



Writing Peace: From Alienation to Connection

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- I argue that literacy studies needs to define the role of peace
- in our efforts to pursue social justice. Drawing on the work
- of Vietnamese Zen Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh, I show
- that promoting peace is the means, as well as the end, of
- working toward social justice. Further, I demonstrate that
- the process of transforming alienation into connection is a
- crucial step in fostering peace. Using this framework, I analyze
- ethnographic data on one highly successful writing instructor's
- classroom literate practices to illustrate a pedagogical
- approach that helped shift both students and teacher from
- alienation to connection.

I. Introduction

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire repeatedly insists on the role of love and mutuality in pursuing a revolution that will transform social relations to provide justice and equality for all. "This, then, is the great humanistic and historical task of the oppressed," he explains, "to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well" (44). They must not, he notes, "in seeking to regain their humanity . . . become in turn oppressors of the oppressors" (44). The pedagogy that Freire claims will help the oppressed to achieve this end "is an instrument for their critical discovery that both they and their oppressors are manifestations of dehumanization" (48). For Freire, achieving liberation and social justice inherently involves cultivating love for all people and working for their liberation, as well as one's own. Thus it does not appear as a



fundamentally violent process but rather as one designed to bring about peace.

Yet Freire repeatedly describes this process as a "struggle" and a "fight" for liberation. As a result, his central metaphor paints an ambiguous picture of the relationship among liberation, equality, and peace. For instance, he says, "this fight . . . will actually constitute an act of love opposing the [oppressors'] lovelessness" (45). Similarly, he explains, "as the oppressed, fighting to be human, take away the oppressors' power to dominate and suppress, they restore to the oppressors the humanity they had lost in the exercise of oppression" (56). In both cases, love and restoration of the oppressors' humanity stand as the central result, but the means of achieving this result are figured in terms of a battle. Martial metaphors continue throughout the first chapter. Freire refers to the "struggle for liberation" (65 and 69) and the "struggle for humanization" (68). He uses the same metaphor to characterize the process of developing revolutionary consciousness, declaring that, "the conviction of the oppressed that they must fight for their liberation is not a gift bestowed by the revolutionary leadership, but the result of their own [coming to consciousness]" (67). Further, he adds, "to regain their humanity, [the oppressed] must cease to be things and fight as men and women" (68). Thus while peaceful coexistence among all people appears as the strong implicit goal of the revolution Freire describes, peace seems to have little or no role in the process of bringing about this revolution.

I suggest, though, that achieving social justice demands achieving peace, not only as an end but also as the key means of pursuing equity. Nonetheless, literacy scholarship more broadly and community literacy scholarship particularly have taken up Freire's emphasis on social justice without noticing his strong implicit stress on peace. Much scholarship in literacy studies post-Freire has sought to equalize socioeconomic, political, and cultural opportunities, sometimes with explicit reference to Freire's work, though often without. For instance, many



literacy scholars have focused on understanding the literate practices of various marginalized groups so as to find ways to bridge those practices with the literacies taught in schools and demanded in workplaces. Such scholarship has focused on communities defined primarily by race (Mahiri; Richardson; Smitherman), by ethnicity (Farr; Moll and Gonzalez), by gender (Finders), and by socio-economic class (Hicks; Rose).

Scholars who study community literacies pursue parallel goals, though sometimes taking varied approaches. Some community literacy scholars emphasize understanding the experience of the culturally other (Himley), while others stress understanding the systemic factors that reproduce inequality (Herzberg), and still others highlight the development of strategies for generating dialogue that draws on both disenfranchised and socially sanctioned literacies (Peck, Flower, and Higgins). Yet whatever the approach, all of these community literacy scholars, like literacy scholars more broadly, ultimately seek to pursue social justice and equity through their work. However, the question of how peace figures in such efforts is at best implicit (Peck, Flower, and Higgins) and more often ignored (Herzberg; Himley).

I suggest that literacy studies as a whole, and community literacy studies in particular, need to define the role of peace in our efforts to pursue social justice. Drawing on the work of Vietnamese Zen Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh, I show that promoting peace is the means, as well as the end, of working toward social justice. Further, I demonstrate that the process of transforming alienation into connection is a crucial step in fostering peace. Using this framework, I analyze ethnographic data on one highly successful writing instructor's classroom literate practices to illustrate a pedagogical approach that helped shift both students and teacher from alienation to connection. Further, I suggest how literacy scholars and teachers can use and build on this instructor's strategies to promote peace.



II. Conflict and Collaboration:

Peace in Community Literacy Scholarship

In this section, I consider the role of peace in community literacy scholarship's visions of social change and social justice. I do so by examining two highly influential texts in this subfield, Herzberg's "Community Service and Critical Teaching," and Peck, Flower, and Higgins' "Community Literacy." I show that Herzberg's argument for engaging students in critical analysis of the role of social institutions in reproducing social injustice, while addressing crucial issues, takes root in a conflictual model of intellectual exchange and thus positions social change as a process based in ideological struggle rather than in practices of peace. In contrast, Peck, Flower, and Higgins endorse a negotiative model more like Freire's. Yet, as I illustrate, even in this negotiative model, while peace seems a clear implicit goal, struggle remains central to the negotiation process, and the role of peace seems ambiguous. I conclude that by looking carefully at how peace fosters social justice, literacy studies scholars, especially community literacy scholars, can better promote viable social change.

Herzberg's well-known essay argues that involvement in service-learning efforts does not, by itself, spark critical consciousness in students. He explains that the literacy tutoring in a homeless shelter that his students completed over a semester did not help them in any straightforward way to understand critiques demonstrating the role of literacy education in supporting the myth of meritocracy (65). "The community service experience," he asserts, "doesn't bring about an epiphany of critical consciousness—or even, necessarily, an epiphany of conscience" (65). While he does acknowledge that such experiences do tend to produce "a social conscience," Herzberg expresses concerns about the extent to which students' responses to such experiences do "tend, quite naturally, to be personal" and to focus on "perceptions and emotions" (58). He argues that instead of encouraging such responses,



service-learning courses should focus on critical analysis of the social structures that (re)produce social inequities and social problems (58-9).

