and myopic world views, a refusal to interrogate one's assumptions in favor of concrete, dilettantish chatter. Like Ann Berthoff, Ohmann wants more inquiring generalizations, not more highlighting of thingness. Probably stemming from the Marxist contention that the workings of monopoly capitalism are so subtly masked that they almost defy detection, Ohmann critiques solipsistic specificity as yet another illustration of how innocently humanists encourage students "to accept the empirical fragmentation of consciousness that passes for common sense in our society, and hence to accept the society itself as just what it most superficially seems to be" (250). Along with Wallace Stevens, Ohmann would "Let the lamp affix its beam" and "let be be finale of seem."

It is hard to imagine a committed writing teacher who would not find these literate essays both compelling and provocative. Ohmann's struggle against hegemonic thinking as it manifests itself in our verbal culture makes our work as writing teachers seem even more politically and intellectually vital. He shows us that we have important work to do in the world.


Reviewed by John Schilb, Associated Colleges of the Midwest

We can read the title of this anthology two ways. Glossed as "*Freire for the Classroom,*" it underscores what increasing numbers of us in composition believe: that the pedagogy of Marxist educator Paulo Freire can nurture American students' powers of social critique in an age in which resuscitators of the Great Books, advocates of "basic skills," and champions of "cultural literacy" otherwise seem poised on the brink of triumph. Yet, read as "*Freire for the Classroom,*" the title indicates that various issues of translation arise when we shift his model of teaching from the slums and villages of his native Brazil to our own instructional sites. And right at the start, editor Ira Shor suggests the book will address the question: "Can a social pedagogy emerging from the Third World truly work in the North?" I'd go even further and contend that "a sourcebook for liberatory teaching" should keep in mind the tensions between theory and practice that might get obscured when any precepts for teaching are certified as "sources" leading to particular "liberatory" effects. This methodological prudence seems especially worth observing when claims for students' liberation are being made by people other than the students themselves.
Readers unfamiliar with Freire as a rival to more orthodox theorists of literacy, and those wishing to renew their acquaintance with him, might find this book useful. Although it sometimes lapses into sheer repetition, it performs a service in cumulatively surveying Freire's principles and some North American attempts to enact them. But readers wanting sustained attention to the various complexities involved in the relation between pedagogical theory and actual classroom practice might well be disappointed. Indeed, several of the essays make assumptions about this relation which ought to be pondered skeptically.

After the introduction, Shor's article "Educating the Educators" shrewdly points out the neglect of pedagogy in recent proposals for school reform. It then neatly summarizes the teaching activities that Freire values, like fostering dialogue between teachers and students, problematizing traditional subjects, situating topics in students' personal concerns, and studying how institutions can change. The remaining articles elaborate on Freire's ideals, often through a combination of theory and classroom anecdote. The most engaging are ones that embed their generalizations in concrete detail: Kyle Fiore and Nan Elsasser's account of Elsasser's experiences in teaching Bahamian women; Elsasser and Patricia Irvine's description of how they integrated the study of Creole into writing courses at the College of the Virgin Islands; Elsa Roberts Auerbach and Denise Burgess' analysis of debilitating messages in ESL textbooks; Nancy Schneidewind's identification of strategies to promote democratic learning in women's studies classes; Marilyn Frankenstein's explanation of her course on the role of statistics in society; and Cynthia Brown's recollection of Freire's work in Brazil.

At the conclusion of their essay, Auerbach and Burgess submit that "by problematizing our knowledge about teaching, we do exactly what is proposed here for students; our own critical self-examination becomes a model of the process we are inviting our students to engage in" (167). In other words, Freirean teaching presumably involves perpetual questioning of its own premises. Yet, as I've indicated, I don't find enough reflection of this sort in the book.

I'm troubled, first of all, by the drift of several essays toward a "false consciousness" notion of teaching which may not produce the student "liberation" it intends and can even grow authoritarian. This tendency to find students politically incorrect lurks at times in Freire's own writing. Despite his emphasis on students' actively inquiring into the conditions of their oppression, he occasionally suggests they should aim for a knowledge of politics that he himself securely possesses. For example, in a letter at the back of this anthology, Freire states that "a progressive teacher, in contrast to a reactionary one, is always endeavoring to reveal reality for her/his students, removing whatever keeps them from seeing clearly and critically" (212). The language is a disquieting blend of Marx and Plato, or of Terry Eagleton and Allan Bloom. It seems to put the teacher in a vanguard position...
and the students further back in a teleological movement that the teacher has already accomplished.

