WHY TEACH LITERATURE?  
REPLACING ASSIMILATION WITH CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

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ABSTRACT

Distraught by the idea that literature first became an academic discipline as a way to promote a kind of gentleman’s class among the commonly cultured and concerned it was possible that underneath my own teaching practice I might still be encouraging conformity even while I hoped to promote diversity, I was urged to investigate the ways the study of literature might still be promoting assimilation and what I might do to resist that. This investigation first took me back to the roots of the common school curriculum in the late nineteenth century where character development and patriotism, linked to grooming a compliant workforce, were the forthright purposes of literature’s inclusion. I then examined how educational reform since the late 1970s has returned to a national promotion of commonness but now no longer primarily in the interest of cultural assimilation but in the interest of economic assimilation. Critical of how conformity put society’s interests over the individual’s, I searched for an alternative pedagogy with a different priority. I discovered that the progressive movement, started by John Dewey in the early twentieth century, established a different model based on student centrism and a desired mutuality between the student and society. In her “theory of aesthetic transaction” Louise Rosenblatt builds upon Dewey’s model by positing that readers and texts are co-determinate in the same way that mirrors the complex relationship between people and culture. In this way, Rosenblatt fulfills Dewey’s faith that education can be used to promote a relationship of mutuality, where society’s interests do not take precedence over the individual’s interests. Her
theory suggests that education can be used to empower students to see themselves as co-determinate with the world they inhabit in the same way that they are co-determinate with the texts they read. The work of critical pedagogues takes this even further by suggesting that the goal of education should be to empower students to resist oppressive political dynamics. In contrast to offering students power through cultural and economic assimilation, progressive educators and critical pedagogues desire that education not only prepare students to live in the world as it is but that it also help students reshape society in more democratic ways. In conclusion, I posit three strategies for practicing a student centric pedagogy in a literature classroom including focusing a student’s education on the knowledge she produces rather than the texts she studies, interpreting texts in relationship to specific contexts, and recognizing the partiality of all perspectives. In contrast to assimilative models, these strategies are designed to help students resist prescriptive life outcomes and have greater agency in directing their lives.
To my boys,
Robert Richard,
Noah Mandela
& Gabriel Romero

may we keep learning together

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION
RESISTING PRESCRIPTION, A NEW GOAL FOR LANGUAGE ARTS

During my ten years as a high school language arts teacher, I have been committed to challenging students to examine why they believe what they believe. I am particularly interested in challenging students to examine their value systems and beliefs in the contexts of the systems of value in the communities they come from and in society at large. I agree with educators R.W. Connell and Michael Apple who claim that education is always a moral activity because “teaching and learning always involve questions about purposes and criteria for action (whether these purposes are shared or not), about the application of resources (including authority and knowledge) and about responsibility and the consequences of action” (qtd. Connell, Apple 94). As a teacher of reading and writing, and particularly as a teacher of literature, I lead class discussions that easily lend themselves to analyses of values people hold, where they come from, and what actions they give rise to. In one example, we often examine characters in terms of what they perceive as the ‘good life,’ setting in terms of what informs a character’s perception, and plot in terms of what characters struggle against to attain the life they wish. Students’ analyses of fiction experiences transfer to critical ability to examine the problems they immediately experience or witness. As a high school teacher, I am able to see young people develop substantially as they grapple with who they are in relation to what they believe about the world, and as they make paradigms to understand the conflicts around them. I want to help students become more critical of the societal structures around them, including the cultural, economic, and political forces they live within that vie for their uncritical loyalties. When unexamined, these forces will result in their pre-scripted beliefs and actions that have been infused with the interests of others, long before their adoption of them. My goal is to help students have
increased freedom to use their creativity, work ethic, and intellect to resist prescriptive life outcomes, and to gain power they can use toward the achievement of their consciously directed interests. To do so requires a critical perspective of how power is used in our society, whose interests are ultimately served by its use, and strategies for channeling its resources back toward themselves.

Within this paper, I want to talk about ‘power’ in terms of the ability to achieve academic success, financial success, and social standing. Because these achievements cannot be uncritically accepted to always lead to students’ long-term happiness, I want to talk about ‘students’ interests’ in contrast to ‘others’ interests’ in terms of who is ultimately served by the results of the use of power. In other words, I will use power to talk about the raw material from which wealth is made and interests in terms of who benefits from the wealth generated by that power. This is an important distinction here, because schools have always been a place where power is transferred to students, but that power certainly does not serve their interests alone, often serves students’ interests less than others, and at times is at odds with their interests. I want to examine school as an institution that must balance serving both students’ and society’s interests, with the hope of revealing where the interests of society have been prioritized over the interests of the student and with the hope of recommending how this imbalance can be redirected back toward the interests of students, especially in the context of teaching literature.

From the vantage point of my classroom, I have watched teachers transfer power to students within specific ideologically laden goals of how that power should be used. For instance, I worked within a politically conservative community where the much celebrated history teacher taught American history as a story of the ever-increasing realization of democracy. Within this context, students became convinced that the then current war in Iraq was
about spreading democratic opportunity to those who didn’t have it. One young man with incredible integrity decided he must join the war to further this noble purpose. In Iraq, however, he became convinced that his power was not serving the purposes he had signed up for it to further. After first hand witness of its effects as well as due to substantial reading, he came to believe there could be no moral justification for any war. He successfully applied for conscientious objector status, and received honorable discharge from the military. This student now studies psychology at Columbia University and is particularly interested in the effects of violence on combatants. This young man’s ability to recognize his values, act with integrity on them, and then re-examine and change them in light of new knowledge, models an exceptional level of critical thinking and courage. He was able to see how school had directed his power to serve interests he opposed and was able to re-direct his power back toward interests in line with his visions for the world. If I could help students think and act as this young man has done, my goals as a teacher would be fulfilled.

But this student’s story is exceptional. Most young people’s lives are far more predictable, and the trajectories of their uses of power are dependent on factors outside of their own critical thinking. The cultural contexts most students grow up in, including the influence of their schools, their families, and their communities, are uncritically perpetuated in students’ lives. As an example, in my experience, if I want to get a heads-up on what it will be like to work with a particular young person, I have learned to look first to the attitudes, educational history, and social position of his or her parents. As a twelfth grade teacher, I’m in the unique position to see students reach the brink of adulthood, a perspective college teachers share, while I still have a lot of parental contact, as elementary and middle school teachers have. In this position, I’ve had the chance to interact with two generations in hundreds of families. From this
vantage point, the metaphor suitable for describing a young person’s eventual attainment of power in society is uncomfortably like the inheritance of DNA.

In some ways, the idea that we inherit social and cultural relationships seems natural. For instance, I want my children to be able to use the intellectual and material wealth I’ve accrued in my life to further their own. I also appreciate when families and communities pass along the cultural distinctiveness that is testament to the particular experiences of their ancestors. I don’t want wealth, in its multiple forms, to be lost from one generation to the next. But in other ways the inheritance of cultural and social relationships is deeply disturbing. First, this is disturbing because attitudes can be passed along uncritically, as exemplified by the earlier student’s adopted support of war. Secondly, this is disturbing because this ‘inheritance’ reveals that society is not fair, since some families and communities have more wealth to pass on than others. This is particularly frightening in a society that frequently describes itself as a meritocracy and diminishes the unjust distribution of wealth of which we are born into. There is a pervasive notion in American society that our educational system equalizes opportunity for social mobility through a merit-based system. Generally Americans like to resist the notion that we move within rigid social systems that perpetuate social positions independent of individual choice and action. We prefer to believe in the ‘American dream’ that anyone who works hard in school and in work can earn a comfortable life. But if this is the case, why are the successes and failures of my students’ performances in twelfth grade English so predictable? And what can I do in my twelfth grade language arts class to increase the ability for students to resist prescription and determine their own futures?

I approach these questions from a number of angles. To begin with, I experienced a wider range of class experiences than most in my childhood that made my own social
relationships less predictable along a single trajectory. On the one hand, my parents’ income
taxes have stayed under the poverty line for most of my life. On the other hand, because of my
parents’ creativity, through the influence of friends and grandparents, and frankly due to my
being a tall, pretty white girl, I was given many social privileges including exposure to the arts,
travel, good jobs, and private schooling. From another angle, I have worked in an array of
schools and cultural contexts that helped me see cause and effect relationships between
individuals and society that are often otherwise internalized as the result of personal choice. This
recognition of the way context shapes beliefs and actions has provided a lens for me to consider
the origins of identity and ideologies that otherwise can be taken for granted.

By moving within different class and cultural experiences, I have become convinced that
American society perpetuates social power in a way that is fundamentally at odds with its touted
educational goals of equalizing opportunity. In these experiences, I have seen how certain
groups have more and less access to power despite how ingenious their members are or how hard
they work. This paradigmatic slippage between perspectives has become central to my
developing a sense of what Elizabeth Ellsworth calls the ‘partiality of all perspectives’ in which
she uses both senses of the word at once to indicate that all perspectives are both biased and
incomplete (319). The recognition of partiality helps lay bare the unfairness of a social system
that narrowly allocates power based on certain group membership. As an educator I want to
promote students’ abilities to similarly slip between different paradigms, and from this to provide
students multiple positions from which to critique the use of power. As they are able to critique
how different perspectives lend themselves to promoting certain, interested uses of power, they
will be increasingly able to adopt perspectives that are helpful toward realizing their goals as
well as be able to continuously critique the worth of their own aspirations.
In a parallel process, teachers must become critically aware of the theories of power’s transfer that have motivated their discipline’s presence in schools. It is helpful to me to imagine teachers and students acting within an electricity grid, where students become charged as teachers connect them to sources of power. As when electrical currents are run toward different uses, the transfer of power to students isn’t neutral. Whether it is recognized or not, the theory of empowerment that prompts the way in which a teacher transfers power, already limits the student’s use of that power. All disciplines transfer power equivalent to providing students with potential energy that will direct the future of society in certain directions, and teachers within these disciplines operate based on different theories of how their discipline provides power. If teachers make it their jobs not merely to transfer power but to help students question the nature of the power they are being extended, they will provide students with the ability not merely to participate in society as it is, but they will be providing students with the opportunities to change society towards its betterment.

Because of my investment in the hope of inspiring independent thinking, I was deeply concerned when reading about the history of the study of literature to be told that its use in the university was initially to promote a kind of gentlemen’s class of commonly cultured academics (Crowley 47). This suggested that the historical purpose of the literature curriculum had essentially been to stymie independent thinking - not to promote it! I began to wonder, if this were the case then, how was I to know whether my class wasn’t unintentionally still promoting the same end? It was at the same time that I read this about the discipline of literature that I had been investigating why so many of my urban, African-American students were resistant to learning standard grammar (And by this I do not mean they were resistant to the goal of learning standard grammar, but rather resistant to the effect. In contrast to the lack of effect of my
teaching, the same students who struggled the most were often those who most adamantly agreed that their English was ‘bad’ and should be ‘corrected’). The two issues began to converge when I wondered if my teaching of standard grammar wasn’t motivated by the same reason for literature’s historical presence in academia: were they both ways to draw students into an inflexible common culture in which they were being unequally included in making? It was easy to suppose that a parallel existed between the motivation to teach a narrow ‘canon’ of literature and to describe language choices in terms of ‘right’ and ‘wrong;’ both made the path of entrance into society one of learning the books and adopting the language of mainstream culture. Essentially, they both promoted assimilation as the route to social power.

In order to find new ways of thinking about grammar that wasn’t based on cultural imposition, I investigated the debate about ‘code switching’ versus ‘code meshing’ led by many language scholars, and I came to the belief that all language use should be taught in terms of what was appropriate for promoting a particular rhetorical end rather than in terms of essential ‘rights’ and ‘wrongs.’ This motivated me to teach understanding context as the key to deciding which language choices were ‘correct’ in different situations. With this in mind, I turned my attention to the question of how to teach literature so as to promote rather than to stultify cultural pluralism. If context was key to framing language choices, perhaps it was also key to making choices about which literature to read. This was not an argument I was unfamiliar with. It is a common discussion amongst high school English teachers to debate which literature should be taught and why. Though canonical texts still make up the majority of the high school language arts nonfiction reading, it is increasingly common that teachers choose texts in which the experiences of characters look more closely like the experiences of the students who read them. These teachers often claim that stories must be relevant to students’ experiences if they are to
engage readers. It is also argued that it is necessarily part of a colonial project to make a diverse body of students study a body of literature that primarily represents historically white, owning class experience. I believe these arguments represent serious considerations that English teachers must grapple with. But creating alternative reading lists based on relevance or similarity to students’ lived experiences also presents multiple challenges.

To begin with, many teachers do not have either the authority or the means to continuously change which literature students read because of administrative barriers or because of the lack of resources. Secondarily, not all students in a single class come from a single context, and changing the literature to mirror one set of student experiences may bring to the forefront the exclusion of the representation of others’ experiences. But most importantly, finding fault with what literature is taught rather than with how it is being taught doesn’t seem to confront the real place of cultural oppression. The problem of merely switching the canon with another more ‘relevant’ set of texts is that it denies students the opportunities to be critical of the uncomfortable dynamics that exist between themselves and the power invested in texts as cultural agents. Texts can be avoided easily but oppressive forces in society cannot be. Where a text represents an oppressive power, avoiding the confrontation with the power invested in it will only put the confrontation off for later.

My goal is for students to theorize why texts have been invested with cultural capital and strategically position themselves in relation to that power. Remembering that power is not neutral, they should question what interests they are furthering by assuming a relationship with any given text. Only by grappling with why various knowledge sets and skills are assigned social power (or why they are included in their high school curriculum) will they be able to critically investigate where their interests are and aren’t being served through the kind of power
their education offers them. This kind of critical engagement with knowledge prepares them for the world outside the classroom where they are more likely to encounter forces desirous of parasitically using their power than they are to encounter forces desirous of assisting them to acquire power to further their own visions. Therefore students’ contexts and experiences are key to what kind of discussions must be had about texts, not necessarily which texts should be read.

Understanding which texts to teach and how to teach them is again made clearer to me when compared with teaching language. Here’s why: a teacher may help a student debunk an essentialist myth that says any one use of language is inherently better than another, but this will not change the fact that in the world we live in now most professional situations students will find themselves in will demand their use of standard grammar. Similarly, teaching texts relevant to students’ experiences doesn’t change the fact that, again, in many academic and workforce situations, their cultural experiences aren’t particularly valued. Like canonical texts, standard grammar is invested with cultural capital. Traditionally, students have been transferred power by merely adopting the power invested in these agents through assimilation into mainstream culture. Challenging the legitimacy of this power would only have set in motion forces that disempowered the student. In other words, if students wanted to share in the wealth generated by American society, they have been expected to respect, and not challenge, the way that wealth has been accrued. Students have been expected to accept power as it is or be socially disempowered. But as teachers today, maybe we can carve a new possibility, one that is critical of the way education has transferred power and one that recognizes that though students’ immediate social positions may be contingent on their adoption of the rules of the game as they are, their ultimate empowerment lies in questioning those rules and proposing better ones.
Students’ social successes are largely contingent on their ability to move within contexts that are defined outside of their personal experiences. If motivated by my desire to resist cultural imperialism, I chose the literature students read and the language that was acceptable to use based only on an acknowledgement of the value I had for their personal experiences, how would I also be preparing them to successfully compete in a professional world where their experiences often hold so little weight? Almost everybody teaching high school language arts today is familiar with the remarks of the contemporary influential education reform leader David Coleman, leading architect of the Common Cores Standards and now President of College Board, who in an address to the New York Department of Education argued that teachers should stop including so much “personal writing” in the high school curriculum, claiming “as you grow up in this world you realize people really don’t give a sheet about what you feel or what you think” (10). I don’t respect the uncritical prioritization of work skills revealed in this statement, which is therefore all the more reason to want the students I influence to be able to compete with the students he influences for positions of authority in society. If my students are going to be able to compete, while also desiring to change the direction of power’s use, they’re going to need to know how to ‘be in the world but not of it.’ In other words, they must be able to use the skills and have the knowledge others have but use them consciously and critically. It is one thing to despise cultural domination and another thing to reverse it. Therefore, helping students identify cultural oppression does not mean legitimating English variations in all contexts. Similarly, teaching literature in a context that resists cultural imperialism does not mean merely choosing a different set of literary texts based on relevance to students’ experiences. But on the other hand, I don’t think the only curricular change I can make is limited to helping students acknowledging the unfairness of the dominant social structure around them. So how do we teach students not
only to critique society’s inequitable social structures, but also to change them, while simultaneously preparing them to live well within social systems as they are? Answering this multi-faceted question is the purpose of this thesis.

I divide the discussion into two aspects. First, I want to reveal how a philosophy of assimilation undergirds the dominant theory of how education should transfer social power in historical and contemporary political contexts and show how this philosophy perpetuates class hierarchies and resists social mobility. Secondly, I want to show how the theory of progressive education tries to redress the imbalance of an assimilatory philosophy by putting the student at the center. Drawing these two aspects together, I examine how literature has been and can be used to prepare students to gain power within the world as it is, while simultaneously promoting their critical capacity to challenge that world to make room for new visions of society’s direction. In the conclusion I offer how several lessons I’ve learned from this study can be put into use in my high school language arts classroom to help students resist oppressive power dynamics and prescriptive life choices and open up potential for an education that promotes critical consciousness and student power.
To better understand my own teaching practice, I first wanted to return to the context of and motivation behind the formation of the U.S. public school system and the basis of literature’s study within it. I have often found that examining the roots of an idea or behavior clarifies for me its use in the present. Many thoughts that were developed in the past continue to be perpetuated despite their no longer having reason. For instance, I recently examined an old typewriter and discovered that the shift key manually moved the old platen up and down. Today, our keyboards continue to use the word “shift” despite their being electronic. When I started this project, my suspicion was that in a similar way, aspects of my teaching practice were embedded with traditions that were no longer useful to today’s students, or even downright harmful to them, but that I was unable to see or change because they had been practiced for so long that they had begun to feel natural. This investigation was inspired by Sharon Crowley’s claim that literature first found its way into the college curriculum as a means of promoting cultural assimilation among the well to do. I wanted to investigate that claim and explore further when and why literature became a discipline in the public high school curriculum. This I hoped would give me information and a perspective from which to comparatively examine the reasons I find literature to be significant to today’s high school students. What I discovered astonished me significantly.
In his work *Reconstructing American Education* (1987) Michael Katz poses the formation of the system of American public schools in terms of an ongoing tension between the desire to democratize opportunity, which has the effect of extending increased opportunity to share in society’s power, and the desire to perpetuate social order, which has the result of entrenching social practices and narrowing opportunity (122). He reports that there were four competing models that could have formed the base of the public school system. He provides this history for several reasons. First, he wants to show that the ways things are done are not the only possible way things could be done. Second, he wants to show how from early on choices were made that prioritized the perpetuation of social order over the democratization of opportunity.

The first historical model he describes he calls “paternalistic voluntarism,” whose proponents, motivated by “noblesse oblige” on a volunteer basis would run schools for the children of poor families (25, 27). This model focused on the extension of opportunity but limited who had a say in what ‘opportunity’ entailed. The second model was “democratic localism,” whose proponents believed that schools should be run by local organizations that could make autonomous decisions based on local democratic process (32). This model provided lots of local control but presented the difficulty of what to do if a controversial group with narrow interests had the majority say. The third model was “corporate voluntarism,” which the U.S. system of public higher education most resembles. In this models institutions with independent boards of trustees would run schools on a combination of private and public funding (37). This model also allowed for more varied say of input, but also had the possibility of easily inviting the wrong kind of input by turning educational institutions into businesses. The final model was what Katz calls “incipient bureaucracy” (41). He posits that it is this model that became the basis of public high school education as we know it today (41). In this model, power
was less likely to get into the hands of people with narrow interests, but the emphasis on central management and homogeneousness content severely restricted the opportunity for the people who were being educated to have a say in the direction of their educations (42-44).

Supporters of bureaucratization believed that America “lacked fixed traditions and the security of ancient forms,” the development of institutions in the U.S. took on increased significance as they solidified the basic structures of society (56). School’s development, and the presence of disciplines within it, can be understood as a reciprocal expression of its creators’ political visions for the nation. “Bureaucrats,” he writes, saw the purpose of schools as “increasing standardization of institutions, practices, and culture” (56). This rigidity was seen by the proponents of “incipient bureaucracy” as necessary to build social relationships that could be counted on to organize many different people into a cohesive nation. Prioritization of order over increased democratic opportunity was furthered by leaders’ desires to prepare students to enter the emerging capitalist economy, which had the effect of distributing resources unevenly. The resolution of this tension in the favor of bureaucracy set the precedence of values for years to come.

Despite the pressure that bureaucracy placed on realizing America’s promise of equalizing access to opportunity, it still should not be diminished that, as Katnelzson and Weir say, “the most distinctive American public policy of the early nineteenth century” was the nation’s commitment to educate all children in schools paid for by the government (qtd. in Katz 16). Nineteenth century Americans did not miss the statement this made. The coincidental development of democratic politics in the early nineteenth century, marked by early, universal white male suffrage and widespread political participation (7) led working class people to see the state as their ally and to largely accept the premise that public schooling was an institution in
their favor (15). This was in marked difference to many European nations, where disenfranchised working class individuals resisted the promotion of public schooling due to their suspicion of state coercion (15). This early widespread belief in the democratic intentions behind public schooling gives context to the persistent belief that U.S. schools offer social mobility, despite evidence in many cases to the contrary.