I agree with Herzberg that such systemic awareness is vital to fostering in students (and ourselves) the kind of understanding that can spark real social change—that can encourage all of us to participate in political and other systems in ways that support structural change that transcends what Herzberg calls “personal acts of charity” (66). Further, the final papers he describes critically examine the relationship between education and social inequities in ways likely to appeal to proponents of critical pedagogy, including me. As Herzberg shows, his students respond to his emphasis on critical examination of how U.S. educational institutions perpetuate structural injustice by developing admirable analyses of specific educational practices and their effects.

Yet the pedagogical approach that elicits these analyses emerges from a model of intellectual exchange and development as processes of struggle that, first, entail a dimension of aggression and, second, tend to alienate students from their own and others’ experiences, rather than deepening their connections with such experiences. For instance, Herzberg describes his students’ difficulty in seeing Mike Rose’s critique of the American myth of meritocracy, and the role of educational institutions in sustaining that myth. Recognizing that Rose is criticizing, rather than praising, meritocracy and the educational system, he says, “costs [students] more than intellectual effort; it means a reevaluation of the very deep-rooted beliefs that Rose is discussing here. It means seeing that Rose is talking about their beliefs and criticizing them” (63). While I share Rose’s and Herzberg’s position on the role of U.S. educational institutions in crafting the myth of meritocracy and in fact sometimes present the same text to my own service-learning students, I believe it’s crucial not to insist that students accept a position they choose to resist, as Herzberg says his students do, and as many of mine do as well.



I believe that respecting students’ resistance is essential despite the importance of the issues under discussion, because doing otherwise pushes them into a change they are not yet prepared to make. This unpreparedness appears in Herzberg’s point about “how difficult my students find it to transcend their own deeply ingrained belief in individualism and meritocracy in their analysis of the reasons for the illiteracy they see” (61). It also appears in his description of what his students need. “To understand that they are in the presence of the effects they have been reading about,” he says, “the students must also understand—viscerally if not intellectually—the nature of what Gramsci called hegemony: the belief that one participates freely in an open and democratic system and must therefore accept the results it produces” (62). That is, students must recognize the ways in which they have internalized a belief in the inherent fairness of our society’s systemic inequities. While I agree that such changes are key in promoting social justice, the nature of these change involves fundamental shifts that, as Herzberg indicates, go far beyond the cognitive in the scope of their significance in people’s lives. Thus the resistance Herzberg describes demonstrates students’ unreadiness to make such changes. As he shows, Herzberg responds to this resistance by challenging students’ claims for the validity of meritocratic arguments (64). Hence his teaching approach relies on a model of intellectual engagement as aggression and struggle that, in his depiction, ultimately leads to appropriately critical final papers.

Yet I suggest that eliciting such papers risks prompting students to give lip-service to their instructor’s ideas while potentially failing to shift—or even deepening—their initial resistance. I share the goal of increasing students’ understanding of the systemic factors behind inequity and social injustice and see this goal as an important part of working toward social change. But I believe that the traditional academic model of intellectual encounter as a struggle among competing views, which I see as the likely source of the teaching approach Herzberg describes, undermines the possibilities for viable



social change. It does so for two reasons. First, it uses an inherently conflictual model that by its nature militates against promoting peace. Second, in its emphasis on rational argument over more holistic responses, it devalues experience and tends to alienate people from that experience. This tendency appears in Herzberg's early dismissal of the personal in students' responses to service-learning projects and, even more strongly, in his concluding claim that most students did not incorporate their literacy tutoring experience into their final papers and that "this was as it should be" (66). I suggest that such exclusion of holistic experience fosters alienation. As I show in subsequent sections, working for peace instead involves transforming alienation into deeper connection with one's experience because that connection inherently leads to greater understanding of one's relation to other individuals, communities, and systems.

In contrast with Herzberg, Peck, Flower, and Higgins define community literacy as a negotiative approach to working collaboratively for social change. They emphasize the need to work closely with diverse others to construct mutually designed solutions to social problems. They explain, "we affirm our commitment to developing a community literacy that works for social change and which arises from an intercultural conversation that creates bridges and allows for productive working relationships among people of difference" (201). Stressing that diversity provides varied types of expertise to social change efforts, they define such efforts in terms of attempts to address "the dilemmas of urban life," from tensions between police and teens, teen pregnancy, gang violence, and the like to landlord-tenant disputes and school suspension policies (205). To enable diverse groups to address such problems, they advocate "intercultural conversation," which comprises "dialogue between allies, stakeholders, constituents, and neighbors who organize around problems" to hold "bridging conversations that seek out diverse perspectives for the purpose of reaching mutual ends" (205).



Noting the challenges involved in holding such conversations, Peck, Flower, and Higgins discuss their complexities. They describe these interactions as "boundary-crossing encounters that go beyond mere conversation to the delicate exploration of difference and conflict and toward the construction of a negotiated meaning" (209-210). Because stakeholders in some social problems may have competing, or even opposed, interests, the authors highlight the role of negotiation in enabling collaboration. They argue that the "intercultural knowledge" that results from such efforts "emerges from a sense of conflict and a willingness to negotiate social and cultural differences through collaborative literate action" (212). Such willingness emerges when competing parties come to believe that decisions will be made mutually, at least in part (212).

Through these efforts, participants generate "an intercultural discourse—one that embraces differences, negotiates conflict, and speaks through hybrid texts" (213). They construct a "negotiated meaning" that operates "in the awareness of multiple, often conflicting goals, values, ideas, and discourses" (213). Using this intercultural discourse, participants "go beyond the celebration of difference and the examination of conflicting assumptions and beliefs . . . to take rhetorical action together, across differences, to change their relationship from that of commentators on diversity to collaborators" (214). Thus Peck, Flower, and Higgins position intercultural discourse—the hallmark of their version of community literacy—as the central tool for negotiating conflict to produce both the means of pursuing mutually beneficial ends and such ends themselves. As such, intercultural discourse clearly seeks to address conflict by devising win-win solutions that dissolve the source of disagreement and so replace the potential for violence (physical, rhetorical, institutional, or otherwise) with the conditions for peace.

