

Interview

Hannah Ashley

Hybrid Idioms in Writing the Community

An Interview with Ira Shor

Ira Shor serves on the English faculty at the College of Staten Island, CUNY and is Professor in the City University of New York's Graduate School, where he started up the doctorate in composition/rhetoric in 1993. His nine books include a recent three-volume set in honor of the late Paulo Freire which includes Critical Literacy in Action. Shor's close work with Freire began in the early 1980s with Shor's Critical Teaching and Everyday Life (1980) the first book-length treatment of Freire's methods in their North American context, and lasted until Freire's passing in 1997, the same year that they co-authored A Pedagogy for Liberation. Shor also authored the widely used Empowering Education (1992) and When Students Have Power (1996). Ira Shor came to CUNY during the height of the Open Admissions battles in 1971. Experimenting with critical teaching and literacy, he taught Basic Writing for 15 years and continues to teach first-year composition and other writing courses in addition to seminars in the pedagogy and rhetoric of critical whiteness, postcolonialism, autobiography, and composition studies.

Reflections: In your 1999 interview with Howard Tinberg for *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*, you outlined a program for “critical literacy across the curriculum” in which you propose that students sign up to be writing interns and/or ethnographers in community-campus organizations, engaging in real writing projects with and for those organizations, while teachers serve as supervisors and provide workshops and seminars on literacy practices. What affinity or distance do you see between this model and service-learning as it is currently understood and enacted in many places?

Ira Shor: I've proposed Critical Literacy Across the Curriculum as well as Across the Community. My proposal for a comprehensive writing program includes service-learning, community based literacy, action research, writing internships, and ethnographic projects. Service-learning is one model for answering the foundational question “Where does subject matter come from?” The subject matter is the work of the agency or organization in which the student serves, as well as the student's experience of working there. As Bruce Herzberg has suggested, service-learning per se can be merely philanthropic or exotic touring among the less fortunate. By itself, it does not have to include

critical thinking about connecting the local site to larger conditions and power relations; service-learning can be configured simply as reportage on an internship experience. However, as Bruce proposed, the critical writing teacher is responsible for framing the questions which engage service students in a critical inquiry vis-a-vis their internships.

Critical Literacy Across the Curriculum and the Community acknowledges and embraces the brilliant innovations which have characterized the field of comp/rhet over the past 30 years. My proposal assumes the values of such moves as writing-across-the-curriculum and writing-in-the-disciplines. It expands these initiatives into comprehensive internships and action/field research on and off campus which will be mentored by writing instructors who serve as project directors and critical literacy coaches. In a way, I see Critical Literacy Across the Curriculum and the Community as a unified field theory and comprehensive program structure for innovation in composition and rhetoric.

In this curriculum, students go to diverse communities and use those sites as the subjects of research and writing. Critical literacy and critical thinking are not abstract textbook activities or classroom exercises unrelated to community issues. This kind of critical writing

class teaches techniques in a social context. It's not the kind of generalized writing skills instruction, that Joseph Petraglia critiques in his book on composition, where abstract forms of logic or rhetoric are taught scholastically with the hope that some writing skills will rub off and remain for use in real contexts.

Rather, we situate critical literacy in local communities. This means that subject matter is not defined as a core curriculum of great books chosen in advance from an elitist canon; this means that the subject matter of first-year writing is not literature chosen by English teachers who prefer teaching from their special discipline. Rather, the real life of a setting is the subject matter, and the task is to research it to be of use. When community sites are the subject matters and when critical writing about them is the method, we democratize literacy and instruction, we make pedagogy a force for bottom-up theorizing instead of top-down, depersonalized learning.

Reflections: To expand on the theme of critical literacy—a few years ago, you published the essay, “What is critical literacy?”, in which you wrote that a critical writing class is “a zone where teachers invite students to move into deepening interrogations of knowledge in its global contexts,” where teachers as well as students are developed, and where “democratic relations in a class and democratic action outside class” are encouraged. I was particularly taken by this set of demands on teachers and students. Is there anything in particular in them you would like to update or expand on?

