

CHAPTER THREE

Conflicting Discourses: Teacher and Student Making Progress in a Racialized Space

The starting-point of critical elaboration is . . . “knowing thyself” as a product of the historical process . . . which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory.

Antonio Gramsci (1971, p. 324)

In the previous chapter, we reported Fishman’s success in helping a recent immigrant, Neha Shah, make progress toward his goals for undergraduate thinking and writing. In this chapter, we describe Steve’s success with another underprepared writer, a pupil with a very different history: 36-year-old, African American, returning student, Ellen Williams. Although Ellen’s improvement with regard to the surface features of her writing was, like Neha’s, modest, the change in her attitude toward philosophy and her ability to use it in personally meaningful ways was quite dramatic.

OUR CENTRAL FINDING: STORYTELLING IS NOT ENOUGH

Our main finding in chapter 2 was that writing-to-learn was not enough for Neha Shah, that she also needed small group discussion of her writing-to-learn homework exercises in order to succeed in Fishman’s course. Our central finding in this chapter echoes that one. We found that, for Ellen Williams, storytelling was important but that, by itself, it was not enough. Ellen’s stories and accounts of personal experience were productive for her only when Fishman

could help her contextualize them—that is, help her see them as reflective of broader philosophic issues. Thus, just as writing-to-learn was important for Neha but required connection to small group work, so, in similar ways, storytelling was important for Ellen but required opportunities for reflection and questioning.

Unfortunately, Fishman was not always successful in orchestrating such opportunities. As McCarthy will show, when he could not help Ellen examine her stories from new angles, her accounts of personal experience were unproductive, actually erecting or strengthening barriers between her and her classmates and teacher. By contrast, when he did provide philosophic background for Ellen's stories, she came to see her views less as transcendent truths and more as social constructions. She could, thus, step back to explore and appraise them in ways both she and Steve deemed productive.

Fishman's effort to provide philosophic background for student stories and opinions reflects his commitment to Gramsci (1971) and Dewey (Dewey & Bentley, 1949). Following Gramsci, Fishman believes that for students to know themselves they have to investigate the intellectual movements that, as Gramsci puts it, have deposited their "traces" in pupils' ideas but have left no "inventory" (p. 324). That is, Fishman sees contextualizing stories as a way of enabling students to label their beliefs, to make explicit their ideas' histories and the ways these histories carry with them implicit worldviews and assumptions about power. In Deweyan terms, setting student accounts in philosophic and historical context is important because it encourages students to see their experiences as transactions between their interpretive frameworks and their material conditions. It helps them recognize the ways in which their own perspectives shape their experiences and the meanings they take from them.

When Fishman succeeded in helping Ellen do what Gramsci and Dewey wish—put her ideas in historical and philosophic context—we found there were two consequences for her. First, she could gain critical distance on her narratives and, thus, achieve one of Steve's overall goals for students: an appreciation of the value of exploring cultural knowledge and its usefulness for developing a better understanding of oneself and one's world. Second, it helped her realize

another of Fishman's general goals—social reform—as it gave her, as well as other students who contributed to joint inquiry in class discussion, a sense of a democratized and transformed social space. More specifically, it enabled Ellen and her classmates to become more sensitive to the effects of their actions upon others, to develop the social intelligence Dewey sees as the hallmark of democratic living (1916/1967, pp. 87, 121–122). This feeling of mutual concern and trust among classmates that Ellen experienced in this space was something that not only Dewey treasures but Gramsci and Freire as well.

In sum, we agree with Critical Race Theorists and feminists who argue that storytelling is essential to giving minorities and women a voice (eg. Bambara, 1984; Bell, 1992; Christian, 1987; Delgado, 1989, 1990, 1989/1995a, 1995b; Grumet, 1988; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Russell, 1983; Schniedewind, 1985; Shrewsbury, 1993; Williams, 1991). However, we also agree with hooks (1989, p. 110) and Giroux (1991, p. 254; 1992, p. 80) who warn that storytelling and personal opinion are not enough if students are to achieve powerful and influential voices. To do this, hooks and Giroux claim, students must also forge connections between their narratives and cultural, historical, and political themes. Our study of this particular under-prepared writer corroborates their claim.