The first great challenge to school’s democratizing potential was the necessity to use it to prepare students to accept the emerging capitalist market that distributed resources unevenly. Schooling attempted to respond to the needs of capitalism on a number of fronts. Structurally it replaced an apprenticeship system that prepared individuals for specific careers with the creation of a “mobile, unbound labor force” (14) that made the power of labor a commodity that could be “bought and sold on the market like any other object of exchange” (Dobb qtd. in Katz 13). Paradigmatically, schooling prepared young people to accept the class hierarchies inherent in a capitalist society by encouraging an uncritical assimilation into a unified national culture and pride in being American. It further promoted acceptance of wealth stratification by teaching the spiritual value of the “substitution of higher for lower pleasures” (47) in order to encourage youth to temper their desire for physical wealth. Katz reports this type of direction when he states, “The character of pupils was a much greater concern than their minds” (23). The primacy of moral development in the curriculum is particularly important to note in order to understand the role literature would take on.

Schooling also became one of the leading institutions to respond to the social problems that resulted from the nation’s emerging economic structure (the other national institutions included poor houses, mental hospitals, and prisons) (9). Katz reports that “Early and mid nineteenth century school promoters argued that public educational systems mediated the
tensions associated with the spread of capitalism and democracy by attacking five major problems” (16). These five problems included (1) increased crime and poverty in cities, (2), the perceived threat of the growth of ethnic diversity in cities, (3) the preparation of an industrial workforce, (4) what to do with the new stage of “idle” adolescence that had previously been absorbed by agrarian demands, (5) and the anxieties of parents that their children achieve financial success in the emerging market (16). Rather than identify the increase of crime and poverty as possible consequences of the new economic structure, it was generally believed that they were the results of moral failure particularly on the part of lower class and ethnically diverse families, which were perceived to be the “breeding place of paupers and criminals” (17). It was furthermore believed that immorality and social deviance were “embedded in a set of foreign and inferior cultural patterns” (18). Therefore public school organizers believed that education could confront the problems of crime and poverty through a “massive task of assimilation” (18) that would bring all children, but particularly immigrants, into a national culture grounded in Puritan, Anglo-American cultural values; “In short, fears about cultural heterogeneity propelled the establishment of systems of public education; from the beginning, public schools were agents of cultural standardization” (18-19). These early agendas for American public schools are essential for understanding why education is so often scapegoated today for social problems like crime and poverty and why a model of assimilation was adopted to handle ‘the problem’ of difference.

The Influence and Limitations of Matthew Arnold’s Theory of Cultural Assimilation

The ideas of British cultural critic Matthew Arnold (1822-1888) provided American educators a strategy for achieving the cultural assimilation that was thought necessary to the
perceived nation building process at hand. For Arnold, the goal of schooling was “to educate a responsible and thoughtful citizenry to participate in a moral and humane society” (Pratt 3). He believed that it was through a liberal arts education whose central focus was the humanities that the “ideal of a democratic society would be realized” (Pratt 5). Arnold believed the central educational aim of a functioning democracy was the common study of “culture,” “culture being a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on all the matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world” (Culture and Anarchy 8). His model of a common humanities curriculum carved a path that would be followed in the U.S. to try and make a diverse American demographic take on a unified culture that prompted a shared sense of national loyalty.

Arnold developed his model in the context of his recommendations for how to improve primary and secondary education in the British school system particularly in order to further democratic participation in the growing English middle class. As one of Her Majesty’s School Inspectors, Arnold examined the quality of schools throughout England and Wales from 1851-1886. From this position Arnold witnessed the social disparity between the middle and upper classes (Arnold did not address the needs of the working class or the poor) and posited his hope that public education could alleviate the persistent social disparity between them. In 1874, Arnold reported that England was failing its middle class citizens (“that immense business class which is becoming so important” (Higher 190), stating “what schools of good standing there are...fall chiefly to the lot of the upper class” (189). “The social injury is this,” he writes, “...the middle class, is brought up on the second plane” (emphasis original 189). This happens because the “lines of training...for gentlemen...give a cast of ideas, a stamp or habit, which make a sort of association of all those who share them; and this association is the upper class...an Englishman
does not...become a vital part of this association, [if] he does not bring with him the cast of ideas
in which its bond of union lies” (190). Arnold advised the state that the middle classes could
make up for their lack of the inherited social attitudes of the aristocracy through a systematic
study of the ‘best ideas,’ which he hoped would relieve their perceived cultural disadvantage.

But Arnold’s recommendation of how to work toward social opportunity for middle class
youth reveals the privilege that perpetuated cultural oppression. He posited that the difference in
education between the classes was their different entrances into this understanding of culture.
Upper class citizens came by this knowledge socially; it was inherited as a first language was,
whereas middle class citizens would have to come by it intellectually, as a foreign language is
achieved through deliberate, systematic learning. Arnold reprehended the exclusion of the
middle classes from democratic participation, but the method he recommended for righting this
inequity would perpetuate the supremacy of the aristocracy by making the culture they produced
the object of education for all. During his service as Inspector of Schools, Arnold was also
elected Professor of Poetry at Oxford, a post he served from 1857-1867. In his inaugural lecture
as Poetry Chair, Arnold stated that the end of education is “To know how others stand, that we
may know how we ourselves stand; and to know how we ourselves stand, that we may correct
our mistakes and achieve our deliverance” (“The Modern Element” 305). Arnold’s “we”
included the aristocratic Oxford students he addressed, of which he had been one. In his address
“to know ourselves” as Englishmen, and therefore to be English, was to know the great ideas
associated with aristocratic education. He desired a nation of men who could be equal, but he
described this equality as conformity to the current ruling class culture.

When Arnold reported on England’s public schools he wrote about what was necessary
for the middle class, but when he addressed the Oxford community he did not address them on
what was necessary for the aristocracy but rather on what was necessary for “the human race” and for “all individuals and in all ages” (304). So, whereas the middle class must be educated in response to the attitudes and knowledge of the upper class, the upper class was encouraged to consider their education as a response to unchanging ideas of inherent value. The assumed essentialism of upper class culture is evident in Arnold’s language when he stated that the end of their education was the “true point of view” (305) and a “complete intelligence (306) through the study of an unqualified “comprehensive literature” (306). Arnold wrote that one consequence of growing up within the upper class’s “natural” access to that “cast of ideas” was receiving from these ideas “governing qualities” (Higher 189). Arnold inferred that it was the cast of ideas themselves which transferred the governing qualities rather than the constructed position of cultural privilege, which he was part of promoting, that made a man believe it was right for him to lead other men.

Arnold is interested in promoting democracy, but his stance is that of a missionary whose attitude is that he and others are responsible for bringing power to those who don’t have it. Arnold’s address at Oxford begins with the parable of a Buddhist disciple who after learning all that he can from Buddha is told “Go then, O Pourna,...having been delivered, deliver; having been consoled, console; being arrived thyself at the farther bank, enable others to arrive there also” (304). In these opening words, Arnold reveals his belief that it is the upper class’s responsibility to “deliver” and “enable” others. This condescending attitude will perpetuate the localized power that it claims it will disseminate. Despite its proponents’ belief in their helpfulness, an inequitable system will never change that tries to lift people up rather than help people lift themselves. Whereas Arnold spoke for the publicly educated community, he spoke to the Oxford community, charging them to take responsibility for their own educations. Arnold
was a poet whose work reveals an extraordinarily keen culturally critical eye, as in his famous poem “Dover Beach” which laments the loss of ideological stability in modern society. Arnold wasn’t just a student of “culture” he was also a contributing creator. Arnold’s cultural contributions reveal in him balanced impulses to respect the past and to mold the future. His address to the Oxford students encouraged them to balance these priorities as well, but his plan for middle class youth prioritized a model of education that kept them consuming and not producing. In this model, if these youth did assume places of national governance, it would only be to perpetuate the culture that had been there before them.

Like Arnold, early American educators either failed to see or were not interested in seeing how a culturally assimilative model did not offer all students equal opportunities to contribute to the culture in which they were participants. Instead, it was never acknowledged that assimilation allowed for the cultural privilege of some. Influential Bay State Educator in the 1840s-50s, Horace Mann wrote “The great ideal,” of the common school system, is “that those points…upon which…men differ shall not be obtruded into this mutual ground of the schools” (qtd. in Katz 46). No matter how ardently schools promoted an exclusionary view of culture, it was assumed, as Mann wrote, that schools were neutral grounds. Educators of today, and particularly teachers of the humanities must be forewarned by this assumed position of neutrality. As an example, prior to my study of the debates over the political and psychological consequences of code switching, I had not questioned the vocabulary of ‘correct’ and ‘incorrect’ in which I had described student’s adherence or deviance from standard grammar. I had not perceived the Anglo-American cultural bias revealed in my language. Similarly, Katz critiques that though educators have often recognized that “the social implication of schooling was a political issue shaped by ideas about the behavior and role of citizens...educators [have]
remained mostly silent about one political consequence of the organization of schooling: its contribution to the legitimation of inequality” (115).

Arnold’s intention was not to limit students from becoming critical thinkers. His intentions were to use the study of culture to refresh society’s insights. Arnold believed that the study of the humanities brought a student to get “a fresh and free play of the best thoughts upon his stock notions” (*Culture and Anarchy* ix). He stated that education’s “prime direct aim is to enable a man to know himself and the world” (emphasis original *Higher* 155). “He who examines himself,” he writes, “will know the difference it makes to him” (*Culture and Anarchy* ix). But from this point, rather than encourage all students to examine their own cultural experiences and become critically aware of their positions in the world, he encourages them to study the culture of others. He writes, “Whoever seeks help for knowing himself from knowing the capabilities and performances of the human spirit will nowhere find a more fruitful object of study than of the achievements of Greece in literature and the arts” (*Higher* 155). His direction slips from encouraging students to study themselves to encouraging students to study past traditions and fails to see the difference these two directions imply to learners about their relationships with the world. When students are encouraged to study the world in relationship to their experiences, the world is presented as flexible and responsive to humans’ changing needs. But when they are made to study a fixed body of knowledge, they are discouraged from seeing culture as something they could potentially contribute to, and therefore they are encouraged to conform to what already exists. These distinct perspectives establish an especially keen difference when teaching students whose home cultures are distinct from the mainstream, as it implies they must change their cultural identities in order to achieve social success.
Americans shared Arnold’s concern that not all cultures were equal and embraced his solution to use a study of culture to encourage lower class students to assimilate into upper class culture. The same diagnosis of a problem of cultural inferiority can be seen by an American commentator writing for The Unitarian Review in 1876, who writes, “A very large proportion of the pupils in our cities and populous towns come from homes utterly destitute of culture” (Peabody qtd. in Katz 48). The devaluation of cultural diversity is particularly offensive in the language used by the Boston School Committee in 1845 to describe its task as “taking children at random from a great city, undisciplined, uninstructed...and with the inherited stupidity of centuries of ignorant ancestors; [and] forming them from animals into intellectual beings” (qtd. in Katz 48). But I think minus the blatant language of offense, a similar attitude that sees children’s cultures as the problem often pervades educational circles today, especially when the young people being educated have grown up affected by the close proximity of poverty and crime. I am not denying that limited resources result in some home experiences that are harmful to children, but it easy to see a child’s difficulty with assimilating as the fault rather than investigate how the fault might lie in the original demand that they assimilate. In desiring to confront crime and poverty by discouraging cultural diversity, promoters of early American education arrived at the post hoc conclusion that because crime and poverty rose alongside ethnic diversity, it must have been caused by it. From this belief arose the prescription for cultural assimilation. But since, as Katz writes, “little connection [has] ever existed between the extent of public schooling and the amount of distress and disorder in social life” (115), crime and poverty neither went away nor were likely even lessened by the promotion of cultural assimilation (115).
Looking back, we can see the complicated situation out of which increased poverty and crime arose. Urbanization, industrialization, the loss of wage earning traditions, and the monopolization of corporations are just a few of the threads in the knot. In today’s curriculums, rather than use the humanities to draw people into a common national culture, we can use the humanities to create opportunities for cultural criticism, and we can train students to identify the roots of the problems they experience. But rather than do this, I think it is too often the case that we uncritically perpetuate the same curriculum without really knowing why. Very recently, I asked a teacher in my department why we continue to read many of the same books the U.S. has read over the last century. I was met with the answer that it would be a disgrace if our urban, multi-cultured youth were ignorant of the knowledge most other middle class, academically successful students would know. After all, wouldn’t they be competing with these youth for positions in college and later in the workforce? This fear of limiting students’ ability to compete, keeps the terms of success defined by a very limited cultural group. Students outside of the dominant culture are kept running to keep up, much as Arnold’s recommendation for how to improve the social standing of middle class youth did years ago.

Cultural and Class Bias in the Early American Common School Literary Curriculum

Teachers who develop conversations about literature that is intended to have the effect of promoting students’ adoption of ‘improved’ moral systems are working within a long standing tradition. It easily follows that addressing the human propensity for evil would become a central aspect of a child’s education, especially as it was intended to affect the increased social problems of crime and poverty. In his report to the superintendent of schools in Connecticut in 1851,
Henry Barnard exemplifies the priority of using education to improve students’ moral positions. He wrote that the purpose of the public school curriculum was “not so much...intellectual culture, as the regulation of the feelings and dispositions, the extirpation of vicious propensities, the preoccupation of the wilderness of the young heart with the seeds and germs of moral beauty, and the formation of a lovely and virtuous character by the habitual practice of cleanliness, delicacy, refinement, good temper, gentleness, kindness, justice and truth” (qtd. in Katz 44). Similarly, when the Boston School Committee described its task of education as “giving to many their first appreciation of what is wise, what is true, what is lovely, and what is pure” (48) it pointed to the Biblical tradition used as its base in the allusion to Paul’s letter to the Philippians where he charges them to think upon “whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely” (Phil 4:8 NIV). Literature teachers that intend to shape a student’s morality toward a particular end are continuing in the tradition of education as moral reform.

Like assimilation, education as moral reformation has furthered the purpose of helping students assume places within the system of American capitalism. In her essay “Early Histories of American Literature; a Chapter in the Institution of New England” (1989) contemporary U.S. literary critic and literary historian Nina Baym traces some of the interests other than students’ interests that are represented in the choice of the early American literary canon. She is particularly critical of the intensions to use the literary curriculum in common schools to acclimate the nation’s poorest students into a social structure that benefited them least. (Before the term “public school” came simply to mean federally funded education available to everyone, the term “common schools” was used in direct contrast to those “private schools” “in the richer communities” (“American Classics” 44).) Baym points to an address made in 1888 to the NEA by Houghton Mifflin’s newly formed leader of the Department of Education, Horace Elisha
Scudder (1838-1902), to reveal the connection between the common school’s literary curriculum and the desire to quell social dissatisfaction in the nation’s immigrant and working class communities.

Scudder was asked by the NEA to make an address on “The Place of Literature in the Common School Curriculum.” He responded that, “It is not without significance that you chose for your leading theme last year Industrial Education, and that this year you have taken up the Place of Literature. The two subjects indicate the two lines along which educational thought is moving, and they correspond to the two dominant fields of national endeavor” (“Place” 8). Scudder posited that this two pronged priority for the education particularly of the poor comes from a single demand of how to respond to their “cry of Labor in Poverty” (10). On the one hand, an industrial education trained the poor for work, and on the other hand they were taught American literature which “attuned their ears to the finer things, the satisfaction of their spiritual needs over their material” (10). Through the common school curriculum, the poor were prepared both to fill an economic need in the newly industrialized U.S. and to devalue a desire for material wealth.

Baym notes that the choice of the common school curriculum can be understood as a response to increased immigration, writing that “intellectual leaders saw almost at once that the public, or common, schools could be important to [the] nation-building process.” She reports that common schools proliferated directly in relationship to the arrival of non-English speaking immigrants; “By no accident, both Connecticut and Massachusetts established boards of education in 1837, in the decade when a substantial Irish population settled in the Northeast and, more specifically, in the panic year of disproportionate suffering among the working poor” (83). In the last two decades of the nineteenth century, common schools abounded in response to the
waves of immigration and industrialization. She interprets that national leaders called for more schooling to calm the chaotic sea of American difference back into a predictable Puritan character (83).

Per Matthew Arnold’s model, literary study was central to this end. In a footnote published when the address was printed, Scudder credits Arnold with inspiring the importance of the humanities in directing the culture of the nation saying, though “I have been speaking of course of a condition of American life, with special reference to New England...the same theme is presented by the late Matthew Arnold in reference to English life” (“Place” 17). Scudder’s belief of literature’s importance in the common school curriculum is aligned with Arnold’s position of the role of culture in the education of the middle class, which did not include the emphasis on cultural production that it did when he posited his ideal educational situation to the Oxford students. To upper class students, Arnold posed his educational ideal that the study of culture be connected to an examination of oneself. To these students he stated that the study of culture should result in “a fresh play of the best thoughts upon [one’s] stock notions and habits” (Culture and Anarchy ix) thereby infusing society with new ideas. Scudder’s testament to the use of literature in the American common schools reveals no such interest in helping a student contribute to the redirection of society. Instead, Scudder connected the study of literature to the maintenance of “true democratic order,” using ‘democratic’ ironically to mean the maintenance of existing social structures. (“Place” 11).

Scudder posited that common school students’ study of American literature was beneficial to shaping their identities rather than to their shaping the nation’s. He claims, “The common-school system is the one vast organization of the country...swayed by one general plan...offer[ing] the most admirable means for the cultivation and strengthening of the sentiment
of patriotism [and toward this end]...the most important aid of all is to be found in a steady, unremitting attention to American classics”(49-50). Baym posits that because leaders believed “the nation was an artifice undergirded by no single national character type,” American literature could be used to construct a history to tie these peoples together. America’s leaders believed that “the nation’s future peace, progress, and prosperity required a commonality that, if it did not exist had to be invented” (82). She stresses that the American story leaders constructed was not a false one, but one of several possibilities, and it is important to understand the motives behind its existence (82) such as “forming character and ensuring patriotism in a motley, fractious population” (81).

As an example of the choice educators made to align curriculum with national aims, Baym reports how following the Civil War belle lettres replaced history as the curricular site of fostering social ideology due to the negative light war cast on the peaceful national character educators wished to promote in common schools (83). The evidence of this choice is in the textbooks, which reveal a clearly different treatment of literary studies in antebellum America. Prior to the war, only brief excerpts of fiction and idealized biographies of literary characters were published for students, reflecting a curricular decision propounded by Horace Mann and other educators who distrusted imaginative literature and believed the Bible was sufficient for all reading needs (85). This is in stark contrast to the argument Scudder made in 1888 for the centrality of literature in the common-school curriculum.

Arnold’s position that a humanities curriculum puts a student in relationship to “the best that been thought and said in the world” endures as the most popular defense of why some works are ubiquitously read, but Baym shows this as highly suspect. In the textbooks common school students read, stories were included whose themes modeled the character these students were
being prodded to take on rather than on an author’s style or ability. The exclusion of Edgar Allen Poe’s work due to the work’s lack of overt moral themes exemplifies this pattern. She posits that textbooks included idealized historical and literary biographies, depicting a kind of unobtainable saintliness, as a way of fostering deference. She writes, “In the racialism characterizing the last decades of the nineteenth century [textbooks] tended to attach these [idealized] traits to “real” Anglo-Saxons, in part by playing up the strictly English origins of the American nation. Thereby the readings instructed classrooms of children with non-English ancestry “in the virtue of deference to Anglo-Saxon traits more than in the acquisition of Anglo-Saxons traits themselves” (85). This example reveals very well the lack of commitment to maintaining reciprocity between the common’s school children’s best interests and the nation’s.

Not unlike something you might hear today, Scudder passionately argued to the NEA that a movement away from America’s “divine origin” would be the end of American freedom. He forewarned that “an anarchic force” threatened the nation, and he claimed that if the U.S. “turns its back on its own history, refuses to believe in its divine origin, its divine order, its divine end...and worships worldly success then [we will lay ourselves] open to a more sure loss of liberty than could possibly result from exposure to outside attack (“Place” 11). (This language was prescient of the future language in Reagan’s A Nation at Risk, which famously equated the supposed poor quality of education with “a unilateral educational disarmament”) (9). Scudder reasons that a “loss of liberty” and an “anarchic force” would follow a “worship of worldly success.” But in the context of why literature should be taught to working class and poor students, whose struggles were to resist poverty not to resist corporate greed, his hopes to quell social rebellion can be understood as a desire to keep the poor from questioning their unsatisfactory material conditions. Essentially Scudder argued that teaching the poor to accept
spiritual wealth as more important than material wealth would keep them from challenging the ‘liberty’ of those within the group who were content in the existing social structure. The end of ‘American freedom’ he speaks of is the end of the peaceful acceptance of a social hierarchy built on vast income disparity. In Scudder’s view “the protest of spiritual man” is pitted against “the tyranny of materialism” (“Place” 11), and from this he proffered that social rebellion could be avoided if common schools were used as a pulpit to decry materialism. Toward this end, he believed that “literature in its purest, noblest form” would lead the student to a consideration of the “superiority of the spiritual to the material” (13), to the belief that the “highest life is not in bread alone, and to diagnose a reversed priority, not just as dangerous to those who benefit from the existing social structure, but as “devil possessed” (10). Mandatory and systematic study of the ‘American classics’ was used to keep the poor from challenging the unjust social structure of an increasingly industrialized society, which had a vast need for a large, socially peaceable working class.

