Being the Namer or the Named: Working-Class Discourse Conflicts

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Busy academics are choosy about what we read. We skim articles that seem mildly interesting but not very useful to our own scholarship and teaching. We speed through the introduction; page through the subhead-
ings; peruse the works cited, making snap judgments about the author’s career or the fate of the field; and then move on to encounter a text that appears worthy of close reading. Occasionally, I encounter an article that connects with my interests and gets me thinking so that I am scribbling in the margins, tracking down references, and resolving to read the whole thing over again as soon as I finish. Since Jim Zebroski and I regularly communicate and often present at conferences, I was not expecting to find myself staring into space after I reached the end of “Social Class as Discourse: Mapping the Landscape of Class in Rhetoric and Composition,” energized by mental excursions into multiple directions and looking forward to the next reading. Zebroski marshals extensive readings in rhetoric, composition, linguistics, philosophy, politics, sociology, history, media, and art to make a case for attending to the power of discourse to shape thought, especially in regards to class.

My response will extend Zebroski’s emphasis on discourse to three working-class conflicts for teachers and students: the naming of terms, emotion, and identity. The last part focuses on how the composition teacher can use the power of naming to complicate and add value to students’ subjectivities. Although I agree with Zebroski that we need to explore the larger category of “class studies,” I limit my response here to conflicts that working-class members experience related to composition pedagogy. Moreover, it is usually my analysis of individual personal experience that pushes me to seek larger connections to theory and practice. In this response, I suggest that composition courses must provide a space where working-class students can name a complex self-identity with value. In the very last section, I also provide an outline of four types of writing assignments that have the potential to invite students to narrate ethical representations of themselves and others.

**Academic Conflicts over Naming Working Class**

As I read Zebroski’s introduction that chronicles published scholarship about class in composition and rhetoric, I wanted to interpret it as a progress narrative in which we are finally willing to talk about the role of pedagogy in structuring conflicts for working-class students. But, I could
not. My lived experience prevents me from assuming this hopeful stance. I have witnessed discussions about class being derailed by comments from colleagues at conferences, about submitted articles, or on graduate students’ papers. These comments discipline what can and cannot be said by silencing, narrowing, or dominating the discussion. What I am alluding to is the moment when a perfectly wonderful panel about working-class issues has the discussion time hijacked by a colleague who wants to debate the definition of working class with the intent being that whatever is said or could be said is invalid because the speaker has not forwarded an acceptable definition of working class. Clearly, I am not against defining terms. In my defense, I would claim that I cover the politics of defining terms in every graduate course that I teach. I emphasize the drama of following the plot line of when and how a concept first comes into the field, including the climactic career move of coining a new term, no matter how clunky that name may be (social epistemic rhetoric, for example). Limiting discourse about working-class issues serves as a gatekeeper so that working class remains the pejorative other. Julie Lindquist’s example (which Zebroski cites) of the academic who objected that her relative would be offended by the label exemplifies the dominant belief that negative values are attached to working-class culture (550–51). When I have been able to publish articles about working class, I have preferred to enlarge the conversation with the most inclusive definition available so that others can join my club based on a function of economics, politics, or ideology (Harris). I once heard Ira Shor ask the audience to self-identify as working class based upon how long they could last without a paycheck (“What”). Zebroski gives six more ways to define class discourse: as position, social relations, work and the workplace, cultural heritage, individual affiliation, and witness (543–53). Or I could notice if you sing along or get up and dance to various popular songs that include sayings like “workin’ for a living,” “takin’ care of business,” or telling the boss to “take this job and shove it.” A more productive discussion might be to consider the rhetoric of definitions and why our field is most comfortable restricting the definition of class to economics or culture as Zebroski notes (516). Have we graduated from the playground fights over calling someone a name to the academic game of defining that name? Or does this act signify the display of power prior to
or in place of wrestling someone to the ground and forcing that person to "take it back"?