I'm equally disturbed when Shor refers to "desocializing" students (23), as if his own views transcended social influence; when he declares that the population of the United States is "politically undeveloped" (105), as if he were higher on some evolutionary scale; when Linda Shaw Finlay and Valerie Faith insist on the need for students "to establish the recognizable features of reality" (73); and when Nancy Zimmet calls for "objectifying situations in students' lives" and for getting students to identify the "literal" meanings in texts. I suspect teachers interested in students' intellectual and material "liberation" can encourage it without resorting to a leftist inflection of Platonism. To consider it necessary is to concede too much to the Allan Blooms—as well as to Richard Rorty and Kenneth Bruffee, who hold that once foundationalism of this sort is discredited, the only option left is their self-admitted postmodern bourgeois liberalism. Besides, engaging in such epistemological wrangles can leave one believing that progress is simply a matter of arriving at the correct epistemology, rather than a matter of worldly political struggle. I think teachers stand a better chance of acting "progressively" if they drop Freire's ocular metaphors—thinking of themselves not as unveiling an ultimate "reality" for the myopic, but as joining with students in the rigorous comparison of specific institutions and their specific effects, with all of the inquirers trying to consider the influence of their own prejudices on their research. At the very least, the "false consciousness" paradigm merits the scrutiny that several neo-Marxists have already given it.

Teachers of advanced composition might be especially bothered by how various essays in the book view writing. The techniques they propose for teaching it seem dated and simplistic, not up to Boynton/Cook's reputation for innovative models of writing instruction. Although Freire's idea of having students analyze key terms in their culture certainly can prove fruitful, too many of the essays promote it through a celebration of listmaking. This is a device which might already be tiresomely familiar to students, and it runs the additional risk of slotting concepts into hierarchies and binary oppositions before they're examined in all their complexity. Shor hardly comes across as fresh when, in an excerpt reprinted from his 1980 book Critical Teaching and Everyday Life, he calls for the introduction of "free writing" and "prewriting." Zimmet too quickly extols "exercises" of hers which ask students "to work with such patterns as cause/effect, comparison/contrast, time order, and simple listing" (124). The assumption here, apparently, is that current-traditional methodology can be retained if a new politics underlies it. What's needed, though, is consideration of how mechanical techniques might numb and constrain students no matter what the ideology of the teacher deploying them.
Furthermore, some of the essays proceed from dubious concepts of the relationships among thought, speech, and writing. They suggest that thought can be formed prior to and outside of discourse, that speech is potentially a more authentic medium than writing, and that writing should express the authenticity of which speech is capable. Elsasser and Vera John-Steiner, for example, refer to literacy as “the unfolding of conceptual knowledge” (59), as if the actual process of writing doesn’t shape thinking. Shor declares that “the written language of our culture is nothing more than encoded speech” (109). Finlay and Faith stress as a pedagogical aim the fostering of students’ “free,” “authentic,” and “natural voices.” A deconstructionist like Jacques Derrida would contend that ideas like these uphold a traditional nature/culture opposition which students should question. But recall that Freire’s own teaching is devoted to helping illiterates consider how culture is too often depicted as nature. Why hold theories of writing exempt from such analysis? It could help us understand how social forces might operate even in the preliminary construction of thought, and how even oral communication is mediated by them.

Certain essays make what strikes me as exaggerated claims for the enhancement of student writing in the courses they describe. They suggest that young writers automatically flourish after studying their previous alienation from school. Elsasser and John-Steiner declare without any evidence that their model of teaching “offers learners a range of strategies that enables them to externalize their thoughts through writing” (60). Finlay and Faith maintain, also without evidence, that their students “experienced a dramatic improvement in the quality of their thought, and especially of their writing” (76). The larger problem, I think, is again that these authors posit too deterministic a connection between certain teaching methods and certain reactions that students might have to them.

Overall, Freire for the Classroom would have been stronger if the authors of the pieces within it had been more willing to test their key premises about radical teaching and students’ learning. I found myself wishing, too, for new essays which would explicitly play Freire’s ideas off against other trends in composition studies, including the recent calls for merely initiating students into the academic disciplines. Unfortunately, Shor has included several articles from years past, and he has relied a great deal on a small set of authors (with three essays co-authored by Elsasser, as well as two essays and an introduction by Shor himself). Whatever my regrets, however, I think we need all the elaborations of Freire’s pedagogy we can get. If this anthology brings him to the attention of readers who have never known his work or have forgotten it, great. If it prompts others to re-examine how his ideas might best travel to American classrooms, so much the better.