Following our organizational pattern in chapter 2, we offer a three-part account. In the first, Steve Fishman describes what he sees as Ellen Williams's progress toward his goals by contrasting her early and late semester papers. In Part Two, Lucille McCarthy outlines the instructional supports that Ellen indicated were significant in her progress. Finally, at the end of this chapter, as at the close of the previous one, we provide a coda in which we explore our unresolved differences: our disagreements about appropriate course requirements and grading criteria for Ellen Williams. Throughout this three-part chapter, in order to gain a critical edge on Fishman's pedagogy, we employ, in addition to the theories of Dewey, Gramsci, and Freire, the work of the Critical Race Theorists we have just mentioned as well as scholars engaged in Whiteness studies (eg. Dyer, 1997; Frankenberg, 1993; Marshall & Ryden, 2000; Miles, 1993;

Prendergast, 1998; Roediger, 1991, 2002; Thompson, 1998).

We begin our account of Ellen Williams's experiences in Intro to Philosophy by contrasting her with Neha Shah.

TWO UNDERPREPARED STUDENTS: SIMILAR INSTRUMENTALIST GOALS, DIFFERENT HISTORICAL AND MATERIAL CONDITIONS

Ellen Williams, a junior transfer student who had completed an associate of arts degree 12 years earlier, came to Steve's course, like Neha Shah, with little preparation for the sort of reading and writing he assigns. And, like Neha, Ellen's goal for taking the course was solely to fulfill a graduation requirement. She had no interest in philosophy and believed, more generally, that undergraduate education is without intrinsic value. But Ellen needed "that piece of paper," as she referred to the bachelor's degree, because, without it, she could not advance in her job as a prison guard working the night shift in a minimum security facility. Thus, she sounded much like Neha Shah when she told Lucille that, for her, UNC Charlotte was a useless and time-consuming stepping stone to her real objective. Alternatively put, Ellen, like Neha, approached her work in philosophy as alienated labor.

Although Neha and Ellen were both female members of minority groups, uninterested in and new to the reading and writing Fishman required, and although both had full-time jobs when the semester began, this is where their similarities ended. The historical and material conditions within which they labored were very different. Whereas Neha lived with her family and could afford to reduce her out-of-school work hours, Ellen could not.¹ She was a single mother supporting two sons, ages 9 and 11, housing a 25-year-old nephew who had moved to Charlotte from New York to live with her, and caring for her ill mother. And whereas Neha saw Steve's philosophy class as unnecessary because she already had a degree from a university in her home country, Ellen's alienation was differently rooted. Her grievance about having to take Intro to Philosophy was not directed, as it was for Neha, against a particular university

administrator. Rather, Ellen's alienation was from the entire culture of the university, and its origin lay in the very racial tensions and prejudices in America which came as a surprise to Neha and which are at the center of Critical Race Theorists' concerns.

More specifically, Ellen's aversion to taking philosophy was rooted in two fundamental beliefs. First, it was Ellen's tacit sense that the university is a racialized space, one designed to maintain the economic and cultural dominance of Whites, or, as Critical Race Theorists put it, to maintain Whiteness as a valuable property (Bell, 1987; Harris, 1993; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). That is, UNC Charlotte represented for Ellen a public school system that has historically excluded African Americans, an institution that has used admission requirements and writing placement exams to conceal its role in the perpetuation of deep-seated social injustices. Second, Ellen's alienation from the university was rooted in the related belief, one she frequently articulated to Lucille, that book learning is of little value in comparison to life experience. This valuing of wisdom gained from life experience above that gained in school is, according to educational researchers, common among Black reentry women (see Luttrell, 1989; Weis, 1985, 1992).

Thus, Ellen's and Neha's resistances to Fishman's course sprang from their histories as members of different minority groups. Whereas Neha is a member of a high-status minority, a product of voluntary immigration in pursuit of increased economic opportunity, Ellen is a member of what Ogbu (1988) calls an involuntary immigrant group, one that has had to battle centuries of negative attributions and exclusions by the dominant Euroamerican class (see Cummins, 1986; Suarez-Orozco, 2001). That is, Ellen, unlike Neha, grew up in a society that deprecates her home culture, its language and practices. These differences between Neha Shah and Ellen Williams meant that, although they both were instrumentalists and approached their work in philosophy as alienated labor, the material, political, and social conditions under which they labored were quite different. In particular, there were significant disparities between these students in the amount of time they could afford to devote to Intro to Philosophy, the forces of academic production they could

bring to their reading and writing, and the family supports they could draw upon.