Much like other discourse terms that name the oppositional other such as race, gender, sexuality, ability, and region, any factual definition falls apart upon critical analysis. Can DNA evidence change racial labels? Are virgins really heterosexuals? Are people who wear glasses disabled? "Can a black person be a redneck?" (qtd. in Beech 180). In no way do I wish to trivialize what it means to suffer the pain of prejudice or internalized cultural stigmas. I use hyperbole here to exaggerate the folly of believing that these cultural categories are neutral facts. The question might be whether labeling composition students or teachers as working class is a matter of discourse or a matter of fact. In a forthcoming article, Patricia Harkin makes the astute point that some disciplines treat texts as facts whereas composition and rhetoric wish to treat facts as texts. All language can be read as a cultural text, including factual statements, song lyrics, and advertising slogans. We might also do as Zebroski counsels and examine language as a classed social relation among interested groups—not a neutral given, but a value continually produced by lived culture. Limiting working class to one narrow definition preserves certain values and ignores others. When the definition becomes more dynamic and inclusive, we can make room for several types of analysis, including economics, subjectivity, emotion, and pedagogy. In addition to the Zebroski article, JAC has recently published a series of articles and responses that offer complex analyses of class (Gallagher; Williams; Harrison; Hendricks; Watkins; Horner). As a reader I gain more information from these complex explications of working class that are willing to reflect upon the multiple, dynamic ways that our discipline and our practices are classed.

When frustrated students query whether graduate faculty are cruel enough to require them to define every term mentioned in their papers, I respond that they need to define only those terms that are central to their argument, the field, or which are likely to set off land mines among other scholars in our department. Likewise, only certain names or terms merit attention in academic journals. Zebroski underscores that discourse about working class in our field provokes volatile responses that divulge a great deal about current cultural anxieties. This quotation from Volosinov is a
pithy reminder of how radically the value of words can change from one cultural moment to the next: "Any current curse word can become a word of praise, any current truth must inevitably sound to many other people as the greatest lie" (23). It is no coincidence then that we are fussing over defining working class at this historical moment when our institutions are being warned that diverse student populations will soon flood the academic terrain. Since change cannot be forestalled, culture vests language with the power to discipline both the desired limitations and inclusions. Studying language controversies for signs of cultural change fascinates those of us interested in critical analysis, as well as those in advertising, politics, and law—but for different purposes. Language controversy is a cultural conflict barometer. Zebroski’s trope of storm warnings works well in this case.

Representing and Re-presenting Emotion

One of the reasons why defining working class seldom satisfies is that the most common definition puts into play a set of values that the working class is assumed not to have—a lack of wealth, resources, morals, intelligence, credentials, health, manners, taste, and so on. Referencing the history of working class as a discourse construct, sociologist Beverley Skeggs warrants that the term was forwarded by the British middle class to enhance respectability—to consolidate, distance, and position itself (Formation 4–6). In the following quotation, Skeggs is clear that the naming and defining of working class functions to add value to the middle class:

If the projection of negative value onto others is established as a central way in which class divisions are drawn, then to read the site of projection as the “truth” of the person or object is to mis-recognize and mis-read one’s self. Attributing negative value to the working-class is a mechanism for attributing value to the middle-class self (such as making oneself tasteful through judging others to be tasteless). So, it is not just a matter of using some aspects of the culture of the working-class to enhance one’s value, but also having the authority to attribute value, which assigns the other a negative, thus maintaining class divisions. (Class 118)
Skeggs further explains that popular representations of working-class culture expose middle-class desires and fears more than they actually represent traits of the working class. Reductive representations of working class reveal more about the namer than the named.

Names for groups that privilege the status quo by constructing a negative relation are weak constructs that will always be problematic for the maligned group to accept. Accordingly, when I announced to a colleague that I was teaching a graduate course about working class, he remarked that our students would hardly be interested in studying working class since escaping it was their reason for coming to the university in the first place. I fell silent because I had, in part, come to college to escape the classed and gendered identities presented to me. Unfortunately, many of us come to the classroom named by society as the devalued other. Whether our emotions are irritated, frustrated, enraged, or frightened by the name, we are still giving power to those who do the naming or those who possess the value that we lack. We accept the negative distinctions that are associated with our given identity and can only long to pass or move into the position of the other.