Given the key role of negotiation in this approach, peace appears inherent in the means of working toward such revised conditions. Yet a



more complicated picture of these means emerges in Peck, Flower, and Higgins' discussion of the rhetorical strategies used to negotiate. In explaining how college students from a prestigious university mentor urban teens in community literacy projects, the authors emphasize that the teen "holds the authority" and the mentor acts as "a partner and supporter" (216). The mentor's role quickly appears as complex, requiring mediation between competing imperatives. "The mentor supports Pierre [the pseudonym for a teen participant in the authors' community literacy program] as a thinker and writer," they explain, "first by the serious listening that draws Pierre into developing his own jumble of thoughts about the prestige and pressure of gangs, and secondly by challenging him to respond to the real rhetorical problem before him" (216). In this description, the mentor must balance "serious listening" with "challenging" and thus, by implication, must balance a focus on understanding with a focus on changing the teen.

The authors describe a central rhetorical strategy taught to mentors and teens to help them achieve the negotiation that produces intercultural discourse. This strategy, "rival hypothesis thinking," or "rivaling," involves teaching writers "to challenge their own ideas and imagine readers who see things differently" (217). Because rivaling "brings more voices to the table by asking writers themselves to generate alternative interpretations, to imagine and speak for the responses of others who belong at the table," the authors explain, "it offers a way to respond to open questions . . . that do not admit of easy or single answers" and "a strategy for inquiry into other images of reality" (217). They illustrate rivaling by describing mentors' and teens' challenges to a draft of Pierre's story about gang violence; Pierre's initial resistance to revising his story; and his eventual final text, which responds to his peers' and mentors' challenges by stating his purpose in telling the story (217-218). "[This] collaborative moment opened the door to personal discussions not only with Pierre but among other writers and mentors," the authors conclude, "and to a continued negotiation with those rival readings" (218).



Such efforts to understand others' positions, especially when those positions differ significantly from one's own, and to devise a rapprochement seem crucial to promoting peace, as means and as end. Thus the overall premises and goal of rivaling seem oriented to working for peace. But the prominence of challenging others' positions in rivaling raises questions like those called forth by Herzberg's teaching approach and Freire's central metaphor of struggle. Specifically, this emphasis on challenging participants' thinking suggests the agonistic discourses of academe or of competing political parties, rather than the collaborative discourse of community activists pursuing a shared goal. While such agonistic elements do not seem inevitable in rivaling, its name and description suggest they might be likely to emerge in its use. Although peace seems the clear implicit end goal of rivaling, its role as means appears more ambiguous.

In their argument for negotiative discourses and intercultural collaboration as the means of generating such discourses, Peck, Flower, and Higgins offer a crucial step in pursuing social change likely to promote peace. But in efforts to bring about such change, peace must figure centrally in the means, as well as the end. Similarly, enacting genuinely negotiative discourses requires strategies that foster inherently peaceful interactions, rather than potentially promoting agonistic exchanges. I suggest that to develop such strategies, we must seek non-conflictual ways to foster awareness of one's relationships with self, others, and the various communities one inhabits, from local to regional and global. Such strategies would focus on generating acceptance and understanding as first steps in negotiation. Rather than encouraging people to challenge others' positions, they would call forth a deep level of connection with self, others, and communities, because such connection inherently leads to a fundamentally new perspective that reveals mutually beneficial solutions to personal and social problems.



III. A Vision of Social Justice: Peace as Means and End

Efforts to expand awareness to develop a holistic understanding of our interconnections with one another and our environment are a hallmark of Zen Buddhism generally. A particularly clear explanation of how such understanding promotes peace in our personal and public lives emerges in the work of Zen teacher Thich Nhat Hanh. A Buddhist monk exiled from Vietnam in 1966 for his peace activism, Nhat Hanh has taught in the west for over forty years, based in southern France and attracting thousands of students throughout Europe and the U.S. In addition to leading retreats on the practice of mindfulness—concrete techniques designed to expand awareness—he has published nearly 100 books in English, including several that are widely read in the west. In many of these texts, Nhat Hanh explains that cultivating awareness, particularly of our relationships with self, others, and communities, helps transform the pervasive experience of alienation into a sense of connectedness. Because that holistic understanding of interconnectedness reveals our shared interests with all beings and our environment, it intrinsically promotes habits of perception and interaction that foster peace. Those habits cultivate the intercultural discourse Peck, Flower, and Higgins advocate while transforming the conflictual elements in it and in the more typically academic discourse Herzberg prescribes. In this section, I show the philosophical basis for this position by illustrating how it unfolds in Nhat Hanh's work.

Developed by Nhat Hanh and his students as a response to the devastation brought to Vietnamese villages by the war, engaged Buddhism links traditional Buddhist teachings with social activism. Describing the order he founded to practice engaged Buddhism, Tien Hien, or the Order of Interbeing, Nhat Hanh explains that it involves practicing “Buddhism in daily life, in society, and not just in a retreat center” (*Being Peace*, 111-112). That practice, in turn, requires us to identify with both sides in conflict, rather than taking sides. Nhat Hanh illustrates with an example from the Tien Hien Order's peace activism in Vietnam: “We were able to understand the suffering of both sides,



the communists and the anti-communists. . . . We wanted reconciliation, we did not want a victory. Working to help people in a circumstance like that is very dangerous, and many of us got killed. . . . But we did not want to give up and take one side” (*Being Peace*, 91-92). Explaining that such situations exist today as well because people identify with one ideology or another, Nhat Hanh insists on the need to understand all sides in a conflict in order to bring about peace. Life is precious, he emphasizes, and preserving it and making peace must replace commitments to any ideology: “If we take one side, we cannot fulfill our task of reconciliation in order to bring about peace” (*Being Peace*, 96). For reconciliation to succeed, he concludes, “the world needs . . . people with the capacity of understanding and compassion” (*Being Peace*, 127).

To develop this understanding and compassion, he emphasizes, we must transcend alienation. Noting our tendency toward that state, he says, “we want to forget ourselves” and that we do so through “religion, sports, politics, a book . . . television” (*Being Peace*, 112). To counter this tendency, the Tien Hien Order stresses learning to be in touch with oneself (body, feeling, and mind) and with “the source of wisdom and compassion” in enlightened people (*Being Peace*, 113). Similarly, it stresses attending to the present moment in order “to be peace, to be compassion, to be joy right now” (*Being Peace*, 114). In doing so, Nhat Hanh explains, we can manifest such qualities concretely: “Love and understanding are not only concepts and words. They must be real things, realized in oneself and in society” (*Being Peace*, 114).