Though I do not believe there is a necessary relationship between democracy and a common national culture, as Arnold held when he directed Oxford students to participate in a common study of culture, the argument at least poses the tension between commonness and freedom in terms of what is best for the student. Baym exposes the financial interests of the lucrative textbook publishing industry in the process of the canonization of American literature. She reveals that Houghton Mifflin held the copyright to all the New England authors that Scudder, head of their Department of Education, recommends as simply “Americans of Americans,” (“Place” 25) including Bryant, Emerson, Longfellow, Whittier, Holmes, and Lowell (“Place” 25) Hawthorne, Irving and Cooper (26). I do not doubt he considered these authors as highly as he recommended them, but the financial gains he would personally make in their larger
distribution severely discounts any claim he may have had to a neutral recommendation. The “imperishable value” (“Place” 25) he claims of these authors’ work cannot then be separated from their tangible value to him, a point made all the more ironic in the context of his strident cries against the dangers of materialism, as for instance when he writes “we measure the force of spiritual influences by their capacity to give wings to the soul, to set it free from meaner, baser appetites, and to give the unseen supremacy over the seen” (“Place” 13). Perhaps these dangers were closer than even he wished to acknowledge.

Conflicting interests are rarely entirely one sided, and the progenitors of the early literary curriculum like Scudder were most likely genuinely convinced that the interests of the state and the interests of the student were mutual. Those supporters of using compulsory public education to foster the ‘American qualities’ such as “self-reliance, self-control, and acceptance of hierarchy” (Baym 82) believed such character qualities would resist the chaos and violence of social revolution that would threaten the well being of all involved. But education that is really vested in mutuality between student and nation must consider more than encouraging a peaceful acceptance of the status quo that results from drawing students into a common national identity. Baym concludes her essay with the instruction that if educators want to use literature to define ‘American’ identity and improve American citizenry then they must accept the nationalistic aim that puts the student’s interest second to serve the interests of the state (99). Instead, education that is mutually interested must simultaneously prepare students to enter into the existing social order, in both its cultural and its economic expressions, while simultaneously training them to critique whose interests those cultural and economic systems serve.

The Persistence of Class, Cultural, and Racial Bias in U.S. Education Today

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Though the use of literature to affect the moral sensibility of students in early American education was not intended only for the poor, “the class bias of [this] education...was as pervasive as its tepid Protestant tone” (Katz 46). In the educational textbooks, readings, and lessons of the time, such as in the pamphlet “The Necessity of Restraint,” “it was apparent that the traits of character necessary to fit the working class for upright urban living represented an idealized self-portrait of a Victorian middle class” (Katz 47). Similarly today, though public education is neither only for the poor nor intended to stand in as a pulpit for morality, it continues to perpetuate both class and cultural bias. If public education did not privilege students based on their racial, cultural, and socio-economic backgrounds, then we could expect that public access to education, at least eventually, if not immediately, would have resulted in a society where academic achievement and financial wealth were distributed throughout. This is the logical conclusion of a meritocracy. But it is all too evident that this is not the case. Education and income inequality are pervasive and predictable along racial, cultural, and socio-economic lines as reported by Julia Isaacs, Isabel Sawhill, Ron Haskins in the report “Getting Ahead or Losing Ground: Economic Mobility in America” (2006).

If the financial standing of one’s family is a greater indicator of future economic success than individual work ethic, not only is the American dream discredited that claims social equality is reachable for everyone who applies themselves academically, but also something undemocratic is fundamentally revealed in our educational system. Perpetual inequality indicates that none of our students are receiving the kind of empowering education that is helping them interrupt social determinism. Education in America, in both K-12 and post-secondary institutions, is generally accepted to be the place where our society democratizes
opportunity. For those educators, administrators, and others who hold fast to this vision of education’s purpose, we must be willing to examine where cultural and class bias persist in our educational system. Since the legal rejection of the philosophy of separate but equal following the Civil Rights movement, the nation has touted integration as evidence that the language of oppression and domination in describing education has become outmoded, without either acknowledging that class bias was ever even an issue or that racial bias goes much deeper than requiring that all races be educated together. But a half a century later, educational integration has still not produced the panacea of equal economic opportunity, and the philosophy of assimilation underlying educational integration is increasingly revealed to be an easy answer provided by the cultural dominant to resist radical social re-evaluation.

Methods for Using Discussions of Literature to Move Away from the Goal of Assimilation

In light of my resistance to the way literature has been used in the past to promote the interests of society’s power holders, my desires to use literature to promote the interests of my students inspires in me several new approaches. The first is to actually investigate the context of a literary work’s introduction into the high school curriculum. For instance, it is important to me to know that Houghton Mifflin owned the rights of the American authors who Scudder believed wrote those exemplar “American classics” (50) and who he called “Americans of Americans” (25), including Emerson, Longfellow, Hawthorne, Irving, Cooper, et al. This fact helps me debunk an essentialist myth of their works’ inherent value. If I read these authors with students, I want to discuss with them why in a national address they would have been called “the consummate flower of American life” (26). If these authors were assumed to be the flowers,
what was implied to be the plant? This perspective of examining why a work was introduced into the curriculum also provides a way to significantly shift the discussion of morality. Rather than talk about a work’s ethical system in terms of exemplifying a system students should or shouldn’t adopt, the conversation can shift to discussing who might differently benefit from its adoption. So for example, rather than talk about Othello’s jealousy and its violent consequences as behavior students should avoid, my class can discuss who might benefit by including in the curriculum a picture of the negative consequences of jealousy. One conclusion we might arrive at is that in a capitalist society where income is distributed unequally, this theme could be hoped to warn young people entering that market not to be jealous of those who have already accrued wealth within it. Therefore this reveals a possible motive for Othello’s canonical inclusion rather than relying on the idea that it is simply acontextually one of the finest works that exists.

This renewed application of contextualization inspires in me another consideration. Perhaps the conversations that focuses on the faults of characters rather than the faults of society reflects an uncritical examination of individual morality in the context of larger social forces. For instance if a teacher is leading a discussion about morality that she believes is important for students to adopt, it simply becomes convenient to talk about a character’s struggles in terms of personal failures. Instead a conversation that contextualizes morality in terms of which social groups or forces might benefit from it lends itself to contextualizing a character’s ethics in terms of the social forces acting on him or her. For example, when talking about Othello with students the easiest conversation to have is about Othello’s jealousy, especially if teachers are motivated by warning students not to be jealous. But the more complicated conversation examines the roots of Othello’s jealousy in the xenophobic society, which is represented in Iago’s hatred of Othello’s success. In another example from Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet is often taught to
adolescents as a portrayal of the violent consequences of over passionate youth, rather than from the angles of other non-personal themes including the consequences of unchecked factionalism or the examination of the relationships between words and actions. This approach is frequently not so much the fault of the book as it is a fault of the limited questions asked of it. If moral failure is examined as the expression of social faults, classroom discussions would shift from aiding students in identifying, say, the inherent dangers in human nature, a classic Protestant theme, to aiding students in examining the complex consequences of human action inside rigid social structures.

Both of the above suggestions result in shifting from placing the student in the position of self-examination to encouraging students to examine society (considering ‘society’ not just as other people but in terms of larger social constructs that provide the context of individual human behavior). In other words, do we speak about the human action in Othello in terms of exemplifying moral systems that we should or shouldn’t model, or do we speak about the individual actions in Othello as the results of social structures those characters exist within that lead individuals down roads of narrow choice. This shift will have the consequential benefits of complicating simple conversations about ‘good’ and ‘evil’ characters, so that instead conversations become about how a story ‘explains’ the individual actions within it. Within the context of why characters act the way they do, the larger paradigms of authors will be exposed. For instance a puritan author is likely to create a story where the belief in a human’s innate tendency for evil motivates a character’s moral failure. This motivation will do poorly to explain why the African-American character Bigger Thomas murders the white girl Mary Dalton in Richard Wright’s Native Son, a scathing social commentary on mid-twentieth century U.S. racial relations.
What holds together the methods suggested above is an interest in questioning whether the discussion of literature is motivated by the philosophy of assimilation. Are we using the portrayals of human life in the stories we read to move students to adopt a certain set of beliefs? Whether these beliefs be a love for cultural unanimity or a love for cultural diversity, if as teachers we are using literature to recommend students adopt a particular moral identity, than we are still operating on the basis of an assimilative model. A philosophy of assimilation measures students’ success by their adoption of particular identities that they are expected to accept. Therefore, assimilation will always privilege the success of students who come into the classroom with the ‘right’ identity already in tact. In contrast to this, if our goal is not assimilation into society as it already exists but critical evaluation of human behavior within particular social and political constructs, then all students – no matter their entrance – are given the opportunity to be successful based on the work they exert in their critical thinking. Those students who have suffered due to society’s unequal distributions of wealth may actually have an advantage where social criticism is required. Whether this is or isn’t the case, a literature teacher’s class will foster a high level of critical thinking and become a lively place of debate where all students’ experiences and analyses are welcome.
CHAPTER THREE:
THE EDUCATION REFORM OF ECONOMIC ASSIMILATION
IN THE STANDARDS, ACCOUNTABILITY, AND SCHOOL-TO-WORK MOVEMENTS

What I hoped this previous section accomplished was twofold. First it was intended to suggest the concept that the structure and content of education always expresses the political visions of educational leaders. National systems of education train students to play particular roles in society. Thus the kind of power transferred to students empowers them in a limited kind of way, as it prepares them for specified roles. Second, it was intended to exemplify this concept in early American education, which demonstrated the following key characteristics: 1) It revealed its particularly Protestant roots, which would lay the foundation for a curriculum that continued to privilege European heritage children. 2) It revealed its creators’ consciousness of society’s class stratifications and offered a curriculum that prepared students to accept these stratifications rather than challenge them. 3) It transferred power to students based on their assimilation into the dominant culture and class structure that existed. In this next section, I want to identify how and where an educational model of assimilation is still operative in a way that is at odds with the profession of public education’s democratic purpose and that continues to hurt worst those children whose families are furthest outside of the culture they are being asked to assimilate into.

An Odd Alliance of Conservative Forces in Favor of Education Reform

Many people have expressed the same sentiment of Fred Pincus who states that we live in a time of incredible “conservative restoration” (qtd. in Berliner 132) where a philosophy of assimilation underlies the great majority of K-12 education reform today. In this conservative
era, policy makers coming from all ends of the political spectrum have agreed that commonness in education is in the best interest of the nation. After over thirty years of efforts to create national standards for education, this past January 2013 all but five states have formally adopted the Common Core Standards (Common Core State Standards Initiative; “In the States”). The standards represent astonishing continuity of belief in the necessity of assimilation and no small bit of irony in the context of the U.S.’s much touted tolerance of difference. However, the commonness that is called for today looks very different than that of the late nineteenth century.

If you listen to rationales for today’s Common Core Standards you will often hear people speak about the need to provide students with a “twenty-first century skill” set that will prepare them to enter the workforce. In these rationales, studies are rarely believed to be essential if they can’t be clearly linked to improving an individual’s productivity in the world of work. This is represented by Coleman remarks on why personal writing should be diminished in the high school curriculum. The priority of giving students experiences in education that mirror future workforce experiences can also be seen in the Common Core Standards’ larger project to replace much of the fiction students are reading in K-12 with non-fiction, which Coleman calls “informational text.” In the same address to the New York Department of Education where he addressed the ‘problem,’ of personal writing, he defended this project, claiming “informational text...[is] the text through which students learn about the world” (8). Coleman makes the assumption that to learn about the world is only to learn about its facts, rather than to learn about the subjective experiences and values that are at the heart of nonfiction.

This is in stark contrast to Scudder’s religiously saturated language in defense of literature’s purpose. In light of the culturally assimilative goal of literature in the nineteenth century common school curriculum, it is almost uncanny to read today’s Common Core
Standards for reading that don’t even acknowledge that stories have the potential to inform a reader’s identity or beliefs. Other than a brief mention of being able to identify the ‘moral’ of stories in elementary school, there are no efforts to encourage the discussion of morality and no promotion of a singular moral sensibility. So it seems educational leaders’ interests have shifted in the purpose of literature’s inclusion and in their overall interest in promoting cultural assimilation. But to thus assume that assimilation has been abandoned as an underlying philosophy in public education is an acontextual conclusion. Instead, this shift represents a move away from cultural assimilation and toward a promotion of economic assimilation in which a particular character type is no longer seen as necessary.

Coleman’s argument is that standards must be rooted in promoting educational experiences that are useful to students’ future professional experiences, but it is deeper than that, since many professional experiences actually require a lot more creativity than he is asking students to be prepared for. Both regurgitating information and writing market analyses are activities that do not encourage a student to participate in her learning as an individual trying to make sense of her world in a unique way. They are activities that point toward an interest in the student as automaton, as one prepared to accept the world as it is, not one who is prepared to critique, challenge, and redirect it. Under-emphasizing personal, value-laden, critical thinking and over-emphasizing workforce preparation is the result of a conservative agenda in education reform that for the last thirty years has put the interests of the economy over the interests of the individual.

The conservative restoration has been the result of an alliance of different groups who all saw increased federal control over curriculum as an important aspect of their theories of improving U.S. economic competitiveness following the economic downturns of the 1970s.
Many authors have noted the odd alliance of reactionary forces that emerged in the 1980s and have characterized the groups into several key factions (Berliner and Biddle 132-138, Apple 5-14, and Shea 4). Though individuals can belong to multiple groups, thus making it an oversimplification to divide them into categories, it is still helpful to separately consider the impact of conservative thought in terms of the interests of neoconservatives, of neoliberals, and of the business community. Though they all promoted a common curriculum that was tied to students’ economic assimilation, their differences lead them to invest differently in the reform movements to come. The interests of the neoconservatives can be seen most clearly in the standards movement, the interests of the neoliberals can be seen in the accountability movement, and the interests of the business community can be seen in the school-to-work movement. To different degrees, the limitations of these three movements have been tied to their proponents’ over-emphasis of conformity into existing social structures. Before examining each of these movements, it is helpful to briefly characterize the interests of each of these groups.

Neoconservatives believed the country needed to return to Christian values, to the western tradition, and ‘back to basics’ in education (Apple 14). Christine Shea writes that, “Unlike traditional classical/libertarian Republican party solutions, this New Right coalition called for a much more centrally controlled, activist federal government to provide the framework for renewed national supremacy” (16). A return to a unified set of cultural values was seen as getting future generations on board with the government’s central control. This group also saw military supremacy as essential to maintaining global dominance (Shea 34), and preparation for military life is furthered by the promotion of commonness on many levels. Cultural assimilation in education could further military supremacy by promoting attitudes of compliance and deference to authority and by teaching American history as one of the inseparable connection
between American power and American military action. The key educational focus of this group became maximizing state interest by enforcing the teaching of “correct knowledge, norms and value” (Apple 6).

In an odd alliance with the neoconservatives who desired to maximize state control, the neoliberals desired to minimize state interests within a ‘laissez faire’ market. This group held that education, like all other forces in the market, should operate based on its ability to achieve desired results. They pushed for privatization of education and school choice through a system of vouchers (Friedman 89). This group believed that too much funding had been given to disadvantaged students (Berliner 134) and that instead the state should fund those students with the most talent in order to open new capitalist markets (Friedman 96). Michael Apple notes that in the neoliberal framework “the major role of a national curriculum is in providing the framework within which national testing can function” (32). He continues, positing that national testing provides “consumers’ ‘quality tags’ on schools so that ‘free market forces’ can operate to the fullest extent possible” (32).

Joining the neoconservatives and neoliberals in their belief that education must change were leaders in the business world. Michael Timpane argues that during the 1960s and 1970s business leaders had become less involved in education because there had been a flood of workers into the labor market due to the post WWII baby boom and because of women entering the work force. This had allowed businesses to be critical during hiring and to reject workers that lacked desired skills (Martin 43). But business in the early 1980s believed this was soon to come to an end as it was predicted that there would be 20 percent fewer high school grads in 1990 than in 1980 and fewer women entering the workforce (Timpane 389-390). Simultaneously there was a shift in production so that labor-intensive, low-skill jobs were being
increasingly outsourced to developing countries (Shea 5). This global shift in production was perceived as the “deindustrialization” of the U.S. (Berliner 141 and Shea 4). It became widely believed that for the U.S. to remain competitive in the global market, it would have to train a new highly-skilled, more productive workforce that would drive the creative and critical engines of an emerging technologically based economy (Berliner 141). These predictions created a labor supply demand that only a national education system could help prepare to meet (Martin 43). Business leaders became more involved in policy in order to influence public school curriculums so that they could ensure that the future labor force was being prepared for the emerging technological market as they thought they should be (Timpane 389).

These three groups created a powerful hegemony over educational reform and allowed for little else to be discussed that wasn’t either in the interest of “increasing international competitiveness, profit and discipline [or] returning us to a romanticized past of the ‘ideal’ home, family and school” (Apple 28). These conversations were in complete contrast to the powerful conversations about equity in education that had taken precedence in the 1960s.

_Resistance to ‘Equity’ and the Scapegoating of Education_

Education leaders in the 1960s, mirroring many other facets of social movement, were taken up with issues of equality, not just racial equality but also equality of each individual student’s needs with society’s needs. This resulted in increased weight given to the student-centered theories of progressive educational reform (Katz 126). This is exemplified in the wide acceptance of the whole-language approach in language arts even at the state level (Apple 56), which theorized that reading skills would grow in relationship to a student’s interest in and
relationship to the material studied. There was also increased investment in problem-based-learning, which similarly was based on looking to the student’s interests not just to society’s to create situations where learning ‘naturally’ occurred as it was moved along by the curiosity of the learner (Neville 1). Bilingualism also became popular as a move to provide greater educational equity to diverse students and resulted in showing greater respect for students’ home-cultures (Hasci 63). These changes occurred while the effects of Brown v. Board were slowly making their way through school districts and most closely bore the face of the drive for equity in education. Many of these changes were spurred from the widely held belief that the interests of ‘the establishment’ could not be trusted to be in the interests of ‘the people.’ This belief prompted a critical attitude that encouraged Americans to check power’s use and fostered an era of limited federal control over educational policy.

But toward the beginning of the seventies, the movements that inspired these changes came to a grinding halt. The American economy had begun to stagnate. Inflation and unemployment rose. Political leaders, economists, business leaders, and others that represented the interests of the three factions listed above all saw education reform as central to addressing the needs of the economy. But in order to get the nation on board with educational reform, many people had to agree with the assumption that market changes required changes in education. But how could they make this claim? Graduates of the current structure hadn’t yet entered the emerging technological market and had been found wanting. K-12 education had never been strictly aligned with preparing students for specific jobs. College, technical training programs, and business-sponsored education were available to provide technical mastery in specified fields. What would motivate people to accept the belief that language arts, history, math and science, just a few of the disciplines in which today’s Common Core Standards dictate curricular
directions, must be changed in concord with changes in the market?

The U.S. public had to be convinced that education was failing them, and this is just what many set out to do. With hindsight on their side, David Berliner and Bruce Biddle tell this story in their work *The Manufactured Crisis: Myths, Fraud, and the Attack on America’s Public Schools* (1995). “The Manufactured Crisis was not an accidental event,” they write, “Rather, it appeared within a specific historical context and was lead by identifiable critics whose political goals could be furthered by scapegoating educators...as a way of diverting attention from America’s deepening social problems” (4,7). In *Culture, Politics, and Education* (1996) Michael Apple draws the same conclusion. He states that one of the major achievements of the political Right has been to “shift the blame for unemployment and underemployment for the loss of economic competitiveness, and for the supposed breakdown of “traditional” values and standards in the family, education, and paid and unpaid workplaces, from the economic, cultural, and social policies and effects of dominant groups to the school and other public agencies” (28). The number of incendiary reports criticizing public schooling and often forthrightly blaming it for the social problems in the U.S. reached record numbers in the 1970s and 1980s (Martin 39).

Berliner and Bruce proffer that Americans were willing to accept the blame placed on schools because of “beliefs in the myths of individual efficacy and unbounded instructional responsibility” (158). The myth of individual efficacy suggests that people’s abilities and inabilities are largely due to choices they have made that stem from how hard they work and their personal talent or lack there of. It fosters an extreme sense of individualism, which is so often characteristic of American identity. Compared to other countries, Americans have long placed both exorbitant credit and blame on individuals for their successes and failures (Berliner 155). Out of an assumption that this is true, many have accepted the idea that anyone who is
extended a public education can thus ‘pull themselves up by their boot straps’ and make a way for themselves into American wealth. Much American literature tells this story of rags to riches, such as the works of nineteenth century author Horatio Alger, Jr. Thus, when people suffer economically it is ubiquitously seen as either the fault of individuals or the fault of the schools they attended.

The second myth of “unbounded instructional responsibility” suggests that public education can take care of many more problems than it realistically can. This stems back to the over reaching motivations for the creation of a national public school system which Michael Katz reported in *Reconstructing American Education* (1987), which included alleviating crime, poverty, and the “threats” caused by diversity, workforce preparation, keeping young people out of trouble, and providing them with paths to prosperity (16). Although not perfectly, Katz argues public schooling has responded to the latter problems related to making pathways to jobs, but it has never affected the former social problems (115). Despite this, it is still widely held that U.S. public schooling is responsible for a plethora of social ails of which it has no immediate connection. Despite the fact that poverty causes social problems - and not the other way around - there have been many serious campaigns to convince the American public that education is at fault for endemic social problems, as was the case in the 1980s (Berliner 9). Berliner and Biddle claim the federal and independently commissioned reports of the 1970s were based on faulty proof, such as when *A Nation at Risk* claimed “The College Board's Scholastic Aptitude Tests (SAT) demonstrate a virtually unbroken decline from 1963 to 1980” (11). In *Manufactured Crisis* Berliner and Biddle claim that “standardized tests provide no evidence whatever that supports the myths of a recent decline in the school achievement of the average American student” (34). In a lengthy analysis, they debunk the claims made about the declining SAT
scores. To do this they draw attention to the impact of the increased number of students representing lower income families and minorities who started taking the test in the 1960s due to increased number of children from these families who hoped to pursue a college education. Children from these families tended to receive lower scores on the test, which pulled down the nation’s aggregate achievement. In offering one explanation for why these students’ scores have impacted the aggregate test scores negatively they write, “the SAT was standardized to predict the college grades of students interested in entering college in 1941—at a time when these students were predominantly from white, Anglo-Saxon, middle—or upper-middle-class, Protestant homes where English was spoken. We should not be surprised, therefore, to learn that minority and immigrant students tend to have lower scores than the group that first took the SAT fifty years ago” (19). After this analysis, they continue analyzing and pointing to the failures of each of the claims of evidence made in *A Nation at Risk*.