In “Tripping Over Our Tropes: Of ‘Passing’ and Postmodern Subjectivity—What’s in a Metaphor?” Karen Kopelson critiques Pamela Caughie’s use of passing as a metaphor. Kopelson reminds us that the position from which the fragmented, fluid self speaks creates the speaker who can never fully erase the sociocultural embodied history of the prior location—just as the term passing implicates racism. Indeed, Kopelson implores us to take care when speaking about difference by interrogating old terms, metaphors, and tropes for subjectivity and finding new ones (462–63). Many scholars like Kopelson are engaged in examining issues related to discourse and subjectivity in order to forge new connections to agency. Reflection and representation have a significant role to play in creating agency. A long life has taught me that there are moments—be they mundane or monumental—when we are forced to mentally revisit the past history of our subject positions. Again and again, we take out moments from our past and critically reinterpret them from the vantage point of our developing identities’ latest insights. Deciding which interpretation or representation of a memory is the most accurate may not be
as important as re-presenting that memory to ourselves in such a way as to foster the agency to forgive, reconnect, resolve, authorize, or affirm a change. Any narrative of the past contains within it a narrative of the future.

In thinking about how subject positions, identities, and groups of real people are represented, I began to wonder about cases in which group members have re-presented themselves by speaking the devalued name in a reactionary fashion, imbued with humor, irony, or revenge. Sometimes, the humorous bantering of a name can assert negative power as in the small book, *You Say I’m a Bitch Like It’s a Bad Thing*, which matches advertising graphics of women from the forties, fifties, and sixties with humorous captions such as, “I only fake it so he’ll buy me stuff.” The assertion of laughter subverts power from the status quo and can demonstrate a critical awareness of the power relations involved. Several critical questions can be asked about the power gained from resentment humor: in what context can humor be used? How long do the results last? How significant are they? And does laughter only make it more possible to endure an oppressed position? These questions remind me of earlier forms of critical analysis that evaluate the agency of actions as resisting, opposing, or accommodating the status quo. Although such resentment may be morally justified, critical theory needs to progress beyond blaming or getting even with the opposition, which still credits the other with more power.

Invoking critical theory can be dangerous since it has a public relations problem, partially due to its popular association with impolite negativity. If the status quo creates some with more entitlements than others, then we should all just admire and be happy for them. Marlia Banning points to a growing anticritical sentiment that has resulted in legislation, euphemistically named the “Academic Bill of Rights for Higher Education,” which mandates that classroom discourse should not be controversial. Banning demonstrates how the discourse of resentment becomes the issue versus the material conditions of the shrinking middle class and the growing working poor. Thus, the emotion of resentment is re-presented as the “politics of envy,” “class warfare,” and “political correctness” and is displaced onto other marginalized groups (80–85). Like Zebroski, Banning relies on the scholarship of Lynn Worsham to
connect discourse to the way that emotions are disciplined, with emotions being especially vulnerable when feelings are diffuse and prevocalized. Thus, resentment can be critical of power but underdeveloped in terms of agency. Banning calls for a pedagogy that pays attention to emotion, discourse, and subjectivity:

By pedagogy of emotion, I mean to suggest the emergence of alternative curricula and classroom practices that address the affective component of experience, situate emotion historically, and account for emotions both as sites of social control and of political resistance. (90)

Banning questions the efficacy of two types of pedagogy in respect to dealing with emotions of resentment: those that privilege rational reasoning and those that emphasize validation of identity.