Being in the moment generates awareness, he explains, which in turn produces insights that, by their nature, help us to realize these qualities. “When you understand, you love,” he says, and “to develop understanding, you have to practice looking at all living beings with the eyes of compassion . . . when you love, you naturally act in a way that can relieve the suffering of people” (*Being Peace*, 20). Such understanding transforms our modes of interaction, particularly our



modes of communication. “Never blame, never try to persuade using reason and arguments,” Nhat Hanh advises, explaining, “They never lead to any positive effect. . . . If you understand, and you show that you understand, you can love, and the situation will change” (*Being Peace*, 144). This approach contrasts sharply with the kind of argument-based academic discourse Herzberg sees as the key to social change. By eschewing that discourse’s emphasis on critique (often in a blaming vein) and on persuasion using reason and arguments, Nhat Hanh’s approach shifts the focus in listening from assessing areas of agreement and disagreement and planning a refutation to developing a deeper understanding. Thus it lays the foundation for truly successful intercultural collaborations of the type Peck, Flower, and Higgins recommend. Cultivating them requires shifting from modes of challenge and debate in discussing differences to modes of deeper listening.

Nhat Hanh also advocates paying such deeper attention to the broader effects of our day-to-day habits, stressing that focusing our awareness in the present can help us recognize such effects. “Every day we do things, we are things, that have to do with peace. If we are aware of our lifestyle, our way of consuming, of looking at things,” he notes, “we will know how to make peace right in the moment we are alive, the present moment” (*Being Peace*, 87). Pointing out the typical Sunday newspaper and the trees cut to print it, he concludes, “When we pick up the paper, we should be aware. If we are very aware, we can do something to change the course of things” (*Being Peace*, 87).

Highlighting the explicitly political and economic implications of some choices, Nhat Hanh also targets U.S. readers in particular. “America is somehow a closed society,” he says, “Americans are not very aware of what is going on outside of America” (*Being Peace*, 122). He links this call for greater awareness directly with Buddhist principles: “In Buddhism, the most important precept of all is to live in awareness, to know what is going on. To know what is going on, not only here,



but there” (*Being Peace*, 86). While eating bread, he notes, we might choose to be aware of damage to the environment caused by farmers’ use of toxic chemicals and that in eating the bread, we contribute to the destruction of the environment.

He then explains how westerners’ food consumption impacts world hunger:

When we eat a piece of meat or drink alcohol, we can produce awareness that 40,000 children die *each day* in the Third World from hunger and that in order to produce a piece of meat or a bottle of liquor, we have to use a lot of grain. Eating a bowl of cereal may be more reconciling with the suffering of the world than eating a piece of meat. An authority on economics who lives in France told me that if only the people in Western countries would reduce the eating of meat and the drinking of alcohol by 50 percent, that would be enough to change the situation of the world. Only 50 percent less. *Being Peace* 86-87

Nhat Hanh then explains how the U.S. promotes violence in the Third World through weapons manufacture and sales. “Everyone is too busy” in America, he says, to discuss solutions to related issues, such as job losses that would result from decreasing weapons production and the Third World’s need for food rather than guns (*Being Peace*, 96-97). We must develop the awareness required to understand how our daily habits as consumers and citizens contribute to such problems and the government policies behind them. “Our daily lives, the way we drink, what we eat, has to do with the world’s political situation,” he concludes. He explains, “Meditation is to see deeply into things, to see how we can change, how we can transform our situation. To transform our situation is also to transform our minds. To transform our minds is also to transform our situation. . . . This is the real meaning of engaged Buddhism” (*Being Peace*, 98-99).

Developing this capacity to transform our minds and situation requires us to shift alienation into connection. Nhat Hanh claims that our



society promotes alienation and that mindfulness practice, including meditation, helps reconnect us with self, others, and the environment. That reconnection sparks social change, and Nhat Hanh calls for practice centers that foster it: “a meditation center is where you get back to yourself, you get a clearer understanding of reality, you get more strength in understanding and love, and you prepare for your reentry into society. . . . As we develop real understanding, we can reenter society and made a real contribution” (*Being Peace*, 71).

Nhat Hanh’s mindfulness practices provide concrete exercises for nurturing the shift from alienation to reconnection:

When we ride on a horse that is out of control, I think our deepest wish is to stop. How can we stop? We have to resist the speed, the losing of ourselves, and therefore we must organize a resistance. Spending two hours on one cup of tea during a tea meditation is an act of resistance, nonviolent resistance. . . . We can do it together, we can resist a way of life that makes us lose ourselves. Walking meditation is also resistance. Sitting is also resistance. So if you want to stop the course of armaments, you have to resist, and begin by resisting in your own daily life. *Being Peace* 147-148

Such acts of resistance enable us to see problems as they unfold and so to prevent them.

Noting the wars and other forms of violence facing the world, Nhat Hanh says many people feel helpless and despairing because injustice seems overwhelming. “If we panic,” he holds, “things will only become worse. We need to remain calm, to see clearly. Meditation is to be aware, and to try to help” (*Being Peace*, 15). Comparing the situation to that of boat people fleeing Vietnam in rough seas, he points out that when passengers panic, boats can sink. “But if even one person aboard can remain calm, lucid, knowing what to do and what not to do,” he explains, “he or she can help the boat survive.



His or her expression—face, voice—communicates clarity and calmness, and people have trust in that person. They will listen to what he or she says. One such person can save the lives of many” (*Being Peace*, 16). The world, he concludes, is like such a boat, and it needs each of us to cultivate calmness to produce peace, a key step toward social justice. To cultivate calmness, we must practice mindfulness to transform alienation by connecting with ourselves, one another, society, and our environment.

IV. Fostering Awareness: A Classroom Example

The question of how to shift alienation to connection in classrooms, especially in required general education courses, poses significant challenges, because many students see such courses as a hurdle and often view educational institutions as opposing, rather than supporting, their intrinsic interests. While much literacy scholarship (e.g., Heath; Mahiri; Moll and Gonzalez) stresses the importance of tapping such interests to conduct effective literacy education, even those texts, like Heath’s and Mahiri’s, that describe pedagogical efforts to do so acknowledge the substantial challenges of such work. In this section, I draw on data from one semester of a two-semester ethnographic study of writing courses taught by Justin Vidovic, a particularly successful writing instructor whose classes are noted for effectively encouraging students to bring their intrinsic interests into their academic projects.¹ I see Justin’s success in engaging students as important for pedagogical, composition, and literacy studies more broadly. But I also suggest that his strategies for doing so support students in expanding their awareness in ways likely to shift alienation into connection with self, others, and the wider world.