Shor: Again, for me, vis-a-vis critical-democratic pedagogy, the key foundational questions are: Where does subject matter come from and what do we do with it? The critical teacher has to discover what Paulo Freire called “generative themes” as the initial subject matter for extended critical discourse. In *Empowering Education*, I added “topical themes” drawn from current social issues and “academic themes” contextualized into student experience as two other subject-matter resources for the critical writing class. The choice of subject matter is absolutely crucial in our efforts to situate critical literacy in the interests of the students. In addition, the learning process we deploy will also determine the fate of student development. The subject matters that count most or work best in any specific set-

ting are those problem-themes which will provoke students into critical reflection and action. What these will be is an experimental and situated question that is answered on-site, in class, by teachers who take a research habit to their own pedagogy. We have to investigate and test subject matters from local student experience, from topical concerns, and from academic sources, to find which fit best into the profile of student cognition, which will draw students into extended inquiry. The teacher's role is to discover the subject matters best-suited for critical inquiry with the specific group of students he or she is working with. Then, the teacher has to initiate a dialogic, problem-posing, participatory study of these themes that goes successively deeper into their personal, local, societal, and global implications.

Our job as teachers is to find ways to pose the historical context and power relations that any specific subject matter belongs to. This activity has citizen-developing implications for the teacher and for the students. The teacher who seeks generative themes from student life or from social issues is designing her or his pedagogy with civic commitment. The students who accept this invitation to engage in critical study likewise accept the civic responsibility to connect the personal with the social in such a way that we conjointly pull ourselves further into civic thought, feeling, and action.

Reflections: Within these models of critical-democratic pedagogy, you advocate that instructors' expert knowledge should be inserted into classroom discourse on a “need-to-know, just-in-time-basis.” You also refer to “backloading” instructor expertise. As a teacher, I am often fearful that “just-in-time” will turn into “far-too-late,” especially in a more democratically run, authority-destabilized class where I am not an expert on many topics students might bring up, even within composition and rhetoric, let alone in the community. Is this a fear for you? Do you have any examples of this happening and how you dealt with it?

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at the moment such knowledge would be really useful for a teachable moment or a critical inquiry. I accept these limits as challenges of experimental and critical pedagogy. They teach me what I have yet to learn. So, I go out looking for what I need to know as soon as possible so I can put it to use for the moment that came up in class. This does give me some anxiety but I think, as Dewey and Freire pointed out, genuine education is really an act of research and all research involves giving up certainty, facing doubt, accepting risk in the domain of the unknown.

If students do action research and writing about community sites or service locations, they bring back to class the raw data—eyewitness observation, informant interviews, etc. The critical teacher asks students to write about their experience from their points of view, producing the first drafts about the communities or agencies which they examined or worked in. Following the students' development of these drafts, the teacher and the whole class have extended dialogue about how to interpret, evaluate, make sense of the subjects under scrutiny, using the students' own texts as the foundational discourses. In this way, student experience, expression, and perception are the frontloaded materials for critical dialogue and revision. The teacher in this dialogue backloads her or his perspective into the student-authored texts already on the table.

It is fair to say that teachers have been trained to deliver the traditional model of pedagogy—teacher-centered discourse about academic subject matters solely chosen by the teacher. In writing classes, this subject matter is usually literature or essays. Teachers are English majors who have been trained in literary analysis by literature professors. Some get rhetorical training in non-fiction prose analysis. So it makes sense for new teachers, especially, to feel confident mostly when teaching the literature they know. Making community literacy or service-learning work as new paradigms for writing instruction will require staff development seminars for the faculty teaching those classes. We've already seen large-scale staff development take place vis-a-vis computer-assisted literacy classes once high-tech was put on the educa-

tional agenda, so I'm optimistic that a civic and critical orientation of writing teachers towards community subject matters and student-generated themes will also succeed if such a serious staff development is undertaken.

Reflections: You have also said—in the *TETYC* interview—that you would like to come to campuses to help faculty and administrators move toward your critical literacy across the curriculum model. Can you give a sense of what you might begin by saying and doing if invited to a campus to do that? Also, let me add that in my own experience, it is often the mundane complaints of time and funding restrictions that prevent programs from being attempted, let alone effectively implemented. I wonder if you could include a response to the concerns of writing program administrators or instructors—particularly already overworked part-time faculty?

Shor: Yes. I have worked with faculty on curriculum redesign and I see this as a very important undertaking. Before addressing that work in a little detail, can I say that the funding issue is bogus? There is no shortage of money on campus or in our society. The problem is political, not economic. The problem is, Who controls the wealth generated by our vast economy and who controls the budget on any campus?

