The term *cynicism* derives from the name of the ancient school in Athens, inspired by Antisthenes, a student of Socrates. While the cynics are referred to as a philosophical school, they did not embrace a systematic form of idealism, but focused instead on the practical—for instance, on their ostentatious rejection of luxury. The most notorious cynic (the first, according to Donald Dudley [ix]) was Diogenes, who, according to tradition, took every opportunity to ridicule Plato's strange appropriation of Socrates’ dialectic. In one anecdote, he responds to Plato’s carefully achieved definition of the human being as “featherless biped” by bringing a plucked chicken to the public square. The cynics’ hatred of luxury has not survived as a connotation of the word *cynicism* today, but certainly the rejection of high-blown theoretical ideas in favor of the pragmatic has.

One of Diogenes’ reputed mottos, “to deface the common coin,” suggests that even then, the repudiation of wealth may not have been an end in itself, so much as an available rhetorical gesture to express dissatisfaction with the values of Athenian society for which institutionalized philosophy provided intellectual justification. The social problem that the term *cynicism* is now used to describe provides a serious challenge to rhetoric and composition and its attempts to recognize the political nature of writing instruction and respond to its ethical challenges. The influential approach championed by James Berlin argues that first-year writing instructors should instill a political sensibility in students that will lead them to resist. This approach underestimates the sophistication of capitalism, which allows it to turn resistance to its own ends; it fails to take into account the cynicism that presupposes and disarms critique. A better account of the rhetorical situation of college
writing instruction shows the need to move away from rhetorics that can actually increase cynicism and toward the pragmatic approach of engaging with technologies of writing. Engagements with writing technologies that take institutional and psychological constraints seriously can help students and teachers apprehend and grasp possibilities, thereby generating feelings of agency rather than the melancholy detachment of cynical resentment.

**Enlightenment and Cynicism, Or, A Candle in Broad Daylight**
Definitions of cynicism abound: cynicism is variously understood as the dishonesty of the powerful, the disillusionment of the governed, contradictions between the beliefs and actions of individuals, hypocrisy, apathy, detachment, irony, moral weakness, and perceived powerlessness. Peter Sloterdijk uses the term to describe an “enlightened false consciousness” that leads people “to act against better knowledge.” It is “a new attitude of consciousness toward ‘objectivity’” by which falsehood absorbs and disarms enlightenment. To the ethical and empirical revelations of philosophy and science, cynicism responds: Yes, what you say is true, but nevertheless we are constrained by “the power of things” (6). In Everybody Knows: Cynicism in America, William Chaloupka defines cynicism as a condition of lost belief. Democracy is susceptible to the cynical manipulation of public belief, and the public has responded with a cynical distrust of its leaders and institutions. Chaloupka observes that moralists have used the diagnosis of cynicism to call for a return to traditional beliefs and the values of “leadership, education, obedience, and the responsible application of moral criticism” (15). In response to this, Chaloupka reminds us that distrust in power is often justified. Simple faith and obedience goes against people’s awareness that the powerful do not always know (or care) what is best for others. Worse yet, the moral charge of cynicism can itself be a cynical attempt to consolidate power. Timothy Bewes’ discussion in Cynicism and Postmodernism speaks to this problem, where he blames the mixing of the public and private spheres for the decline of political discourse. So-called character debates and sexual scandals have been purposefully and cynically used to crowd out substantial policy discussions. This strategy discourages the public from staying informed and seeking opportunities to transform the political sphere.

A society that seeks to be democratic requires a certain amount of skepticism and circumspection. No one should discourage the observation that political systems do not distribute power evenly among people,
that powerful interests compete in society and not necessarily transparently and for the good of all. If the project of fighting cynicism were understood as encouraging the belief that power and justice walk naturally hand in hand, then it would be nothing more than a means of educating people to be more easily manipulated. Cynicism is dangerous not because it perceives political motives operating behind expressions of idealism, but because as a form of inverted idealism—what Nietzsche called ressentiment—cynicism allows the existence of imperfections to cast a shadow over the possibilities of life. Modern cynics use the imperfect reality as a justification for participating in degrading situations, rather than as a motivation to transform or depart from them.

Writing teachers most need to understand the “cynicism” that refers not to the cold machinations of the powerful, but to the psychology of the manipulated: a melancholy or boredom that leads people to neglect or underestimate their powers and to facilitate their own manipulation. Cynicism is a learned psychology of survival, for which schools are but one of the training grounds. This sort of survival is not for those in actual mortal danger, but for Survivor-spectators in a culture that ships people off to remote locations so that dangerous physical challenges can be simulated. Cynicism, like watching television, is a passive activity, a clinging to identifications and attachments that promise protection against or at least diversion from an objective world that simultaneously represents itself as an absurdity and a necessity.

The cynicism that teachers face (and are not, themselves, immune to) poses a special challenge, because unlike mere ignorance and superstition, it is not a lack of information or a source of false information, but a means of resisting information that challenges ingrained habits of thought and behavior. For trained educators, ignorance and superstition are like well-teed balls, ready for the striking. Cynicism, by contrast, presents a diffuse, unfocused, and intractable form of resistance. In their 1969 Teaching as a Subversive Activity, Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner argue that education needs to help students develop “bullshit detectors” so they might resist the manipulations of a commercial-glutted media environment. While they call for educational reform, it is reform in the very traditional mode of enlightenment against lie, error and ideology. Cynicism, though, itself takes a form not unlike the BS detector, only with a dysfunctionally-low threshold, so that whatever does not immediately gratify the individual or satisfy the socially-established regime of values sets it off. “Do I really have to know this?” Students learn very quickly that ideological examination devastates their belief structures, their
libidinal wants, and the means that their culture uses to provide for their material needs. "Whatever." Cynicism provides a sometimes artful, sometimes juvenile, often unconscious means to selectively apply the unmasking critiques of enlightenment according to a logic of tightly-constricted pleasure and practicality. Student cynicism disturbs writing teachers not because we have an aversion to what is fun and useful. Rather, it is because, like modern cynicism in general, student cynicism relinquishes what Sloterdijk called the "'cultural struggle' for the great ideals, whose validity or worthlessness decides the existence or decay of personal and collective integrity: heroic courage, the legitimacy of power, love, the medical arts, praise of the living, truth, authenticity, obedience to experience, just exchange" (544-45).

