth’s course as a case of her failure to differentiate between coercion and authority. Ellsworth’s recognition of her own partiality incapacitates her from giving direction to the course, since it precludes the rational persuasion she sees as requisite to critical pedagogy (Bizzell, “Power” 61-63). While Bizzell sees Ellsworth’s recognition of the partiality of all parties as laudable, she also sees that Ellsworth’s students are in desperate need of direction to bring their varied experiences of difference “around a shared project” (63). What Ellsworth dismisses from consideration as a “paternalistic” move—the teacher deciding for the students what will be necessary—Bizzell names utopian, in the positive sense of “projecting images of what we might achieve.” And, if this seems to require the imposition of the teacher’s ideology (or politics), then, for Bizzell, so be it. As she argues elsewhere, the eschewal of one’s ethical commitments on the grounds that everything is ideological in fact “indicates a real nostalgia for the transcendent ratification that we in theory reject. For if we were utterly convinced of the inevitability of ideology, we would not feel uneasy about seeing the world through ideological interpretations” (“Marxist” 55). In other words, the disavowal of pursuing one’s politics because one recognizes the ubiquity of the political represents a slide from the more expansive Althusserian notion of ideology to the more restricted, conventional sense of ideology as “false consciousness.” While recognizing that one’s inevitable “partiality” can affect how one pursues one’s ethical commitments, it does not justify abjuring those commitments, which would, in effect, lead to collusion with dominant ideology—laissez-faire pluralism again. I am not suggesting that we excuse coercion in the name of one’s commitment to achieving a particular utopian vision but that we commit ourselves to learning to live with and confront the contradictions between our inevitable partiality and the egalitarian universals of the utopian ideals we espouse (see Bizzell, “Marxist” 64-66).

While Bizzell’s differentiation of types of power offers a way of escaping the “impasse” created by pursuing critical pedagogy’s seemingly contradictory ideals of empowering and directing students, the model she presents remains limited in its conception of power as an entity to be used or distributed in different ways. In an examination of power in education, Nicholas Burbules notes this limitation in various efforts to differentiate power. First, such attempts “assume that power is something an individual or group has, and uses, and that what differs is the form of exercising it”; second, such “typological” approaches tend to “hypostasize what are actually artificial points of emphasis”; finally, “the very attempt
to classify discrete forms that power takes distracts from the interrelated aspect of certain elements (e.g., persuasion and manipulation) . . . and from the systemic nature of power in society as a continuous 'web' of relationships that catches up persons in a series of effects which are only partly intended” (96). We can see these limitations operating in Bizzell's formulations. These formulations treat power as an entity that individuals possess and exercise (for example, A exercising power over B, with or without B's consent), overlook the politics of categorizing power, and assume a degree of autonomy among the parties involved in such exercises at odds with the Althusserian view of power and ideology that otherwise informs her arguments.

As an alternative to such approaches, Burbules draws on Anthony Giddens to argue for a view of power as relational (Burbules 97). Such a conception emphasizes the circumstances under which specific parties come together and thus avoids the rationalist view of the exercise of power and the expectation of fixed outcomes from that exercise. A complex of material circumstances—as much as any uniform conscious intention—determine or, rather, overdetermine, power relations and the effects of their operation. Furthermore, a view of power as relational undermines the reification of power, and types of power, as always and everywhere the same entity. Rather than differentiating power in terms of the consent of those on whom it is exercised, power is differentiated according to the specifics of those circumstances. And finally, this view recognizes a degree of power in all parties rather than in just one. As Giddens observes,

Power relations . . . are always two-way, even if the power of one actor or party in a social relation is minimal compared to another. Power relations are relations of autonomy and dependence, but even the most autonomous agent is in some degree dependent, and the most dependent actor or party in a relationship retains some autonomy. (93)

Applying this view of power to Ellsworth's example, we might say that her students' resistance to her efforts at achieving a "critical" pedagogical ideal represents neither evidence of the failure of that pedagogy nor her failure to assume authority but students' own exercise of power in relation to Ellsworth. Thus, it was not something that had to interfere with the course but evidence of the potential they brought to bear on the course. From this perspective, too, Ellsworth's complaint—that "there have been no sustained research attempts to explore whether or how the practices it [critical pedagogy] prescribes actually alter specific power relations outside or inside schools"—is robbed of its force,
depending as it does on a failure to recognize both the complex of power relations operating in any given historical site and the overdetermination of their effects (301). As Jennifer Gore argues, if power is viewed relationally—as something one “exercises” rather than as an entity one possesses and can give to or share with others—then “we confront the unforeseeable and contradictory effects of the exercise of power and must be more humble and reflexive in our claims,” recognizing that “no matter what our aims or how we go about ‘empowering’, our efforts will be partial and inconsistent” (62, 63). From this perspective, the indeterminate effects of Ellsworth’s “pedagogy of the unknowable” is an attribute to be granted any pedagogy, given the operation of such complexes in any site. We cannot expect the exercise of power to be simply either empowering or repressive.

