OPINION: Revision as a Critical Practice

Joseph Harris

I n this essay I argue that in teaching students to write as critics we need to ask them to change not how they think but how they work—to take on, that is, a new sort of intellectual *practice*. I believe this practice is characterized by both a strong use of the work of others and a reflectiveness about one's own aims in writing. Drawing on examples from my teaching, I show how helping students become more aware of the choices they make in revising their texts can help them gain control of these two discursive moves—and, as a result, claim some real measure of authority as writers in the academy.

This focus on writing as a practice diverges, I think, in small yet important ways from recent leftist or critical views of teaching which, following the work of Paolo Freire, aim to reform the *consciousness* of students, to lead them to understand and resist the ways they are positioned by broad social forces and discourses. For instance, at the end of *Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures*, James Berlin argues that since "our teaching strategies may unavoidably shape our students as ethical and social subjects," we should openly discuss how we want to use that influence toward democratic goals (180). And, similarly, Patricia Bizzell closes *Academic Discourse and Critical Consciousness* by calling for a return to the teaching of "civic virtue," which involves a willingness to "prophesy for social justice" (295). While the work of Berlin and Bizzell is too nuanced to be summarized fully by such catchphrases, their language here still illustrates a shift in focus away from the practice of writing and toward questions about social values, subjectivities, ethics, and ideologies—a shift that characterizes the "social turn" that they were instrumental in helping composition take in the 1990s.

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In contrast, I want to argue for a renewed attentiveness to the visible practice or labor of writing. My aim in doing so is not to depoliticize the teaching of writing but to suggest that our first job is to demystify the actual workings of academic discourse. I will thus use the term *critical* here so that it is no longer vaguely synonymous with *oppositional* or *progressive*—as is the case with *critical consciousness*—but rather refers more concretely to writing that responds to and makes use of the work of others. In this sense, to write as a critic is to situate what one has to say about texts or issues in relation to what others have had to say about them. And while this sort of critical writing is practiced at many sites, the academy is where most of us learn its distinctive moves and gestures.

But while I understand that how students learn critical or academic writing may be shaped by the ideologies of their schools and cultures, I think that the relationships between practices and values are extraordinarily complex, mediated, and unstable. I am thus not convinced that there is any necessary link between learning a critical practice and acquiring a critical consciousness—or any other kind of consciousness, for that matter. But this doesn't strike me as a problem. For if our aim as teachers is to help students take part in the cultural and political discussions of their day, then we need less to influence their present attitudes (which strikes me as a kind of intellectual canvassing for votes) than to help them learn to deploy more powerful forms of reading and writing.

To illustrate what is at stake in choosing to emphasize practice or consciousness, I would like to turn here to a recent account of an experiment in critical teaching, Ira Shor's 1996 *When Students Have Power.* Shor's book is useful to my project for two reasons. First, unlike many critical theorists and pedagogues, Shor is interested and skilled in narrating the lived experience of the classroom, in offering a sense of what is involved, week by week and class by class, in working through a particular teaching agenda with a set of real students who don't always do what he'd like them to. This level of detail offers me a chance to define in fairly precise ways where our aims and practices as teachers differ. Second, in bringing an openly politicized set of concerns to his teaching and writing, Shor nicely articulates the desire to link work in the classroom to a broader program for social change that has driven so much recent scholarship in composition. *When Students Have Power* is thus at once generously specific and usefully representative. In pointing where I disagree with Shor, then, my aim is less to argue specifically with him than to suggest what I think is missing when the goals of teaching are imagined in terms of shifts of consciousness rather than changes in practice. And having done that, I can then look at some examples of how I have myself tried to teach writing as a practice, and why I think revision is key to doing so.

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In *When Students Have Power*, Shor tells the story of a course he taught on the theme of Utopia in an overcrowded and windowless basement classroom at Staten Island College. Shor's tone throughout the book is thoughtful, personal, comic, and committed. He is sensitive to the ironies involved in asking students to talk about Utopia while they are crammed into fiberglass chairs filling a cinderblock room, as well as in urging a group of people who think they may finally have a shot at the American Dream to become, at that very moment, critical of it. He is obsessed with democratizing classroom procedures, with making sure that everyone in the room has had some say about where they will sit (circles or rows?), how they will converse (raising hands or not?), and the rules governing lateness, attendance, assignments, and grades. The goal of all this is to raise the question of what a classroom utopia—a democratic, self-governing group of learners—might look like, and much of *When Students Have Power* recounts the complicated and often frustrating negotiations involved in trying to work toward such a class.