To explain, I could point out that first-year writing courses are typically revenue-rich “cash cows” that produce surplus tuition drained out of writing programs to finance other institutional purposes, like administration, upper-division courses, and graduate seminars, which are politically privileged claims on the college budget. Writing courses are exploited cash cows because they are staffed with very cheap labor (mostly female adjuncts) who work too hard for too little with too many students.

The students in these writing courses pay tuition on a full-time basis, yet they get a teacher paid part-time. Bogus testing regimes produce enormous failure rates that fill up these revenue-producing, cheap-labor writing courses. This ugly and anti-educational arrangement sends lots of money out of the writing program into the hands of administration and other places.

So, we can't really say that there isn't enough money to make changes. The problem is one of power—how do we get the power to make the changes we need so that writing programs can work? The current structure of writing pro-

grams is not defensible ethically, educationally, or democratically, so big changes are long overdue. Some of those changes have been underway and some more will be pushed as adjuncts organize against their own exploitation, but the bulk of the field remains trapped in the cheap-labor, bogus-testing mode.

That's my view of traditional writing programs which I develop and defend in writing and in public speaking when invited to a campus. On the other hand, if any program wants to overhaul its courses, and asks me to come there for discussion, I like to read in advance as much as I can about the place before my arrival. Then, once there, I prefer to listen for as long as possible to faculty and students speak about their conditions. I speak in the context of the situation as I understand it from the materials I've read and from the presentations of those at work on campus. I ask a lot of questions about the current situation on campus and the intentions of the faculty and students.

For example, when I recently spoke with faculty in New Jersey overhauling their general education program, our session began with faculty presentations to which I responded in depth. Prior to my arrival they sent me various data including detailed information on student major distribution across the departments as well as transcripts of previous faculty meetings.

When I'm consulting, I often ask faculty and students there to speak about the biggest problems they see in their programs as well as the biggest strengths. Critical-democratic pedagogy in general and Critical Literacy Across the Curriculum and Community specifically adapt to local conditions and constituencies. I would want to know what kind of writing program is already in place—the sequence of required courses, the testing and placement regimes (entry and exit exams), class size and course load, faculty profile (age, gender, race, training, full- or part-time, etc.), student profile, administrative disposition, innovations already in place, writing center functions, etc. From these various inputs, I offer recommendations.

Reflections: You have dedicated much of your professional life to teaching working class students. What are the particular concerns, rewards, or paradoxes of designing service-learning or community-based writing with working class versus more “elite” students in mind?

Shor: Yes, this is a very good question. First, can I speak about how I understand the scale and meaning of term “working-class student”? About 36% of first-year students at four-year campuses come from homes making less than \$50,000 per year, so senior colleges have a large contingent of working-class students, in addition to the enormous two-year network that enrolls over 5 million students. With this huge working-class group of students in higher education, it's telling that no Department of Working-Class Studies has ever existed anywhere, even though a vibrant working-class studies movement is evolving now on the margins of the academy. We have business departments and business schools but not labor departments in our colleges; every major newspaper and TV newscast has a business section but none devoted to labor reporting, testifying again to the corporate hegemony that dominates school, media, and society.

Coming of age in schools, colleges, and mass media built under corporate hegemony, we are disabled in our ability to understand class identity and class conflict. I would say that we tend to think of community college students or low-income students or basic writing students as “working-class.” But, such students are on most campuses, though not in the same numbers. Also, it helps to keep in mind that about 55% of high-school graduates aged 18-24 are not now in college, so the majority experience of young adults is not college but something else. On the whole then, it's

hard for us to imagine just how big the working-class in America is (estimated at over 60% of the population by political scientist Michael Zweig) and how college is not the majority experience of American youth.

If some folks wanted a rule of thumb to define “working-class,” here's a base starting point: If you or your parents have to go to work every day to make ends meet, if you or they have no choice but to work for wages to pay the bills, if you or they can't afford to leave employment because there is no other income

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from property or stock portfolios or family legacies, if you or they depend on weekly paychecks from jobs where you have little or no managerial authority or decision-making power, then you are working-class.

Having said that as prologue, let me make a few observations about service-learning and community literacy projects for working-class students.