I concur with Banning’s critique of rational debate and evidential reasoning more because of how it has been popularized by textbooks as teaching argumentative writing rather than as a wholesale condemnation of rationality itself. I disapprove of assignments that ask students to reduce major issues into a rigid binary structure of pros and cons, for or against, which antagonizes as it misrepresents (Mack, “Selling”). No controversial issue is so simple that there are only two stakeholders whose interests can readily be judged as right or wrong. This type of reasoning enables one-issue voters to close their minds to reasoning and become further entrenched in their unexamined beliefs. Moreover, the codependent narrative of Nietzschean ressentiment perpetuates conflicts that predictably escalate into having to eliminate the enemy through drastic measures such as war and death. Whenever we assert discourse that backs the other into a corner of an oppositional fixed subjectivity, the agency for hope is removed. I believe that critical theory can affirm the subjectivity of all interested parties on the way to a rational resolution. Affirmation should be about attributing value to subjectivity. The next two sections are devoted to narrating a self-identity with value and problems that arise from the power to name value.
Narrating a Self-Identity

I am struck by how seldom I have read about positive traits of working-class culture in academic publications. Zebroski cites Larry Smith's list of working-class positive values in regards to communication, family, community, work, and education (558). Psychologist Barbara Jensen identifies working-class verbal and nonverbal semiotic strengths of belonging, connectedness, cooperation, sharing, directness, and mutuality. From her experience in private practice with middle-class clients, Jensen implies that by contrast working-class culture fosters values that promote mental health.\(^2\) Jensen may be overstating her case since those from working class are less likely to afford therapy, but I appreciate her sentiment precisely because she is attributing value to working-class culture. Jensen also references the positive traits of middle-class culture. In regards to subjectivity Jensen states that middle-class culture values individuality and uses words "as bricks and boards with which one can attempt to systematically build the house of language, self and society" ("Becoming"). The problem is that classed constructions of self-identity can be too rigid.

Zebroski's article clarifies how discourse about class is classed; similarly, the discourse about identity is classed. Jensen delineates how middle- and working-class values for self-identity are different. Jensen infers that middle-class culture values competitive individualism whereas working-class culture sees identity as being connected to family, community and place: becoming versus belonging. Some academics may favor the working-class concept of identity as connected through social relations over one that constitutes identity as separate, singular, and autonomous. Regardless, both views are problematic since they assume a fixed identity and will not help students deal with rapid change and the prevalence of anxiety about postmodern ambiguity. A dichotomy or even a dialectic still tends to stabilize the categories in such a way as to limit agency. In other words, it is hard to escape the hegemonic discourse that names the categories. For example, in writing this response I have not been of one mind; my various identities have been quarreling over my use of the terms subject position, identity, and self. But as Zebroski advocates, seeing the discourse is an important first step.
Erasing the fetish for individuality from middle-class culture is hardly possible; however, complicating it as a concept is within our purview. Perhaps it falls to those of us who capitalize on language to theorize subjectivity to be sure that we reshape discourse in such a way as to attribute value to marginalized identities. I have outlined elsewhere the possibility of representing identity as having several complex features: identity is mediated through language, socially interpreted, embodied in experience, materially situated, multiply conflicted, temporally developmental, and continually open to revision (Mack, “Ethical” 58–59). Ideally, we could just give the students a quiz about postmodern subjectivity and leave it to them to make the necessary mental revisions in their thinking, but alas conscientization is never this simple. Composition teachers have no choice but to deal with the issue of subjectivity because writing always implicates a representation of a speaking self—whether the self is fictitious, fragmented, confused, authoritarian, or absent.

More scholarship is needed that investigates how value can be added to maligned subjectivities without ending up proposing either violent revenge or extreme self-concept building. In the most recent in a series of books that chronicles injustices in public education, Jonathan Kozol contemplates how ludicrous it is to believe that having students chant, “If it is to be, it’s up to me” in a school assembly will change an entire education system that he argues is now more racist than before integration (34–37). In order to study agency, scholars should trace the rhetorical moves of devalued groups who have campaigned to associate positive distinctions with their given names by re-presenting their group to society as beautiful, capable, knowledgeable, moral, civil, powerful, and so on. In an effort to recuperate some hope, a dialectic always exists between the individual and the culture so that individual consciousness-raising may set in motion a critical thought process that months or years from now might realize a connection with like-minded individuals that results in a collective response—or not. Sometimes, we simply cannot know what or when the effects will be. If we conclude that individual subjectivity is socially created, then we can assume that an individual act of agency springs from possibilities already inherent in the sociohistorical collective. Language is the
repository for this ongoing sociohistory. We both speak and are spoken by language.