Early on Shor introduces the key metaphor for both the book and course: the Siberian syndrome, or the way many students sit as close to the back corners of the room, as far away from the teacher and the center of activity, as they possibly can. This hanging back is itself a kind of physical metaphor for these students' mistrust of and lack of involvement in the mass education that society has deemed fit for them. It's a way of saying, you keep your distance and I'll keep mine, and Shor is quick to note that, however self-defeating it may be in the end, the gesture also has a Bartleby-like quality of quiet refusal and dignity. The Siberian syndrome is a powerful metaphor that points to a key problem in teaching: How do you energize and involve people who just want to be left alone, who are only there because they have to be?

My only reservation has to do with the name: Siberia is a place of forced rather than chosen exile, but the self-willed isolation of Shor's students, their clear desire to opt out of public life, seems to have less to do with Siberia than with suburbia (or at least the hope of it), less with a flight from totalitarianism than an escape into privatism. And indeed the most salient virtue of Shor's teaching and writing is his steady refusal to romanticize the goals and attitudes of the working-class students who populate his courses. They are not latent organic intellectuals, not characters out of either Gramsci or Pasternak, or are at least not easily imagined as such; they are instead, mostly, white, Irish or Italian, from the outer boroughs of New York, their lives centered around jobs and families, the girls and women with big hair, the guys with baseball caps—and almost all of them with the wrong opinions. They juggle demands and schedules at home and work in order to drive to campus, where they can't find parking, can't get into the courses they need or want, and end up sitting, with their jackets and books on their laps, in uncomfortable chairs of molded plastic, in a semi-required literature and humanities course, even though few of

them are humanities majors. And into their midst comes Ira Shor, rearranging the furniture, negotiating the curriculum, "trying to be a critical-democratic teacher in a setting where critical inquiry and power-sharing have virtually no profile in student experience" (19). It's a wonderful story about a courageous experiment in teaching.

And yet . . . as I read through Shor's account of the term, I kept looking for something that wasn't there, something that never happened—and that was an engagement with the *language* of utopian reform. Shor says that his goal in the Utopia course was "to merge civics with literature" (33), but as the class plays out, its focus appears far more social than textual: Students read two books, *Walden 2* and *Ecotopia*, along with a pamphlet on practical environmentalism. They have two main writing projects: one a proposal to make Staten Island College better in some way, the other a proposal to improve New York City. Some students also participate in an after-class group that advises Shor on the running of the course. Throughout his book, Shor offers a detailed account of the social dynamics of his class—its conversations, its feel, its look, its procedures. But while he often quotes from the writing of students, he doesn't say much about how he worked to get them to attend to the phrasings or structure of the texts they were reading, or how he helped them go about the actual work of rethinking and redrafting their own texts as writers. Rather, his focus remains pretty much on the level of ideas, on problems and alternatives rather than on close work with texts.

Now this may seem little more than saying that Ira Shor teaches a different sort of course than I would. But I think there's more to it than that, and I suspect that Shor agrees, since he makes something very much like this complaint part of his narrative, through reporting the comments of a student, Stephanie, who seems dissatisfied from the very start of the term with the intellectual level and focus of the course, and who at its end comments that, "What I believed would be an English class turned out to be a civics class . . . the role of the teacher in assisting the student in studying, unraveling and interpreting the text is irreplaceable" (218). I admire Shor's willingness to bring this criticism of his teaching into the open, but I am also troubled by his way of doing so. For Shor identifies Stephanie from the start as someone who doesn't quite seem to belong in that cinderblock classroom, as a transfer from a liberal-arts college whose tuition her family could no longer afford, whose politics are more liberal and tastes more sophisticated than those of most of her classmates. Indeed, Shor refers to her no less than six times in distancing terms as a "transfer" from an "elite" and "exclusive" liberal arts college (53, 59, 118, 151, 165, 217). His sense of Stephanie as privileged seems to drive his dismissive response to her comments: "Her statement seems to long for the intense, close reading of texts offered in the small classes at the elite private college she left before arriving at our mass institution" (218). Shor reports that he "posed Stephanie's objections to the