*Changing Demographics and the Groundwork Laid by the “Human Capital” Theory for the Conservative Movements to Come*

The increased number of minorities taking the SAT during the era of de-industrialization was at least partly due to there having been a steady increase in population growth of non-white families, a fact oft repeated by many school reformers (Shea 8). It became clear that “any future longevity of the United States in the new global marketplace depended on the ability of American public policy to resolve the dilemmas posed by a mismatch between the personnel demands of an emerging high tech, high skill economy and an increasingly ill-prepared personnel supply from largely poor, minority, single-family headed households” (12). She continues that out of this situation the theory of “human capital” emerged. The theory of
“human capital” suggested that there is a high rate of return on investment in training personnel, and therefore the U.S. could create the most economic long-term gains by investing in a workforce to meet the future’s twenty-first century demands. The nation’s lowest academic performers including poor white children and the growing numbers of minorities represented the most under developed resources and were therefore seen as the raw capital that would produce the greatest national gains and on which the nation’s future economic growth most depended.

One of the earliest proponents of the theory of “human capital” was the now well known neoliberal Milton Friedman in his work Capitalism and Freedom (1962). In the chapter “The Role of Government in Education” Friedman theorizes that the investment in “human capital” has far more returns than the investment in physical assets, claiming that “there is considerable empirical evidence that the rate of return on investment in training is very much higher than the rate of return on investment in physical capital” (102). But Friedman posits that there is an underinvestment of wealth into human capital because investors have so little control over their investments. He remarks that people can be trained for one task, but unlike property, they can choose to redirect that investment toward a vision of their own choosing and the investment is lost, so that “such an investment necessarily involves much risk” (102). Through Friedman the theory of human capital became widely distributed. It was reprinted in his work Free to Choose which sold nearly half a million copies in hard cover, was translated into twelve languages, became the basis for a popular TV show of the same title, and was issued as a mass-market paperback (Preface, 1982 of Capitalism and Freedom vii).

Considering the nation’s changing demographic alongside its deindustrialization and the need for a new and highly trained workforce, political leaders influenced by human capital theory believed that the risks of this investment could be limited if the nation returned to a public
curriculum that called for cultural assimilation. Increased assimilation of poor and minority children into mainstream culture would help fix the results of the public’s investment in education by encouraging these young people to be loyal to the capitalist economic structure. A return to cultural assimilation required a quick end to the movement toward freedom and equity in education that had begun in the 1960s. In her essay “Pentagon vs. Multinational Capitalism: The Political Economy of the 1980s School Reform Movement” (1989) Christine Shea posits that “Contemporary Reaganite conservatives have become convinced...that a new unified cultural system must be developed and a coherent, rationalized worldview promoted if a compliant, adaptable, submissive, mobile citizenry and work force is to be maintained” (19). America’s educational institutions must once again become important vehicles for the “transmission of socially desirable cultural norms and personality traits” (19). Toward this end, the neoconservatives’ agenda of “character development” became useful and was considered the missing equation in human capital theory” (Shea 19).

*Neoconservatives Lead Schools in a Return to a Promotion of “Virtue”*

A step in “export[ing] the crisis of the economy onto schools” (Apple 72) was to “reduce social problems and crisis to the level of the personal and psychological” (Shea 34). By reducing the economic crises to “personality defects” and “individual skill deficiencies” (Shea 34) the site of change is made to be the individual rather than the culture of capitalism the individual is expected to enter. Shea quotes James Q. Wilson, professor of government at Harvard, in his essay “The Rediscovery of Character: Private Virtue and Public Policy” (1985), writing that “many public problems can be addressed only ‘if they are seen as arising out of a defect in
character formation” (Wilson qtd. in Shea 19-20). To lead the nation in its renewed focus on personality and character development, Reagan’s administration brought in “a set of influential Neoconservatives—William Bennett, Chester Finn, Lamar Alexander, and Diane Ravitch—who came to dominate federal education policy during the late Reagan years and the Bush administration” (Berliner 137). This group promoted the beliefs that American students had become less internationally competitive because of their following unfocused curriculums and because of their lack of discipline due to teachers’ excessive promotion of equity (137). To reverse both these trends these national leaders focused their energies on the promotion of a highly controlled national curriculum that would ensure classroom discipline and promote ‘character development’ and patriotism. In a Policy Review article “The Moral of the Story,” (1985) Gary Bauer, who was Reagan’s Deputy Under Secretary for Planning and Budget in the Department of Education, wrote that “we should attempt to discover a common body of ethical knowledge that, even if it has religious origin, serves the purpose of maintaining and strengthening devotion to our country” (Bauer qtd. in Shea 21). Within the efforts to achieve a common curriculum was the hope of establishing “a new kind of civic religion...that supposedly blends the Judeo-Christian moral code, the patriotic fervor of traditional democratic beliefs, with a facts-based, skills-oriented curriculum” (Shea 21). This group led the way in the formation of national curricular standards in what became ‘the standards movement.’

In as recently as 2011, Diane Ravitch, who has remained a player in education policy since the 1980s, defends the claims made in A Nation at Risk of the wrong turn America had made in its public education in the 1960s and the importance of return to a controlled curriculum. She writes, “A Nation at Risk was...an impassioned plea...[in] response to the radical school reforms of the late 1960s and early 1970s” (Death and Life 23, 25). She characterizes these reforms as
admirable in spirit but intellectually ludicrous, writing, “The reforms of the era were proffered with the best of intentions” but resulted in cries to “Free the children, free the schools, abolish all rules and requirements. Let the English teachers teach Math and the Math teachers teach English...Down with the canon...Let the students...learn whatever they feel like learning whenever (or if ever) they feel like learning” (23). Ravitch believes that “the primary cause of this inadequate academic performance...was the steady erosion of the content of the curriculum” (emphasis original 25-26). After leading the revision of the California history standards, Ravitch was recruited to join the George H. W. Bush administration where she and Chester Finn lead the fight for national standards under Secretary of Education Lamar Alexander (17). These leaders desired national standards that would keep educators from getting caught up in well intentioned directions motivated by good things like social equality at the cost of losing sight of what they believed were important attitudes and skills.

Ravitch believed that a strong high school education was marked by a curriculum with a heavy dose of classic literature and American history, which she argues in the book What do our 17 year olds Know? co-authored by Chester Finn and published four years after A Nation at Risk. Literature and history were the two key proponents of promoting this group’s moral agenda. In the first paragraph of the foreword of this book, Lynne Cheney harkens back to Scudder arguing the importance of literature by quoting Thomas Jefferson on literature’s “moral dimension” (vii). Ravitch’s recommendations for an increased study of literature and history continue in their similarity to the common school curriculum’s early motivation to develop a Eurocentric, Protestant ‘American identity.’ This is recognizable in the questions students were asked to answer, on which the work’s claims of young people’s ignorance was based.

These questions were almost entirely about the historical and literary accomplishments of
white Americans. For example, of the one hundred twenty questions testing students’ knowledge of literature, five questions were about works written by non-white Americans. They included one question a piece for each of the following African-Americans writers: Martin Luther King, Jr., Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and Lorraine Hansberry. The only other exceptions to questions about the work of non-white writers were the fourteen questions that tested students’ knowledge of the Bible. The story of America being promoted was one that diminished the contribution of minorities and made American history about the increasing realization of progress and democracy. In this context Reagan’s Secretary of Education William Bennett wrote, “In my view, there are still too many schools in which our students are taught that this country’s past is primarily a history of racism, pollution, oppression, and inequality” (*Education Week* 1985 qtd. in Shea 21). The desire to minimize America’s problems and maximize the promotion of “the new civic religion” contributed to the project of grooming students’ moral sensibilities and national loyalties into predictable form. Coupled with the demographic changes of the growing non-white population, the assimilative project becomes even more evident. By controlling the knowledge and values of American youth, leaders could be more assured that the public investment in education would result in a compliant workforce that could be relied on to promote the national economic strategies that leaders had decided was best.

After nearly thirty years of the national standards movement, the nation’s recent adoption of the Common Core Standards seems an obvious success for those who pressed for a national curriculum. Despite this, Ravitch surprisingly bemoans what became of the movement, considering it “hijacked” (*Death and Life* 15) and even ‘dead’ (20). Ravitch criticizes the standards that have been adopted by most states for their being “vapid” and mere “babble” (20).
She exemplifies this in her particular disdain for the English language arts standards, which she criticizes for their referring to no “single significant work of literature” (20). Ravitch believes that the last three decades of her work in bringing to pass national standards have been hijacked by the accountability movement (Death and Life 30). In contrast to the early standards movement’s interest in controlling the content of what is studied, particularly by promoting a narrow view of the humanities, the current accountability movement focuses on being able to measure students’ basic reading and math abilities only. “Whereas the authors of A Nation at Risk concerned themselves with the quality and breadth of the curriculum,” Ravitch rails, “No Child Left Behind had no vision other than improving test scores...It promoted a cramped, mechanistic, profoundly anti-intellectual definition of education” (Death and Life 29). The two movements are linked because you can’t measure students if you haven’t first articulated a standard against which students are measured. But the movements’ significant differences reveal a parting of ways between parties in the original conservative alliance that backed education reform in the 1980s. The neoliberals’ interest in assigning schools an easy relative value no longer relied on the neoconservatives’ defamation of students’ personalities. In the more recent accountability movement, the end goal continued to be the entrance of students into the current economic structure, but testing won over as a less costly and more efficient means of producing compliance than character reformation.

The Influence of Neoliberal Economics on Education Reform

To understand the intellectual roots of the accountability movement, one must understand the entrance of the economic theory of neoliberalism onto the global stage. As defined by David
Harvey in his work *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2005), “neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (2). The close of the 1970s and the decade of the 1980s marked an incredible shift in the global economy as the theory of a ‘free market’ became practice under the leadership of Reagan in the U.S., Margaret Thatcher in the UK, Ding Xiaoping in China, and many other leaders throughout the world (1-3). Proponents of neoliberalism in education desired to minimize federal spending on education and let “the market enter through privatized choice plans” (Apple 9). Friedman introduced the idea of school vouchers to enhance market-based competition in *Capitalism and Freedom* (89) a view that was taken up by Reagan in his early education agenda alongside the desire to abolish the Department of Education (*Death and Life* 25).

But the real influence of neoliberalism was not in government’s dramatic abdication of responsibility for education, but in the ironic and slow strategic move to first gain control through testing only to then open doors for market competition. Apple proffers that “a national curriculum and national testing can be seen as ‘necessary conditions’ in pursuit of this long term aim” (32). Friedman laid the groundwork for this use of testing when he suggested that in a competitive capitalist market the “role of government [in education] would be limited to insuring that the schools met certain minimum standards, such as the inclusion of a minimum common content in their programs, much as it now inspects restaurants to insure that they maintain minimum sanitary standards” (89). Friedman’s emphasis on “minimum common content” was prescient of the basic reading and math requirements on which school performance is now based underneath current NCLB laws.
What is most important here, in recognizing the neoliberal underpinnings of the accountability movement, is to see that its first motivation is what will do the market good, not what will do the student good. Though neoliberal theory posits that market freedom mutually benefits “human well being” (Harvey 2), this unfortunately works out in theory better than in practice. The essential component of neoliberal theory is voluntary exchange between two parties (Friedman 13). In the accountability movement, standardized testing was supposed to offer balanced benefits to the student and to the market. The eventual consequences of testing were intended to result in increased math and reading skills for students, on the one hand, and a way to stimulate market competition based on school performance on the other. In the end, however, testing has resulted in fear-based education, where students are relentlessly pounded with stressful tests that tie the hands of educators rather than free them to help their most struggling students. At the roots of this problem is the opposite of a voluntary exchange, where policymakers get to decide what happens in schools and students have no choice but to suffer through it.

A Model of Assimilation at the Heart of the Accountability Movement

Where assimilation is understood as the process of conforming to a prevailing pattern of behavior, the accountability movement has resulted in possibly the most pervasive promotion of assimilation in the history of education reform. Classrooms striving to meet the demands of state tests exemplify a quintessential assimilative education, as teachers and students are compelled to conform themselves to external demands. Despite the fact that the accountability movement does not dictate to states how exactly they should assess basic reading and math skills, by tying
high stakes consequences to standardized test scores, the accountability movement has assured that America’s lowest performing students have the least say in the direction of their educations.

The accountability movement was sold to the American public on the basis of the interests of America’s poor and minority students. Leading advocate Margaret Spellings made an emotional appeal to members of the U.S. Chamber of Congress when she was defending the reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2007, claiming “before [NCLB] became law, kids often moved from grade to grade, and nobody knew whether or not they had learned to read, write, add, or subtract ... The lack of accountability helped create an achievement gap where poor and minority students lagged far behind their peers. Not once in all my travels have I met a parent who didn't want their child learning on grade level” (Spellings 1). President Bush reiterated the sentiment that resistance to the accountability movement revealed a lack of concern for America’s poorest, famously calling opposition “the soft bigotry of low expectations” (“Acceptance Speech to the Republican National Convention).”

Placing the blame of the achievement gap on “a lack of accountability” and “bigotry” in education is once again blaming schools for students’ failures rather than recognizing poverty as a result of flaws in the larger economic systems around education. Both the language used in A Nation at Risk and the language more recently used to defend No Child Left Behind created a set-up for the state to become the watchdog of ‘careless’ educators and based the mandated accountability measures on the necessity of monitoring ‘bad schools.’ But if the blame was correctly placed on “the lack of accountability” and “low expectations,” why hasn’t a decade of standardized testing changed the prescriptive social outcomes of the nation’s poorest?

Since more education is statistically linked to the likelihood of more career choices and more wealth (Leeds 45), we would hope that the national push for the advancement of America’s
poorest performing students would have promoted greater self-determinism for these students, a rise in wealth in America’s poorest families, and less predictability of how one’s class, race, or cultural background resulted in one’s college and eventual employment success. But so far, evidence indicating such gains is not available. In the twenty-first century, there have been no appreciable gains in the economic performance of the nation’s lowest income earners, matter of fact there have been losses (Figure 1, “Economic Mobility” 49). The U.S. Census Bureau reports that between 1980 and 2011 (their most recent report), the percentage of persons below poverty level has slowly increased (Table 711, “People Below Poverty Level” and Table 4, “Number in Poverty and Poverty Rate: 1959-2011”, 13). In contrast to this, the financial gains of the nation’s highest income earners continues to climb (Table 2, “Economic Mobility” 50). Causes of lack of academic or financial success continue to be prescribed by one’s background. Ron Haskins reports in the Pew Charitable Trust’s “Economic Mobility Project” that the wealth and education levels of one’s parents continues to be the leading indicators of the wealth and education levels of their children (Figure 8, 54 and Figure 7, 97). As one example, in 2011, the Center for American Progress reported that race continues to be a leading factor in determining employability, such that “unemployment rates for African Americans stand at the highest levels since 1984” (Weller para 3). Economists Michael Leeds and Elizabeth Wheaton report similar prescriptive outcomes in their study of the youth labor market in the 1990s, which shows that wage gaps between black, white, and Hispanic populations have persisted even when educational levels have closed. These statistics are part of the larger trend where people with and without power are predictably ushered along paths carved by the system and not by themselves. Standardized testing has only furthered this trend. Though students impacted by the standardized tests mandated by NCLB have only just begun to enter the labor market, the disempowerment of
I am not claiming education is at fault for our society’s recalcitrant class stratification. To do this would be to make the same mistake of blaming schools for problems that have much deeper roots in America’s economic structure. But I believe the current accountability movement continues to misguide educational reform because it excludes those whose educations are most at stake from having a say in deciding the direction of their educations. To begin with, this is the case because those economically disadvantaged communities whose interests politicians have touted were the least represented in the national leadership that placed such a heavy emphasis on testing. Despite the widespread value of diversity, upper middle class white men continue to fill a majority of public seats. Private funding has become increasingly significant in political campaigns, making it even less likely that socio-economic and racially diverse individuals will gain positions in public office. But what I believe disempowers students even more is their exclusion from contributing to decisions in the day-to-day direction of their curriculums. High stakes standardized testing fosters an educational situation where students are treated as repositories of knowledge rather than producers of knowledge. Educator Paulo Freire coined the now famous term a “banking” model to describe this situation (Pedagogy of the Oppressed 53). A banking model is most apparent in a classroom that must satisfy the demands of a state test. Students under the most pressures of achieving better scores on state tests have the least say in shaping their educations, and it is no surprise that the students who are under the greatest testing duress are economically disadvantaged students, minority students, and students with limited English proficiency, thereby disempowering these students to the greatest degree.
Lessons Learned from an Over-Emphasis on Economic Assimilation in the Rise and Fall of the School-To-Work Movement

In the last thirty years the standards movement and the accompanying accountability movement have lead educational reform, in terms of the amount of funding put into them, the over all impact on students and teachers, and the countless public and academic conversation they’ve generated. But they haven’t been the only educational reform movements, nor are they the only ones worth remembering. Also in response to the economic conditions of the 1980s, the school-to-work movement (STW) evolved during the 1990s as another strategy intended to prepare students to enter the workforce and contribute to the improvement of U.S. competitiveness. When the school-to-work movement arose it competed for federal funding with the standards movement. Business leaders and educators who were committed to providing students with marketable skills and who were in many cases critical of the neoconservative emphasis on character values and the humanities backed STW. It garnered political support primarily by the Clinton administration, based on arguments of its necessity to prepare young people to enter the emerging high-tech economy. The movement reached its peak in the mid 1990s, and by the late 1990s approximately half of all U.S. school districts received part of the two billion dollars spent in implementation of President Clinton’s School-to-Work Opportunities Act of 1994 (Stull 6). But by the turn of the century funding from STWOA had been absorbed, and the movement declined (3). STW helped schools diagnose the relevance of their curriculums to preparing students for an evolving market, an important consideration, but its short life indicates education was overly aligned with the immediate health of that market rather than the continued needs of individual students.

In their anthology School to Work; Origins and Destinations (2003) William J. Stull and
Nicholas M. Sanders state that the school-to-work movement’s origins were the increasingly lower rate of national productivity in the 1980s, the decline of growth rates of real wages, and the growing wage gap between those who did and didn’t have college degrees, which made many in industry fear the future of U.S. competitiveness (4). They then posit that the faltering economy was largely due to the inability of unskilled workers to add value to the increasingly technology-driven economy (4). The response of the school-to-work movement was to prepare students for jobs that would further U.S. competitiveness by promoting clearer pathways between high school and work that included work-related school based learning, work based learning, and connecting activities (Stull 7). STW differed from the vocational training of previous years because it did not consider job skills and academic skills in separate domains. Rather, it tried to link academic and work based skills, thereby expanding opportunities for either a future college or career track.

Stull and Sander’s association between the faults of the economy and the lack of preparation of its workers relies on the common assumption that the equity-driven public school system of the 1960s could not have prepared workers for the anticipated technological industry of the twenty-first century. This reflects the common fear of business leaders who suspiciously viewed the equity-driven educational reforms of the 1960s in light of the simultaneously predicted declining workforce. They were thus urged to take a more prominent role in affecting the curriculum of public schools (Timpane 389-390). In his essay “A Critique of the Concept of Work and Education in the School Reform Reports,” Don T. Martin is critical of the motivation behind business leaders’ renewed involvement in education. He writes, “It has been clearly established that career education was a direct reaction to the open, free school movements of the 1960s and early 1970s. Critics of open education claimed that it eroded the student’s motivation
to work ... Career education in the 1970s sought to restore in the student a sense of the importance of the general world of work” (50-51). Martin’s criticism of prioritizing aligning education with the market stems from his observation that its effects were to promote a curriculum that trained the minority of gifted and talented students “for the future high tech military and commerce needs of the American economy” (52) and diminished focus on a curriculum that sought to broaden the educational experience of all students (46).

The corporate sector’s diminished interests in education following the improved economy of the 1990s and the inequitable distribution of educational resources based on the limited needs of the economy are both negative results of prioritizing the needs of the economy over the needs of students. The first problem is that if reform is motivated based on a narrow interest in promoting economic competitiveness, investment in education will be sporadic and its relative quality will be prone to unnecessarily fluctuate in response to the interests and financial gains of market competitors. The school-to-work movement began to decline after the predicted technology industry came to pass and unexpectedly reversed business leaders’ fears, because when it came to pass “the demands for highly educated labor in the U.S. economy [did] not keep pace with the rising educational level of workers” (Martin 52). Business leaders’ concerns that there wouldn’t be a workforce able to lead the new technology industries were alleviated, and new problems even arose associated with an over-educated workforce, such as the dissatisfaction of these workers with unchallenging jobs, which could lead to “greater job turnovers and absenteeism” (Berg qtd. in Martin 52). It followed that the business sector lost motivation to invest heavily in K-12 education, and the curricular changes that had been made in the interest of STW were slowly starved of funding.