Sloterdijk's *Critique of Cynical Reason* explains the failure of the Enlightenment to help people achieve a better and happier way of life. In the tradition of the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, his analysis of cynicism continues to search for explanations for people's willingness to live with their own exploitation. The Frankfurt School revised Marxism to respond to the fact that the proletariat did not, as expected, revolt in Western societies. Capitalism was able to delay—and perhaps avoid altogether—its overthrow, by incorporating the workers into the system with a limited sharing of wealth and power. Mechanisms such as labor unions gave workers voice and the ability to strike, but also brought their overriding interests in line with that of the owners and managers. Simultaneously, a culture industry developed with the capability of managing ideology with a new level of sophistication. The injustices of the economic system could be openly dramatized and then symbolically resolved, which provided a sort of release valve for the workers' frustrations. As Thomas Frank argues more recently in "Why Johnny Can't Dissent," this process has become yet more sophisticated. Films, television shows and books offer political critiques as products and in commercials; parodies of critiques are used to sell other products. Sloterdijk's analysis of cynicism describes the subjective component of these objective developments. Marxist science was supposed to dispel ideology and cause people to demand justice, but while people now largely understand that capitalism is unjust, they willingly participate in it anyway, cynically. In the psychology of cynicism or "enlightened false consciousness," understanding is disconnected from behavior.

Sloterdijk describes cynicism as the stalling of enlightenment as a political force toward the good after a long string of successes. Sloterdijk reviews "Eight Unmaskings" achieved by the Enlightenment: (1) The
“Critique of Revelation” questioned the Church’s right to reveal and interpret the Truth arbitrarily, from a position of authority, without having to provide verifiable evidence. (2) The “Critique of Religious Illusion” went further, by charging the religious mind with projection (the idea that the deity is made in the image of humans, not the other way around) and the religious authority with deception (by examining the political and economic ends served by dogma). (3) The “Critique of Metaphysical Illusion” asserted that the operation of reason is limited to experience and cannot confirm or deny metaphysical ideas such as the soul. (4) The “Critique of the Idealistic Superstructure” was Marx’s demand that people examine the value placed on their lives by the existing structure of economic production, rather than accept the rationalizations and mystifications provided by the cultural superstructure. (5) The “Critique of Moral Illusion” attacked those who use morality as a justification to attack and dominate others rather than as a mode of self-improvement. (6) The “Critique of Transparency” used the discovery of the unconscious to destroy the illusion of unproblematic self-awareness. (7) The “Critique of Natural Illusion” refuted the religious and political use of the idea of Nature being inherently evil as a justification for their regimes, countering that idea by finding hope in the child and the “savage.” (8) Sloterdijk characterizes the “Critique of the Illusion of Privacy” as the final and ongoing “uncovering” of enlightenment, after which would come only praxis. It is the self-reflection that seeks to overcome the egoism that naively takes its perceptions as reality. It examines the programming and experience that produce the self and its self-satisfying worldview (22–74).

These eight stages of enlightenment created the conditions of possibility for a vast proliferation of information and technological advancement, setting into motion “a permanent industrial and cultural revolution” (76). Arguably, the successes of the Enlightenment have led to the material achievement of a production capacity making possible the satisfaction of all material needs. Perhaps the reason cynicism presents such a complex and ill-defined problem is that under its heading fall innumerable and differing factors that forestall the implementation of social and economic justice when it finally seems technologically possible. The impact of enlightenment being so great, many of those intransigent factors turn out to be unfortunate effects or perversions of enlightenment itself. Enlightenment cannot offer a positive practice or universal Way, because its means are essentially negative critiques that disabuse people of superstition, error and ignorance. Obviously, the
obliteration of the "idealistic superstructure" has not left a universal solidarity in its place. As Sloterdijk puts it, "There is no unified and unambiguous enlightenment 'movement.' One feature of the dialectic of enlightenment is that it was never able to build a massive front; rather early on, it developed, so to speak, into its own opponent" (76–77).

"Master cynics," having themselves been freed by enlightenment critiques from the obligations and fears with which metaphysical beliefs had constrained them, developed a "politics of antireflection" by which they simultaneously projected an image of themselves as enlightened to the people, while simultaneously impeding the spread of enlightenment. Censorship controlled the dissemination of enlightenment texts, while modern pedagogy developed as a positivist institution that served to divorce knowledge from life (82–83) so that it could facilitate production without threatening power. The means of enlightenment have been appropriated and parodied to serve the interests of control and exploitation for so long, it is difficult to distinguish the logic of unmasking from the mask itself. The main problem is not ignorance so much as that, given the very real possibility of being "fooled again" (as The Who puts it), people would rather defend their provincial ways of life than consider evidence that might suggest they should change their behavior. This cynicism from below, the resistance to changes that could potentially lead to happier lives in a more enlightened social, political and economic reality, is not so much intellectual as habitual. Ideology critique has thus hit a wall of subjectivity, because its intellectual means gains no traction on the surfaces of emotion and desire that masquerade as private reason.