other students and found the majority preference was for the civics orientation because most wanted to know what was wrong in society, what can be done about it, and how Utopia related to their lives" (57). Although I respect Shor's sense of the abilities and needs of the students at Staten Island, I am alarmed by his two-tier imagining of higher education, which has the mass of students talking about "civics" while reserving the close "unraveling and interpreting" of texts for an elite. I want to know instead what it might mean to be a critical teacher *of writing*—that is, how I might use my trained understanding of how texts work (and not simply talk about the ideas in them) to help all students gain the authority in reading and writing that some of their classmates, like Stephanie, come to college already possessing. And, ironically, the only way to address this gap in cultural capital is, I believe, through the sort of instruction in close work with texts that Stephanie asks for but Shor is reluctant to offer.

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In *Toward a Rational Society*, Jürgen Habermas worries that intellectual work geared exclusively toward practical results, what he calls *instrumental reason*, "could pay for its unreflected relation to practice by stabilizing implicit professional standards, cultural traditions, and forms of political consciousness, whose power expands in an uncontrolled manner precisely when they are not chosen but result instead from the ongoing character of existing institutions" (4). These words merit study. For, on the one hand, what Habermas has to say could be read as an indictment of the project of composition—which has always aimed to produce subjects, students, who are prepared to take on the work of the academy, and which can thus be accused of furthering the ends of the status quo, of ensuring that the machinery of the university remains well-oiled and well-tuned, its essays ordered and its sentences parsed. And, indeed, this critique of composition as merely instrumental has already been made—in a sweeping and uninformed fashion by Wlad Godzich, in the first chapter of the *Culture of Literacy*, and with considerable nuance by Sharon Crowley in "Composition's Ethic of Service, the Universal Requirement, and the Discourse of Student Need." But, on the other hand, it might also be argued that the course in composition, with its characteristic focus on the actual *doing* of academic work—on the somewhat inchoate, often tedious, and never wholly programmable piecing together of sentences and paragraphs into critical prose—is one of the few places left to us where, to use Habermas's suggestive phrasing, "the ongoing character" of academic work, its "implicit professional standards, cultural traditions, and forms of political consciousness" might be brought under direct scrutiny.

The goal of much cultural criticism in the last thirty years has been demystification—first of the workings of literary texts and then of the codes of power.

Unfortunately, however, the workings of this criticism itself have often remained mysterious. How did Barthes actually go about writing his mythologies? How did Foucault construct his genealogies? What features did they look for in the texts they read? How did they move as writers from sentence to sentence, paragraph to paragraph? Unless we can share with students how we approach the activities of reading and writing, we run the risk of once again casting them as simply the spectators of criticism, who are shown the results of our work but are not engaged in doing it, who are asked to ventriloquize our positions and interpretations but not to form their own.

Keith Hjortshoj has noted the desire of many academics to repress the disorderliness and difficulty of writing. We tend to represent our expertise in terms of a command of a certain body of knowledge, Hjortshoj argues, but writing (and reading and teaching) are *activities* that have to be performed over and over—and there is thus always the threat that the situation will get out of hand, that the words won't come, that one will have nothing to say, or will simply seem wrong or rambling or foolish. The demands of our colleagues that we "clean up" the writing of students can thus be seen, at least in part, as a projection of their (our) own anxieties about the ways none of us can ever wholly control language. What I want to suggest, then, is that we may be most effective as teachers when we focus as directly as we can on the unstable workings of writing itself—since that is precisely what almost everyone else wants to set aside.

Let me be clear: I am *not* advocating a course in grammar, or in heuristics or formulas for writing, but rather a course that looks very closely at how ideas get shaped in and refracted by language. I am arguing for a focus not on form but on function, on use in context.