The second problem is that an over emphasis on improving the economy can lead to the
inequitable distribution of resources. Neoliberal economists and business leaders alike were concerned that public schools spent too much of their resources on the worst students and not enough on talented students who could best generate future capital. Friedman suggests this when he promotes the investment in education based on individual talent out of the belief “that the hope of the future” relies on “the exceptional few” (93). Underlying this belief is the myth of individual efficacy (Berliner 158) and a naive faith that the U.S. school system is a working meritocracy in which students’ successes and failures are measures of internal rather than external circumstances. Since national economic competitiveness does not rely on widespread individual financial wealth accumulation (in fact, on the contrary, Harvey in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* reports how the adoption of neoliberal economic strategies has increased the sum of U.S. wealth while poverty has become more widespread), a concern with the economy does not translate into an equitable concern for all students. Increasing disparity in resource distribution will result from this type of meritocratic paradigm.

Allowing a drive for national rather than individual economic growth to too heavily influence curriculum is likely to encourage attitudes that accept rather than question increased social inequality. This is what Martin suggests happened in the 1980s and 1990s when “school reformers seem[ed] to be more concerned with the expectation of producing a more highly disciplined work force built on the kind of ‘brain power’ needed to serve the new information-based, high tech society than they [were] with providing a general education that would serve broad, social, economic, and political purposes” (Martin 46). This leads to the conclusion that a drive to produce workers to satisfy an economic future planned by those who already have wealth must always be tempered with a drive to teach this future labor force to question the economy for how its interests do or do not reflect all of society’s. A culturally critical student
can be taught to protect her own interests while also being taught to productively contribute to the existing economy.

Despite many of its proponents over emphasis on promoting economic competitiveness that benefited some more than others, the STW movement had more potential for empowering learners to create their own life directions than the standards and accountability movements. This is because educational experiences were individualized, localized, and optional and because learners and educators’ energies were not absorbed in worrying about top-down testing demands. It unfortunately lost political support because its outcomes weren’t as quantifiable as the accountability movement’s. This reveals another consequence of trusting the ideas of political leaders who wanted success measured on their own terms over the ideas of individual learners who could have attested to the increased attention they received. The school-to-work movement could have had great gains for the U.S.’s lowest performing students, as shown by the studies done by Francis Rivera-Batiz on the impact of STW on minority youth (29).

Rivera-Batiz’s studies showed STW’s positive gains by conducting over 8,000 interviews with students before and after their STW experiences (171). Through these interviews he gathered evidence of the indication of the success of STW education in three areas: increased number of math and science classes taken (179), greater labor market participation (182), and lower drop out rates (183). Though white, black, and Hispanic students all showed gains in all three areas, minorities showed greatest gains. For example, STW experience increased the number of math and science credit hours taken by white students by 13%, whereas it increased the number of credit hours taken by black students by 19%, and the number taken by Hispanic students by 20% (179). But interviews are expensive and timely in contrast to data from multiple-choice exams, and they don’t result in easy numbers the government can use to tack
“quality tags” on schools (Apple 32).

_A Vision of Balancing Students’ Needs with the Economy’s in a STW Practice_

Educational reform that is directed towards the successes of the U.S. economy is not necessarily in opposition to teaching students to question the economic structures they are being taught to enter. However, the critical element can be easily lost in an already crowded curriculum that is trying to balance work-based competencies, a traditional academic curriculum, and high stakes standardized testing. To maintain the critical element within a curriculum that is focused on career readiness, theorists David Thornton Moore and Katherine L. Hughes describe how cultural criticism could be developed to compliment a STW practice in their essay “Developing Work-Based Learning Pedagogies.” They identify the different educational outcomes of a functionalist model, which transfers only practical skills in association with the needs of an economy, with a critical approach, which builds on top of these skills students’ understanding of the relationships of power in which the skills they are learning have been assigned value.

Moore and Hughes posit that a functionalist model “takes the structure of the workplace—the forms of knowledge, the requisite skills, the social relations of power and action—as given and stable” (154). In contrast, the critical approach sees all knowledge as both socially constructed and socially vested. Using students’ work experience as their objects of study, students and teachers theorize why things are the way they are within specific historical, political, and social contexts. From these conversations, together they imagine new possibilities for the distribution of responsibilities, knowledge, and power. In this approach students are
introduced to the skills of protecting themselves and their own interests in a fast-paced market that - if not interrupted - will give many more opportunities for the student to assume the stance of consumer rather than producer. Most importantly, in a critical approach students are motivated to learn because they recognize they are not just seen as resources within a capitalist system that demands their labor, but they are seen as individuals who can create new ways to make that system a more humane and just place.

Moving Beyond Assimilation

The complex national and international network of commerce that makes up the U.S. economy includes many people’s interests. One difficulty with a vision for education that stems from an interest in improving the economy rests in the idea of the economy.Politicians, educators, employers, and others who promote an alignment between education and the economy are invested in their own economic outcomes as much as they are invested in the economic outcomes of students, and the interests of these varying forces are not always mutual. For instance, corporations who pressure for policies that benefit them fund the campaigns of politicians who make laws. It is possible to interrupt these vested interests by writing into the laws specific protections for the students, such as were written into the language of the School-to-Work Opportunities Act which had as its goals “to increase opportunities for minorities, women and individuals with disabilities, by enabling individuals to prepare for careers that are not traditional for their race, gender and disability” (qtd. in Rivera-Batiz 174). But writing protections into laws does not necessarily translate into empowering thinkers to protect their own interests. To help students safeguard themselves from a limited interest in a national economy
that may not mutually benefit them, students must be trained to think critically about their educations and the interests behind them.

In contemporary education reform, cultural assimilation is no longer enforced, but economic assimilation continues full throttle. Though white, Protestant culture is still privileged in many ways, today it is far more acceptable to question whether God exists than it is to question whether capitalism works. The accountability movement’s pushing educators toward a banking model of education due to testing pressures reveals how an education motivated by economic demands can disempower students. Such an education prepares students to uncritically enter into a powerful system against which they have not been trained to protect themselves. Federal funding has been tied to state’s adoptions of Common Core Standards, because these standards best indicate the limited economic interests of the government. But who can be surprised that national policy puts the interest of the nation above the student? If a different priority for reform is desired, a different source of reform is required. It is up to the educators and students - who do not want from their education less than a job, but certainly who want more from it - to demand that more is made. A student’s empowerment is not limited to her achievement of material wealth or political weight but ultimately comes from her ability to understand the relationship between herself and her context and, in perceiving this, to be able to re-shape her identity and social position toward her own choosing. Using this definition, if education is to empower a learner, material prosperity must be understood as only one outcome that indicates education’s ultimate goal.

*The Role of Language Arts in the Development of a New Model*
The creation of the Common Core Standards were largely motivated by a conviction that the U.S. must adopt “internationally benchmarked standards” in order to remain economically competitive (“Tough Choices” 3). Fulfilling this motivation, the study of language arts serves many utilitarian purposes that can make students more competitive in the job market, including being able to write well, to analyze arguments, and to communicate effectively. However, the study of fiction literature is not necessary to learn these skills. Hence leading proponents of the CCS like David Coleman, who are motivated to change education in order to improve market competitiveness, have argued that too much time is spent studying nonfiction literature. In this context it makes sense that the CCS, in keeping with the recommendation of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), requires that by the time students reach 12th grade 70% of the texts they encounter be informational (“English Language Arts Standards” para 9).

The subjective, experiential, value laden, and culturally critical nature of stories must be appreciated for fostering something more than job skills if nonfiction is to be prioritized in the curriculum.

The study of nonfiction literature can foster students’ abilities to examine society’s development and judge social structures for what they contribute to people’s lives and what they take from them. Simultaneously, the study of nonfiction can help students gain transferable skills that also help them in the world of work, such as creating and analyzing arguments. Thus the study of nonfiction literature can be used to help students prepare to enter the world as it is and to challenge it to become something better. However, in today’s schools, under the pressure to meet mandated standardized test benchmarks, little value is placed on developing cultural criticism. This is especially the case in schools that teach those who struggle the most.

Political leaders’ lack of interest in promoting cultural criticism can be seen in the conflict
that arose in the mid 1990s between different players who sought to influence the developing national standards for language arts. The U.S. Department of Education withdrew funding from the Standards Project for the English Language Arts (SPELA) in 1994 when SPELA failed to create standards that placed “sufficient weight on the conventions of English grammar, spelling, and other skills” (“History of the Standards”). The U.S. Department of Education’s interests in language arts were in the development of objectively measurable job skills such as the acquisition of ‘correct’ English.

The emphasis on job skills and the lack of interest in developing cultural criticism can be seen in the final nationally adopted Common Core Standards for reading. All of the verbs used to state learning objectives treat knowledge as if it were something external to the learner, rather than as information and experience that dialogically engages with learners, who both shape and are shaped by what is read. Students are asked to “recount, determine, ask, describe, distinguish, compare, explain, comprehend, quote, analyze, cite, and demonstrate” but never to construct, interpret, produce, engage, critique, challenge, adopt, apply, absorb, resist, or be moved by what they’ve read (“Common Core Standards for reading”). This indicates that the standards’ advocates are not interested in individual students and the knowledge they create but are narrowly interested in workers who can play their part in furthering economic competitiveness in a global market. In order to change this, we must be willing to examine how educational models of economic assimilation, despite their claims of mutuality, sacrifice the interests of individual students to the interests of the nation. Developing cultural criticism in the context of reading and studying nonfiction can help toward this end.
In the early twentieth century, the progressive educational movement began that countered the prevailing educational model of assimilation. The progressive movement redirected education’s interests back toward the learner and challenged the priority of society’s needs over the learner’s. The foundation of the progressive movement was laid by American educator, philosopher, and social theorist John Dewey (1859-1952), who at his deathbed was called by the New York Times the “Father of Progressive Education” (1). Like Arnold and Scudder before him, Dewey still posited that the essential goal of K-12 education was to bring young people into a common national culture. He also believed that individual social empowerment resulted when students assumed social responsibility and took upon themselves the burden of what was best for the community. But unlike Arnold and Scudder, Dewey believed that in order for education to provide a pathway into community membership, the learning environment must first accommodate the interests, proclivities and personhood of the student. Equally important, Dewey believed that education should help students reshape society in more democratic ways. The beliefs in the centrality of learners and the necessity of movement toward democracy were critical tenets of a new educational model.

Thus Dewey attempted to rebalance the interests of society and the student by perceiving education as a fluid transaction between them. Dewey’s ideas had far reaching influence on the development of student centric pedagogy. But Dewey’s interests in democracy were limited by his continued emphasis on an assimilative model. Though he was committed to the idea of democracy, he was unable to imagine how people with different beliefs could peacefully co-inhabit a single society. In his belief that social consensus was best, Dewey continued to assume
that the interests of the student and the interests of society were mutual, perhaps an assumption that comes from his position within dominant culture. But where Dewey’s model reaches its progressive limits, many other educators have picked it up, using his belief in the ability of education to meet personal and social demands as the cornerstone of their theories. At the forefront of those educators influenced by Dewey is Louise Rosenblatt (1904-2005) whose theory of the aesthetic transaction fulfills Dewey’s suggestion that student centrism and an interest in society could coexist. In her theory of the aesthetic transaction, Rosenblatt posits a reciprocal relationship between reader and text that is indicative of the reciprocal relationship Dewey desired between the student and society.

*Dewey’s Ideal of Reciprocity*

Dewey’s work is based on the assumption of the reciprocal relationship between the student and society as is evident in two of his earliest works about education *The School and Society* (1900) and *The Child and the Curriculum* (1902). As the “and” in the titles of these works suggest, he believes the goals of education in a democratic society can be dualistic. In *The Child and the Curriculum* he charges educators to “Abandon the notion of subject matter as something fixed and ready-made in itself, outside the child’s experience; cease thinking of the child’s experience as also something hard and fast; see it as something fluent, embryonic, vital...[instead consider that] the child and the curriculum are simply two limits which define a single process” (8). Here Dewey attempts to deconstruct the opposition between an external, objective, impersonal subject matter and an internal, subjective, personal experience. The implications of this breakdown suggest the child can be brought to the center as the very subject
matter of her education, and in turn the experience of the child can become the raw material around which her relationship to society is formed.

In his opening lines in *The School and Society* Dewey redirects educators back toward the student stating, “Only by being true to the full growth of all the individuals who make it up, can society by any chance be true to itself” (21). Here, Dewey makes a radical move to place consideration of the individual at the center. Dewey continuously points educators back to the individual and suggests they cannot teach a student without first considering the student’s unique point of entrance into her own education. To prepare material for a student’s entrance into the curriculum “requires getting outside of it, seeing it as another would see it, considering what points of contact it has with the life of another so that it may be got into such form that he can appreciate its meaning” (5). By making it the teacher’s responsibility to empathize with and meet a student where the student is at, Dewey challenges the common hierarchy that makes it the student’s job to climb from a position at the bottom toward the knowledge offered by the teacher who is above her. In Dewey’s model, the burden of education is upon the teacher to work toward the student.

Dewey suggests education should be seen as working alongside the natural inclinations of a child rather than as working in opposition to them. He writes, the student “is not a purely latent being whom the adult has to approach with great caution and skill in order gradually to draw out some hidden germ of activity. The child is already intensely active, and the question of education is the question of taking hold of his activities, of giving them direction” (*School and Society* 38). Thus Dewey assumes the intellect and curiosity of the student, which suggests that when school becomes boring the fault lies in the approach. Dewey theorizes the history of education and posits that formal schooling became necessary to society when much of human
learning became recorded in “formal symbolic branches—the mastering of the ability to read, write and use figures (66), but the problem with learning to work with symbols is their distance from what feels vital to a child’s interest. Due to this distance, schooling can easily become “remote and bookish” (Democracy 8). He asks, “How can instruction in these formal symbolic branches...be carried on in such a way that the child shall feel their necessity through their connection with subjects which appeal to him on their own account?” (66). Dewey answers this question by suggesting many methods including play, hands on learning, considering real world problems, and facilitating interdisciplinary connections. He also suggests a greater inclusion of technical training, not in order to pass along specified skill sets but to create an environment where the application of academic learning has physical, ‘real world’ meaning.

The Influence of Jane Addams and Charles Darwin on Dewey’s Progressivism

An important influence on the development of Dewey’s student centrisim was the work of social philanthropist and future Nobel Peace Prize Winner Jane Addams who founded Hull House, a settlement house Chicago. The goal of Hull House was to create a place where poor and rich people could live together and learn from each other. Addams wrote that she desired to be the “embodiment of an alternative view of education” where education could “serve the needs of people of many different backgrounds and, at the same time, could foster a new sense of community” (4). Addams lived with the poor at Hull House and claimed that “the dependence of the classes on each other is reciprocal” (4). Dewey was on the board of directors at Hull House and a close friend of Addams (Zilversmit 4). Learning from her model of interdependence,
Dewey developed a parallel model of the classroom where teacher and student respected each other’s needs and goals.

A student of his times, Dewey was also greatly influenced by Darwin’s *Origin of Species*, which had begun a revolution in the social sciences parallel to that in education (Zilversmit 3). Dewey’s language of reform frequently makes use of the language Darwin used to describe nature. In *School and Society* he posits that there should be a change in schools that mirrors the “whole social evolution” going on around them (70). Adapting the idea of the continuous evolution of all living species, Dewey posits that formal education keeps the best of society from being lost while also allowing the learner to keep adapting to its evolving needs (*Democracy* 1-5). Dewey begins his most well known work *Democracy and Education* by comparing the way education maintains society with the way biology renews itself through genetic transmission (1). By comparing the social institutions of man to the evolution of a living organism, he describes society’s changes in terms of positive adaptation. Dewey believes education is the vehicle of society’s ‘genetic transmission.’ In this way, education makes sure that the best genes are passed along to the next generation. He states, “Education, in its broadest sense, is the means of this social continuity of life” (*Democracy* 2). Education enables society to survive by passing along its “communication of ideals, hopes, expectations, standards, and opinions” as well as its “technological, artistic, scientific and moral achievements” (*Democracy* 4). In keeping with a belief that all things are in a constant state of flux, he also held out that education’s broadest goal should be a “social order different in quality and direction from the present” and that “schools should strive to educate with social change in view” (Dewey qtd. in Zilversmit 11). As the social equivalent to biological evolution, Dewey saw education as fulfilling both the conservative goal of keeping the best from being lost and the liberal goal of allowing change for the better.
Though it inspired an educational model in which change was good, social Darwinism also created a tension in Dewey’s student centrism by encouraging him to be unfazed when education promoted the loss of different cultural traditions. In this case, a curriculum that privileged the dominant culture was neither a good thing nor a bad thing but simply a natural thing. Defending the exclusionary tendency of subject matter, Dewey states that “selection aims not only at simplifying but at weeding out what is undesirable,” using a language reminiscent of the process of natural selection. He justifies the process of omission explaining “Every society gets encumbered with what is trivial, with dead wood from the past, and with what is positively perverse” (*Democracy* 22). By associating what is lost with the negative qualities of triviality, perversion, and death, Dewey makes light of the complex problem of choosing a curriculum that promotes cultural uniformity amongst diverse students. Here Dewey’s progressivism teetered on a dangerous cliff, especially in light of the fact that many of Dewey’s contemporaries were applying the theory of the survival of the fittest to excuse existing hierarchical social structures, as did psychologist Edward Thorndike, claiming “in the long run it has paid the ‘masses’ to be ruled by intelligence” (Zilversmit 10). But Dewey avoided that cliff, desiring instead that schools rectify social injustices by providing a way for an individual to “escape from the limitations of the social group in which he was born” (22).

*Dewey’s Progressivism Is Still Limited by the Goal of Homogeneity*

Despite Dewey’s new student centric direction, he stills sees homogeneity as in the best interest of American society. In Scudder’s model of education, information should flow in one direction from God, to the nation, through the teacher, to the student. In this model, students had
to conform to an inflexible and impenetrable standard. “God has set great lamps in the heaven of our national life,” writes Scudder, “and it is for us to let the radiance stream into the minds of the children in our schools” (“Place of Literature” 27). The metaphor of light streaming in one direction is distinctly different from the desire for a student’s education to be a “fluent, embryonic” experience (Child and The Curriculum 7). But Dewey’s difference to Scudder is not essentially oppositional, rather its difference is a matter of degree. Dewey depicts a child that wants to become part of dominant society and a society that is harmonious because it is homogeneous. “Individuals are certainly interested, at times, in having their own way,” he writes, “But they are...chiefly interested upon the whole, in entering into the activities of others and taking part in conjoint and cooperative doings” (27). Because it doesn’t seem natural to him that different social groups would want to retain cultural autonomy while being part of the same society, he doesn’t account for what happens when a child isn’t “chiefly interested…in conjoint and cooperative” activities or when there are variations in what people want to learn or which social groups they want to become part of.

Though Dewey wants to resist a model of education that merely works to change the student to fit society, revealed in lines like “only by being true to...individuals...can society...be true to itself” (School and Society 21), he ardently holds that a community’s long term peace and sustainability will come only from its commitment to shared values. “In dealing with the young,” he writes, “our chief business with them is to enable them to share in a common life” (7). He sees public education in modern society as essential to bringing people into community and preserving shared values, “there is the necessity that [its] immature members be not merely physically preserved in adequate numbers, but that they be initiated into the interests, purposes, information, skill, and practices of the mature members” (3). And beyond mere survival, Dewey
posits homogeneity is necessary for social harmony, “Men live in a community in virtue of the things which they have in common” (4). One of the greatest values of public schools, he states, is that in them there is an “intermingling” of beliefs and cultural practices, the end of which is an “assimilative force” and a “common subject matter accustom[ing] all to a unity of outlook” (23). He portrays the purpose of schooling as bringing together a multitude of voices with the aim of furthering a single set of cultural practices, beliefs, purposes and aspirations, giving no value to the maintenance of different cultural positions. Despite the fact that he arrives at commonality as Arnold and Scudder did before him, he sees commonality as a natural result of the comingling of difference, and in this way lays the groundwork for a society that accepts a much greater degree of individual choice.

Dewey even describes the diversity in American society positively, and uses language very respectful of difference in his early 20th century context, describing the U.S. as “composed of a combination of different groups with different traditional customs” (23). His argument for homogeneity is made in terms of the best interests of the student, claiming that its educative purpose is to provide the student with a “balanced appeal” and a “broader horizon” (23). Dewey’s justification for education’s homogenous social outcome is that assimilation will help a young person’s developing identity avoid “the danger of being split into a being having different standards of judgment” (24). He applies to school the position of “steadying and integrating…the diverse influences…within the disposition of each individual” (24). Though he ultimately ascribes to education the job of shaping the subjectivity of individual students toward a commonality that will include promoting a singular set of “standards of judgment” and will result in a ‘unified personhood,’ his concern for students who inhabit multiple cultures is prescient of educators’ concerns today about the psychological burdens on “third culture kids” or
on students who must code-switch between home and school environments. Dewey suggests the role of public schooling is to influence a student’s “disposition” by organizing and prioritizing cultural influences toward “purified” and “idealized” social customs to create a “wider and better balanced environment” (24). Thus even Dewey’s cultural imperialism is posed in terms of student-centrism.

Despite his respect for students, Dewey’s belief that schools should shape students’ identities reveals an uninterrogated privilege of dominant culture, which is reminiscent of Arnold’s belief that culture was simply the culmination of the “the best that had been thought and said.” In Dewey’s portrayal, culturally dominant beliefs are not qualified as dominant because they are those held by society’s most powerful members. Rather, he suggests they are simply the best possible beliefs and practices. “It is the business of the school environment,” he writes, “to eliminate, so far as possible, the unworthy features of the existing environment from influence upon mental habitudes” (emphasis added Democracy 21). When he contrasts what is “best” with what is “trivial,” what is “dead,” and what is “perverse” (21) he does not recognize that he represents a particular political paradigm that privileges a narrow cultural perspective.