This crucial recognition of power as relational and of the consequent indeterminacy of its effects can thus help in resisting the commodification of pedagogy. But to further such resistance, the application of this recognition cannot be restricted to relations within the course but must also be applied to relations between the changing positionalities of students before, during, and after a course; relations between one’s students and others outside the course; and relations between the course and the specific institutional and more general material conditions in which it is located. Ellsworth effectively differentiates among students in her course (by race, sex, sexual orientation, class, and so forth) but fails to make differentiations diachronically and synchronically between student positions before, during, and after the course, and between her students and others. Ellsworth does note that both she and her students experienced contradictory and shifting positionalities, a possibility she admits critical pedagogy recognizes. She complains, however, about the “pain, confusion, and difficulty” this posed for her and her students (311-12). A non-commodified notion of pedagogy would understand that students’ difficulty in speaking, however painful, is inescapable, something to be directly confronted, rather than as a justification for dismissing the pedagogy.

Unlike the view of pedagogy as commodity, in which teaching and learning must be pain-free and must feel “good” to all, treating pedagogy as the site for doing work on a project would give students and teacher the perspective, context, and direction to understand and work through such difficulties (see Giroux 176; hooks 52-53, 102-103; and Bizzell, “Power” 64-65). A relational view of power would aid in thinking through the difficulties of confronting the different positionalities that such students
experience, and when and how to exercise what sort of power to help move the students as a whole toward the project of the course.

For example, Ellsworth and her students might have negotiated where and how they, in all their partialities, would direct all their materially-limited energies to investigate and counter racist structures and practices at the University of Wisconsin, Madison (the initial topic of and impetus for the course, after all). They might have used what expertise, authority, and resources they possessed to work toward such ends rather than attempting the inevitably doomed project of achieving a critical utopia in classroom relations. Indeed, it appears that the students themselves came to abandon Ellsworth's commitment to achieving an ideal classroom environment when they transformed the course into what they termed "Coalition 607" (317). That is, rather than imagining the work of the course outside material exigencies, they relocated it within a particular time and place, reoriented their efforts toward achieving more reachable goals, and treated their contradictions and partialities in relation to those exigencies rather than letting them serve as obstacles to their work.

That they were successful in doing so demonstrates the need to couple attention to differences within and among students in a course over time with attention to differences between the students within a course and students and others outside the course. Ellsworth is attentive to the differences among her students, but she says little about the relation of those students to other students, to their institutional position vis-à-vis those other students, the university, herself, and the course—all of which might provide a useful perspective and context from which to understand the difficulties and successes that she and they experienced. Gore, noting that many accounts of feminist and critical pedagogies "pay little attention to the location of their practices in educational institutions," argues that we need to define the contexts for such pedagogical work "historically and politically" while acknowledging "the unique struggles that characterize the exercise of power at the micro levels" (61). Otherwise, the problem of "empowerment" remains trapped in the dualisms of power/powerlessness and domination/subordination, understood as "purely oppositional stances" rather than as a problem of "multiplicity and contradiction." In the case of Ellsworth's course, differentiating between her students and others by attending to the fact that the course was a "special topics" graduate education course rather than, say, a required first-year writing course would surely be significant to any understanding of the work of that course. By contrast, her failure to investigate the implications of the specific institutional, curricular location of the course
and its student population threatens to treat the course, the teacher, and the students transhistorically. Indeed, her account of pedagogy differs from testimonials about other commodities—from refrigerators to drugs—only by its use of the account of her experience to illustrate not a product that "works" but one that doesn't. Conversely, an understanding that her students were enrolled in a graduate education program at least suggests a specific condition of power that they enjoyed in relation to Ellsworth, the school, and other students that would begin to account for the particular turns and successes the course took. It would enable us to see the pedagogy as something that students, so positioned, engaged with, that they "worked" in particular if contradictory ways, to particular if contradictory ends, rather than treating the pedagogy as something expected to act on the students in predictable and uniform ways—that is, as commodity.