Justin used four strategies that I see as well designed to help students expand their awareness. First, he fostered their awareness of self and relationship with self. Second, he cultivated their awareness of others and wider communities, from the local to the national and global, and their relationships with those others. Third, he modeled for students



productive, compassionate ways of dealing with strong emotions. Fourth, he used his own ongoing experience to show students how increasing awareness can shift one's perceptions and allow one to make desired changes. Justin used the first and second strategies regularly throughout the semester and the third and fourth on the occasions when opportunities to do so arose. In this section, I present examples of his use of each strategy in one especially rich class discussion in which he brought all four into play. This conversation took place in late October, and as Justin told students directly, it initiated important changes in his own awareness and perceptions, as well as steps toward realizing goals he'd previously articulated. While Justin's strategies for fostering awareness do not correlate exactly with those recommended by Thich Nhat Hanh and other Zen teachers, as I show in the analysis in Section V, they have important connections. These connections foster an insight that differs in important ways from the realizations sought by Herzberg and by Peck, Flower and Higgins. I suggest, though, that Justin's strategies ultimately offer vital means of promoting these scholars' goal of social justice.

First, I describe the study and Justin's course, particularly how he turned a service-learning project that fell apart into a process for collaborating with students to design group projects based in their interests. In fall 2005, Justin taught a course listed in our university's schedule as a special service-learning section of Intermediate Writing, which fulfills students' second general education writing requirement. Generously, he allowed me to collect qualitative data on the course. I attended all but one-and-a-half of 28 two-hour class meetings and took ethnographic fieldnotes totaling roughly 225 typed, single-spaced pages, collected all instructor-generated texts and as many student-generated texts as I could, and interviewed Justin and some students. With Justin's and students' permission, I also audiotaped many class sessions. In summer 2006, I coded this data using traditional ethnographic methods.²



The fall 2005 semester was the second term I collected data on one of Justin's Intermediate Writing courses. After coding the earlier data (collected in winter 2004), I drafted an article that demonstrates Justin's extensive—and highly effective—strategies for supporting students' intellectual boundaries in ways that enabled them to make arguments that challenged and/or complicated positions he had encouraged them to consider during class discussions. In doing so, I developed a strong interest in his distinctive ability to help students expand their holistic awareness and integrate it with their conceptual understanding. While working with both sets of data, winter 2004 and fall 2005, I increasingly saw correlations between Justin's efforts to help students expand their awareness, the outcomes of those efforts, and Nhat Hanh's methods and goals.

The planned service-learning project for Justin's fall 2005 course involved taking university students as a group to mentor in an after-school program at a public charter school close to campus. The charter school was a new community partner, replacing a partnership that had dissolved when another middle school where Justin had taught several other service-learning sections of Intermediate Writing could no longer support its after-school program. That summer, Justin and I (as coordinator of our department's service-learning courses) had met with the outgoing and incoming directors of the charter school's after-school program. Both displayed enthusiasm for adding the mentoring course, and particularly for Justin's plan to draw on his theater and earlier service-learning experiences to guide the university students in supporting the middle schoolers as they drafted plays they would perform for an audience of parents.

Unfortunately, those promising conversations did not bear fruit. Stressed by extensive new responsibilities, the incoming after-school program director could not provide either middle-school students or classrooms for Justin or the other university instructor scheduled to teach her Intermediate Writing course on site at the charter school. By



that point in the semester, Justin's students had already done several reading and writing assignments and held class discussions designed to prepare them to mentor.

When the service-learning project dissolved, Justin asked students to consider what they wanted to use the course to learn, and they worked out a plan to do group projects that would explore different perspectives on a topic of shared interest. As they began these projects, Justin asked students to find a piece of writing either in a style they liked or on their topic and to be ready to say what the piece added to their understanding of their own projects. He told students he'd choose three of the pieces they brought to class and photocopy them for everyone to read. When they discussed the texts everyone had brought, Justin invited students to say which of the pieces they'd like to read as a group. Based on that discussion, Justin asked students to read, among others, the text contributed by Pete, an anthropology major and fiction writer.

I describe the meeting when students and Justin discussed this text to illustrate Justin's use of all four strategies for fostering students' awareness. The discussion was shaped by the text itself, Hunter S. Thompson's depiction of the Kentucky Derby, a piece that raises a wide range of issues, and by the fact that Justin had encouraged Pete to share his extensive knowledge about Thompson and his work throughout the conversation. Students considered how the text's characters focused on alcohol- and gambling-saturated Derby celebrations to such a degree that they remained unaware of key contemporary issues, like racial tensions in the U.S. and the Vietnam War. Justin asked students to focus on Thompson's ideas about decadence and depravity in American culture and how those ideas relate to the text's concluding picture of the writer himself in a state of hung-over remorse after a drinking binge. In response, students pointed out that by depicting himself as getting caught up in the emotion and excesses of the Derby celebrations, Thompson's text illustrated that all Americans—even those with opposing views—tend to lose themselves



in escapist behaviors. In the midst of a lively exchange, Justin began to make a comment, then stopped himself, noting with feeling that he was supposed to raise his hand before speaking.

His comment referred to his earlier introduction of a game in which students were to take leadership of the discussion, each speaker calling on someone to speak next. Justin was to raise his hand like everyone else and to speak only when a student called on him. He'd developed the game out of a desire to implement the student-centered discussions Wallace and Ewald advocate and had noted in earlier class meetings how difficult it was for him to catch himself, given his tendency to speak spontaneously out of his interests and role as teacher. When he stopped himself, three other students took turns to speak, including Pete, who then called on Justin. After praising a point Pete made that he himself hadn't seen, Justin posed another question to the class regarding the issue of accuracy in Thompson's depictions and whether and how such issues affected students' reading of the text. During an extended discussion of that question, Luke commented that the extent of the text's accuracy didn't matter. "It just depends on the emotion [the text] brings out of you," he remarked. Students contributed a range of ideas, including the view that Thompson was initially blaming the American problems of racism, homophobia, and violence on society as a whole but, by ending the text with the image of himself seeing his own hung-over reflection in a mirror, he made the point that to change society, he had to change himself.