Subjective or "privatized" reason conspires with an "activist" culture to obscure alienation, in which people mistake all kinds of interests for their own. Sloterdijk does not mean "activist" simply in the sense of being politically informed and engaged, but to describe the compulsion to act without reflection. "In the theory of subjective reason, the world is paraphrased as the content of our doings. Subjectivity has been turned fully into praxis" (539). Praxis, which through action pits one set of cultural values against another, can turn out to be a supporting element of hegemony even when it sees itself as the opposition. Hegemony maintains itself through, rather than despite, cultural heterogeneity. Praxis is indispensable; however, praxis without an ongoing "Critique of the Illusion of Privacy" takes for granted oppositions which structure the regime of values that structure the transactional framework within which praxis operates. Subjective or "privatized" Reason flatters the individual that its core exists as something utterly discrete from the social, that apart
from transactions, it takes no part in the whole of objective political and economic relations. As the assumed originators of their own desires, needs, and habits, individuals reject attempts to question cultural “idols” and systematic exploitation, because the very idea of dominating values or ideology forces us to question whether we truly enjoy individual autonomy, the consolation prize of unhappy consciousness.

The analysis of cynicism brings to attention the dangerous tension that exists in a society that holds up the free individual as its cultural ideal as a means to constrain the individual. Considering the “free agent” as the norm entails understanding constraints as aberrations. Education is conceived as a special, temporary case of the child, rather than as an ongoing manipulation of constraints on every scale of social interaction. This way of understanding agency results in a lack of common means to distinguish between the obligations to community that oppress and those that structure life beneficially. The lack of conscious connection between individuals and social organizations has exacerbated a general trend in American culture toward ineffectual expressions of political re-ssentiment.

Cynicism can be described as a kind of detachment that results from a distrust of political structures and cultural ideals; however, as Chaloupka explains, cynicism can also take the form of a ressentiment that makes people “manipulable by powerful cynics” (46). When we encounter someone who can be goaded into a fight easily, even when they have nothing to gain, we say they have a chip on their shoulder. Cynical ressentiment takes the form of a bridle. Cynicism pretends to a rejection of cultural values that creates independence, but skilled manipulators hook up their wagon and put the unfocused energy of ressentiment to their own use, essentially transforming the cynic into a willing slave or worse: the rebel without a cause joins a militia. We can understand Sloterdijk’s celebration of passivity more easily in this context. “Letting one’s self go” does not mean being inactive or willfully slavish. It means, rather, a conscious rejection of the ideology of free agency along with the furious, unfocused ressentiment that it seeds. In order to counter the passive activity of cynical transactionalism, Sloterdijk seeks to reinvigorate the active passivity of the kynical or embodied “Critique of the Illusion of Privacy.”

Cynicism and Social Epistemic
Using Sloterdijk’s analysis of cynicism, we can explore the place of enlightenment assumptions and metaphors in guiding recent attempts to
understand and make use of the political effects of writing instruction, in particular Jim Berlin’s program as he developed it through appropriations of social epistemic, ideology critique, and cultural studies. The “enlightened false consciousness” of cynicism represents an insidious ideological structure that swallows critique and puts it to its own purposes. Berlin’s approach assumes that if students are demystified and the violence of the system is revealed to them, the students will experience a complete transformation and resist domination for the rest of their lives. In her “Afterword” to Berlin’s Rhetorics, Poetics and Cultures, Janice Lauer writes, “In a number of conversations that Jim and I had about the criticisms leveled against cultural studies for leaving students discouraged and negative, Jim strongly insisted that the act of critique was so powerful that students would never again view themselves as coherent autonomous subjects nor their culture as entirely benign and therefore they would inevitably resist and work for change” (182). However, as Chaloupka explains, many people become discouraged and negative as a normal part of maturing in a cynical culture. Whether from the political left, right or center, the U.S.’s own cultural productions pronounce its corruption. As Sloterdijk says, “All the ‘Free World’ wears ‘the crooked smile of open immorality’” (4). The idea that a cultural studies curriculum is necessary to show eighteen-year olds that their culture is not “entirely benign” may be off the mark. The sophisticated tools of critical pedagogy continue the students on a cynical trajectory by giving them additional evidence that they have been born into a corrupt system. It may also give them a more structured understanding of that corruption. What it does not do is provide a roadmap out of their predicament that could make it possible for them to choose otherwise. The analysis of cynicism shows that knowledge is not enough. Demonstrating that students are not autonomous will not, in and of itself, make them more autonomous.

Victor Vitanza raised this concern in his plenary speech at the 1998 CCCC Research Network Forum:

I want to talk about cultural studies or cultural critique or cultural criticism or whatever you wish to call it. I am aware that each of these is theoretically different—and according to a variety of schools—but I purposefully conflate them, for they are the same essentially in their reliance on bringing Reason to bear on ethical-political problems. On Social Change. I want to raise a question about the value of such areas of “thought-thinking-thought” that would teach students to identify the contradictions in the social fabric and to set about correcting those contradictions. Specifically, as a long-standing member of the Research Forum, I want to
question, or have you question, in the name of “making knowledge” (doing research), whether or not teaching students cultural studies and other similar studies makes them seek for a better world that is obtainable. I want to suggest to you, on the contrary, that cultural studies may lead only to cynicism.

Vitanza goes on to characterize the sameness he perceives in these approaches in terms of their shared intellectual lineage (Plato, Aristotle, Kant, and so on) and the guiding assumption that through critique people can resolve culture contradictions or be liberated from false consciousness. Vitanza does not call for the abolishment of critical pedagogy or social epistemic or cultural studies, but presents his statement as being in the tradition of critique. The fact of the huge capital and emotional investment in our educational enterprise does not automatically bring our work under suspicion, but the critical tradition of hermeneutic suspicion (that Vitanza both questions and participates in) requires that we not confuse our hopes with our effects.