First, working-class students have had little invested in their development, so any curriculum with their interests in mind has to make the educational experience a decisive break from the impersonal, mass-produced, bare-bones, bureaucratic nature of their prior schooling. The students' academic literacy has not been taken seriously in any school they attended, even though their non-academic everyday literacy is strong. Yet, abstract exercises in the forms of logic, argumentation, or rhetoric will be useful only to a scholastic handful of working-class students who already identify with academic discourse for one reason or another. This means that a worker-based discourse for academic inquiry needs to be deployed—one that is dialogic, problem-posing, and participatory, as I have been elaborating over the years in a series of books.

Secondly, critical working-student discourse will be informed by the students' community idioms, ethnicities, autobiographies, and conditions. The syllabus, subject matter, readings, writing assignments, teacherly remarks, and classroom discussions have to address working students in a language legible to them with materials of manifest interest to them and in a register that positions them as people capable of serious intellectual work...such a situated and critical project will provide a wonderfully steep learning curve for both the teachers and students involved.

students and teachers bring to school—everyday non-academic speech and teacherly discourse.

Thirdly, the syllabus has to grow from a generative and topical base. That is, the themes for inquiry have to be drawn from the everyday

speech and conditions of the students as well as from problematic topics in society which should be presented to them and chosen by them for their civic engagement. Further, working students will need extra time and tutoring to finish their assignments, because of job, family, and commuting demands on them.

It's a daunting task for ANY late adolescent undergraduate to present herself or himself as an intern at a service agency or as an ethnographer/tutor in a community literacy project. It takes substantial maturity, security, and authority to enter an organization from the outside and, within a few weeks' time, fit into it as its chronicler and critic. So, let me counsel a lot of patience in supporting working-class students especially in taking on the literate habits and social authority needed to function as service or community literacy interns. All in all, it seems to me that such a situated and critical project will provide a wonderfully steep learning curve for both the teachers and students involved.

Reflections: If students—any and all students, not just working class ones—choose which agencies and communities to write with and for, they may match themselves up ideologically and avoid inquiring into the conflicting ideological discourses in which they themselves participate. Do you see this as an issue? Or, perhaps it might be better to ask more generally, what are the challenges that you see arising in this or similar service learning models?

Shor: It's alright if a student chooses a site where she or he feels ideologically at home. Let them do the work and prepare the study of the site and their activities there. Then, our job as critical educators is to question the report produced by the student about that site. We need to pose problems about the student's choices at and write-up about the site, to ask the questions hidden or evaded by the agency and/or by the student.

Reflections: Can you elaborate on that reverse concern? That is, students are interning at organizations, which are composed of people, individuals who are hoping to put the writing students do to work. In writing for "real" audiences, students are likely to try to write pieces that will be in some way well-received by their audience. These people all have their own dis-

course practices and norms, their own sets of power relations and ideologies. What are some ways that you see of resolving the conflict between, on the one hand, producing writing that will be valued by the organization, and, on the other, “deep interrogations” of the rhetorics that inhere in that organization? Or do you not see these as conflicting?

Shor: Service-learning requires cooperating agencies to accept students, so when we make a connection with such a place, we are often grateful to have a site where the project can begin. I’m sure that service-learning faculty know the importance of picking sites where students will get something valuable out of their internships. Wherever possible, service-learning and community literacy internships should be in organizations where critical inquiry and pedagogy can be practiced.

If we do have student interns working in organizations hostile to challenging the status quo, then we can’t expect students on their own to thrive there as critical ethnographers or literacy animators. We may have no choice but to expect students in such situations to write critical reviews of such organizations for consumption only in a seminar outside the internship site. Writing interns are marginal and vulnerable, so we need tactful behavior and modest expectations about what they can handle on their own at a cooperating site, and count on doing the most critical inquiry off-site in a setting open to such activity.

Reflections: So do you imagine that when working class and other students made marginal (though not numerically a minority, as you said) by the academy are involved in such community literacy internships, that there might evolve “fourth” or “fifth idioms?”

Shor: The third idiom I mentioned above and first explained in *Empowering Education* is not a single form of language. Rather, it is an invented discourse synthesized in process whenever students and teachers engage a critical-democratic learning process that questions the status quo in society, the subject matters we study, and the teacher-centered relations of traditional schooling. Inside the third idiom, the teacher’s academic discourse and the students’ everyday dialects take on new expressions and capacities needed for their mutual development

inside a critical-democratic dialogue. Now, if a student is a service-intern or a tutor in a community literacy site that is hostile to critical inquiry, where she or he is not allowed to question the status quo but is rather expected to mimic the dominant values there, then he or she will have to work under the radar, keeping critical inquiry alive in a private journal and in a site report which is for consumption only

off-site. I suppose that under those conditions, the students will develop working idioms that help them make it through the task, and you can call those working idioms “fourth and fifth idioms” if you like, to deflect hostile attention to their activity.