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One way of getting at such issues of language use is through working with competing versions of the same text: parodies, remakes, abridged or altered editions, adaptations, excerpts, and the like. Cover versions of popular songs tend to be good examples, as students are often quite willing to argue about how a certain song has been improved or ruined by its remake. For instance, a breakthrough in a basic writing class I taught a few years ago at the University of Pittsburgh occurred when Timothy, a tight end on the football team, wrote a sustained analysis of the changes the Fugees had made to Bob Marley's "No Woman, No Cry," arguing that they had shifted and updated the message of the song from a 1960s-style shout of protest to a more current plea for black unity. While I'm not sure that Timothy's argument always quite held together, both he and his classmates were startled that he had managed (over the course of several drafts) to write six full pages discussing a two-

stanza song—and his doing so gave us an opening to talk about why small shifts in phrasing might matter, how they might point to larger matters of stance and tone.

The class that Timothy wrote his essay for was an intensive six-credit course for students considered academically at risk. My co-teacher, Stephen Carr, and I had decided to center the course on the theme of retellings, and to do so we had put together a series of matched texts: Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and *Mary Reilly*, Valerie Martin's take on the same story from the perspective of a serving girl in Jekyll's house; Philip K. Dick's dystopic fantasy *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* and Ridley Scott's extraordinary revisioning of it in his film, *Blade Runner;* Grimm's fairy tales along with both Bruno Bettelheim's subtle readings of them in *The Uses of Enchantment* and Anne Sexton's mordant rephrasings of them in her book of poems, *Transformations.* In assembling the course, we had two principal concerns: How does the same story get invested with different meanings when placed in different contexts, put to new or different uses? And, more important, how can students reuse or transform what they read in their own writings, move past the level of summary or report and toward criticism?

This is not to say that we wanted to shy away from discussing issues of power or politics. On the contrary, we designed the course so that such issues might well arise, that connections might be made between what we were all reading together and each of our own lived situations. Most of the differences between *Jekyll and Hyde* and *Mary Reilly*, for instance, can be traced to the gaps between the social classes—gentleman and servant—of their narrators. A fretting over race runs through, or perhaps just underneath, the narratives of both *Androids* and *Blade Runner*—with Dick brooding over Aryanism and eugenics, and Scott exploring the implications of cyborgism. And the forming of a gendered identity is precisely what most fairy tales are about. But we didn't want to make these connections for students, or even to suggest that making such connections was in itself the goal of the course. Rather, the kind of power we hoped to help students develop was one that would be shown not in statements they happened to make about class or race or gender but rather in the stances they took toward, the uses they made of, other texts in their writings. We wanted to imagine power, that is, not in terms of an abstract relation that one might take toward a dominant ideology, but as a set of specific and local moves that a writer might make, as a *discursive agency.*

Let me offer an example here, a deliberately modest one, of a student beginning to acquire such agency. The first assignment we gave students that semester was to find and analyze a passage in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* that helped them define what was "horrific" about the tale. The challenge here is that not much happens in the novel that seems particularly gruesome or scary. Rather, Stevenson's narration often seems perversely indirect, oblique; he presents his "strange case" entirely through a series of letters and diaries, and almost all the violence takes place off-

stage, as it were, and is reported second- or third-hand. Even the famous transformation scene is not from Jekyll to Hyde, as we all remember from the movies, but from Hyde back to Jekyll—and this takes place not in the mad scientist's lab but in the drawing room of a friend, whose retrospective account of the change is surprisingly short on physical detail. As a result, on a first reading many students found the book surprisingly dull. So how, we asked, did this then become one of the most familiar and liked horror stories of our culture? Here's how one student, Esther, approached this question.

<div align="center">The Unexplained Act (Draft 1)</div>

> "At the sight that met my eyes, my blood changed into something thin and icy. Yes, I had gone to bed Henry Jekyll, I had awakened Edward Hyde" (pg. 80). This passage is very creepy because there is no logical reason for him to change like this. He went to sleep as himself and awakened as someone other than himself, this is strange. The book is creepy because it has so many events happening and there is no reasonable explanation for them. I wonder what is the reason for this happening, without him have taken the potion.
>
> This action is not common in an everyday life. It is very queer. Was this change happening because he drank too much of the potion the night before or is it just the side effects? It's very inexplicable why this sudden change came about. Dr. Jekyll was astounded by what happened to him. The first two things that came to his mind were, "how was this to be explained and how was it to be remedied?" (pg. 80). He could have prevented these acts by not taking the potion as often as he did. There may be several explanations for him changing without recognition.