I agree with Julie Drew when, in response to Vitanza, she writes, “analysis of the conditions in which discourse is produced contributes significantly to the possibility of producing effective, interventionist discourse” (412). In fact, Vitanza’s statement contributes to social epistemic specifically by considering cynicalism as a condition that impacts what can be accomplished within writing courses. Furthermore, I agree that “cultural studies” is, as she says, a “highly contested” (413) term and practice—so much so that I would not know what it would mean to say, “I do not do cultural studies.” Vitanza acknowledges the differences in various forms of critical pedagogy, but points to an inadequately interrogated assumption that frequently motivates these approaches, just as it frequently motivates approaches that do not identify themselves with these movements: that composition classrooms make good locations to enact a production of critical consciousness and political resistance. As Thomas Rickert puts it, “It is becoming increasingly difficult to get others to see or care about injustice, at least in the way we want them to” (298). Rickert observes that simply relaxing “standard forms of pedagogical regulation”—such as teacher authority and current-traditional textual expectations—does not produce “engaged, liberated students, nor has the opportunity to develop and explore a critical sensibility resulted in a slew of good, politically engaged, social critics” (298).

The “loss of belief” that Chaloupka discusses speaks to the low expectations that many of our students have for any engagement with politics or writing. By the time most students get to college, they have
already imbibed the American cynicism that involves a loss of belief in the legitimacy of our government and educational system. Many students already feel—though they perhaps would not articulate it with precision—that their culture is broken; nevertheless it is theirs. It should not be surprising that many of them are turned off by a heuristic that reveals their participation in something ugly and then leaves them in that ugly place. A pragmatic approach to college writing instruction would seek to help students develop their capacity for action and reflection, rather than attempting to instill a sense of horror and feelings of outrage, even though outrage and horror can always find justification.

Cynicism explains the student resistance that takes shape in response to what is perceived as the instructor's political agenda. Resistance to Marxist-inspired political education should not be mistaken for a defense of national or commercial ideologies, but should be understood as self-defense. "In Rhetoric, Poetics and Cultures as an Articulation Project," Patricia Harkin describes the resistance that Berlin and she encountered at Purdue:

As Jim himself somewhat ruefully admitted, these procedures were not entirely successful. Often, he told us in person and in print, students construed Jim's carefully engendered "dissonance" merely as an obstacle to be overcome as they struggled to become a productive member of a capitalist economy. The students Jim dealt with are, by and large, products of a homogeneous, rural, politically and religious conservative culture.

My Mentees and I have named this typical student the "postmodern Hoosier rhetor" . . . . When the postmodern Hoosier rhetor has a contradiction pointed out to her, then, she is less likely to contemplate the cognitive dissonance as a spur to invention and more likely simply to say "whatever." And since Jim's method calls for students to arrive at a genre as a function of their invention processes, the pomo Hoosier rhetor reinvents the "whatever" genre—the essay that concludes by asserting that "everyone is entitled to their own opinion"—the very kind of writing that we hoped cultural studies would eliminate. (496)

This description of a student illustrates that the effect of a teacher using pedagogy based on political assumptions and exigencies that place the teacher in opposition to the students. The teacher begins to regard the class as a "class" or block group. The ideological distance between teacher and student makes the students seem more alike—"typical"—and, I will venture to guess, it makes all the teachers seem more or less the same to the students as well.
Harkin says that her group continues "to work at developing ways of confronting the pomo 'whatever' as a problem for invention" (497). The present work also takes up this problem, proceeding from my own understanding of this "whatever" as a refusal to engage that comes from the students' cynicism as well as pedagogy's failure to recognize its own role in increasing cynicism. I understand the statement "whatever" to mean, "I have no use for what you are saying." It refuses to answer questions that the students believe are designed to attack their identifications or that engender a way of thinking that does not speak to the pressing decisions before them. "Everyone is entitled to their own opinion" strikes me as a foreseeable response to such a setup, because it protects students from having to take personal responsibility for the huge and ancient injustice of the world, while avoiding the obvious mistake of disagreeing with their grader.

Berlin argues that demystification is necessary, because it compels students to resist; however, Berlin's argument would only makes sense if his pedagogy also provided them with an effective way of resisting, if resistance could be successful. These courses provide a technology of seeing that reveals the evils of contemporary capitalism, but it does not give them the power they would need to overturn it. Before the class, they have no way to overturn capitalism. After the class, they have no way to overturn capitalism; but if the course is successful, they leave the class with an increasing resentiment toward a world that gives them no choice but to participate in evil. I doubt the success of this course, though, because it proceeds from the assumption that you can convince an audience while showing open contempt for its entire belief system. I can only think of two cases where this works. First, this approach sometimes works in religious situations in which the promise of everlasting life is made; the idea of a political utopia is harder for many students to accept. The analogy is appropriate because Berlin's justification rests on the assumption that if students see the Good, they will naturally be drawn to it. This is the assumption regarding education that we have inherited from the Enlightenment and which Sloterdijk shows to be incorrect: people know that what they are doing is not good, but they do it anyway. Second, that persuasive tactic can work when backed up by force. The grade represents something of a force, but it is powerless against strategies of dissimulation, such as pretending to have experienced an epiphany or employing the great rhetorical parking brake, "everyone is entitled to their own opinion."
Cynicism and the Institutional Context of FYC

Cynicism has a stifling effect within the rhetorical situation of writing instruction, especially within the context of first-year composition. Arguably, the institutional constraints of first-year English make it easier to give in to the culture of cynicism than to ease it or make creative use of it. Particularly, composition’s status as a service course intended by the university—if not necessarily by the administering departments and instructors—to establish a base proficiency in the rules of current-traditional rhetoric ties writing courses to a reified conception of writing. Within the context of cynical transactionalism, it is not hard to make a case acceptable to the “private reason” of students that their marketability depends on the ability to follow writing conventions. One can also make such a case for “critical thinking,” by telling students that companies demand employees capable of problem-solving and inventiveness. Using financial success as a carrot, though, has the obvious negative effect of restricting the economy of a course. Range of expression and range of critical thought both suffer. As such, many in the field of rhetoric and composition see the teaching of writing as an ethical and political practice that should not be reduced to the task of satisfying the needs of the marketplace.