Justin then reminded students of Luke's comment about the importance of the emotion the text evoked and its impact on the reader. He described how disturbing he'd found the text when he'd read it the preceding day and how he'd immediately talked about wanting to change based on that final mirrored image of a hung-over Thompson. He asked whether students remembered the text's brief mention of what was happening to Thompson just before he went on his drinking binge. After two students made comments, Justin found the passage



and both read and summarized a description of Thompson the character returning home to Louisville to cover the Derby, encountering many family members and friends experiencing crises, and, once those encounters began, drinking the entire weekend. Students commented on the tendency in American culture to deny problems rather than dealing with them and to blame them on others rather than looking at one's own role.

"Do you see the parallel?" Justin asked. "The way American culture deals with our wars, our violence, our poverty, and the way he deals with his own life? There's some awareness here that the two things are related." Students commented on choices they thought Thompson had missed, on the journalist's seeming search for the answers to fundamental life questions in drinking and drugs, and, again, on the question of accuracy in Thompson's depictions. Justin returned to the point about seeking an answer to fundamental questions in addictive behaviors. "The emotional impact for me of the article is one of despair and emptiness," he said.

Several students suggested the possibility of turning instead to religion and/or spirituality as an alternative place to search. They asked how addictive behaviors may interfere with such a turn and how personal depression relates to despair about social problems. Luke commented that Thompson was "trying to show that society is operating off all these ideologies" and that he, Thompson, had actually lived out those ideologies but none really led to happiness. Justin replied that this position on the text fit Pete's description of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, another Thompson text, as "searching for the American Dream and it falling apart."

He then pointed out that Pete called Thompson brave for revealing himself in the textual depiction of his character. "I know it takes guts to look at oneself," Justin said, noting that looking in the mirror honestly is an important step toward change. Returning to Pete's



earlier point about Thompson's disillusionment with religion and the class's distinction between religion as institutionally sanctioned and spirituality as a personally defined relationship with a greater power, he pointed out that in Thompson's text, "There's work beyond that [disillusionment]."

Students pursued that distinction further and then discussed another, the difference between success and happiness. Luke argued that Thompson's conclusion was pessimistic "because everything he's done, he was looking for, he didn't find happiness. So his conclusion was happiness is an ideal that doesn't exist." Other students discussed alternative approaches to seeking happiness, and Teri remarked that people start with a purpose they want to accomplish in the world and that Thompson ultimately wasn't happy because, as Pete had told them earlier, he'd recently killed himself. Shortly after that, Justin commented that, "That image of looking in the mirror and all the self-loathing. Happiness is being able to look at that image [with all its depravity] and saying 'Ok.'" Students followed up with comments about the ongoing disappearance of the American dream and of civil liberties during the Iraq War, the role of society, including religious institutions, in shaping identity, and then returned to the question of defining happiness for oneself.

Afterward, Justin said that he'd like everyone to take a moment to appreciate what had happened in the last few class sessions, pointing out that each student had brought a text he or she liked and that one, Patricia, had suggested the class read Pete's text, which led to the meaningful conversation they'd had that day. "I feel emotionally moved right now, not just intellectually moved, and that doesn't happen all that often in classrooms," he said. "That came from Pete bringing something he was passionate about, and somebody else saying, 'I want to know what Pete is passionate about.'" He continued, saying that what had brought about such a powerful conversation was "all of us bringing our own life experiences and perspectives to it."



In response, Luke asked why Justin had felt depression when reading Thompson's text. Justin responded, "To me, there's this striving, passionate trying to find answers, this brilliant intellect and wit trying to find answers. That's a nice first step to [then] finish with the loathing of who I am. That's not enough, for life, for learning. I want to get to the place where I look in the mirror [and accept what I see]. I felt that he ended in a moment of despair, and I absorbed a little of that." Noting that one other thing felt important to him about the discussion, Justin explained, "As a teacher, I wouldn't have brought this to class. I hadn't read Hunter S. Thompson." He explained that he was nervous about teaching the text because it was "so deep and complicated" and had so much potentially explosive material in it. "I was scared about that," he continued. "I'm proud of myself for having the trust to handle that and of you guys for the great discussion we had."

Shortly afterward, Justin ended class and answered individual questions. Pete waited for Justin to finish those conversations, and afterward, Justin went and shook his hand and thanked Pete for bringing the Thompson text. Pete noted that the class had talked about the content of the text, despite his plans to talk about its style, and said that the discussion had made him see that Thompson was an even better writer than he'd recognized. "It's really cool," he finished. "I'd never realized how deliberate all his choices are." Justin agreed, and a few minutes later told Pete, "You've encouraged me absolutely to have faith in the idea of having people bring something to class."

V. Cultivating Peace: From Alienation to Connection

Justin's first strategy, fostering students' awareness of self and relationship with self, appears at several points in the discussion. First, by asking students whether and how the question of accuracy in Thompson's depictions affected their readings of the text, Justin encouraged class members to notice both their responses to this question and how those responses shaped their reaction to the essay. In an even more marked use of this strategy, Justin also modeled it



for students. He did so when he reminded them of Luke's comment about the importance of the emotion the text evoked and its effect on readers and then followed up with a dramatic description of the text's emotional impact on him, emphasizing that it elicited feelings of "despair and emptiness." The conversation that followed built on this theme, in Justin's emphasis on the bravery required to look honestly at oneself, on Thompson's efforts to work beyond his disillusionment, and on the suggestion that happiness entails looking honestly at oneself and accepting what one sees. Each of those ideas further encouraged the self-awareness that Justin promoted and that he highlighted during the discussion of Thompson's text.

These sections of conversation also illustrate Justin's second strategy, cultivating students' awareness of others and wider communities, and their relationships with those others and communities. In his explanation of why Thompson's text evoked despair and emptiness for him, Justin had emphasized the parallels between Thompson's depiction of himself in the text and his depiction of American culture, namely as avoiding our wars, violence, and poverty by fleeing into addictive behaviors. In doing so, Justin enacted his second strategy in three ways. First, he helped students to see how that relationship, in this case between Thompson's self and the wider culture, appears in the text. Second, by sharing his own emotional response, Justin modeled for students awareness not only of self but of the relationship between one's emotional state and an outside influence like Thompson's demoralizing picture of American culture. Third, by asking students to consider how we, as Americans, tend to avoid and deny problems by using addictive behaviors and how that tendency promotes violence, racism, homophobia, and similar ills, Justin encouraged their awareness of their own relationships to other individuals and groups and to society more broadly. While the conversation did not focus on any specific students' behaviors, the use by both students and Justin of the pronouns "we" and "us" throughout those sections of the conversation suggest that it fostered such awareness. Further, in the discussion of



what constitutes happiness, he encouraged students to pursue their exploration of how various kinds of cultural influences, like religious institutions, shape one's experience of self.