It's clear that, even at this early point in the term, Esther already knew something about how to write an introduction. She begins with a striking quotation from the novel, and she very clearly tries to address the question posed her: "The book is creepy because . . ." So she has a sense of the *form* of a critical essay, of how they typically begin. But I'd argue that she doesn't yet seem to understand the *function* of an introduction, of what it's supposed to do—which is to set an agenda for the essay that follows. Look at the last sentence of her first paragraph: "I wonder what is the reason for this happening, without him have taken the potion." This move places Esther in an almost wholly subordinate position to the text, as she asks a question that in fact has a clear answer in Stevenson's narrative. She thus ended up spending most of the rest of her essay simply restating those details of Stevenson's plot that form that answer—which is, very briefly, that Jekyll increasingly relapses into Hyde both because he is builds up a tolerance for the antidote and because he can no longer get a "pure" solution of it.

But note the final sentence of her second paragraph: "There may be several explanations for him changing without recognition." Esther goes on in her essay to note what those reasons were, seemingly contradicting her previous claim that there was something "unexplained" or "creepy" about the transformation. But I say *seem-*

ingly because there is indeed something creepy about Jekyll's situation, something that goes beyond the explanations given in the plot. In responding to her draft, I drew Esther's attention to this problem—to how she had described Jekyll's transformations as both "unexplained" and capable of "several explanations"—in the hope not that she would simply remove one of the contradictory sentences (the easiest and worst form of revision) but that she would begin to think through the tensions she was experiencing as a reader, to *use* the problem she was having to say something new about the text.

And so she did. In her second draft, after pretty much repeating her first paragraph, Esther refocused her essay with a striking new paragraph:

> The plot of the story offers several explanations, but it doesn't give us the horrifying thought the passage brings to mind. Dr. Jekyll is a wealthy and very intelligent man. He is a chemist with his own laboratory inside his home. He also has a large house with butlers and housemaids working for him day and night. Dr. Jekyll has friends around town, he often has gatherings at his house for them. This is the most horrific thing of it all. He has everything a person could ask for in life: to be wealthy and live in a huge home. So why would he want to change all this for someone or something that is worst than what he already is? The first thought that came to my mind was that he was unhappy with the way he was. The way he was living didn't seem to bad, but behind all his wealth there had to be some kind of discomfort or unhappiness with himself.

I'm struck by the differences in the questions Esther asks herself in these drafts. In her first draft, she asks a question—why did this happen?—whose answer can be found in the details of Stevenson's plot. In her second draft, she asks a question for which there is no such ready answer: "So why would he want to change all this for someone or something that is worst than what he already is?" To respond to this, Esther needs to turn not only to the text of the novel but also to her own understanding of human motives and psychology.

And look at how Esther now makes the first and last sentences of her paragraph turn on the word *but:* "The plot of the story offers several explanations, *but* it doesn't give us the horrifying thought the passage brings to mind. [. . .] The way he was living didn't seem to bad, *but* behind all his wealth there had to be some kind of discomfort or unhappiness with himself." In these sentences, Esther carves out some work for herself to do that Stevenson hasn't done for her already. Roger Sale has pointed out how, while the conjunction *and* continues a line of thinking, *but* redirects it, points to something missing, on the contrary, or unexpected. *But* allows for distinctions to be made. And so, in these sentences, Esther begins to distinguish between the plot of the story and the thoughts it prompts in her as a reader, between the details of the narrative and what they might imply. Her stance as a reader has become more assertive and confident; there's a line of thinking in this second draft that belongs not to Stevenson but to her.

I have reprinted here only the first pages of Esther's drafts. In neither case was she fully able to make good on her promises in the pages that followed; rather, as an inexperienced writer, she stumbled both in trying to restate Stevenson (in draft 1) and in offering her own interpretation of his work (in draft 2). So the two introductions here document not an epiphany but a step forward, small but real, in which we can see in concrete ways how Esther is beginning to learn a new sort of practice as a writer.