In Rhetoric, Poetics, and Cultures, Berlin describes the priority of preparing students for work as one goal among “a comprehensive range of democratic educational concerns” (51). Berlin persuasively outlines the challenges of contemporary education as it attempts to prepare students “to become active and critical agents in shaping the economic, social, political, and cultural conditions of their historical moment” (52). Toward this goal, Berlin calls for the recognition and removal of the hierarchical relationship between literary and rhetorical studies in English departments that makes trained aesthetic appreciation the mark of achieved culture while regarding rhetorical studies as merely functional (3–16). By “Dislodging the Binaries” that privilege literary texts over rhetorical texts, Berlin hopes to produce “an enlightened conception of the role English studies plays in preparing students for their lives as citizens, workers, and sites of desire (94). This reconfiguration would seek to provide English studies with the mission of producing “good subjects” in a way that responds to the postmodern critique of subjectivity. Whereas the “good subject” had been defined in terms of class, race, and gender, Berlin seeks a subject with the agency and will to support the goals of political and economic democracy; however, a look at Bill Readings’s The University in Ruins warns us that combating cynicism
with citizenship will be very difficult within the context of the decline of the nation state.

Readings describes a crisis of mission in contemporary universities with consequences for the institutional context of college composition. The German model of the university upon which U.S. universities were based was designed to serve a specific social function within the Enlightenment vision of the nation state:

Within modernity, the University held a central place in the formation of subjects for the nation-state, along with the production of the ideology that handled the issue of their belonging to that nation-state (culture). Its internal organization as a community was meant to reflect that structure of belonging or community in which a general culture of conversation held together diverse specialties in a unity that was either organic (Fichte), societal (Newman), or transactional. (167)

"The grand narrative of the University, centered on the production of a liberal, reasoning subject," (11) depended upon clear borders between nations and relatively homogenous populations so that it was possible for each person in the university to imagine him or herself as an embodiment of the universal subject that the university was designed to endow with the national culture. In the more current, anthropological sense of the word "culture," all human activity qualifies; "cultural productions" include not only the artistic and educational works of people of every ethnicity, religion, class, nationality, gender and sexuality, but also "productions" that are not specifically edifying or aesthetically distinct. The distinction between "high" and "low" that gave the older sense of "culture" its identity and force has weakened.

Unlike conservative critics who see this decentralization of cultural value as a dangerous attack on Western Civilization, Readings sees the political validity of these challenges to the "traditional values" that propped up the idea of the Universal Subject as a gentleman of European descent. At the same time, however, his analysis finds that conservatives are nevertheless correct that the deconstruction of "culture" and "subject" is not something that can be achieved in a surgical fashion without affecting the institutional body. As politically suspect as it is, the sense of culture as something achieved by a exemplary subject provided the university with a mission that can no longer function as its guide. In this context, he explains, viewing "cultural studies" as a form of resistance is absurd; it is a movement on the way to hegemony, because its dereferentialized notion of culture and interdisciplinary methodologies
provide moral justification to the disorganization of the university by capital (89–118).

Undermining the traditional mission from another angle, multinational corporations are challenging the power of nation states. In the project of Enlightenment modernization, nation states were to provide the political force in relation to which the meaning and purpose of culture and subject would be formed. Thus, the globalization of capitalism weakens this traditional source of value for the university and its reason for being. As a result, the mission of national culture has given way to the mission of “excellence.” While “culture” was vulnerable to dereferentialization, it is impossible to challenge the value of excellence, because it is already a completely vacuous honorific term. The language of excellence allows administrators to speak of the relative value of programs and initiatives without the need to justify them in relation to a real mission. The university is no longer the arbiter of value because it is no longer charged with the production of ideology for the nation state; in order to survive, universities now must produce “excellence” as defined by the need of corporations for disciplined and skilled workers and intellectual capital. For Readings, there is no possibility of rebuilding the university on the old model because, fortunately, people would be unwilling to go back to a monocultural definition of culture and subject, and, unfortunately, there is no power capable of challenging the rise of multinational corporations. Continuing to work within a university that has lost its mission requires the development of strategies that might transform the reality of dereferentialization and the subsequent meltdown of disciplinary structures from a cause for nostalgia into a source of possibilities.

The university carries on despite its loss of mission. For Readings, “dwelling in the ruins” of the university is not a matter of clearing it or rebuilding upon old foundations, but of making “détournements and radical lateral shifts” (168). “Détournement” (diversions) was a key term for the Situationists, a French political movement that provided inspiration for the May 1968 student revolt. According to Greil Marcus, the Situationists had two main strategies, “the ‘dérive,’ a drift down city streets in search of signs of attraction or repulsion, and ‘détournement,’ the theft of aesthetic artifacts from their contexts and their diversion into contexts of one’s own devise” (168). These strategies focus on architecture and writing, thereby underscoring the importance of contexts in considerations of politics and subjectivity in a way that can be transferred to the situation of writing instruction. The Situationists insisted on the political significance of the experiences that occur in everyday situations.
The transformation of localities, including the classroom, may not represent a grand overturning on the scale that traditional Marxism sought, but the local has the advantage of being both accessible and tangible. It can be changed, and those changes will be felt. While the reality of cynicism provides an often insurmountable challenge to teachers who would transform students by focusing on political macrocosms, writing instruction that focuses intensely on students’ situations can address the problem of cynicism directly, becoming a venue for an embodied Critique of the Illusion of Privacy.