If we cannot scrap existing cultural notions of identity, perhaps we can attribute value to the multiple identities that students bring with them to the classroom and stop dangling upward mobility in front of them as the motivation to do well in school. While rereading sources for this response, I began thinking about Skeggs' point about working-class identity being fixed within society. Being fixed means that things will never get better because you are frozen in time and space: you are stuck with how media depict your group, confined to current circumstances, restricted from resources, bound to a history of fossilized stereotypes, castrated from power, thwarted from adapting to change, victimized as a sitting duck, limited to simplistic academic analyses, and imprisoned by discourse. Skeggs contrasts this working-class trap to the middle-class cosmopolitan freedom of adopting traits from other cultures without being fixed by such borrowings. For example, when middle-class teenage girls wear clothes that resemble cheap working-class female garments, they may be read as dressing sexy for an evening out whereas similar clothing on a working-class teenage girl would more likely be interpreted as confirmation of her fixed subjectivity as a slut—since marginalized groups are generally ascribed as sexually immoral. Skeggs elucidates how a fixed identity can be exploited and victimized by the middle class. Fortunately, Skeggs moves on from exploitation, placing agency in the ability to narrate the value of one's self-identity:

Only from the position of, and with access to, the resources of the middle-class, can a presumption be made that there is a possibility first, to tell a story, second, to assume the power to re-define and, third, to assume a significance to the story. (Class 126)

Skeggs ends her book by advocating the importance of working-class members narrating a self with value—not exchange value but use value—"praiseworthy for its own sake" (Class 186). According to Skeggs, power lies not just in occupying the valued position, but in possessing the ability to attribute value to a position through representation. Although she does not apply this analysis to composition pedagogy, I believe that Skeggs' idea of narrating a self with value has several implications for composi-
tion pedagogy. Those of us who have witnessed narrative writing being squeezed out of composition courses in favor of other types of academic writing would exploit Skeggs' points to reclaim narrative writing as a form of critical memoir. However, I read Skeggs' use of narrative as being more broad so that all writing narrates value for the implicated identities. Before I advocate some ways to add to self value through writing assignments, I forewarn that the power to name can be abused by both composition teachers and students.

**Being the Namer**

Academics have highly developed interpretive skills, but I do not believe that we should be in the business of foisting them upon others by naming their subjectivities for them no matter how obvious those subjectivities may seem. Besides the horrible consequences of making wrong assumptions, we have learned from disability studies that self-disclosure is a powerful, political choice. I have no right to essentialize one subjectivity as more important or needier of examination or praise than another (Royster). I do not give higher grades to students who come out as working class or who write about working-class experiences. Naming students as working class does not go well; neither does asking them to self-identify as working class. One semester, after reading a lot of critical pedagogy, I tried a confrontational approach and structured the course around my negative perceptions of my students' racism, sexism, and classism. My name-calling polarized us all, and I learned once again that confrontation is rarely effective as an instructional strategy.