Dewey’s unqualified cultural bias is further revealed when he describes the movement of society as on a trajectory from “low grade” (8), “savage and barbarian” (17) to “advanced” (8) and “civilized” (51). Dewey’s argument is based on the assumption that what is good for society is good for the individual, but he does not take into account the dynamic of social privilege that benefits dominant cultural practices and oppresses others.

Dewey works hard to resist participation in oppressive forces, always qualifying any place where there is a lack of student choice as already having considered a student’s natural proclivities or social benefits. But even his repeated use of the word “natural” to describe a
student’s movement toward commonality reveals an essentialist paradigm. He fails to question all the social forces beyond a student’s control and not necessarily in the student’s interest that contribute to her socialization. He thus leaves the following questions unanswered: By which standards are cultural influences prioritized? What constitutes a “pure” versus an “impure” social custom? In what narrow confines must a “wide environment” fit? And what weight is forced upon a student’s identity that is demanded she must ‘balance’?

Despite its limitations, Dewey offers a new model of public education that puts the student’s interests first. Dewey originally recognized that a student’s educational transformation was most likely to occur when her personhood was taken into account and her education was allowed to grow out of her unique interests. But because he saw education’s ultimate goal as the survival of civilization through the perpetual march of progress, he did not consider how much more she might learn if her education not only took her unique personhood as the starting point but her matured cultivation of difference as the ending point. In sum, Dewey radically challenged the methodology of public education toward increased student-centrism, but he did not challenge its ultimate aims. The flaws of this model are most apparent when considering the education of students who are outside of the dominant culture. These students would not only have the greatest distance to travel to reach the culture others came by from birth, but their identities would suffer the greatest losses in the process. For these students, full membership into society came at the cost of identity transformation.

*Rosenblatt Extends Dewey’s Model of Reciprocity in her “Theory of Aesthetic Transaction”*
Today, though the value of diversity is common, there is still much unresolved tension in public education between balancing the needs of society and the needs of the individual. Whether due to bureaucracy’s interest in control, such as has resulted in the enforcement of standardized tests, or due to the pressures of the job market, such as has resulted in the market value of standard English, or due to the pressures of academic traditions, such as has resulted in the continuity of teaching the canon, what a teacher believes is in the best interest of a student to learn may not be what a teacher has the freedom to teach. In their day-to-day decisions, teachers must continuously confront this tension. Dewey had faith it was possible to respect the student’s individualism while meeting society’s demands to conform, but he left many questions unanswered as to how this was possible. But where he left off, educator and literary theorist Louise Rosenblatt picked up. Rosenblatt recognized that the relationship between the individual and society was mirrored in the relationship between a reader and a text. She theorized that where forces between the personal and the social were previously understood to be either resisting each other or dominating each other, they could now be understood to be mutually informing each other.

Rosenblatt’s theory of aesthetic transaction builds on Dewey’s idea that “the child and the curriculum are simply two limits which define a single process” (Child and the Curriculum 8). By helping students recognize that interpreting is an interactive process, Rosenblatt’s theory of reading fulfills Dewey’s hope of creating a transaction that neither privileges the personal interests of the student nor the external curriculum they encounter. Rosenblatt develops the term “transaction,” which Dewey suggested in his work Art as Experience (1934) but the ideas of which are already recognizable in The Child and the Curriculum (1902) in his desire that educators, “Abandon the notion of subject-matter as something fixed and ready-made in itself
outside the child’s experience [and] cease thinking of the child’s experience as also something
hard and fast [but] see it as something fluent” (8). The transaction here occurs between the
student and the curriculum such that neither is independent of the other. Rosenblatt built off of
this idea to suggest that a text is the recursive exchange between a reader and what she reads.
This implicates the reader’s subjectivity in the text’s assigned significance and dismantles the
claim of the text’s objectivity. Rosenblatt sees something beyond the hard categorizations of
subjective and objective that suggests teachers either take an authoritative stance and dictate
what students must learn or a relative stance that cannot discriminate between more and less
appropriate responses.

Rosenblatt traces the idea of the transaction between text and reader back to Dewey’s
observation of the paradigmatic shift that took place after the implosion of Cartesian dualism.
In Discourse on Method Descartes postulates that knowledge obtained through logic can and
should be organized separately from knowledge obtained through experience. Another literary
critic characterizes the Cartesian divide as separating all conception from the objects of
conception, stating, “What the Cartesian [metaphysics] collectively implies...is ‘that our thought
is in no case subjected to or confused with its objects, but independent” (Paulson 37). Dewey’s
criticism of traditional education as having created an unnecessary divide between academics
and real life experience is a criticism of the academy’s acceptance of the Cartesian separation
between mind and object. Dewey calls for a movement away from the effects of this separation
on education in his effort to make the curriculum and the student co-determinate. High school
teacher and college professor Mark Faust testifies to Dewey’s resistance of the binary this way,
“Dewey...suggests the rhythmic interplay of past and present, matter and mind, in the production
of experience, but he rejects the temptation to privilege either side of the binary, insisting instead
that each is co-determinate with the other: “What is done and what is undergone are reciprocally, cumulatively, and continuously instrumental to each other” (22).

In her article “The Aesthetic Transaction” (1986) Rosenblatt writes that one of the implications of doing away with the Cartesian divide between logic and experience is a new consideration of language where “a word is not simply its public lexical meaning but ‘the sum of all the psychological events aroused in our consciousness by the word’” (123). From considering language as informed by both public and private references, Rosenblatt derived a standard to evaluate what kind of transaction a reader has with a text. On one end of the spectrum is what she calls “an efferent reading” where the focus of attention is the information carried away from the reading event. On the other end of the spectrum is “an aesthetic reading” where the focus is the experience a text evokes during the event of reading (124). In an efferent reading the focus is language’s public referents whereas in an aesthetic reading more attention is paid to language’s private symbols. Rosenblatt posits that it is not the text that requires a specific type of reading but the reader’s purpose that decide the kind of transaction that takes place.

Rosenblatt observes that in high school literature classrooms teachers often hurry students from the experience of a text toward an analysis that favors an efferent reading, but because their own transactions were initially aesthetic, teachers ask students to produce an efferent reading that assumes an initial aesthetic reading where none exists (126). The lack of an initial aesthetic reading produces a shallow experience with literature. Rosenblatt’s categorizations can help teachers clarify their own expectations for student transactions and can help them strategize for deepening student engagement. Rosenblatt believes, “Curriculum and classroom methods should be evaluated in terms of whether they foster or impede an initial
aesthetic transaction and on whether they help students savor [and] deepen the lived through experience, to recapture and reflect on it, to organize their sense of it” (126). By moving from an aesthetic to an efferent reading, students develop greater capacity for critical thinking by both observing the assumptions they brought to their initial reading and how the text itself operated to create the aesthetic experience. Increased awareness of how texts operate will also help them direct their notice when reading future cultural and artistic expressions. A virtuous cycle develops between aesthetic experiences laying foundations for efferent analyses, which deepen future aesthetic experiences.

This model suggests a way to change the high school classroom discussion about literature. Rather than demand students use evidentiary reasoning to argue the objective meaning of a text, which suggests that meaning is fixed and points readers toward language’s public significations, teachers can encourage students to participate in an aesthetic reading where they notice their own experience and then ask students to articulate how both public and private referents work together to produce their particular understandings of a text. In this second activity, race, class, gender, religion, and other social positions and interests of the reader can be considered as key to producing their interpretations. Students get a chance to see that readings never take place ‘absent of external purpose’ (Rosenblatt 125). This will also lead to a parallel discussion about the implicit social positions and interests of the implied author that are brought to light depending on which questions readers ask of the text.

*Faust’s Idea of Writing To “Account For” Interpretations Rather Than “Defend” Them*
Conversations and written work about reading experiences should move from asking students to defend their readings to asking students to account for their readings (Faust 27). The subject of student composition is moved from the text, conceived of as independent from them, to their experiences of the text, which are the results of the interaction between two socio-historical moments, the text’s and their own. The appropriateness of a response then becomes relative to a student’s ability to effectively communicate her experience. She does not have to come up with the ‘correct’ reading but neither is she left alone to feel self satisfied within her own isolated understanding. She assumes the responsibility in making herself known. The power she develops through this practice is essential to her participation in impacting society. This presents another way Rosenblatt realizes Dewey’s desire to see education further democracy states Faust, claiming, “Not much of a leap is required to make a connection with Dewey’s (1916) idea of a critical democracy in which people enhance each other’s experiences by listening and raising questions that interrupt habitual ways of thinking and foreground the permanent possibility for dialogue in social settings” (27). As readers listen to others’ experiences they have the opportunity to “question their reactions in light of their own and others’ emerging concerns” (Rosenblatt 28).

Empowerment takes place when a student becomes aware of how her thinking patterns have operated in determined ways and thus has the opportunity in future situations to choose between the thinking done for her by others, which she has internalized as her own, and that thinking which best matches values she has critically examined. By asking students to become metacognitive of the kind of readings they perform, students practice critical awareness, which gives them greater power to resist many different forces that can operate to determine their thinking. As readers become aware of their co-authorship in the production of meaning in their
transaction with literature, they will become sensitive to how their transactions with diverse
cultural forces continuously work to resist and create meaning. Students’ metacognitive
understanding of their own reading practices can mature into their recognition of the “full
potentialities of language, public and private” (Rosenblatt 127) and suggests a simple, organizing
epistemology for processing all experience.
“Critical pedagogy” is another discourse that stems from Dewey’s theories of student centrism. As Rosenblatt’s aesthetic theory encouraged teachers to facilitate a dialogical exchange between the student and the text, critical pedagogues encourage teachers to facilitate a dialogical relationship between the student and society. In this dialogical exchange, society, like Rosenblatt’s text, is understood to be flexible. Though critical pedagogy is informed by Dewey’s insistence on the consideration of the student, there is an important shift from the goals of Dewey’s student centrism to that of critical pedagogues. Dewey hoped to empower students by using education as a vehicle to pass along the work of previous generations. Critical pedagogues hope to empower students by using education to encourage students to resist oppression. Both the work of Dewey and the work of critical pedagogues are intended to promote democracy, but the challenges to it are perceived differently, and therefore so are the solutions. Dewey believed education promoted democracy through the creation of a space where social consensus could be reached. The critical pedagogues believe “conscientization” will promote democracy by helping students become aware of and resist the unjust power dynamics social relations are based on. Though inspired by Dewey’s interest in and respect for the individual, where Dewey’s progressivism encouraged conformity, critical pedagogy stridently resists conformity and strives for social justice through the recognition and appreciation of difference.

Possibly the most influential social philosopher in the critical pedagogy movement has been Paulo Freire. The different pedagogical goals of Dewey and Freire can be understood in terms of their different social experiences. Born in Vermont in 1859, Dewey was a celebrated
academic of European heritage whose mother was a devout Calvinist and whose father was a Union army soldier ("John Dewey Biography" 1). Dewey’s family was part of the social mainstream and he assumed social leadership easily through his education. Freire’s relationship with society was not as simple. Though also of European heritage, Paulo Freire was born in 1921 in Recife, Brazil. Freire’s family experienced financial hardship due to the Great Depression, which was exacerbated by his father’s death when Paulo was thirteen. Freire writes about hunger hindering him from success in school as a young person. When his family’s financial situation improved, he was able to go to college where he excelled. Like Dewey, Freire started teaching soon after graduation from higher education and was recognized widely. The Brazilian government recognized his work teaching illiterate adults to read and appointed him Director of Brazil’s National Literacy Program. There his adult literacy program was slated to reach 2,000,000 illiterate adults ("Freire Institute" 2). But in 1964 a military coup in Brazil changed Freire’s relationship to society. Prior to the coup, literacy was a requirement of voting. Therefore his literacy programs would have revolutionized Brazil’s political landscape. After the coup, not only was the program closed, but Freire was also imprisoned under charges of subversive teaching practices. From this point on, Freire became astutely critical of the way political powers could work in opposition to democratic education.

Like Dewey, Freire aimed to empower students to improve society, but where Dewey encouraged students to participate with existing political structures, Freire encouraged students to critique them. Freire’s student centrism was therefore more progressive than Dewey’s because it did not necessitate assimilation. Freire was like Dewey in aligning educational goals with a vision of national direction. For both the galvanizing motive was social, not individual. He writes, “my comprehension of empowerment [is] ‘social class empowerment,’ Not
individual, not community, not merely social empowerment” (emphasis original 111). Both also believe there is a reciprocal relationship between individual empowerment and the possibility of a democratic society. They part roads, however, in their different conceptions of the relationship between democracy and economics.

Coming both from a later experience of capitalism and from a Latin American perspective where the rigidity of class hierarchy was obvious, Freire’s theories posit economic social positioning as institutional. Brazil’s blatant exclusion of the poor and the working class from political empowerment clarified the need for an organized, alternative route to political power. Four years after his seventy-five day imprisonment in 1968, Freire published Pedagogy of the Oppressed in which he describes the methods and the political agenda of his practice of ‘liberatory’ or ‘critical pedagogy.’ Freire’s pedagogy rests on a Marxist critique of capitalism, which necessitated the disempowerment of the vast poor in support of the economic power of the wealthy few. The clarity of the institutional economic exclusion of the poor and the working class in Brazil gave rise to Freire’s radical break from a belief in political empowerment through consensus and assimilation. Freire’s resistance to economic assimilation led him to arrive at the belief that cultural assimilation was also oppressive. Alternative cultural production thus became central to economic resistance; “The question of social class empowerment involves how the working class through its own experiences, its own construction of culture, engages itself in getting political power [and seeking] freedom from domination (emphasis original 112). In complete opposition to Arnold’s model of education that tied political power with cultural conformity, Freire’s model of education tied the goal of political empowerment with cultural autonomy.
Critical Pedagogues Paulo Freire and Ira Shor Discuss Their Critical Practices

Paulo Freire and leading American critical pedagogue Ira Shor believe the vocabulary of domination and oppression also describes U.S. educational experience. They address this in what they call their “talking book,” *A Pedagogy For Liberation; Dialogues on Transforming Education* (1987) in which they discuss their liberatory education practices in Brazil and in the U.S. (122). Although in the U.S. there isn’t violent political coercion as there was in Brazil, there is force, which is at the root of these concepts. There is force in the lack of choice students have in deciding the direction of their educations, most evident in standardized testing. And there is force which results in the greater likelihood of students from wealthy families succeeding in school while students from low socioeconomic backgrounds fail. Shor argues that there is a “symbolic violence” of “rules, curriculum, tests, punishments, requirements, correction, remediation, and standard English,” and avers that “the advantages of the elite are hidden behind a myth of equal opportunity” (123). He continues, “This environment is symbolically violent because it is based in manipulation and subordination. It openly declares itself ‘democratic’ while actually constructing and reproducing inequality” (123). Such force is not exerted upon all students equally, but instead is exerted most on those who have the least power to resist.

Critical pedagogy in the U.S. offers an alternative solution to assimilation as a route to social power. It takes a two-prong approach to empowering students by taking as its responsibility providing an education students can use to make a living within the world that exists while simultaneously training students to produce critical understandings of that world that can lead to social change. These two outcomes necessarily make it the concern of educators to consider both the individual as an autonomous being and as a social being who on the one hand
produces her own understanding of reality and on the other hand who participates with others within a complex, economically interdependent society.

*Ellsworth Inspires Recognition of Partiality*

The critical pedagogue’s ultimate goal is the reformation of society, and the methodology she uses is dialogue. The critical pedagogue first helps a student develop a self-conscious recognition of her historical and political context. Then she helps the student see the limitations the student’s context has imposed on her. In resistance to an education that “tries to habituate students to taking orders and to denying their own critical thinking” (Shor 124), the classroom should be the site of making “new theories rooted in an attempt to understand both the nature of our contemporary predicament and the means by which we might collectively engage in resistance that would transform our current reality” (hooks 67). “Making new theories” through “collective engagement” relies on dialogue reminiscent of Rosenblatt’s theory of aesthetic transaction, where different understandings of the world are qualified as produced by different contexts rather than as inherently correct or incorrect. Professor of Media Studies at the New School for Public Engagement, Elizabeth Ellsworth has crafted the following principle that guides her classes in resisting the perpetuation of cultural domination:

If you talk to me in ways that show you understand that your knowledge of me, the world, and ‘the Right thing to do’ will always be partial, interested, and potentially oppressive to others, and if I can do the same, then we can work together on shaping and reshaping alliances for constructing circumstances in which students of difference can thrive (324).
Professor Ellsworth’s principle is guided by the triangulation of talking, listening, and shaping. It relies on students understanding the dual uses of “partiality” to indicate that no perspective is either neutral or complete. After they can recognize their partiality, Ellsworth helps students gather the input of others toward a collectively more informed and balanced interpretation of experience.

As in Rosenblatt’s aesthetic transaction, a key measure of a student’s success is her awareness of herself as a producer of culture rather than as merely a consumer. This requires a type of metacognitive consciousness that will allow a student to distinguish when her thinking is productive versus when it merely consumes. It was Freire who coined the idea of the “banking system of education” to describe the way traditional classrooms measure a learner’s success by memorizing and recalling masses of education that seem uninspiring and irrelevant to them. As a symbol of the banking system, Shor jokes that “eventually textbooks will be gigantic bodies of print carried on stretchers throughout the subways of New York...[students] will begin reading [a] text in high school and end at retirement” (88). Awareness of their thinking will keep students from being distracted by the quantity of data they are asked to consume that hinders them from participating in producing new knowledge (7). But a banking model will only train a student to pay attention to the content of her knowledge rather than the process of its production. Another leading critical pedagogue bell hooks sheds light on this process, by theorizing that a critical classroom must resist the banking model by training a student to be aware of her “epistemological perspectives—the points from which [her] perspectives are shared” (184). This would result in her metacognition that will “critically re-orient [her] to society” (Freire 40), and give her a conceptual place from which to critique her own understanding.
In critical pedagogy the production of knowledge first takes place around teachers’ and students’ attempts to “make sense of everyday life experiences” (hooks 74) rather than around content external to learners’ experiences. Despite their different political visions, Freire and Shor share with Dewey belief in the importance of a student’s education starting from her reality. In the prologue to their talking book, Freire and Shor quote from Dewey’s work *Experience and Education* (1938), which states, “There is, I think, no point in the philosophy of progressive education which is sounder than its emphasis upon the importance of the participation of the learner in the formation of the purposes which direct his activities in the learning process.” By the “participation of the learner in…the purposes which direct his activities” Dewey argues that students should participate in deciding the context of their learning, much as young children learn through their own self-guided exploration. This is more difficult in academic subjects in higher grade levels but still possible. For instance, rather than learning grammatical rules simply because they are ‘correct,’ a student could be asked to examine the ways she hears English being used and examine how these different uses serve different rhetorical ends. She could be asked to examine what speakers want to achieve in their particular uses of English, how they go about trying to get what they want, and whether their methods work. This process would empower a student by asking her to take ownership over her education. A teacher could parallel this project with grammar lessons about the colloquial and standard English variations that students encounter. The principle underneath this direction is that learning takes place best when a student is involved in choosing to learn about something that is genuinely important to her.

The teacher first models this reorientation of the production of knowledge around the student by “redefining [herself] as a learner of the student’s reality and knowledge” (Ellsworth 306). As an exercise in the recognition of the unique experience of reality of each person, hooks
will ask each student to read aloud in class a paragraph he or she has written, no matter how many students she is teaching (40). As the teacher draws into the context of study the unique perspectives of all of the learners, she begins to point to the concept that all knowledge is produced within a specific context, for the furtherance of a specific interest. This necessitates a critical perspective be taken on all knowledge to figure out where it came from and what its purpose is. Freire describes this task as “unveiling the raison d’être of any object of study” (172).

As teachers and students continuously contextualize their own understandings of the world (remembering the partiality Ellsworth posits), the same contextualizing scrutiny can be applied to any disciplinary content knowledge as it is made the object of their study. Directing students to consciously theorize the purposes and origins of the knowledge they encounter shifts the power dynamics so that they can take control over their knowledge rather than the other way around. All objects of study in a student’s education can themselves be examined, not as unquestionable representations of reality, but as cultural objects with agendas that should be interrogated. This means that a piece of literature can be examined not just in light of its originating historical context but in light of how its meaning has changed and continues to change in each new place it is valued. For instance, this encourages a class to investigate what the words of Phillis Wheatley’s poem meant to her when she wrote, “Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land /Taught my benighted soul to understand / That there's a God...”? Perhaps as an American slave, she saw her social status as a hopeful example of power, despite its achievement through assimilation. In contrast students could investigate what might Wheatley’s poems have meant to her colonizer. In another contrast, they could investigate why are her poems are still studied in most high school language arts curriculums today. How does its
context change what the knowledge of her poem is expected to mean to readers? Questions like these make the task of unveiling the raison d’être the continuous process of unveiling ones self and the world in which one lives. In this way, critical pedagogy encourages teachers to recognize that a student is empowered not because of what is studied but because of how it is studied. Any content, even a student’s hatred of the content of her education, can be investigated in a way that empowers a student’s critical consciousness.