In this sense, even Ellsworth's pedagogy of "unknowability" represents nostalgia for a transcendent master narrative that she has learned to reject and a desire for an impartial knowledge even though she suspects that such a knowledge is impossible and that the claims to such knowledge are oppressive. In terms of Carmen Luke's argument, the "failure" of her course illustrates the self-defeating self-denial to which the "good girl" myth can lead teachers. The invocation of unknowability crystallizes the limitations of a reified, totalized concept of power as uniform in its essence and effects. And, finally, her call for a new pedagogy demonstrates the dilemmas in which teachers get caught when pedagogies are taken for, and judged as, commodities, since a "pedagogy of the unknowable" paradoxically represents the ultimate in pedagogical commodities—a pedagogy that promises, quite credibly, that it cannot not fail to "deliver."

**Pedagogy and the Contingencies of Power**

Ellsworth concludes her account by asking what it would mean to confront "unknowability":

What would it mean to recognize not only that a multiplicity of knowledges are present in the classroom . . . but that these knowledges are contradictory, partial, and irreducible? . . . What practice is called for when even the combination of all partial knowledges in a classroom results in yet another partial knowing . . . ? [What would it mean to recognize] that every social, political, or educational project the class takes up locally will already, at the moment of its definition, lack knowledges necessary to answer broader questions of human survival and social justice? (321)
Ellsworth’s questions and my critique seem to suggest not simply that we should expect from all pedagogies a degree of unknowability, but also that this unknowability justifies absolving ourselves of responsibility for our pedagogy on the grounds that the effects of what we do are, after all, not strictly speaking under our control; they are “unknowable.” Such a conclusion, however, would only evince nostalgia for transcendent certainty and would effectively give sway to the dominant culture’s claims of certainty through retreat from resistance to such claims.

Furthermore, that nostalgia again demonstrates a commodified notion of pedagogy, for it places on pedagogy a burden it cannot possibly bear alone, assigning it a task it cannot by itself perform. Indeed, we can see evidence of such a view in the exclusiveness of the concern both Ellsworth and her critics have with power in the classroom. Such a focus is suggested by Ellsworth’s assertion that for her purposes, “The most important interruption of existing power relations within the university consisted of transforming business-as-usual—that is, prevailing social relations—in a university classroom” (299). This statement makes sense only if we accept both a unitary conception of power and a homological view of its exercise in different sites. That is, the specific relations of power occurring at a pedagogical site are seen as equivalent to relations of power at all other sites; consequently, to interrupt the business-as-usual of the university in any of its sites constitutes interruption of that business at all its other sites. Business is business.

If carried to its logical extreme, such a strategy would constitute a recipe for full containment of counterhegemonic efforts, since it would effectively direct such efforts to those sites the dominant has already foresworn as inconsequential. This is not to dismiss the significance of the politics of teacher-student relations but to insist that we locate those relations within their specific material sites, differentiating between the significance of power relations in specific instances and locales and considering the interaction of those relations among sites. We can account for the particularly complicated and angst-ridden experience of C&I 607 that Ellsworth describes as being the result, in part, of her initial failure to differentiate power in such ways.

By contrast, the pedagogy of the unknowable that Ellsworth ends up calling for appears to require such location, for it is defined as a practice “profoundly contextual (historical) and interdependent (social)” (323). As I have argued above, Ellsworth’s invocation of a pedagogy of the unknowable itself suggests a lingering desire for a commodifiable pedagogy, albeit one that paradoxically fails to “deliver” a consumable
product. Yet, its emphasis on the “unknowable” also hints at a recognition of the inevitable indeterminacy of any pedagogy that is abstractly conceived, critical pedagogy included, when it is put into material practice. However, even her touted pedagogy, as commodity, retains crucial limitations in its conception of teachers and students and does not address the relation of the politics of pedagogy to actions and social change at other sites.

To avoid succumbing to the irresponsible twins of nostalgia and passivity while recognizing the indeterminacy of the politics enacted in pedagogy means changing the issue teachers address to themselves, as Gore puts it, from “what we can do for you” to “what can we do for you?” posed as a non-rhetorical question (62). Answering that question requires both differentiating among relations of power and examining their interactions. Allan Luke, drawing on Pierre Bourdieu’s discussion of different kinds of “capital,” points to one way by which the politics of pedagogies may be understood. Luke focuses on how particular types of “power” are “capitalized” through pedagogy—that is, how the conditions and processes by which such power is constituted, increased, exchanged, or devalued (326-27). Like Ellsworth, Luke critiques versions of Freirean critical (as well as “genre”) pedagogies that romanticize individual voice and student empowerment and mask the political sources of teacher authority (314). His critique differs from Ellsworth’s, however, by also repudiating the reification of power in such pedagogies. Claiming that such pedagogies are based on a “hypodermic” model of power in which the process of teaching literate practices is imagined as directly inculcating power, he notes that this “pedagogy equals power equation” tends to have a one-dimensional, singular ontology of power... [tending] to psychologise or textualise power, because all power is seen to be of the same logical type and empirical status” (315, 322-23). Power thus comes to be seen as a “possession... that can be transmitted (and therefore, bought, owned, rented, leased, and yes, foreclosed), something that is apparently culture-neutral and politically neutral, and something that has economic exchange value” (322).