The kinds of insight this discussion promoted differ from those sought by Herzberg and by Peck, Flower, and Higgins, yet I suggest that these insights play a crucial role in forwarding those scholars' goals. Herzberg stresses promoting students' awareness and understanding of the systemic causes of injustice. Justin cultivated students' awareness of how systemic forces, from cultural norms to religious traditions, had shaped both their experiences of self and their relationships with other people, ideas, and communities. Peck, Flower, and Higgins focus on developing students' abilities to engage in dialogue and collaboration with culturally different others. Justin fostered students' awareness of how both their experiences of self and their relations with others were shaped and could be changed. Based on Nhat Hanh's work, I suggest that such awareness of how one's self and relationships have been shaped comprises the foundation required for real shifts in our understanding of our role in larger systems and in our relations with others. Such shifts are the ultimate goal of the approaches advocated both by Herzberg and by Peck, Flower, and Higgins.

Justin's third strategy, modeling for students productive, compassionate ways of dealing with strong emotions, appears in two key ways in this class session. First, in response to Luke's point about the emotional impact of the text and other students' contention that the concluding image of Thompson's text indicated his need to change himself if he wanted to change society, Justin shared with students his own intense negative emotional response to the piece. By explaining the feelings of despair and emptiness the article evoked in him, Justin provided the spark for students to generate their own long, far-ranging discussion about the possibilities for achieving happiness, their varying definitions of it, and their beliefs about how to pursue it. That is, by illustrating awareness of, and respect and compassion for, his own



emotional response, Justin offered students a catalyst for considering their own responses to the text and the questions about the potential for happiness raised by those responses. Further, Justin contributed to their discussion of these questions by articulating his own definition of happiness, which emphasized self-awareness based fundamentally in self-acceptance. That definition in turn encouraged students to consider such self-awareness as a potential means of cultivating happiness. As Nhat Hanh indicates, "individual happiness is the foundation for creating peace in the world" (*Creating True Peace*, 19). In this passage, the Zen teacher refers to the kind of happiness that emerges from the awareness generated by mindfulness practice, the kind that replaces attachment and grasping. Such happiness, I suggest, is required to build viable paths to change from the intercultural collaboration Peck, Flower, and Higgins recommend and from the recognition of systemic injustice and of one's own privilege that Herzberg advocates.

Second, Justin shared with students near the end of the session his fear about teaching the Thompson text. He mentioned to me afterward that he was particularly anxious about the text's depiction of characters using racist terms and the potentially explosive response such terms might generate, particularly in our university's ethnically and racially diverse classrooms. By sharing that fear with students and then explaining how he dealt with it—by acknowledging it to himself and consciously trusting himself and students to handle the text productively—Justin modeled for students an effective way of dealing with strong emotions, namely by acknowledging and accepting them, rather than denying or repressing them. When he told students how proud of them he was for conducting such a fruitful discussion, he implicitly but strongly illustrated the potential power of dealing with strong negative emotions in this way.

These outcomes also helped Justin to model for students how increasing awareness can shift one's key perceptions and make desired



changes, his fourth strategy. When Justin realized he was about to speak without having been called on and so was about to break the rules of the game he'd initiated, he showed students a moment of such increasing awareness in process. Stopping himself from speaking and waiting several turns until Pete called on him contributed to students' development of the discussion that followed—a discussion that showed remarkably high levels of engagement and student direction of topics, just as Wallace and Ewald advocate. Thus Justin's expanding awareness allowed him to change his behavior, which achieved his desired goal. By sharing that awareness with students, who of course saw the results in the discussion they held, he modeled for them the power of such expanding awareness in bringing about desired changes in oneself and one's interactions.

Similarly, Justin's expression of gratitude to Pete for bringing in the text, to Patricia for advocating strongly that the class read it, and to the group as a whole for conducting a rich, productive discussion with such complicated and challenging material, illustrates expanding awareness. Given his fear of teaching the potentially controversial text, his recognition of the powerful discussion it generated reveals Justin's growing awareness of the significant potential offered by involving students in choosing texts for the class to read and discuss. In fact, in the ten semesters that followed, Justin made the process of having students suggest and choose texts for class discussion a central feature of his courses. The discussion of the Thompson text and this subsequent change illustrate very significant steps toward Justin's goal of making his classes more student-centered. By sharing with students both his initial fears about teaching the Thompson text and his deep appreciation for the class's discussion of it, Justin showed students his process of expanding awareness. Because they saw the outcome of the discussion and Justin's great pleasure in that outcome, his decision to share his experience also modeled for students how expanding awareness can lead to key changes in perception—in this case, of the



optimal balance of student and teacher control—and to realization of one's goals—in this case, more student-centered discussions.

I believe such holistic shifts in perceptions are required for people to recognize injustice when that recognition conflicts with our own interests and sense of identity, as was the case, for instance, with Herzberg's students. Similarly, I believe they are necessary to shift our views of other groups we're culturally and socially positioned to see as fundamentally different from ourselves, whether by virtue of race, ethnicity, class, gender, religion, or other factors, as is typically the case in the kind of intercultural dialogue Peck, Flower, and Higgins recommend. Thus I see holistic perceptual shifts as the foundation needed to build the kinds of social change these scholars prescribe. Although Justin's four strategies for fostering awareness did not lead directly to such changes, they constructed essential groundwork for realizing them.

Similarly, Justin's strategies did not precisely match those recommended by Thich Nhat Hanh and other Zen teachers. Following traditional Zen texts, Nhat Hanh advises students to practice mindfulness of "our body, our feelings, our mind, and the objects of our mind" (*Heart of the Buddha's Teaching*, 68). This practice has several goals. The first is developing awareness of physical and emotional feelings, thoughts, perceptions, and attitudes as they arise. Through that awareness, practitioners eventually realize two other goals. First, they recognize experientially how all of these phenomena emerge from our relations with others, organizations, our culture, prior experiences, and the like. Second, they grasp the fundamentally interconnected nature of all beings, animate and inanimate. These recognitions, according to Zen teachers, naturally generate deep understanding, compassion, and action on behalf of all beings. Justin's strategies neither promoted the depth of fine-grained awareness produced through focused Zen mindfulness practice nor led directly to the experiential recognition of how all aspects of one's self arise from external



phenomena and of one's deep interconnection with everyone and everything in the universe (nor, of course, did Justin intend them to do so).