In the process of this contextualization and critique, students remake knowledge rather than regurgitate it. As a result of this creative process, students practice and prepare themselves for remaking society, as opposed to merely accepting and memorizing “official knowledge” which prepares them only for perpetuating existing explanations of our lives (Shor 10). Students can learn to recognize the political and psychological constructs they live in that shape their thinking. Bringing these constructs to light will help the student explain the conflicts she experiences. This helps her in a number of ways. First it helps her recognize where she is not at fault for problems that society often blames on her. Second it can help her strategize ways to resist the way her power is oppressed and reclaim it. Although this mental reorganization does not change the economic realities she will encounter, this critical dialogue with the world is a necessary step in the long struggle of helping her reverse oppressive political structures.

One of the greatest challenges to a teacher who does not want to merely perpetuate dominant ideology is what Ellsworth calls the “essentially paternalistic object of education itself” (306). An essential element of the liberated classroom is an examination of the power dynamics between teacher and student. By identifying the way a teacher’s power can hinder a student’s liberation, a teacher can better balance directing students with allowing students to direct themselves. According to Freire it is not that the teacher has less authority “but that the
democratic teacher never, never transforms authority into authoritarianism” (91). Shor asserts that if educators are going to foster an environment where students feel safe to reveal themselves, teachers must work against the highly scripted relationships between themselves and students that already exist before any class has started. This often means interrupting students’ expectations about what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable behavior. For instance, a teacher can use a student’s resistance to learning rather than punish it by interrogating the underlying power dynamics that have set the classroom up as a place where the student feels oppressed. “This routine script is the traditional relationship between supervising authorities and alienated students” (115), states Shor who desires establishing a “dialogical” relationship between himself and his students (92).

Freire does not believe the relationship between teachers and students is one of equality since he expects teachers to be more intellectually developed, more critically practiced, and more committed to social change (92). Shor claims that progressive teachers in the U.S. mistakenly believe “self-directed learning” is supposed to empower students and criticizes educators who equate the degree of student autonomy with the measure of democracy and empowerment (109). But Freire and Shor don’t do much more to define where the thin line exists between resisting authoritarianism and leaving students without direction. Ellsworth questions Freire’s and Shor’s assertion that such a balance is possible (306) and believes the best teachers can do includes resisting utopian resolutions, acknowledging their own “implications in these formations,” and committing to continuously unearth their investment in their own privilege (308).

The common denominators of their resistance to authoritarianism in Ellsworth’s, Freire’s, hooks’, and Shor’s work are their refusals to value only their own knowledge, language, and interests in the classroom and their continuous attempts to keep their presentations “rooted in the
discourse already developed within the class” (Shor 45). They also all frequently reference the importance of humor and delight in their classrooms, which hooks takes to the furthest degree by positing that passion and love for the subject matter as well as for each other must be present in every classroom in order for the most productive learning to take place (198).

Learners’ transformed relationships with classroom authority figures is a vision of the hoped for transformation with authority outside the classroom. But this symbol of social change must be discussed with students as such as part of preparing them to encounter authority figures that are invested in establishing traditional authoritarianism relationships. Preparation for encountering the world as it is will come from discussing with students how a changed understanding of reality is not the same as a changed reality. Critical consciousness allows learners to recognize where their minds have been colonized to serve others’ purposes, but it does not change the political reality that many people still have to serve the purposes of others in order to earn a living wage. It is the job of the critical pedagogue to prepare students to live within the reality that exists while simultaneously inspiring them to change it. Shor believes there is an unfortunate divide between programs that are the most critically reflective of society and desirous of changing it and programs that are most interested in preparing students for the world as it is (70). He criticizes “careerism” and “a repressive, business oriented milieu [which] makes students resist experimental pedagogy” (54) and desire instead only that they be prepared to get a job.

It is in the context of the teacher’s dilemma of both desiring to meet students’ demands that their educations be practical and yet desiring that students be inspired to radically confront oppressive political structures that Moore’s and Hughes’ study of students’ STW experiences is particularly meaningful. Moore and Hughes resolve this dilemma by positing that “The purpose
of work based learning is not simply to train the neophyte worker, but also to create the
conditions and resources through which youth can understand and critique the existing work
system and imagine alternatives, penetrate and possibly change the distribution of power and
knowledge, and become active participants in the construction of their organizations and culture”
(154). Freire and Shor similarly agree that their work as educators is twofold. On the one hand,
we “cannot teach only to [students’] demands that course[s] do nothing but help them get a job”
(68). On the other hand, Freire asks, “how is it possible before transforming society to deny
students the knowledge they need to survive?” (69). As a resolution of these tensions, Freire and
Shor commit to deliver the technical training their students desire but in such a way that reveals
the politics of such work. Shor states “job skills must be criticized at the same time they are
learned” (69).

*Balancing What Is With What Could Be*

Freire suggests that one of the primary skills English Departments offer technical training
in is the acquisition of standard English usage (72). Though he acknowledges the culturally
elitist valuation that distinguishes ‘correct’ from ‘incorrect,’ he still holds that “the liberatory
teacher works with students who must gain a good command of standard English and correct
usage,” but he qualifies this, claiming, “It is necessary to teach correct usage while also
criticizing its political implications” (71). bell hooks raises the political implications of standard
English by provocatively describing the psychological impact of learning standard English on a
people who inherited the language through force. She writes:
Standard English ... is the language of conquest and domination in the United States, it is the mask which hides the loss of so many tongues, all those sounds of diverse, native communities we will never hear...How to describe what it must have been like for Africans whose deepest bonds were historically forged in the place of shared speech to be transported abruptly to a world where the very sound of one’s mother tongue had no meaning? (168-69).

But the bloody history of English does not lead her to the conclusion that standard English is not necessary, nor even to the conclusion that its history of violence determines the future relationship people who have been oppressed will have with English. Instead she suggests that it is ignorance of the history, not the history itself, that is harmful today. She then inspires readers to consider the way knowledge empowers students when its oppressive use is resisted and it is reclaimed for one’s own purposes. She exemplifies this by imagining the power and joy these displaced, enslaved people felt when they discovered that they could take the language of the oppressor and re-invent it for their own resistance, in order to begin rebuilding their lives.

It is into this context that we come as teachers, leading us to the question: How do we teach this language in a way that gives students power to use language toward their own self-determination? How do we teach this language in a way that gives students the space of resistance, the space to fill language with their own words and sounds, with their own intentions and meanings? hooks’ concluding advice is that students “must believe they can inhabit comfortably two different worlds” (183). She’s not simply saying we should encourage code-switching. She’s saying teachers must help students figure out how to bring themselves into all the spaces in life they will inhabit. She’s saying teachers must help students recognize where
they can push back, where they don’t just have to change, where they can make other things change too.

It is no small undertaking to take as your ultimate goal the radical transformation of society, especially if it is based on resisting a fundamental institution of our society such as capitalism. The radical pedagogue must be prepared to encounter many frustrations and challenges. One challenge is institutional resistance. Freire offers teachers several tips for keeping their jobs while resisting traditional pedagogical methods that their institution may be more comfortable with. He first suggests teachers perform an “ideological map” (61) of the institution where they teach. He encourages them to know where people stand, where their allies will and won’t be. He believes no one can or should act alone. He encourages teachers to build relationships with colleagues who can offer them mental, emotional, and practical support. He also suggests performing what he calls “deviance credits,” where teachers take on small responsibilities of the institution that aren’t offensive and thereby teachers create their security by “rooting [themselves] into the life of the institution” (66). Perhaps most importantly, Freire suggests, anyone who hopes to participate in the transformation of society should be prepared to face their fears. Freire suggests teachers establish “a relationship between [their] individual experience and the larger political moment” (63). In other words, social reformers should never lose sight of their larger social dreams even in the midst of challenging day-to-day realities.

Despite working for students’ freedom, Shor and Freire warn that it is even more likely that a practice of critical pedagogy will result in resistance from some students than it will from the institution (67). An invitation from a teacher for students to make knowledge for themselves may actually lead students to assess the teacher as incompetent and without enough information to give them. Students are more likely to accept a change in content than they are to easily
accept a change in how they think about that content. Sometimes students will equate a lack of formality in the classroom with a lack of rigor and will not respect the teacher’s authority (145). At other times students will comply with a liberatory practice not because they believe in its goals but simply because they are used to and comfortable with compliance. Ellsworth warns that it is easy to wrongly assume that a class can provide a safe place for all to speak and where all ideas are valued equally (315). But the greatest challenge with students is likely to stem from the fact that their desires for immediate success can be light years away from the teacher’s dream of a liberated society (68). None of the theorists can offer quick fixes to these varied challenges, but what they agree on is that if a teacher holds out for herself a clear picture of what her dream of society is, she will inspire her students to look beyond their immediate challenges to a future society that has greater respect for the individual and equality for its members.

Critical pedagogy offers an opportunity to empower students to resist determined life outcomes by offering them a strategy for critically examining their lives and the cultural constructs they encounter in it. By asking students not just to consume knowledge but also to be producers of it, they move toward taking responsibility for the reality around them. Freire and Shor poignantly describe the process of coming to critical consciousness this way:

[Paulo:] [social] transformation is possible because consciousness is not a mirror of reality, not a mere reflection, but is reflexive and reflective of reality. As conscious human beings, we can discover how we are conditioned by the dominant ideology. We can gain distance on our moment of existence...We can struggle to become free precisely because we can know we are not free!” [Shor:] I like the irony of consciousness that makes liberation possible. By studying our lack of freedom we can learn how to become free. This is the dialectic of the liberatory class. It’s one place where we think critically
about the forces interfering with our critical thought. So, liberatory classes illuminate the
conditions we’re in to help overcome those conditions, offering students a critical
distance on society in place of an uncritical immersion in the status quo (13)

Freire and Shor suggest that by examining the forces interfering with our critical thought,
teachers and students can recognize the ways they are not free in order to reflect on what it
would take in contrast to become free. Through the process of conscientization, critical
pedagogy hopefully offers a strategy by which people can recognize their social determination,
acknowledge their role in maintaining the status quo, and act to change it.
CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION
BRINGING THEORY TO PRACTICE IN MY HIGH SCHOOL LANGUAGE ARTS CLASSES

As the rich time of my study toward a master’s degree comes to an end, and as I prepare to re-enter the classroom as a twelfth grade, language arts high school teacher in just a matter of weeks, I have a fine vantage point from which to survey the educational theories I have researched and take from them useful directions to better serve my students. From this perspective, I have found it is most helpful to begin by taking a broad look at the root problem I associate with assimilation and to offer an alternative platform on which I can begin to construct a different kind of model.

The Problem with Models that Require Assimilation

In models of assimilation a student’s relationship to knowledge, and to the society that knowledge exists within, is one of conformity. When conformity is the goal, a student is taught to study knowledge that will become useful within an existing construct that has already organized information, ideas, and skills into hierarchies of importance. What I am referring to by “constructs” are the theoretical and practical systems in which certain beliefs and actions are determined. When I speak about existing social, economic, theoretical or other constructs, I am attempting to delineate those systems in which individual behavior takes place, as it is determined in relationship to the behavior of others who have acted or believed prior. An education that is based on assimilation requires a person fit into an existing construct and does not even require the individual be aware the construct exists that prescribes appropriate behavior within it. An animal’s behavior exemplifies my point, as it can be taught to act appropriately
within a construct that requires conformity to certain behavior without having to understand what value there is to its actions. In another example, children smoothly conform into linguistic constructs without needing to study the grammar or history that give reason to the ‘correct’ verbal choices they learn to make. An educational model based on assimilation does not provide students with the critical consciousness to examine the constructs in which they behave and therefore neither prepares them to influence that construct nor to influence the behavior or beliefs that construct leads them to.

An education that empowers students both to redirect the world and to redirect themselves within it must resist assimilation and the blind conformity assimilation encourages. Rather than be taught to assimilate, students can be taught that all knowledge, behavior, beliefs, and experiences take place within contexts that prescribe their value, and they can be taught to critically examine both the context and themselves within it. This analysis will create more potential for individuals to act in ways that are consistent with their own goals rather than the goals of others. I do not want to overplay this by suggesting that critical consciousness, as it is called by Freire, will allow individuals to act free of all influences or outside of all predetermined constructs. This is because even those goals and interests that we most closely associate with being ours have been influenced by and represent the actions and beliefs of others. But teaching what I will call the situatedness of all knowledge will help resist the ruts and grooves of predetermined paths by fostering an attitude of constant re-evaluation. In this way, I desire to help students develop the ability to slip in and out of different perspectives, evaluate each perspective’s partiality, and temporarily adopt an attitude or behavior that is aligned as closely as possible with their values and interests, all the while re-evaluating the partiality of those values and considering ways in which they could become more complete.
At the beginning of this thesis, I stated that my purpose was to answer the question “How do we teach students not only to critique society’s inequitable social structures, but also to change them, while simultaneously preparing them to live well within social systems as they are?” I believe the short answer to this multi-faceted question is to help students obtain the slippage necessary to move between what exists and what could exist and to constantly evaluate how their conscientiousness can help the world move with them from what is to what can be.

*Three Strategies in Opposition to Assimilation*

Coming from the belief that all knowledge must be taught as situated and existing within constructs that assign it its relative value, I work my way backward into my teaching practice, investigating where I have approached knowledge as fixed and stable and theorizing how I can upset this. In doing so, I attempt to reveal the multiple contexts in which knowledge can be situated and to make transparent the constructs underneath the assumptions of knowledge’s rigidity. In this process, I have identified three principles that identify places to be approached anew. They are as follows:

1. First, the content of a class should be understood as the students’ production of knowledge rather than as the literature the class reads. When the student’s knowledge is made central, the central curricular question shifts from ‘what texts should we read?’ to ‘what shall we say about them?’ In practice this principle directs teachers not only to localize choices about which texts are read but more importantly to localize the discussions had about them. A work’s value is not ultimately measured by its relative worth to others, as for instance expressed by its place in the canon but by its worth to students as they are able to generate power through analyses of them.
(2) Second, students should be taught to contextualize both a text and their understanding of it by reading literature as responses to specific historical, political, and social contexts rather than as representative of universal themes and values. Texts can be contextualized in the following three different ways: They can be examined as responses to the historical situation out of which a text arose. They can be examined in the context of the motivation of their presence within a curriculum, past and present. They can be examined in terms of how their own identities, intellectual history, and social positions are also contexts by which texts are informed.

(3) Third, teachers should foster an environment where they and their students can see their partiality. Acknowledging partiality will lead to learning and to resisting prescriptive life outcomes, as students and teachers are drawn to discover what they don’t yet know. Acknowledging the partiality of all interpretations of texts, rather than seeking to defend ‘the real’ or ‘final’ interpretation is a significant expression of this principle.

All three of these strategies strive to re-situate a student’s relationship to the knowledge she studies away from a relationship of assimilation and toward a relationship of personal, critically examined, conscientious action and belief. What follows are examples of how I will attempt to do this in my twelfth grade language arts classroom this upcoming year.

*Principle 1: Going Local*

_The content of a class should be understood as the students’ production of knowledge rather than as the literature the class reads. When the student’s knowledge is made central, the central curricular question shifts from ‘what texts should we read?’ to ‘what shall we say about them?’ In practice this principle directs teachers not only to localize choices about which texts are read but more importantly to localize the discussions had about them._ A work’s value is not
ultimately measured by its relative worth to others, as for instance expressed by its place in the canon but by its worth to students as they are able to generate power through analyses of them.

Basing curricular content on the needs of a particular group of individuals is the first step to resisting a philosophy of assimilation. By making a curriculum that is based on local needs, teachers send the message that who students are as individuals is important. Teachers also send the message that they are not merely interested in making everyone assimilate into what someone else has deemed to be an unquestionable, essential way of living. Sending the message that there is no one-size-fits-all education lets students know they are respected, which is critical to opening learners’ receptivity to a teacher’s input. Localizing a curriculum pays attention to the different contexts in which all learners live. One way to go local is by allowing flexible content in the choices of texts and in these choices to consider the needs of learners before simply trying to make room for “the best that has been thought and said,” as Arnold once put it. In a way that is visual to students of all ages, this debunks the idea that knowledge is inherently or independently valuable. Instead it frames knowledge as valuable in relationship to a particular set of goals. This opens the doors for learners to situate knowledge within the constructs that assign it value. Toward this end, it is helpful to begin building a curriculum by asking the following questions: What do I think is important for this group of students to know and to do? Why do I think this? (Because as teachers our assumptions about what is important are often uninterrogated). And how do the texts I’ve chosen help address these needs?

An Instance of Flexibility in Choosing Texts
Choosing goals before texts results in an on-going re-examination of which texts I read with students. As an example of first choosing goals and then choosing texts, I will describe the process of why I have chosen to include Barbara Kingsolver’s most recent novel *Flight Behavior* (2012) in next year’s syllabus. Before choosing this novel, I wanted to generate a conversation with students about different types of knowledge. I wanted to encourage students to interrogate what types of knowledge literature produces in contrast to other disciplines. By investigating what literature is in contrast to another discipline, I wanted to invoke a rich conversation about how different disciplines differently attempt to explain the world. From there, I wanted to develop a conversation about the relationship between different types of knowledge production and the production of culture. I believed this conversation was important to have with the students at the Duke Ellington School of the Arts, where I teach, because as future artists, I wanted them to become more aware of what type of knowledge about the world they are making in themselves and inspiring in others when they make art.

Last year I happened to listen to a radio interview on Talk of the Nation’s Science Friday where Barbara Kingsolver claimed that an important goal to her was for *Flight Behavior* to be both “good science and good literature” (Lichtman). I was interested in what this meant and believed that investigating this with students could begin the type of epistemological conversation that I wanted to have with them. In *Flight Behavior* Kingsolver fictionalizes the effect of global warming as it is witnessed differently by members of the culturally Christian, provincial community in whose town the story takes place and by members of the scientific community who move to the small town to study the phenomenon. Some of the essential questions this novel raises because of this tension include the following: What are the objectives and methods of scientific knowledge? What does it claim itself to be and to do in the world?
How does this contrast with the objectives and methods of literary knowledge? What is the relationship between literary knowledge and literary experience? What can the study of literature uniquely produce in individuals and in society that other disciplines cannot? My hope is that by contrasting the epistemologies of literature and science it will become easier for Ellington students to describe the values of literary studies, as they become more aware of the type of investigation that literature embarks on, the type of answers it posits, the type of knowledge it produces, and the limits of this knowledge. Finally by doing this, I hope students will be able to develop increased understanding of the purpose of their own creative work.

Organizing Curriculum Around What Students Learn Rather than What Students Read

Although choosing different texts is the most obvious way to localize a curriculum, it is only the beginning of this process. Potentially, more opportunity for influencing curriculums toward their localization resides in the choices made after texts have been chosen. This is extremely hopeful because many teachers do not have the option of changing their reading lists. In this upcoming year, though my plan for going local does include trying out new texts, such as Flight Behavior, the bigger change I plan to make is to organize the curriculum around questions I want students to answer rather than texts I want students to read. This shifts the focus of a curriculum from knowledge students must acquire to knowledge students are encouraged to create. I have reorganized my curriculum in six units around questions we will discuss. Students will be required to write answers to the unit’s major questions at both the beginning and at the end of each unit. Under each of these questions, I have a list of texts that could be read in order to help us address these questions. In some cases I will ask students to help me decide which
texts we will read as a class. But more routinely, I plan to prioritize the texts on the initial syllabus and then tell students that we will read as many or as few of the texts as we need to in order to sufficiently help us answer the unit’s questions.

Because I teach six total classes at three different levels, on level, honors, and AP, I expect classes to vary in what and how much they read in order to answer each unit’s questions. By asking students to compare their responses at the beginning and end of each unit, I hope to show students how much more complex each question is than it originally appeared. By the end of the unit, I want students to have developed significantly more complex answers to the questions and be able to measure their own learning by the distance they traveled from their initial answers.

The units I have chosen for this upcoming year are as follows:

**Unit One:** Is there a correct way to speak? On what is ‘correctness’ based? How do you characterize the way you speak? What variables influence the language you use? What does your language use say about your identity? In what ways do you use language to accept the way the world is? In what ways do you use language to resist the way the world is?

**Unit Two:** What is literature? What kinds of knowledge do you produce when you read literature? How does literature attempt to ‘explain’ the world? How is this different than the way other disciplines explain the world? How does understanding the way literature attempts to explain the world help you understand how your artistic discipline attempts to explain the world?

**Unit Three:** What is poetry? How does poetry use language in a unique way? How does poetry achieve its ends? What are the ends it achieves?

**Unit Four:** What difference does it make to read fiction versus nonfiction? What do you think about the Common Core Standard’s new requirement of increasing the percentage of nonfiction students read? In what situations is fiction valuable? In what situations is nonfiction valuable?
Are these situations always different?

**Unit Five:** What is the value of reading ‘old’ books? What is the canon and why do some people value it? Why do some people value the canon less than others do? What is the value of the canon to you?

**Unit Six:** Where do the ideas in language come from? What is the idea of intertextuality and what does it suggest about where ideas come from? What is dialogism? What does it mean to perform a dialogical reading of a text? What is the difference between intertextuality and dialogism? How is the language you use intertextual? How do you interact dialogically with the world?

My hope is that by reorganizing the curriculum around questions rather than texts, I will empower learners to explain the world and themselves in it in new and more sophisticated ways. As part of this, I want students to see that the value to them of a text is not independent of their analyses of it. A text’s placement in or outside of the canon is not what makes it worthwhile to read, but its worth is found in their abilities to uniquely position themselves in relationship to the power a text represents. In this way, a class can push against the imperialist project that makes the historically white, owning class experiences in texts the objects of their study.