To complicate this view of power and pedagogy, Luke uses Bourdieu’s distinctions among cultural, economic, and social capital and his analysis of the conditions and processes by which one form of capital is converted into another. One may be able to exchange economic capital (material goods and resources) for cultural capital (training, credentials, knowledge of specific valued cultural entities and behaviors) or use economic capital to purchase access to social capital (social and institutional networks) (A.
However, while literacy instruction can provide students with both embodied and institutional cultural capital (in the form of bodily training and practice, and credentials, respectively), whether and how such capital "counts," and for what, depend on its relation to social capital and whether it is recognized as capital. For example, as John Ogbu has argued, while schools may provide blacks with cultural capital (for example, through training in specific literacy practices), blacks, as a "caste-like" minority, by definition lack social capital (135-38). As a result, any cultural capital they acquire through schooling is less likely to be recognized as capital or is likely to be devalued relative to the cultural capital others acquire through schooling; as a further consequence it cannot readily be converted to economic capital. Blacks continue to be overqualified and underpaid for the jobs they get (Ogbu 145). Not surprisingly, this situation, along with blacks' ongoing history of limited access to equal education and unfair treatment in the schools, has led many blacks quite reasonably to mistrust the value of the cultural capital that schools ostensibly offer (144-48). As Allan Luke observes, "possession of cultural and symbolic capital is neither necessary nor sufficient for economic and social power. The cultural capital generated in literacy training can only be realised and articulated through a series of contingencies which arise in the cultural and social field" (330).

Recognizing the contingent nature of the cultural capital that schools generate leads Luke to call for a pedagogy that "offers social and cultural strategies for analysing and engaging with the conversion of capital in various cultural fields... build[ing] for students a critical social theory of practice" (332). He would have us build on the strengths of "liberatory" critical and feminist pedagogies by refocusing outward from texts to "diachronic social analyses of education, text-based economies and cultures" (332-33). Thus, his critique leads him not to disown such pedagogies but to complicate them by incorporating into them an analysis of processes of the capitalization of knowledge. Similarly, J. Elspeth Stuckey recognizes the ways in which "literacy" constitutes an act of violence in denying the contingent nature of the cultural capital it represents, and thus she calls for teaching about those contingencies, asking that we learn to understand "the connections between literacy and economy, literacy and work, literacy and race, gender and class, literacy and English teachers" (122).

The alternative understanding of the contingent nature of the power of literacy training—that such training is a mere ruse distracting attention from and excusing social oppression—capitulates to a more totalized
conception of the hegemonic, and a more restricted notion of the political, than is justified. There is, of course, plenty of evidence to make us suspicious of the power of literacy training as either politically inconsequential or complicitous with perpetuating the myth that literacy in itself justifies social relations produced by classism, sexism, racism, and so on. Such suspicions seem particularly appropriate in the case of college-level literacy instruction. As Stuckey observes, “College English teachers do not . . . teach as a matter of course unemployed or impoverished minority women. They do not, as a matter of course, teach many or most of their children. . . . [Thus] at the precise point at which literacy becomes ‘functional,’ English teachers in the United States become [politically] dysfunctional” (108). Drawing on this perspective, Jeff Smith argues that because college students constitute an aspiring elite, those teachers interested in teaching literacy as a means of combating social injustice had best go elsewhere, where they might meet, teach, and possibly “empower” the non-elite (302, 318). Similarly, some arguments for service-learning claim that because universities teach the already select, it is only by leaving the academy that pedagogy can work for social justice.