Yet I believe they nonetheless contributed to developing this fine-grained awareness and thus to the realizations it produces. First, by encouraging students to recognize their emotional responses to the Thompson text, Justin fostered and modeled the beginnings of mindfulness of one's feelings. By asking students to consider how their responses to the text affected their view of it and their thinking about the issues it raised, he promoted students' awareness of their minds. By encouraging students to discuss the essential nature of happiness and their understandings of it, he prompted them to consider the objects of mind, that is, to grasp how our thinking constructs the objects of our perception, a key goal in Zen mindfulness practice. While this work certainly didn't reach the full breadth and depth of Zen practice (which was in no way Justin's goal in teaching the course), it moved strongly in the overall direction of such work. Further, in emphasizing the parallel between Thompson's depictions of himself and of American culture and the difficulty individuals face in trying to extricate ourselves from that culture's destructive effects, Justin prompted students to consider how deeply external phenomena shape our selves and our interconnections with others. In addition, he modeled awareness of such relationships by showing students how powerfully the class discussion revised his teaching approach and his mode of collaborating with students to define a class's focus and goals.

Further, because Justin's strategies promoted students' awareness of their relationships with self, including means of dealing productively with strong emotions, others, and wider communities, they worked to shift alienation to greater connection. While documenting how students took up these strategies, particularly the first two, goes beyond the scope of this article, students did use the strategies to good effect in their discussions and group projects. As Nhat Hanh shows, such shifts



inherently promote the calmness and grounding that bring about peace, both as means and as end. And, as he illustrates, enacting peace is crucial to working for social justice.

VI. Conclusion

I believe that literacy studies, especially community literacy studies, can more effectively promote social justice by taking up Nhat Hanh's understanding of how to foster peace by helping people—particularly ourselves and our students—to transform alienation into connection. Justin's four strategies for encouraging students' awareness are a strong foundation for such work. Each strategy offers significant pedagogical benefits, as demonstrated in the analysis of how they operated in Justin's fall 2005 course. The first two, promoting students' awareness of their relations with self and others, correspond well with much composition and pedagogical theory, with Justin's major addition being a high level of explicit emphasis on non-judgmental acceptance of self and others, an approach that also characterizes the awareness Nhat Hanh advocates.

The third and fourth strategies—modeling for students both productive, compassionate ways of dealing with strong emotions and expansions of awareness that potentially help one shift key perceptions and make desired changes—require a kind of teacher engagement less discussed in composition and pedagogical theory, though notably advocated by Paul Kameen in *Writing/Teaching*. Specifically, these strategies require the instructor to open him or herself substantively to emotional impact and change in teaching a course. As Justin's teaching shows, that openness to change takes root specifically in practices that foster holistic awareness rather than in considering a range of intellectual views from a primarily cognitive standpoint. It requires teachers to find and practice our own versions of Nhat Hanh's mindfulness training—that is, to find and practice concrete strategies for expanding holistic awareness.



This imperative perhaps raises the question of whether there can be a Zen pedagogy. Zen teachers and practitioners often indicate that because Zen aims to promote experiential knowledge, rather than strictly cognitive knowledge, it cannot be conveyed in words, much as the taste of an orange can't be adequately conveyed in language to someone who hasn't eaten citrus fruit. Nonetheless, Zen has a pedagogy some 1,500 years old (marked from the migration of Buddhism from India into China). Among other hallmarks of Zen pedagogy are its emphasis on the limits of words and the need for the teacher to have the experience s/he hopes to foster in students. This pedagogy uses words and other effective means not primarily to convey concepts—typically seen in Zen as impediments to experiential learning—but to create the conditions for students to undergo fundamental shifts in their holistic experience, especially their experience of self and its relations to others and the world.

These three hallmarks of Zen pedagogy—recognizing the limits of words, emphasizing the teacher's experiential knowledge, and creating the conditions for student change—seem particularly relevant to composition/rhetoric teachers because they promote holistic learning, which is fundamental both to writing instruction and to social change. I'm not advocating that composition teachers need to read or practice Nhat Hanh's recommendations. Rather, I'm suggesting we can use and build on Justin's strategies for fostering students' awareness by finding and practicing the strategies that help us to expand our own holistic awareness—shifting our own experiences—and by bringing these strategies into our classrooms. In doing so, we will transform our alienation into greater connection, in the process modeling such work for students. This modeling, I believe, provides us the most effective method we have of working toward social justice by cultivating peace, as means and as end.



Endnotes

¹ This study was approved by our university's Human Investigation Committee. Student names in this article are pseudonyms, but Justin chose to use his own name in publications based on the study.

² See, Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, pgs. 142-168, for an excellent discussion of qualitative coding.

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Doodling

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It all started with my doodling habit. Sitting at meetings – department meetings, committee meetings, doctoral defenses, meetings with the Chancellor, meetings with the insurance guy, you name it – I doodle. Faces, mainly. Big long aquiline noses, thick as weeds eyebrows, creases galore, just for the fun of it. Sometimes muscled, Michelangelo arms and backs, rippling with little muscular bumps for which I have no anatomical backing.

The doodling grew out of my realization at the age of 16 that I would never be an artist. Before that I had entertained little fantasies that I would pursue drawing and painting, go live in Paris and make a living in Florence, or Montmartre, somewhere I could be surrounded by grit and flowers and pretty girls who wanted me to do their portraits. At 16 I realized that my gifts were limited, that I would have to really study hard to rise up off my plateau, and that in any case other things – like learning about the past, digging in old documents, telling stories about dead people – were maybe more in tune with my abilities. So I drafted into history, then anthropology, and became a professor. The dreams of Florence were relegated to the margins of lined yellow pads.

As a professor at Syracuse University for the past 15 years – seems like longer, or shorter, depending on the day – I have dedicated considerable time and effort to building bridges with the "community" – social change organizations rooted in the area to which I can send energetic students to do projects, such as gathering evidence to support the Labor-Religion Coalition's campaign for a Living Wage, or the