In the same class, another student, Creg, decided to center his main writing project of the term—in which students were asked to find and comment on two versions of the same tale—on the differences between William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* and a film version he had seen of it. The problem was that the film proved to be a very literal and faithful adaptation of the book. Creg thus found himself with little to say about differences that weren't there, and so ended up, as is often the case, simply restating the plot and theme of the novel. As he later explained in a retrospective essay on his work in the course:

> After my first draft with the original movie, I realized that my paper totally stunk. When I was told to make changes to the paper, I knew that they meant the whole paper needed to be changed. Everything in the first movie and the book were identical [. . .]. In order for this paper to have any chance at all, I knew I had to say something different about the two texts. I found it impossible to make any kind of contrast with the old movie, so as a result I was fortunate enough to get the most recent version of the movie. When I took notes on the 1990 version and looked for comparisons, I found differences in the boys' humanity.

Creg then referred us to a section of his revised essay in which he felt he was able to point to a significant difference between the book and (second) film, to which I'll turn in a moment. First, though, I want to express my admiration for a student who, faced with turning in a revised draft of a major class assignment, decides that he needs to start over, virtually from scratch, in order to get it right. The sense of agency, of confidence, expressed in such a move is part of what I hope to teach for. The section of his essay he referred us to comes from the middle of his second draft:

> *Lord of the Flies:* Differences between the Novel and the Movie (Draft 2)
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> [. . .] Another difference is shown between the book and the movie in the scene when Piggy's glasses are taken. In the book, a small group of Jack's hunters went with him when they took Piggy's glasses. After the attack they celebrate.
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>> Occasionally they sang softly; occasionally they turned cartwheels down by the moving streak with phosphorescence. The chief led them, trotting steadily, exulting in his achievement. He was a chief now in truth; and made stabbing motions with his spear. From his left hand dangled Piggy's glasses. (p.168)

This quote explains how all the boys were once civilized when they first got to the island by saying they "sang softly" and sometimes did cartwheels, which is what good kids do to have fun. But in the passage they become savage. They made "stabbing motions" with their spears, "trotting steadily" and exultingly. Because they are "exulting" this tells us that they enjoyed being violent. They could have asked for fire, but instead they used violence. It seems that Jack insists on being violent to show everyone on the island that he could do whatever he wants. These actions also make him feel more like a leader.

In contrast the movie scene is different. Instead of only three people in the book robbing Piggy for his glasses the whole tribe in the movie joins Jack in taking Piggy's glasses. The movie shows that the entire group of hunters enjoys taking Piggy's glasses, which shows how young boys sometimes do things unnecessarily because they don't understand what is needed and what is not needed. The group as a whole has all become violent and savage together by using each other as examples.

In this revision, Creg shows an authority over the texts he is dealing with that was largely missing in his first draft. The passage he cites begins with the use of a block quotation from *Lord of the Flies*, and marking off a passage for analysis in this way is itself a convention that many beginning college writers are unfamiliar with. More important, in the paragraph that follows the quotation, Creg begins to pick its language apart, to identify phrasings that develop Golding's contrast between civilization and savagery ("Because they are 'exulting' this tells us that they enjoyed being violent"). He is not simply quoting Golding to move his essay along (as unpracticed writers often do), but *working on* Golding. In the next paragraph, Creg contrasts the particulars of this passage with its corresponding scene in the movie, noting how actions that are Jack's alone in the novel are performed by the whole tribe in the film. And this finally allows him to generalize with some authority:

In contrast to the book in the movie, they encourage each other's violence and usually stick together as a mob. This suggests that being in groups may sometimes make us do things we usually wouldn't do. This is a theme that doesn't occur in the book.

Creg here carves out a space for himself as a critic in the differences he notes between the two texts. He now has something to note about them in a way he did not before. This is not to say that I'm wholly persuaded by what he does say, for while I agree with Creg that in this scene Golding portrays Jack as a demagogue, he also depicts the dark allure of mobs elsewhere in the novel. So there's more work that Creg could continue to do as a reader. But I am more interested in encouraging a style of assertion, of close and aggressive reading, than I am in making sure students reach certain conclusions about the texts we read or the issues we discuss. And, like Esther, Creg has used revision here to begin to move past summary in order to set his own agenda as a writer.

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The moment of revision, of going back to a text, offers us the chance to ask students to rethink not just what they have to say but also what they are trying to *do* as writers. I think such questions can take two basic forms: We can ask students about the stances they are taking toward the texts they are working with, and we can ask them about the choices they have made in phrasing and structuring their own texts. My examples so far have been of students learning to make stronger use of the work of others; let me turn now to ways of encouraging them to reflect on their own plans and decisions in writing.