But while it is true that schooling, literacy, and the academy generally are not the driving force behind social change, they also are not powerless to effect such change. To think that they are powerless is to revert to a reified, monolithic notion of power: if pedagogy is less powerful than other forces, it is therefore imagined to have no power rather than a different sort of power in relation to other contingencies. We must bear in mind the limitations and indeterminate effects of the cultural capital that students may acquire through literacy training at the college or other levels, but it is wrong to use those limitations as justification for abandoning such training altogether. Indeed, to use the indeterminacy of its effects as a reason to abandon literacy training altogether betrays a familiar nostalgia for a sure thing, a simple, guaranteed cure. Of course, as critics who react in these ways suggest, we can and should battle injustice on other fronts—in our roles as academics, citizens, family members, or in other capacities. But our activities on such fronts need not preclude working for such goals at the site of college teaching as well.

Furthermore, critics who react with nostalgia for certain cures also tend to essentialize the identities of students. Unlike Ellsworth, they differentiate between students in college and those outside college, but they fail to recognize the differences among those students within courses and the differences within individual students over time. While we can and should work to alter the gatekeeping achieved through college
admissions standards, it would be counterproductive to ignore those students presently admitted as uniformly elite. That is, if class and other social positions are inherently contradictory and relational, then the ostensibly "elite" students in college composition classes are themselves subject to such contradictions and hence merit attention. "Class" is not a "problem" (or responsibility) exclusively of the working class, any more than race is a problem only for nonwhites or sexism is just a women's concern. Furthermore, students' social positions and self positioning, rather than being wholly determined, can and do change over time in response to pedagogies as well as to other forces.

The Intersecting Politics of Pedagogy and the Profession
I have been arguing that the politics and power of any pedagogy must be understood not as commodities but in terms of the material and historical specificities of their enactment. Attention to such specificities requires that we understand that politics is not crudely instrumental. It is not composed of discrete actions taken by independent agents that lead to direct effects on passive recipients. Instead it is relational, and the instigation, effects, and significance of actions are not determinate but overdetermined. As Allan Luke suggests, the politics of pedagogy must be recognized as socially (and historically) contingent, responding to the circumstances of the course, institution, students, and larger social historical forces. I have not yet directly addressed the more common understanding of the "politics of composition" that refers to the profession of composition: its "internal" politics and its relations with English, the academy, and society generally. As I suggested at the opening of this essay, the politics of the two spheres of the classroom and the profession are typically viewed separately; arguments for a specific pedagogy rarely address the political relations of the profession, and vice versa. In this final section, I will focus on how the politics often seen as "internal" to composition as a profession interacts with the politics "internal" to pedagogy, and I will focus on the relation of both these politics to more broadly conceived social and historical contingencies.

Bourdieu has argued that it is not "political stances which determine people's stances on things academic, but their positions in the academic field which inform the stances that they adopt on political issues in general as well as on academic problems" (xvii-xviii). Applied to composition teachers, this argument would mean that their institutional positions within colleges and within departments would inform their stances on politics generally as well as on "academic" issues, including pedagogy.
The most obvious sense in which this situation may be true pertains to teachers in more vulnerable positions—for example, teachers lacking tenure, especially teachers in part-time or adjunct positions who are dependent on department chairs, deans, or provosts for their jobs. These teachers would be most pressured to adopt stances on both political and academic matters aligned with, or at least unopposed to, the stances of such figures, as a means of improving their chances for job security (Faigley 66).

This argument is made in support of tenure as the necessary means to ensure academic freedom. To give this argument a more concretely materialist inflection, we can say that the working conditions of part-time and adjunct faculty increase the likelihood that their teaching will conform to dominant expectations of the academy and the public, either because such conformity is written into their contracts in the form of required texts and syllabi or because they have neither incentive nor time to teach differently (see CCCC Committee 335). Workbooks, for example, may take less time than essays to correct. A focus on “error,” whatever its “practicality” for students, may well be an eminently “practical” solution for beleaguered teachers teaching multiple sections packed with too many students, particularly those teachers trying to cobble together several “part-time” jobs in order to achieve the earnings necessary for full-time survival. At institutions that define teachers’ performance in terms of the number of students who pass required exit exams, teachers may well focus on “teaching to the test.” Similarly, instructors whose job security depends on receiving favorable student evaluations are unlikely either to be too “demanding” or to challenge the dominant ideological viewpoints of their students, another factor that may in certain instances encourage a focus on just such “practical” matters as error (see Janangelo). According to this argument, tenured faculty, by contrast, have both the material resources and the academic freedom to develop and enact pedagogies in ways that run counter to the political stances of either academic administrators, their students, or the public. Their institutional position as tenured faculty authorizes them to bestow on students the benefits of their professional knowledge and expertise.