By describing the university as a ruined institution and appropriating the means of the situationists, Readings provides a way of understanding cynicism specifically as it effects the university, while also suggesting what might be a healthy attitude for such a situation. It is helpful to understand first-year English as an inherited institution that was designed to develop students as beings that would identify as rational subjects, but which has lost the grounding idea of the universal subject to the forces of multiculturalism, globalization, and specialization. Like other university departments, composition now finds itself subject to a determination of value imposed from outside. But in most places, composition does not even enjoy the benefits of being a department. Composition’s development in the shadow of literary studies is well documented by Berlin, Robert Conners, Sharon Crowley, and others. The fact that a full year of first-year English is required at most universities makes composition a considerable source of revenue that compositionists may eventually like to take with them out of English and into their own rhetoric and composition departments, where they could subsidize courses of their own design rather than ones they are not even allowed to teach. The cash cow of the first-year requirement, though, burdens composition—wherever it is seated—with the difficult mandate of meeting the competing demands of specialized disciplines that are no longer conceived as part of a single academic universe regulated by philosophy. As Sharon Crowley explains in Composition in the University, each discipline has its own understanding of what makes good writing. Rather than a universal subject, teachers are expected to produce students who think and write according to the logic and aesthetics appropriate to chemistry, history, literature, economics, and so on:

Given the highly disciplined, highly specialized nature of curricula in contemporary colleges and universities, and given too that students from truly diverse backgrounds now enroll in higher education, I have serious
doubts about whether a universal student subjectivity is any longer possible or desirable to sustain. And since the required introductory course, considered as an institutional practice, has no content aside from its disciplining function, it is difficult to imagine what sort of content might be appropriate for it apart from that function. Add to this the twin problems that plague the required introductory course—unprofessional employment practices and the intellectual coercion of students and teachers—and it seems that the time has come to reflect seriously on the worth of the universal requirement. (10)

As Readings argues, though, a defining feature of the corporatized university is that it does not require a sensible and integrated purpose, other than to survive economically. As long as first-year composition performs its basic disciplinary function of making sure students behave like students, it is “excellent” enough.

**Passive Activism and the Binary of Rhetoric and Politics**

Up to this point, I have used James Berlin’s work to outline the object of my critique (of critique), not because his is the most worthy of attack or because it has been the last word in critical pedagogy, but because of the clarity with which he articulated the motives of social epistemic, because of the honesty with which he spoke about the unintended consequences of his approach, and due to his well-deserved stature in our field, which has made his motives the motives of many. I would now like to turn briefly to the pedagogical approach outlined by Catherine Chaput in “Identity, Postmodernity, and an Ethics of Activism.” As in Berlin’s approach, the goal is to teach students to resist; however, Chaput goes further than Berlin, not merely trying to reveal the contradictions of our culture, but attempting to instill a culture of activism more directly. Like Readings, Chaput interrogates “the local site in which we work: the university and the ways in which its adopting a global capitalist logic affects instructors, students, and the surrounding community” (45). Both Readings and Chaput attempt something resembling critiques of the Illusion of Privacy, stressing our inescapable involvement with others in a way that demands a consideration of the ethics of our practices. I will argue, though, that Readings’ discussion of our “obligations” enables us to face the problem of cynicism in a way that Chaput’s discussion of “responsibility” does not.

Chaput argues that the mode of analysis in composition “focuses on textual specificity and is primarily rhetorical rather than political” (43). She seeks to “reclaim” a critical Marxist standpoint that “concerns itself
with the economic globalization of capital and its ramifications within a specific, localized site,” arguing that such an approach is less “complicitous in, and less oppressive than, positions that do not acknowledge the interrelationship between the particular and the total or than theories that deny the need to locate one’s positionality” (45). Chaput sees herself not “proposing a radically new pedagogy,” but expanding “on a history of oppositional pedagogy within composition studies that seeks to resist the oppression caused by capitalism.” She cites Berlin as a progenitor (48).

Chaput wages an attack on Jean Baudrillard and Third Sophistics that make use of his concept of seduction. For instance, believing that political agency cannot be achieved without a sense of subjective identity that allows the individual to map out his or her relation to totality, Chaput finds Michelle Ballif’s “pedagogy of seduction” troubling because it frees “students from the requirement that they ground themselves in any sort of individual or political position” (50).

Chaput dismisses Ballif’s problematic of subjective indeterminacy as being purely academic, preferring Homi Bhabha’s concept of translation to Baudrillard’s concept of seduction: “In order to read a text, one must ultimately decide on a meaning or a translation of that text. . . . If I am to engage the argument, I must translate this signifier into one or more of its possibilities. . . . Yet, at the same time that I translate, I must still be aware of the other possibilities. In this way, a translation is always indeterminate and contingent, but my responsibilities are not” (58). In other words, Chaput argues that as long as one remains disengaged, all of the available meanings of a text remain equally tenable, but the moment that one approaches a text from a specific identity position overdetermined by one’s relation to totality and according responsibilities, the pragmatics of the situation resolves the indeterminacy of the text into a set of choices. Ostensibly, Chaput feels that Ballif’s critique of identity removes the very set of constraints that connects students to society and thereby elides the students’ most available means of reducing the complexity of life to a set of political choices. Using herself as an example, Chaput writes, “I am subjectified by dominant discourse as a white woman, but I must necessarily use these same categories to oppose subjectification” (50).