The best way I know of doing so is simply to ask them. In my courses students are required to revise much of their written work in response to comments from me and several of their classmates. When they turn in a revision, they must attach a copy of its previous draft on which they have highlighted the changes they have made in moving from one version to the next—specifically, those points where they've added to, cut, rephrased, shifted, or reformatted their texts. (This can be done by using the "compare documents" function in word-processing programs, or just as easily and well with a few colored pens.) I also direct them to mark two or three particularly significant points of revision and to refer to those moments in writing a brief (250- to 500-word) comment on the development of their work. In addition, I require students to close their revisions with a brief acknowledgments section in which they thank those readers, friends, classmates, tutors, and so on who have helped them in conceiving, drafting, revising, and editing their work. (The only restriction is that they are not allowed to thank me.)

This intense focus on the actual labor of revision has several benefits: It dispels any notion that revising an essay will be less work than drafting it; it shows revision as part of a social process of reading and response; it encourages students to be more ambitious in adding to and rethinking their texts, if only because it is so clear on a highlighted draft when not many changes have been made, or when those changes have been of only a minor sort; and it pushes students to articulate a sense of an intellectual *project*—a cluster of defining concerns and interests, a set of questions to address, a point to move toward—that drives their writing through its series of drafts. To think of yourself in this way as having a project, as having work to do which you have defined, rather than as simply executing a task set by another, can be a powerful move even for students who may seem already to possess the kinds of skills that basic writers like Esther and Creg are struggling to acquire. For some examples, let me turn to an upper-level course I recently taught at Duke University on writing and social class.

The students in this course were all fluent writers and accomplished interpreters of texts, yet even so few of them had previously been asked to seriously rethink their work as writers. Doing so pushed several of them to develop what they had to say in ways they hadn't expected. Here, for instance, is what Charles had to say

about how his essay on Thomas Bell's *Out of This Furnace* evolved over the course of three drafts:

> [. . .] As far as the paper goes specifically, it didn't simply evolve from a mediocre paper to an acceptable one (as I suspect most of my classmates' papers did). Rather, instead of just improving on the same paper, I wrote one with a completely different point. I started out focusing on the cyclic nature of the workers' lives and their experiences, and how the cycle was a perpetual one in which those who were in this class were trapped. However, going from first to second draft, I was asked to find something I could say at the end (or at least the middle) of my analysis that I couldn't say at the beginning. I said that I thought that my analysis validated the statement that the experiences and struggles of those in this working class actually came to define the class of people in this novel. I included something to that effect briefly in my conclusion, and in a few other places throughout the paper. However, I began to realize (not only on my own but also through the help of readers) that my initial argument of the "endless cycle" was weak, and evidence was scarce and hard to find [. . .]. What started out being an insightful one or two line statement in my paper started seeming more and more like an interesting argument I could make, which would also be stronger (due to more evidence). So, my paper metamorphosed from a paper trying to prove the existence of this cycle into a paper trying to show that Bell tries to define this class of workers by their struggles and sacrifices. So the major change in my paper was that my arguments and examples were then framed to support this new thesis. Also, I reworded a lot of awkward phrases, and added a few more examples [. . .]. Besides the fact that the main argument in the paper was changed, all the other changes I made were minor, and mostly technical.

I admire Charles's distinction here between the sort of "minor and technical" work involved in elaborating an argument once found and the more difficult process of figuring out what one might actually want to argue. What particularly strikes me, though, is how he both admits to the role of serendipity in this process (a line he happens to write in response to a question from a reader becomes the new thesis for his next draft) and moves beyond it, since he has now learned a view of revision that involves redirecting as well as simply defending a line of thought. He has moved, that is, from good luck to conscious practice, and in doing so, taken more control of his writing.

But sometimes the key realization is that a project is as yet unfinished—that revision is not always just a matter of redrafting a single piece, but also of one essay continuing and elaborating the work begun by another. For example, one of Charles's classmates, Emily, had this to say about her final essay for the course, an account of how she, as the liberal daughter of a labor lawyer and a public school teacher, still needed to come to terms with her own class privilege.