Such arguments usefully inscribe the academic within the material realm. A teacher’s politics, on this view, have much to do with her or his institutional position. However, these arguments typically assume the same commodified notion of the “politics” of pedagogy critiqued above: as something to be simply read off course syllabi and teaching practices rather than as operating in relation to social and historical contingencies.
While the pedagogy a teacher adopts may well be partially determined by her or his institutional position, the political effects of that pedagogy inhere not in the pedagogy itself but in the contingencies of material and social history. The politics of pedagogy thus have to be understood in terms of the relations between both the pedagogy and the contingencies of its enactment.

There is an alternative view of the import of one's institutional position on the politics of one's pedagogy that nonetheless accepts this commodified view of politics. According to this view, while the material resources and job security of tenure may free faculty to argue for, develop, and enact counterhegemonic pedagogies, that very freedom may well be earned on the backs of the adjuncts and part-timers. Who, after all, is teaching those sections from which the tenured professor is "released" to do such work? In his foreword to *The Politics of Writing Instruction*, Richard Ohmann asks: "Would we have the free time to theorize the politics of writing instruction, imagine our way toward liberatory composition, and excoriate the two-class system in our field [of writing instruction] if we were in the other class [of the writing proletariat]?" (xii). From this perspective, being "political" is a luxury only those comfortably ensconced in the "professional" class of composition can readily afford. Indulging in this luxury may provide a demonstration of both one's membership in that class and one's moral superiority. And for those teachers who are not inclined to such indulgences, their attachment to the perquisites of tenure will lead them to be less, not more, politically daring because they have more to lose. By the same token, while members of the writing "proletariat" may well feel the full brunt of pressures to teach in ways aligned with dominant ideology, it is also possible that being underpaid, overworked, and disrespected has a politicizing effect. Mina Shaughnessy long ago reported that her fellow basic writing teachers were radicalized by their shared experience of "what it means to be an outsider in academia," leading them to reject in their "bones the traditional meritocratic model of a college" ("Miserable Truth" 114; see also Ohmann, Foreword xi). And members of such an exploited proletariat consequently have less to lose by challenging the dominant ideology in their teaching.

I would argue, however, that such claims assume a false certainty about the politics of a pedagogy by ignoring the contingencies of the specific students, professor, institution, and historical moment involved in the enactment of "a pedagogy" as well as the later consequences of that enactment. To ignore such contingencies, again, is to treat politics and
pedagogy as commodities rather than as strategies, oneself as idealized author, and one's students as passive recipients of, say, one's power. Moreover, the assumption of such a deterministic certainty leads to ethically noxious alternatives. Pursued to its logical extreme, such a position would mean promoting the abolition of tenure and the full proletarianization of composition teachers to encourage their "politicization," and it would mean excoriating all leftist political theorizing by tenured faculty as mere posturing. It is apparent (perhaps especially to those of us in tenured positions) that such arguments—limited by their faith in a structural and deterministic understanding of class identity and cultural effects—ignore historical contingencies and treat people in contradictory class positions as uniform. These same conceptual limitations obtain in arguments for insisting on staffing composition courses with tenure-line faculty. The fact is that neither the provision of tenure nor the absence of its possibility confers a specific class position or politics on an individual or on her or his teaching. Rather, it operates in contingent relation to a host of other material and historical circumstances.

Efforts to understand the politics of pedagogy in relation to such contingencies have been aimed primarily at considering the interaction of specific pedagogies with specific student populations and employer demands. A number of authors have explored the extent to which those pedagogies originally touted as being "liberatory," "open," "emancipatory," and so on might well lead to greater control over students by virtue of the same "openness" that makes them seem so appealing (Gore 68). For example, Mary Louise Pratt refers to her son's description of his new school, one characterized by "nicer" teachers, open classrooms, flexible curricula, and a lot fewer rules, a place where the teachers are nicer "so you'll obey all the rules they don't have" (38). Myron Tuman has argued similarly that such pedagogies exert an invisible control that is more powerful because of this invisibility. Drawing on Shirley Brice Heath's *Ways with Words*, an ethnographic study of language practices of different communities, and on Basil Bernstein's later work on social class and pedagogy, Tuman argues that such control favors middle-class over working-class children because of its alignment with middle-class socialization. Middle-class children, somewhat like Pratt's son, seem already to know that the apparent absence of explicit rules, far from meaning there aren't any rules, means that the students' task is to infer the rules and act on them in ways to which they, but not their working-class peers, have become accustomed through prior socialization at home (44-45). A further problem with educational reforms aimed
at such "openness," Tuman argues, is that the apparent achievement of greater openness and freedom provided by the adoption of such pedagogies can vitiate opposition by eliminating an obvious target for that opposition. Tuman observes that it is all too easy "to confuse an 'open' classroom with an open society" and to forget how "controlling institutions continue to derive much of their strength and their influence from the quiet effectiveness with which they fulfill their reproductive role" (49-50). He argues therefore for more traditional, explicitly "authoritative" pedagogies that, by making the means of their control visible, may more effectively awaken within students "both the aspirations for a better world and lingering suspicions of this one" (50).