Thus, Chaput proposes “A Pedagogical Alternative” that would seek to trace a connection between the students’ location as students to the totality of political and economic relations. By making the university the object of critique in her composition classroom, her pedagogy “asks students to study and participate in university politics, economics, and technologies”:

Matthew A. Levy
In order to establish this theoretical framework for my course, students often study theories of global economics that articulate the relationship between corporate profit and unregulated, overseas labor. They also study the history of public and private university education. In particular, we focus on its funding history and the current trend toward privatization in order to see the relationship between capitalism and higher education. (62)

At the University of Arizona, Chaput had students study her university’s contract with NIKE and the Students Against Sweatshops movement, so that students would understand how their access to education depends upon the global system of exploitation. Her students wrote editorials, helped organized student protests, and some even joined SAS.

At first glance, Chaput’s approach seems to face the problem of cynicism head on. Her assignments are certainly not purely academic, having provided her students with a clear sense of audience and purpose. A certain number of students seem to have gotten politically engaged as a result of her approach, which may be encouraging. Yet, it seems clear that the most potent connection between these students and the totality of economic relations was the teacher herself and her power to impose this view of totality and the imperative to take a specific political position. She trades what she perceives as complicity with economic oppression for the epistemological violence of her own classroom (see Davis). The “responsibility” that framed the students’ interpretation of the texts Chaput provided was not “indeterminate,” but they were certainly “contingent” upon the pedagogical relation. Chaput says, “While this pedagogy might appear to impose my politics on the classroom, I believe that we are well beyond any assumption that denies the pervasiveness of politics inside and outside the classroom” (65). This statement, for me, epitomizes a widely held and mistaken assumption regarding the politicality of writing instruction. The fact that teaching writing is a political act does not justify trying to remake students in one’s own ideological image. Chaput clearly went beyond demanding that students “ground themselves in any sort of individual or political position” and demanded that they ground themselves in her individual political position. With the desired subject-position determined before the commencing of Chaput’s course, there was no need for students to reflect. Chaput believes that the dominant mode of composition is rhetorical, not political; her response to this is to design a course to be political, not rhetorical. Why define rhetoric and politics negatively against one another? Chaput’s approach may actually weaken students’ understanding of the political nature of writing by instilling the view that writing is only political if it is oppositional.
Because she defends the category of identity—in this case, student­ness—and leads students to trace their connection to the political and economic totality strictly in terms of opposition, Chaput’s approach cannot, finally, be seen as an effective Critique of the Illusion of Privacy. Tracing a connection between the student and the social does not promote an affective realization of the interdependence of self and other if this connection takes the shape of a negative identification. Chaput’s approach reinforces the Romantic theory of the social contract, which conceptualizes the individual specifically by opposing him or her to the social body. As Gilles Deleuze explains in *Empiricism and Subjectivity*, “anything positive is taken away from the social, and instead the social is saddled with negativity, limitation, and alienation” (45). Politics cannot be boiled down to the imperative to say no. As Deleuze demonstrates, politics can also be viewed as a social procedure of invention with the purpose of extending sympathies. Chaput’s argument revolves largely around the concepts of agency and responsibility. She does not demonstrate that we have the ability to respond to globalization in a way that would change its course; rather, she proceeds from the assumption that responding to globalization negatively is an ethical imperative, whether or not those responses can be shown to be useful. All pedagogies have failures; however, within this context of ideological examination and coerced political belief and action, failure will be most likely to exacerbate cynicism.

In some ways, Readings’ preoccupations are very much like Chaput’s. She could have easily written this statement from *The University in Ruins*: “I would emphasize that pedagogy cannot be understood apart from a reflection on the institutional context of education (153). He does not, though, conclude from this statement that in order to teach students, we need to teach them to understand pedagogical institutions. Rather, he observes that in the absence of a substantial cultural mission for universities, the administrative function crowds out the practice of thinking (and, I would add, writing). Readings explains that like “excellence,” “thought” is an empty name. But where “excellence” functions as a way to “bracket the question of value” (159) so that the university can serve up the needs of corporations without questioning those needs, Thought names the open-ended process of reflection:

If pedagogy is to pose a challenge to the ever-increasing bureaucratization of the University as a whole, it will need to decenter our vision of the educational process, not merely adopt an oppositional stance in teaching.
Only in this way, can we hope to open up pedagogy, to lend it a temporality that resists commodification, by arguing that listening to Thought is not the spending of time in the production of an autonomous subject (even an oppositional one) or of an autonomous body of knowledge. Rather, to listen to Thought, to think beside each other and beside ourselves, is to explore an open network of obligations that keeps the question of meaning open as a locus of debate. (165)

Chaput’s notion of responsibility involves her responsibility to those who are suffering in sweatshops, rather than to the students. The students become a means to her end; they are texts that she addresses to the administration. By contrast, Readings insists that we regard our students as our audience. This does not mean addressing them as customers who are always right, “or that in order to be educated they need only to affirm who they already are” (163). It does, however, mean engaging them with respect for their values and concerns as we help them understand their inherited selves and their potentialities. It means talking to them, rather than through them.