**Principle 2: Contextualizing**

*Students should be taught to contextualize both a text and their understanding of it by reading literature as responses to specific historical, political, and social contexts rather than as representative of universal themes and values. Texts can be contextualized in the following three different ways: They can be examined as responses to the historical situation out of which a text arose. They can be examined in the context of the motivation of their presence within a
Before sharing what I would like to do differently in this upcoming school year around contextualizing texts, I would like to provide some context to my understanding of context and in this way present what I will do differently in the future based on what I have done in the past. Years ago when I was about twenty and had first started teaching, I started telling students that reading a work of literature was like listening to one half of a phone conversation; in order for that conversation to make much sense, you had to try and uncover the other half. I remember when I came up with this metaphor. I was teaching an adult ESL class at night. All of the students were coming from full time day jobs, were pretty tired, and could easily be frustrated. I wanted to help students overcome their frustrations by helping them diagnose where they were getting lost and be able to re-route themselves from there. It seemed to me that it was often the case that students would wrongfully blame their self-designated ‘poor’ English with what seemed to be a problem rooted elsewhere. We had been reading a book of short stories by a set of culturally diverse authors, and sometimes the stories seemed odd, even to me. The telephone metaphor was simple to grasp and provided us with a direction to investigate that maybe it wasn’t our English that was causing the problem - maybe it was that the author was Portuguese or Nigerian, Buddhist or Mormon, a lawyer or a mechanic, and maybe we just knew nothing about the type of story he or she was trying to tell.

Later I expanded the phone conversation idea when I took it into my high school language arts classes. To uncover what the ‘other half’ of the conversation was, I led students in investigating what I termed an author’s microcosm and the author’s macrocosm. In contrast to
the macrocosm, the microcosm, I explained, were those parts of our lives that don’t show up in newspapers. To get clues to what an author’s ideas were, we would investigate both their personal stories and the larger political and social context in which they lived. Then as we read, we would infer how those contexts helped shape the experiences an author wrote about. This seemed to be such a helpful strategy for fostering deeper conversations about what was going on in a work that I eventually helped lead the school in aligning the literature curriculum with the history curriculum (it was relatively small and private and could make institutional changes autonomously). Through this process, it became clear that contextualizing the literature did more than just shed light on an author’s ideas. Connecting an author’s historical context with his or her ideas began to stimulate conversations about how the ideas we held were related to the contemporary contexts we lived in. It came to be that this had a rather revolutionary effect on the students I was teaching.

I taught one group of thirty-five students for both their tenth and eleventh grade years in a private, religious school during the time we were realigning the English and history curriculums. They undertook this process with me, and together we became absorbed in the political and historical situations that gave rise to authors’ perspectives. In one particularly moving experience, the class became very fascinated with John Milton’s fight for the English people to be free of an authoritarian monarchy. They were intrigued by his portrayal in *Paradise Lost* of God’s choice to give humans free will even at the cost of their rebellion, and they understood Milton’s bitterness after the defeat of the Parliamentarians in the English Civil War as his bitterness toward the English people for not valuing their freedom as God himself exemplified it should be valued.

As we undertook the evaluation of the relationship between Milton’s ideas of free will in
*Paradise Lost* and his struggles for English political freedom from monarchy, students began to consider the relationship between their evaluations of Milton’s ideas and our church’s Calvinist theology of predestination. A central tenet of the theology of the church we were part of stated that God chose a limited group for salvation from the beginning of time. Milton’s insistence that humans had free will was at odds with our church’s belief in God’s absolute sovereignty.

Inferring the connection between Milton’s ideas and his experiences created an interesting tension around the idea of why they held fast to the Calvinist tenet of God’s sovereignty. This presented the possibility that if beliefs reflected context, that they were more partial than students originally had believed. This tension was increased in light of their sympathy with Milton’s love of freedom, which was at odds with their accepted theological positions. I did not lead the tenth grade class in challenging the church’s belief, but I watched as they and I became more aware of our own contexts, and ourselves as shaped by our contexts, through our reading of Milton, a work that some students had heard from previous students was merely a lengthy, irrelevant book based on one man’s inaccurate retelling of the Bible.

In their eleventh grade year, these students and I read Arthur Miller’s play *The Crucible*. I had removed it from its previous curricular placement alongside Puritan writings, which the church held dear, and looked at it the context of Miller’s experience in the McCarthy era communist scare. This recontextualization brought us to consider how different contexts led readers to view the material itself differently. Removing it from the context of the Puritan readings and placing it in the context of the political conflict the author experienced, presented a different angle from which to view the entire work. As we looked at this, some students’ sympathy with Miller’s resistance to McCarthyism created tension in the class, and I had to face my own fears in a meeting with school administrators and parents after two students accused me
of “being communist.” One student’s father was in the military and took the accusation very seriously. Though the meeting scared me, it had the benefit of starting a debate amongst the students about what it meant to “be communist,” to sympathize with communists, and to question the way we come to judgments, in the same way *The Crucible* asks readers to question the way the town came to the judgments about the guilt of Elizabeth and John Proctor.

*A Deepened Understanding of Context*

As I stand between these past experiences and the upcoming school year, in light of a new understanding about why literature has both historically and contemporarily found itself in the public school curriculum, I recognize that one of the main tenets of this project has been to contextualize the study of literature as I want students to contextualize a work of fiction. As I suggested in chapter one, this helps me realize that the content of a student’s education is itself an important object of study, an idea Freire and Shor suggest when they encouraged educators to help students “unveil the raison d’être of any study” (172). This adds another layer onto the idea of studying a work ‘in context.’ As I mentioned at the end of chapter one, I would like to investigate with students why a work is included in their curriculum in the present and in the past. This is particularly an interesting study if a work has a long tradition of inclusion in many curriculums. Even when it is not possible to uncover the historical context of why a text has been studied, attempting this investigation will encourage students to develop a critical perspective on the claims made about education’s purpose.

To begin this study, it would be valuable to read with students Nina Baym’s essay “Early Histories of American Literature” and Horace Scudder’s late nineteenth century address on *The
Place of Literature in the Common School Curriculum. These pieces immediately create an interesting contrast, because Scudder presents an argument for why certain American authors should be included in the curriculum from his perspective in the 1880s, and from her perspective in the 1980s Baym presents an alternative argument for why many of these same authors were included. Baym exemplifies for students how to take a critical perspective on the claims made about the purposes of their educations. Though it may not be possible to discover many historical articles like Scudder’s that argue the reasons for why a given body of knowledge has been studied, students can begin an investigation in this direction simply by asking a teacher about why they teach what they teach. Students can begin to trace a history from there, uncovering what values the teacher’s choice reveals, whether they be unique to the teacher or representative of a tradition in which the teacher is part. This investigation does not have to remain in the discipline of language arts. The analytical skills developed in investigating other disciplines will help students create the questions they will need to investigate the raison d’être of the texts they study with me. The goal of this investigation is that students develop critical perspectives of teachers’ claims and to theorize whether the interests the teachers represent are interests the students believe represent their own. An example assignment may be something like the following:

Choose a discipline and a particular body of knowledge within that discipline that you have studied in the last four years. Investigate why that body of knowledge has been included in your curriculum. What are the ideas behind how this studied content would benefit society? What vision of society does this suggest and who is included in this picture of ‘society’? What are the ideas behind how this content will benefit you? In this situation, do you believe you and society mutually benefit from this study or is one prioritized over the other?
Following this assignment, students can interrogate the reasons behind my choices of which texts we will read. Out of this examination, I hope to encourage students to explore how the content of their education is not neutral and how it reflects specific paradigms and explanations of the world that educators hold. But I also hope students see that although there is intention behind what they are expected to do with the content of their education, this content is ultimately a tool that can be used in different ways. By examining the spoken and unspoken purposes behind their educations, students will be in the best positions to wield the power their educations offer in directions of their own choosing. By examining how texts are like tools, I hope to inspire students to consider how they would like to use the texts we are reading and to see that they can create their own relationships with texts that resist or accept the purposes I or others intend.

To add yet another layer onto the implications of what it means to contextualize a work, I would like to help students recognize that the different perspective each individual comes from is also a context that informs the meaning of a work. Rosenblatt’s theory of aesthetic transaction points readers in this direction by encouraging them to dismantle the idea of a text’s objectivity. As we recognize the different contexts that inform the meanings we assign to works, I want to encourage students to explore how literature, language, and ideas are not stable and fixed entities, but move in relationship to the different contexts in which they’re considered. This implies that the idea of common knowledge is itself a myth. As Michael Apple writes, “there is no way to actually create a common curriculum; the same curriculum will always be ‘read in different ways, according to how pupils are placed in social relationships and culture’” (Richard Johnson qtd. in Apple 33). Teaching all knowledge as situated helps students begin to see that nothing that exists has meaning independent of the context in which it exists. As students evaluate texts in relationship to contexts they can also evaluate their own actions and beliefs as
texts that are responses to the contexts from which they came. This also encourages students to consider how others read them. These thoughts provide a paradigm for how to understand the different actions and beliefs in the world around us.

**Principle 3: Recognizing Partiality**

*Teachers should foster an environment where they and their students can see their partiality.* Acknowledging partiality will lead to learning and to resisting prescriptive life outcomes, as students and teachers are drawn to discover what they don’t yet know. Acknowledging the partiality of all interpretations of texts, rather than seeking to defend ‘the real’ or ‘final’ interpretation is a significant expression of this principle.

This project was motivated by my desire to help students resist prescriptive life outcomes through the study of literature. When I first learned that the history of literature as an academic discipline was rooted in the promotion of assimilation, I was distraught. I want my life, and my teaching of literature within that, to help people question why things are the way they are, not encourage people to merely accept the thinking of others. Assimilation is the process of conformity. Where conformity exists, people are not prone to see the limitations of their views, and are therefore prone to live in the prescription of others’ views. But where critical thinking exists, people are able to see the limitations of their perspectives and work to improve them. One of the best ways to promote critical thinking is to engage with people whose views are different than yours, if this engagement comes from a place of mutual respect. Encouraging mutual respect between learners begins with my showing students that I respect and want to learn from them. I must demonstrate that students know things about the world that I do not. I
must show myself to be a learner before asking the students to learn, and then I must continue to be a learner alongside them.

Mutually respectful exchange that encourages all of us as learners to re-evaluate our previously held views in light of new explanations of the world begins with students and my understanding of our partiality, both in terms of the incompleteness and bias of our understandings of the world. When as learners we recognize our partiality, we are more prone to listen to each other in order to discover what we don’t know. Further recognition of the narrowness of our conception results from listening. Recognizing one’s partiality therefore both precedes and follows a learning situation. Recognizing one’s views are limited draws one toward learning, and through the process of learning one realizes how much more there is to learn. Critical thinking must be seen as critically examining our own views, not being critical of the views of others. We must re-cast critical thinking from being understood as scrutiny and resistance to being understood as the process of expansion and acceptance. Assimilation, conformity, and prescription follow each other in a narrowing spiral, but recognizing partiality, respecting others, and increased learning follow each other in widening spirals of power, freedom, and joy.

To foster a spirit of critical thinking and learning, a teacher must therefore create an environment where partiality is rewarded. In the past, I have found that students can be most resistant to acknowledging their partiality and to learning, where they have already accepted that the pathway to success is conformity. Because I have had many conversations with educators, I know that teachers can come into a class enthusiastic about inspiring real learning, only to be met with a group of students who look at them with glum and glossed over eyes, with pencils in hand, ready to consume what is given them and to regurgitate it back. They show only concern with a teacher’s high level of excitement and see it as evidence that she is ignorant of the real
challenges they face. In cases like this, it can be an up-road battle to convince students that you will settle for nothing less than their spirits revived and their freedom pursued.

*The Slow Path Toward Partiality*

In a particularly poignant example of the difficulty of getting students to learn, I taught a group of primarily working class, tenth grade honors students in a large, urban public high school. Unlike the on-level students, many of whom left school after the free lunch was served, the honors students desperately wanted to ‘get ahead’ and believed college was the path to do this. This ironically worked against me. All the students at the school were required to pass the Maryland HSA standardized test in order to graduate. The HSA was administered in the tenth grade year. When I started teaching, it became apparent that the students were convinced that the sole purpose of the tenth grade language arts class was to pass the English section of the HSA. They were so terrorized of not passing that they vociferously argued any curricular move I made away from obvious test preparation. At the beginning of the year, I studied the HSA so that I could be sure to train the students for it. But I had yet to realize how deeply the fear of the test and its consequences had impacted the students.

At one point, instead of analyzing the short fiction chosen by the test publishers, which was given without any context and usually morally and linguistically facile, I chose to read Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* which had multiple levels of meaning for students, including the portrayal of resistance to social oppression. It was also funny and fun. But students had a hard time appreciating this. They were so stressed about the test, they could often think about nothing else. At one point, as we approached the test, students organized a
‘protest’ that amounted to a refusal to do anything more if it wasn’t direct test prep. I walked into the room and faced a silent class. They refused to respond to my questions, and at a signal from their leader they all simultaneously threw their books on the floor. Feeling powerless, I walked over to my computer, which was connected to the projector, and typed a silent response that asked them what they wanted to. One of the students wrote on a sheet of paper “test prep.” So that day and for several days to follow, I decided I would prepare for the test, but that I would do it on my own terms. I chose a passage of literature that I thought was culturally critical, well written, and often humorous. Then I prepared questions that mirrored test questions. About fifty percent of the time, before giving them the questions, I would ask if we could talk about the literature for a few minutes. It always followed, as I hoped would be the case, that they answered the questions more easily following the discussions. Soon we lingered longer on the conversations and less on the questions, and they began to see that the more they were able to be engaged learners, the better they were able to think about anything, including the test. Many students eventually began to ask me when we were going to return to the curriculum we had been studying prior to their protest.

Looking back on this situation, I can see the beginning of my understanding of partiality. I see that there were many ways in which I had to learn to understand the students’ lives and needs, including how important it was for them to know they could conform to the requirements of the test. Dewey’s insistence that teachers must encounter a curriculum by “getting outside of it, seeing it as another would see it, considering what points of contact it has with the life of another so that it may be got into such form that he can appreciate its meaning” (School and Society 5) gives me context for understanding the students’ protest and what worked about respecting their belief in the importance of the test. In this light, I can see how they responded to
my real interest in them and their curricular agendas with interest in me and my curricular agenda. As we increasingly saw the limitations of our partiality, an exchange of respect began to take place that led to widening circles of learning and closer proximity to wholeness.

*The Contribution of Personal Writing in Moving Closer to Wholeness*

This upcoming year, I now have several more ideas about how to promote an acknowledgment of partiality that will engender learning. The first is to begin with Freire, Shor, and hooks' recommendation of beginning a class by helping students investigate their own realities. Freire and Shor encourage teachers and students to jointly “come up with [their] own account” of the world around them and to together “draw conclusions from the collected findings” (172). Toward this end rather than study texts in chronological order, which I have done in the past, I am starting the year with a unit on personal writing and memoir. This will help students write their college application essays and will show students that what is important to them is also important to me. This will model an attitude of partiality by acknowledging that though I expect them to work very hard, I am not trying to impose on them my own beliefs about what is important, rather I am willing to listen to their stated needs. Once I pay attention to their needs, I believe they will be much more likely to consider those skills I believe are important, including probing the constructs around us to see their limitations and envision society anew.

Since drawing more personal writing into my syllabus is in direct opposition to the national direction being led by David Coleman in the Common Core Standards, it is important to be very clear what my goals are in this project and how these goals both differ and can work in concert with what I believe Coleman’s goals are. Coleman’s resistance to personal writing comes from
an interest in a student’s success in the work world and the belief that self-analysis focuses students’ attention away from the broader social context in which they must enter. Though my goals are not limited by the hope of preparing students to enter the workforce, I believe he is right in fearing that personal writing can encourage egotistical platitudes where students are encouraged to talk about how much they already know about the world. I see this problem when students try to write college application essays that seem to require they describe their unique experiences and knowledge of the world. ‘I’m just a normal high school student,’ many young people say, ‘I don’t have an exotic life.’ Although, I’ve often encouraged students to see how their experiences are unique, I believe there is another entrance into personal writing that doesn’t call for this perspective.

Self-examination in the context of partiality encourages students to consider what they do not know about the world rather than what they do know. In this light, personal writing becomes an opportunity for students to create a map of themselves as learners, rather than map out how they are already learned individuals. Students should be asked to examine the circumstances in which their learning has occurred rather than to present the learned content this situation produced. In this examination, it matters less what students have learned, and if the content of that learning is or isn’t unique, and it matters more how their learning happens. This difference prepares me for opening the school year with the reading of memoir. I am encouraged to help students search for the circumstances an author portrays that prepared that author to learn. I can ask questions like: What brought an author to recognize his or her partiality? And what engendered his or her growth? Rather than questions like: What does this author uniquely know about the world that she can teach us? This shift toward examining the way others have learned in order to lead us to examine the way we learn is both a perfect place from which to begin a
school year and also a perfect place from which to write about why a college should accept a student. Although most colleges desire a diverse student body with unique experiences, it is ultimately more important that all students come with a recognition of how much more they have to learn and what best prepares them to do so. Training students to be metacognitive of how they learn and to be prepared to keep learning is also in the best interest of students’ future workplaces and therefore satisfies Coleman’s interest in preparing students to enter broader social contexts.

Ultimately, helping students see themselves as learners is part of the larger project of depicting the world around us as incomplete and in need of new perspectives and new explanations of itself. This perspective on personal writing works in concert with reorganizing the syllabus around questions, as both moves are intended to communicate that the world itself is partial and will benefit by the contributions of new voices. Organizing the syllabus around content to be consumed suggests that the world already has enough knowledge and that all students must do to be educated is take-in the content that exists. But reorganizing education around the knowledge student’s produce makes the statement that the world’s knowledge is incomplete and that their contributions are critical.

*Educators Mark Faust and Mark A. Williams Centralize Learners’ Recognitions of Their Own Experiences*

A discussion of literature that acknowledges the incompletion of the world’s current explanations of itself values the multiple, varied interpretations of texts that students produce. In order to create an environment that welcomes new perspectives, high school teacher and professor Mark Faust suggests teachers encourage students to *account for* their interpretations
rather than *defend* them (27). Therefore instead of students’ interpretations being judged on their accuracy measured by nearness to the interpretation of a ‘professional,’ an interpretation is judged based on how well a student can communicate the path her thinking traveled as she sought to make sense of what she read. The transition to accounting for one’s unique reading helps stop short the search for a mythical ‘real’ or ‘final’ interpretation. Instead of searching for someone else’s answer, students are encouraged to be metacognitive of the context from which they perceive a text and the constructs in which they evaluate it. Explaining these subjective elements of their reading is critical to both communicating their explanation of it and recognizing the partiality out of which it arises. A switch to accounting for interpretations also contributes to the paradigm of the continued necessity of new perspectives and new explanations of human experience.

The switch from asking students to account for their individual interpretations rather than defend a correct interpretation represents the paradigm switch where education is used to invite students to see the world more insightfully and to lead the world more wisely than it has been seen or led in the past. This is in contrast to an education which exalts limited past understandings of reality by merely requiring students consume what is already known. In my teaching career I have been fortunate to witness the demonstration of this paradigm shift in the teaching staff at the Duke Ellington School of the Arts. Exemplifying the prioritization of helping learners recognize their own experiences is the pedagogy of Mark A. Williams, long time educator and chair of the Literary, Media and Communications Department at Duke Ellington. Recently, Williams led his students in the production of the first ever TEDx Event that featured high school students as its keynote speakers. In Williams’ explanation for how high school students can lead the world in innovation, he claims that it begins with teachers resisting
the American educational system’s operation as a GPS that dictates direction rather than lets learners explore where they need to go and how they need to get there. He argues that the purpose of a GPS is to keep drivers from getting lost but that it is precisely the act of getting lost and of discovering one’s way out where learning and innovation occur. In Williams’ TED address he states that what the GPS educational model gives you is an answer, but that an education that provides answers is “antithetical to the way we train writers and why we need writers.” “The artist,” he continues, “has to live in questions. There are no answers.” It follows that if we allow students to explore, to get lost, and to find new ways to explain reality, we can lift them from the well-trodden ruts of pre-determined life paths and set them on individual journeys toward critical consciousness.

*Education: Dr. or Patient?*

In conclusion I would like to end with two thoughts by Michael Apple that I believe poignantly characterize what we want to move away from in education and what we want to move toward. On the one hand, he writes, “without a recognition of the socially situated character of all educational policy and practice, without a recognition of the winners and losers in this society, without a more structural understanding of how and why schools participate in creating these winners and losers, I believe that we are doomed to reproduce an endless cycle of high or diminished hopes, rhetorical reforms, and broken promises” (97). Apple posits that the extraordinary efforts and dollars we spend on education are wasted if we do not see how education itself perpetuates the problems it is attempting to fix. But how therefore can education work against itself, diagnosing its own sickness while also supposing itself to be the cure?
Though Apple does not lead us to an exact answer, he suggests the process from which an answer can be formed, stating, “The only kind of [curricular] ‘cohesion’ that is possible is one in which we overtly recognize differences and inequalities. The curriculum then should not be presented as ‘objective.’ Rather, it must constantly subjectify itself. That is, it must ‘acknowledge its own roots’ in the culture, history and social interests out of which it arose” (33). Apple encourages us to present education to students not just as a path that can lead to their success but also as the very content of what must be studied along that path. We must all be able to see education both for what we want it to be, as the route to a better world, and for all that it cannot be, because it is itself cut from the fabric it is trying to patch. Only as we learn not just to strive for our ideals but also to question the ways in which we strive and even the ideals themselves will the path toward education as a road to freedom and power become apparent. Resisting the goal of assimilation and instead studying literature with the goal of critical consciousness is an essential component of this process.
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