There are limitations to Tuman's critique. First, his tendency to link particular language practices to students' particular class identities posits an unlikely fixity to such identities and practices, and can lead to pedagogies that accommodate, and so reproduce, the very class structures to which he is, presumably, opposed. Anthony Petrosky points to the operation of such a dynamic at work in the use of recitation and drill in poor rural Mississippi Delta public schools that seek to prepare students for college admission tests and for life outside the Delta, which is the key to economic survival for most. Petrosky sees in that use the subversion of the call-and-response tradition of rural black culture by the language of basic skills technology that teaches students the "unspoken lesson of the technology"—namely, that students "automatically assume a submissive position in relation to teaching and learning" (65-66). This submission may make survival possible but only under certain conditions. Petrosky observes that

the instructional language maintains existing class and socioeconomic order by allowing the students who do well the opportunity to leave the Delta, even though this causes them problems; this opportunity can be said to reinforce the values necessary to maintain the authority, the priorities, and the language that allow those values to exist in the first place. (66)

Applied to the situation of these students, Tuman's argument for the exercise of more visible control over students because of their greater comfort with such visible authority can seem like an argument for the maintenance of such an unjust social order. Or, worse, his argument can easily slide into a call to encourage oppressive practices in the hope that such oppression will provoke resistance. Aside from the dependence of
this argument on a faith in structuralist determinism (similar to the argument for furthering the proletarianization of writing instructors to provoke their resistance), the argument is politically noxious in that it consigns to greater suffering those students who are targeted for oppression rather than those who make this argument.

Nonetheless, Tuman's critique of the class basis of "open" pedagogies foregrounds several principles that I have been arguing are crucial to understanding the relation of politics to work in composition. First, pedagogies touted as an escape from power relations may well simply allow for the greater sway of dominant power relations. Second, the politics of these and other pedagogies can be understood only in terms of the material and historical contingencies of their enactment. These contingencies include not just characteristics of students but also the specific circumstances of the economic and social pressures and practices in which students and teachers work. Even the politics of the pedagogy Petrosky describes cannot be understood strictly in terms of the exercise of teacherly authority over students. As Petrosky acknowledges, since this pedagogy of recitation and drill leads to a solution to the Delta's "most pressing problem—getting students out of the Delta and into postsecondary education or the military"—it might well be seen not as the oppressive imposition of a restricted literacy but as evidence of "a sophisticated literacy at work in a large social and political sense" (65; emphasis added). Similarly, Tuman's analysis shows how pedagogical techniques of "openness" may operate to ensure the privilege of middle-class students and may betray working-class students. Moreover, by stressing process, individual initiative, flexibility, and interpersonal cooperation, such techniques may reinforce the ideology increasingly demanded in the workplace (Tuman 46). For example, the organizational structure of what James Paul Gee, Glynda Hull, and Colin Lankshear term the "new work order" of "fast capitalism" emphasizes egalitarianism over hierarchy and defines work in terms of projects on which people work collaboratively before moving on, as independents, to other businesses and other projects (58-59). Knowledge and authority, rather than residing in one worker, are distributed, both as an efficiency measure and as a means of ensuring that workers cannot take their knowledge elsewhere. Control over newly "empowered" workers is thereby exerted indirectly rather than directly (60). Thus, the very attributes and practices encouraged in some ostensibly "emancipatory" pedagogies—"empowerment," "collaboration," "teams," "self-directed learning," and so on—may well work to produce subjectivities demanded by fast capitalists and thereby prepare students
for lives as contingent workers engaged collaboratively in knowledge production for others.