Self-disclosure is the domain of the person doing the disclosing. My experience has been that students have their own agendas for disclosure over which I have little control. Consequently, students may out themselves in class as any number of identities through their writing, discussions in class, or slogans on t-shirts and hats. Outside of class, students may disclose identity conflicts that caused them to be absent or not to turn in an assignment on time. Because these moments are often unpredictable, self-disclosure is usually surprising and uncomfortable for both teachers and students (Valentino). Forbidding narrative writing or the use
of first person pronouns will never protect the teacher from having to deal with students’ identity conflicts. As my colleague reminded me earlier, students have come to the university seeking changes in subjectivity. Granted, teaching would be easier if we could fix their identities, still them into a place with rigid assignments and structures to prevent conflict and ambiguity. Alas, someone’s life seems to fall apart publicly every term (hopefully not mine). Depending upon the narrative, self-disclosure can provide more power and agency than the feared confessional admission of transgression. It takes courage for a writer to name an identity, or a subject position from which to speak, but this courage does not always result in good writing. A safe classroom environment gives students permission to speak from many different subjectivities without dictating the value to be fixed to them. The teacher’s attitude or the willingness to hear marginalized voices creates the invitation for students to speak (Mack, “Ethical” 61).

If being the namer of value has the power that Skeggs concludes, then it will be tempting for students to pass the suffering along by naming others negatively—as was done to them. With the power to name comes the responsibility to represent the other ethically. Even when narrating our own value, we do so in relation to the other. Zebroski might describe this as a narrative of social relations that always involves power. Therefore, a narrative of loss, pain, or resentment necessarily constructs a narrative of the other. Gil Hochberg finds the means to think beyond revenge in alterity, exchanging our perspective for that of the other, to forget—not the painful past—but our selves as separate from the other. Hochberg’s political treatment of the Middle East foregrounds the importance of understanding that we are always connected to the other by our mutual history and future.

We compose our individuality by ethically representing others, the others with whom we affiliate and those with whom we oppose. As ironic as it seems, we need others in order to become an individual. No name is needed when we are alone; it is when we are with others that we have the possibility of naming our self as creatively unique or as empathetically connected. Bakhtin’s concept of the “excess of seeing” is a metaphor for physically being unable to see oneself without the perspective of the other:
In this sense, one can speak of a human being's absolute need for the other's seeing, remembering, gathering, and unifying self-activity—the only self-activity capable of producing his (sic) outwardly finished personality. This outward personality could not exist, if the other did not create it: aesthetic memory is productive—it gives birth, for the first time, to the outward human being on a new plane of being. (35–36)

Much of Bakhtin's scholarship places significance on the other in discourse, and this is especially true in his regard for ethical answerability (24). In the next section, I suggest four categories of writing assignments through which students can ethically represent value for their self-identities and those of others.

**Complicating Subjectivity to Add Value**

If postmodern scholarship believes that the subject position creates the speaker or writer, then one of the ways that we should critique writing assignments is in terms of how they make room for the writer to construct an identity with value. At first the word value may seem to implicate a foundational, moralistic truth. Indeed, a great many prompts for tests and writing assignments provide a moral and ask the students to work backwards, narrating an experience that proves that hard work and perseverance pay off or that the advice given by a superior was true. Value should also not be the false promise that good writing will guarantee a job or that writing skills can be exchanged for money. Nor does value imply a narrated happy ending in which feeling good is all that matters.

It is best to be a little vague about what value might be since value should not be fixed in order to leave room for others to determine integrity for one's self and answerability to others. Value has qualities directly related to several major points discussed earlier: Zebroski's idea of a "system of emotion that is put into motion and regulated by discourse" (555); Skeggs' ethical discourse that is "praiseworthy for its own sake" (Class 186); and Bakhtin's ethical answerability in which the self and other are closely aligned (24). To combine these scholars' insights, value is continually produced and regulated by discourse about emotion, self,
and relations with others. As a writing teacher, I can contemplate how I attribute value (not grades) to student writing—a larger goal that takes into account the course and assignments, my beliefs about teaching and life, and my ethical responsibilities to students. Value is a tall order in the classroom. It is how I feel about what we are doing as well as why writing should matter to me and the students. This section directs attention to one small part of this larger pedagogical value, the smaller value of complexity.