Reflections: Finally, what have the events of September 11 meant for your ideas about teaching, writing, and rhetoric? What are some responses you would like to see from the academy?

Shor: The attack on the Twin Towers was mass murder of innocent civilians. This terrible crime shocked me. I watched the Towers burn from the roof of my house in Brooklyn. I still can’t believe that so many people died and that such enormous buildings are gone from the skyline. Here in New York, we have been gripped by weeks of grief, fear, and anger. The event was traumatizing. Many are awaiting the next terrorist assault. A long period of mourning is underway which has subdued this usually wild town. We have to grieve for the dreadful loss of life and the permanent tear in our city’s fabric.

In such a moment of grief and loss, followed by an orchestrated war fever, the rhetorical setting is very restrictive, the room for public debate and critical teaching is narrow.... Since the attack of Sept. 11, there has been only one story, one issue, one agenda, one public discourse permitted, the tragic loss of life that justifies a rush to war, bombing, invasion, revenge, ultrapatriotism, and massive security operations locally, nationally, and globally. This terrible terrorist crime has strengthened the war forces in our own society. We live under siege here, with

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police and soldiers everywhere, with barricades and blocked roads, with disrupted highways and subways. The anthrax attack in October only made the state of siege worse. It's very hard to dissent publicly from such a war fever. No other issues are allowed on the public agenda except the apotheosis of the brave firemen, how to clean up the debris so we can return those 16 devastated acres to the big business community that runs the city and the world. There is no debate about education, health care, mass transit, public health, child welfare, housing, police abuse, corporate welfare giveaways, or any other unsettled issues that filled political life before Sept. 11. I expect that as the war in Afghanistan drags on, as the grieving subsides locally, as the ultra-patriotic displays wind down, and as the fear generated by the 9/11 attack subsides, more room for dissent and critical inquiry will open up.

Some 12,000 people did march here against the war in Afghanistan on the day the bombing began. Vigils, teach-ins, rallies, and marches have continued, though this activity is ignored by the mass media. In class, I lit candles to memorialize the dead and to honor the victims of the attack. Sadly, 78 of the dead firemen lived on Staten Island where I teach undergraduate classes, so there is a raw wound here which must be healed.

I bring in articles about the attack to use as topical texts for analysis and to provide some detachment on an enveloping issue. One problem-posing activity was a critical discussion on who should be allowed access to ground zero. The mayor's policy has been to allow only celebrity access. The rich and famous can drive up in their limos and get a tour of the site, but ordinary people are forbidden entry. I asked students, Should everyone have access? No one? Or only celebrities? This issue provoked extended debate in two writing classes. Another issue is the bitter dispute between the firefighters and the mayor over how of them should be stationed at Ground Zero to search for remains. This dispute led to a fight between firemen and police that caused five injuries and 20 arrests. The heroic unity of 9/11 is already breaking down.

In general, I'd like to see more public discussion on how unilateral military action cannot solve the terrorist threat and that American oil interests and foreign policy supporting right-wing Arab regimes and Israel's occupation of Arab land are at the root of the problem.

Reflections: Can we close by asking you about your most pressing current interests?

Shor: In teaching, for two years I've been developing a seminar called "critical whiteness" for the Ph.D. Program at the CUNY Grad School. This is a powerful and intriguing topic. My reading in whiteness studies leads me to think that such courses would be valuable for undergraduates and high school students too, as a means to question racism.

In my undergraduate comp classes, I've been testing the ethnography curriculum based in field research by students at local sites of their own choosing. In addition, I've been teaching courses in patriarchy and the female hero and am also involved in working-class studies, another emerging field which shows a lot of promise and is sorely needed, given the great denial of social class in our very unequal society.

Outside of teaching, I've been working with the Green Party locally on various campaigns. The sooner we build a progressive alternative to the two major parties the sooner we'll be free of corporate control of public policy, education, the media, and just about everything.

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