Understanding the politics of pedagogy in terms of social contingencies involves not only exploring its relation to specific students and the demands to be made of them by specific economies but also exploring its relation to specific teachers and the conditions of their employment as teachers. I have suggested above some of the ways in which conditions of employment may encourage a more conservative and conventional pedagogical "politics." If a pedagogy encouraging empowerment, self-directed learning, teamwork, and so on can work politically to prepare students for the new work order of fast capitalism, that pedagogy may also exist in both homological and material relation to the work of the composition teacher: the part-timer, adjunct, or temporary full-timer (see Faigley 53). Such a teacher is typically hired on a "contingent" basis to work collaboratively with students and other faculty on term-length "projects" designed by others; he or she is "empowered" to be "independent" rather than tied down by job security to an academic institution and is "liberated" from permanent employment and from any say in institutional governance. Indeed, many such teachers may be required to exhibit a considerable degree of "flexibility" just to get by, to be quick studies in inferring the unwritten rules of a host of institutions for which they work, sometimes simultaneously, and to be able to cooperate with all sorts of different students and faculty (see McConnel 42-48). Furthermore, it is at least possible that in such circumstances adopting a pedagogy that appears to be "open" and to "empower" students is preferable to insisting on an explicitly authoritative stance. The latter, after all, might provoke both student resistance and poor teaching evaluations, what people in the "flexible" institutional position of being temporary faculty lack the institutional authority to withstand very easily and have little incentive to attempt. In such ways, hegemony operates to reinforce dominant ideology, making a "virtue" out of necessity for all concerned. The practicality of the "politics" of composition in this more pervasive sense makes it all the more difficult either to recognize or to resist. For that reason, debate over the politics of composition needs to attend especially to the ways in which the "politics" of the profession, the politics of pedagogy, and the politics of work intersect.

Attention to such intersections, while it can point to existing political dangers, should not prevent us from exploring possible alternative politics that the work of composition might also engage. First, we need to recall that the abstracted skills and practices that might be "demanded" by
fast capitalism, for example, may have very different meanings and effects in their specific concrete enactments. After all, we should not, for example, condemn all instances of cooperation simply because some version of such a “skill,” understood abstractly, is desired by fast capitalist gurus. That it may and has been used to serve fast capitalist ends does not mean it must and can serve only such ends. To draw such a conclusion would be to mistake the exchange value of our work for its full potential value. And, secondly, as Tuman’s analysis hints, practices condemned or viewed with suspicion as traditional, authoritarian, or hierarchical may in fact have effects contradictory to their received meanings. Just as we are learning to see “open” classrooms, for example, as less open than they appear, so we must reconsider the politics, broadly construed, of practices in composition condemned for their repressiveness. This reconsideration must apply not only to composition’s pedagogies but to all its practices. The practice of our politics, and the politics of our practices, must be approached not as commodities but as contingent relations. If this sometimes makes for less visibly, less recognizably “political” work, it can also allow us to work in more politically responsible, materially responsive ways: to engage not just the politics of pedagogy, not just the politics of work and the workplace, but the working of power in both.  

**Notes**


2. Ironically, it is just such a discourse that Brodkey and her colleagues intended to counter in their course through teaching argument “as inquiry rather than advocacy,” an intention so at odds with conventional understandings of political discourse as to be unimaginable to opponents (239-41).

3. For a full-length account of a composition pedagogy focusing explicitly on the ubiquity of the political in writing, see Fox’s *The Social Uses*.

4. For examples of the response to Ellsworth’s account, see Giroux; McLaren; Burbules and Rice; Lather; and Leach.

5. Ellsworth restricted her research on critical pedagogy to thirty articles in “major educational journals” published between 1984 and 1988 (298 n. 2), a restriction that has been criticized by Giroux (178) and McLaren (72).

6. For a different account of black ambivalence toward schooling, see hooks 98-100.
7. My argument here is aligned with some of the criticisms leveled at weak versions of "reproductive" theories of education that seem to leave no room for resistance or agency. For a useful analysis of such theories, see Morrow and Torres.

8. For an account of faculty success in battling injustice, see L. Pratt (43-45).

9. A course at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, similar to the one proposed at UT-Austin but with a very different history, illustrates the operation of such contingencies. See Dietz-Kilen and Watkins.

10. For a different argument on the relation of adopting a "practical" pedagogy to the marginality of teachers' institutional position within the academy, see Horner and Lu (13-28).

11. This is emphatically not to argue that attention to error in writing (understood here as the use of unconventional spelling, syntax, and punctuation) is either inappropriate or evidence of complicity with dominant oppressive social forces. As I have argued elsewhere (Horner and Lu, chapter 6), error in writing (and ways to correct it) can and must be addressed in composition pedagogy; to do so, however, its "sociality" must be explicitly confronted.

12. This essay is based on chapter three of my book Terms of Work for Composition: A Materialist Critique.

Works Cited