Since it is unlikely that students can escape existing values about identity that fix and limit subjectivity, an alternative would be to complicate representations of self and others that are narrated in response to all writing assignments, including those genres that are not immediately considered to be narratives. Prioritizing this complexity may help students to resist the hegemonic pull of discourse to create commodified subjectivities. I call for teachers to discover ways to help students complicate their writing through understanding the connections between representation and discourse—how identities represent them and how they represent identities, both those of themselves and others. Valuing complexity will promote writing that does not fix the student or the other without value. Academics can certainly generate many ways to complicate predictable, static representations. To name but a few: critical pedagogues problematize concepts, using methods such as Shor’s space and time heuristic that traces connections from local to global and past to future (164–66); genre scholars depict genres as a network of hierarchal social practices (Johns; Schryer); writing across the disciplines specialists are aware of the critical tools we borrow from many disciplines such as economics, sociology, psychology, and political science. I have added my suggestions for complicating notions of identity: as mediated through language, socially interpreted, embodied in experience, materially situated, multiply conflicted, temporally developmental, and continually open to revision.

This last section is the place in the text where my teacher identity gets to speak. I propose a constellation of assignments for the composition classroom—not quite as large as James Moffett’s *Teaching the Universe of Discourse* but still a wide space for social imagination. These four broad types of assignments ask students to narrate their lived experiences through critique, inquiry, affirmation, and action. Of course, any assign-
ment should be adapted to a particular location, course, theme, or sequence of assignments. Planning a list of assignments for a writing course can be a heuristic activity as we contemplate motives for teaching writing and students’ motives for writing about their lives. For me, assignments are always a work in progress; if an assignment becomes too static, I cast it aside because the assignment starts to become more important than my interaction with students. I want to design assignments that generate papers that I can’t wait to read and that students will want to keep or share with others. Otherwise, I relegate us to a school assembly line where students manufacture essays that nobody really wants to read.

1. Active Critique

Societal givens can be critiqued or problematized as students spot trends and contradictions in the media. Published critiques of scholars should only be offered as models for what students might wish to write. Students are already critical of various cultural practices. Writing assignments can extend the students’ critical consciousness of popular culture into generative themes for further investigation and analysis. Three variations that I have tried include a cultural artifact critique, a media representation critique, and a parody of a cultural myth. Zebroski’s extended example of the shifts in class discourse surrounding the Katrina tragedy is an excellent model of critical analysis that I anticipate sharing with my students (518–26).

2. Primary Inquiry

Cultural groups, social practices, or social issues that affect students’ daily lives can be researched through observation, dialogue, reading, and analysis. Writing should build from firsthand experience so that students are not asked to assume a subordinate position in relation to knowledge. Interesting formats can be created to share the researched and analyzed information with groups outside of the classroom. Students can seek information for those without the resources for access. Variations include an ethnographic essay about social observations, an expert essay about specific life experiences, a we-search report about a topic for service to others, and a multigenre report about interviews and textual research. Zebroski has discussed his success having students write about work in
a chapter on critical ethnography (see Zebroski and Mack; Zebroski, *Thinking*).

3. Identity Affirmation

Individual life experience and folk culture can be documented, interpreted, and analyzed as significant to students' developing self-identities. Writing can preserve the culture of groups that students belong to or affiliate with. Too many academic assignments, writing assignments in particular, ask students to turn their backs on their home cultures. Academic literacy need not be positioned in direct conflict with other, equally valid types of cultural literacy. Variations that have interested me include memoir, oral history, and folklore collection essays. Zebroski would categorize these under the discourse categories of cultural heritage and witness (548–53).

4. Local Action

Students need to employ language skills to take action in their lives. Language study should not result in students who only know how to use writing to win favor with teachers and employers. Writing pseudo-arguments for teachers to read is not nearly as significant as trying to persuade real audiences about local issues of importance. I have tried limit situation analyses, personal manifestos, negotiation proposals, and advocacy letters. I can imagine this type of writing drawing from Zebroski's discourses of position and individual affiliation (543–44, 550–51).