> For some reason, I have a feeling that this is not the final draft of this paper—I imagine that I will revisit it again throughout my life. Therefore, although it is completely "revised" for now, it is doubtful that that is the final version. When the assignment

was first given, I brainstormed lots of semi-related ideas, but I wasn't sure how I could connect them reasonably. I honestly did not think that I would use my homeless story in my piece, but when I told the story to my group, they became fascinated by it. I decided to write about being homeless and somehow relate it to our educational system, comparing myself with Cary and Kovacic. However, when I wrote the paper, I started discussing "cultural capital"—a term which I had previously just thrown around. I have learned about this term in several classes, but I have never truly considered the "cultural capital" of my high school. Once I started brainstorming, it was difficult to stop. I realized that I need to be specific, citing many examples. At this point, I knew that my paper could logically discuss my homeless experience in terms of "cultural capital." The shape of the paper took shape. When I presented it, I realized that I needed to reword some sentences because of my tone. I didn't want to appear that I was overgeneralizing—after all, I am really just trying to discuss my own situation. Even though I tried to make this clear, I still feel that the paper could be easily criticized for its overgeneralization. Throughout this week, I have continued to think of more examples or semi-related topics. It was difficult for me to actually turn in the final draft because I kept on wanting to add more. Finally, my roommate looked at me & said: "you're obsessing Em, turn it in." At this point, I do like this draft. However, I also know that I will probably write a slightly different draft after my experiences student-teaching this summer. This paper will follow me, hopefully expanding and altering through time—it will be interesting to compare drafts. My roommate knows me well—I do obsess.

Emily imagines revision here as not simply a process of perfecting a single essay but as a way of advancing an ongoing intellectual project. Both she and Charles are writing about successful uses of revision, and their tone is less self-critical than celebratory. They back up their claims of learning, though, with brief but specific accounts of how their essays developed: Charles notes the precise exchange that led to the reconceiving of his argument, and Emily points to the tension between the idea of cultural capital and her lived experience of social class as the driving force behind the "expanding and altering" of her essay. And what they both claim to have learned has less to do with ideology—even though in this case social class was the subject of their writings—than with the kinds of labor involved in drafting and revising a critical essay. That is the shift of focus I am after.

* * *

In her brilliant essay on "The Anthropological Sleep of Composition," Ellen Quandahl argues that the desire of writing teachers to empower students has often led, paradoxically, to attempts to control their values and habits of mind—that is, to efforts to discipline students in the name of improving them. Quandahl argues for a focus instead on the "work of reading and writing itself," for a plan of study that we might do *with* students rather than *on* them, but notes that there is still "relatively little language about this work in the pedagogical scene" (426). I have tried here to

add to our stock of such language by suggesting some ways of imagining revision as a practice of making stronger use of the work of others and of more clearly articulating one's own project as a writer. Along with Quandahl, I believe we help students more when we no longer claim to know what is best for them, "to predict what it is they need," but instead try to "think with them about their writing" (425).

The problem with teaching toward civic virtue or critical consciousness is that it is as vague a project as it is ambitious. For how do you tell when students have actually been raised to awareness and when they've simply figured out what they're supposed to say? Rather than aspiring to the sorts of spiritual and social transformations invoked by Freire and his disciples, I suggest that we ground our teaching on the more materialist approach of scholars like Sylvia Scribner, whose essays describing literacy as a social practice—among both the Vai people in West Africa and workers on the job in the United States—underlie much of my thinking here. This is how Scribner defines the concept of *practice*:

> "Practice" is used here to denote a recurrent set of goal-directed activities with some common object, carried out with a particular technology and involving the application of particular knowledge. A practice is a usual mode or method of doing something and cultural practices exist in all domains. Growing rice, for example, is an agricultural practice, sewing trousers is a craft practice, and writing letters is a literacy practice. (202–03)

Imagining critical writing in these more mundane terms as a "method of doing something," much like growing rice or sewing trousers, has for me the appeal of rooting our teaching in the actual labor of drafting, revising, and editing texts. And as in teaching someone to farm or sew, our job in teaching writing is to help students gain more control over their work. Their challenge is to make writing work toward their own ends.*

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