The embodiment of enlightenment that I advocate would jettison the narrative of education as an unmasking that peels away false beliefs to reveal or produce the “free agent.” Rather, it would seek to instill the rhetorical habit of analyzing constraints and practices in order to grasp possibilities. As Slavoj Žižek explains, ideology is inscribed in behavior, rather than belief (28–55). If, as Sloterdijk argues, people believe their actions are wrong but refuse to change, it makes no sense to focus pedagogical efforts on having students believe something in particular. The goal of an embodied enlightenment points us in another direction, toward a focus upon practices as opposed to beliefs. In this regard Chaput’s approach can be said to respond to the problem of cynicism. As Rickert and Readings both acknowledge, there is no pretending to relinquish all pedagogical authority. Each semester we commit to a set of practices we want our students to perform. We decide what practices, processes, and products we will require, which we will forbid, and the relative importance of these different expectations. Though we alter our expectations in the interest of the students when necessary, we never altogether relinquish control. In this context, I understand Chaput’s concern with making her decisions with an eye toward the practices she teaches and in the interest of engaging her students; however, the Critique of the Illusion of Privacy cannot be fulfilled through coerced identification or engagement.
Lisa Langstraat’s “The Point Is There Is No Point: Miasmic Cynicism and Cultural Studies Composition” develops an approach to the problem of cynicism that maintains a commitment to utopian motives, while showing an understanding of the necessity of reflection to the Critique of the Illusion of Privacy and the value of rhetorical analysis as a means to that end. Langstraat describes contemporary cynicism as a trained feeling of detachment that can be explained rhetorically using the cultural studies methods of historicization and articulation:

Cultural studies seems just another brand of theory that academics have bought into, and brand loyalty alone can’t guarantee the social change to which cultural studies has, at least ostensibly, been dedicated. Indeed, it would seem that miasmic cynicism threatens to undermine the cultural studies composition project of helping writing and written agents articulate—and feel the power to negotiate—the production, circulation, and reception of cultural texts. . . .

How do we respond to the cynical assessments of cultural studies composition? Surely not by responding in kind—by cynically agreeing (with a wide grin) that it’s all a farcical business, nor by cynically cajoling (with an even wider grin) the critics who don’t “get” cultural studies and never will. (294)

Langstraat’s discussion of how to respond to our embeddedness in an institutional structure makes all the more sense given Reading’s analysis of cultural studies. If “cultural studies” refers to everything and nothing, it makes no sense either to embrace it as a slogan or to reject every means that has been associated with its name. Rather than opposing “real” political action to rhetorical navel gazing, Langstraat argues that we need to de-privatize cynicism by seeking to understand how feelings of detachment and melancholy have been produced: “To theorize the difference between a cynical action, an empathetic action, a fearful action, an angry action—or any combination of such emotional actions—is to theorize the ways in which our actions are not only tempered by affect, but are communally and rhetorically constructed through affect” (315). In particular, Langstraat focuses on how cynicism “encourages a privatized form of sentimentalism as an emotional outlet” (318). After weeping through an episode of Touched by an Angel, for instance, we feel much better, but we have done nothing about the problems exploited by the program. Making use of kairotic moments in the classroom to turn to a cultural-rhetorical study of apathy, as Langstraat suggests, strikes me as an appropriate, non-oppressive way to combat cynicism in contrast with
Chaput’s identity and totality fixations. Transforming the understanding generated in classroom reflections into agency, however, will necessitate linking it to a positive activity of doing and making. I believe that Langstraat’s opposition between “reactive” and “resistance” sentimentality, while clarifying, will not be useful in this regard (319). The concept of resistance only reinscribes the narrative of oppositional action that makes agency an all-or-nothing enterprise. I am far more encouraged by Langstraat’s discussion of how “emotions act as technologies of persuasion” (308).

**Diogenes Bound: From Ideology to Technology**

Due to its long use within the tradition of negation, I believe the concept of ideology that utterly envelops Berlin’s and Chaput’s work (and Langstraat’s conclusion) may be unrecoverable. Instead, we should speak of technologies. Like ideologies, technologies present symbolic contexts that enable certain thoughts and behaviors while discouraging others. In this sense, technologies are political—far from neutral. Though, where ideology carries with it the related concepts of false consciousness, mystification, and misrecognition, technology encourages us to think in terms of virtualities. Giving up the vocabulary of ideology in favor of the rubric of technology would not prevent us from examining the narratives that inscribe us and prescribe our behavior; I think, though, we would be less likely to think of narratives, beliefs, institutions and such largely in negative terms, as veils to be removed. We know that the symbolic spaces created by technology are not as concrete as our hardware or the physical architecture we inhabit, yet because “cyberspaces” were specifically designed as control-interfaces, we are not tempted to forget the material consequences of the decisions made in the virtual realm or in the space of potentialities we call thinking and writing. By thinking of our syllabi, the theoretical lenses we share with our students, the assignments we create, and even subjectivity itself as interfaces or media that encourage certain behaviors and feelings and discourage others, writing instructors can rethink the classroom and the writing we ask students undertake in-and outside its walls and wires. In pragmatic fashion, we should recognize that physical structures, social institutions, and belief structures—as technologies—are enabling. Making a change requires the establishment of new structures, institutions, concepts, narratives that would enable something else.

Turning off a machine brings things to a halt. That is the best “resistance” can hope for. To make things work better requires a set of
more difficult cognitive leaps and material achievements, but in the end these improvements are more likely to succeed than resistance, because people will not let the systems of the political and economic order stop. Very few people choose poverty like Diogenes rather than benefit from a corrupt social system—specifically not people like academics and students, who have chosen to live, however temporarily, within the institutional constraints of the academy. Perhaps using “technology” as a concept-metaphor can help us explore the innumerable agencies of writing teachers and students without falling into the trap of equating our hopes and our realities. Cynicism creates a double bind. On the one hand, if writing teachers are not realistic about what can be accomplished within our institutions, we run the risk of fostering cynicism by making promises that cannot be fulfilled. On the other hand, if writing teachers sell ourselves—and our students—short by not testing the boundaries of what is possible, then we give into provincialism and the grip of cynicism tightens.

Texas Christian University
Fort Worth, Texas

Works Cited