These assignments may not seem all that different from ones that are already in place. In some regards it is not the assignment but the type of writing that the teacher invites that makes the difference. The teacher should use the assignment to provide a context for writing that complicates subjectivity and increases the student's power as a writer. The teacher can see this power as many things—skills improvement, textual confidence, or identity as an academic or as a learner. When we learn anything, we also learn our social relation to that knowledge. In other words, we occupy a prophetic position within the social context of learning as capable, naïve, precocious, remedial, and so on that predicts our access to power. For instance, if the teacher collects drafts and
micromanages revision for students prior to their being permitted to complete the assignment, then students may learn that they are incapable of deciding what needs to be revised rather than learning how to revise their own texts. How many of us have found that some students only become more rather than less dependent on our help as the term progresses? Zebroski portrays similar instances of emotionally dependent students (562-63). By placing them in a more powerful position in relation to knowledge, students need a different type of emotional support. I try to structure an assignment so that the context provides a topic with value and ethical conflicts that provide the opportunity to gain knowledge about language use. Thus, when students interview others of importance to them and they have to represent these people in writing, students experience a range of ethical conflicts that must be resolved. Having the power to represent others' words that have value creates an ethical conflict similar to what teachers hope students will feel when using quotations from the texts of published scholars (Mack, "Ethical" 69-72). These two similar ethical moments of quotation place students in very different positions in relation to power. Handily, we no longer need to fret over plagiarism since the writer's ethical problems have been outsourced to websites such as turnitin—no doubt in the hopes of avoiding the very legal punishments that they perpetuate. As we teach, we must continually question how our assignments and practices position students in relation to power.

Academics need to be mindful of the arrogance of their entitlement to knowledge. It is disrespectful to name our knowledge as superior to that of others. As a person with working-class lineage, I relive my father's joy when I laugh at how stupid we academics are about the pragmatics of daily life. As a student who had just learned how to use a semicolon to fix a comma splice admonished, "You guys sure care a lot about dots." Patrick Hartwell has cautioned our field about the tendency to create a grand narrative that conflates alphabetic literacy. The knowledge that students bring to class deserves respect. This is not the same notion as the educational tenant that the teacher exploits students' cultures for teachable moments. Instead, a position of radical mutuality believes that knowing more about students' cultures will unveil their assumed intelligence and valued insights that can benefit the teacher as well as the larger
society. My father used to say that people are smarter than you think and that all people have good reasons for doing the things that they do. Rather than feeling sorry for my students by naming them as less, I prefer to work from a position of respect. This is much harder to do than these glib platitudes represent. Respect comes easiest if I name our similarities and differences with value. We are both continually learning about life, language, and culture. Like my students, I am in flux, not having quite figured it all out yet, wondering how things might be interpreted differently. Reading Zebroski's stunning analysis of the constitutive role of discourse moves me to imagine possibilities for naming mutual value.

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Notes

1. The documentary series that Henry Louis Gates, Jr. hosted for PBS is an effective classroom resource for thinking more critically about African-American racial designation and DNA.

2. Jenson writes:

Working-class cultures have many humane, healthy, and life-giving qualities for which people from the middle-class pine and search, at no small consequence to their band accounts. Like most counseling psychologists, I have spent a part of my career helping both “failures” and “successes” from the professional middle-class improve their mental health. We help them, often, to embrace a kind of humanity that values warmth over brilliance, “connectedness” over competition, and that helps them to find a self that exists in spite of personal achievements or failures. I do not intend to romanticize what can be, in many ways, a difficult working-class life with limited options... (“Across” 182)

3. I tell students that memoir writing can consciously construct identity by analyzing the selves involved in interpreting the experience:

a. The naive self who was present at the time of the experience.
b. The subjective self who interprets the experience as the
culture would suggest.
c. The future self who imagines the person that the author wishes to become.
d. The author self who negotiates among the other selves and constructs meaning.

It is the writer's job to negotiate the multiple meanings that any given memory can have. Writing can be a way to make sense out of life's complex experiences.

Works Cited