Different Forces of Production: Time, Habits, Skills

As we have explained, Neha Shah had been a good student in her native India and came from a financially successful and professionally oriented family. When Neha had to revise her expectations about the amount and difficulty of the work in Steve's course, she had well established academic study habits she could bring into play. The fact that Neha could spend as much as six hours preparing for philosophy class separates her not only from Ellen but from the majority of Steve's students. Neha's previous schooling had given her one of the skills Gramsci (1971) believes a pre-university education should provide: the self-discipline to focus for long hours on intellectual tasks (p. 37). In addition, Neha told McCarthy, she received considerable help at home, her older cousin and younger sister acting as respondents and editors for her philosophic writing.

The forces of production that Ellen Williams brought to philosophy stand in sharp contrast to Neha's. By the time Ellen arrived in Steve's course in fall 1998, she had been trying for 12 years to move beyond the associate's degree she had received from a community college. On three occasions, in 1990 at the University of Connecticut at Storrs and in 1993 and 1995 at UNC Charlotte, she had enrolled in a baccalaureate program only to fail or withdraw. So not only did Ellen have heavy family and financial responsibilities that were absent from Neha's life, Ellen's discontinuous education and uneven record of school success meant she had less experience with the rhythms and routines of academic labor which Neha found so familiar. (For more on the challenges facing working class reentry women, see Lewis, 1988; Zwerling & London, 1992. For discussion of the correlation of college success and numbers of hours worked at an outside job, see Brint & Karabel, 1989; Soliday, 1999.)

Ellen's situation is, however, more complex than we have presented so far. Although she did not have the same financial resources and academic work habits as Neha, she brought other types of capital to

Fishman's course, strengths and motivations which were considerable. Alongside Ellen's instrumentalist approach to "that piece of paper," and alongside her sense that universities are racialized spaces, were more positive feelings about higher education. She told both of us about her aspiration to set an example for her young sons, to show them that college was within their grasp. She also told us that she wanted to follow in her mother's footsteps, a woman who, while raising six children, managed to go back to school and earn an associate's degree so she could become a practical nurse. In addition to motives arising from family relationships, Ellen brought important English oral skills, or linguistic capital, which Neha simply did not possess. For example, Ellen was an engaging storyteller and courageous about expressing her views even when the majority or those in authority opposed her.

Achieving Different Successes

Because Neha Shah and Ellen Williams brought different sorts of capital to Fishman's course, it is not surprising that they also achieved diverse successes. Whereas Neha achieved two of the five specific objectives for student thinking and writing that Fishman outlined in chapter 2, we found that by the end of the semester Ellen had achieved four: (1) argument extraction, (2) argument evaluation, (3) contextualization of one's own opinion, and (4) application of philosophy. Most striking, as we will show, was Ellen's achievement of goal 4. She came to understand, in ways Neha never did, the value of applying philosophic issues and methods to her own life. In so doing, she practiced the sort of Socratic inquiry—the critical examination of alternative perspectives—that characterizes philosophic thinking. As she told Lucille in a follow-up interview 5 months after the course concluded,

That class really made me open my mind. I question things now—like religion—that I never even knew you could question. . . . At first, I didn't want to; I just did not have time or interest. But then I heard people putting all sorts of ideas on the table, and I thought, Why not think about these things? The seed was planted, and me being me,

even if I did not want to think about these ideas, I was going to. At 11:00 at night—when I went to work—that class was still on my mind.

By the close of the semester, then, Ellen saw philosophy in less instrumentalist terms than when she began the course. That is, unlike Neha, Ellen came to see her work in philosophy as personally valuable and growth-producing, intrinsically worthwhile instead of just a forgettable means to her degree. Her academic labors came to have, to employ Marxian language, *use* value as well as *exchange* value (Marx, 1867/1967, pp. 47–93).

In Part One that follows, Fishman begins by analyzing Ellen’s first homework assignment, one that manifests her resistance to his book knowledge, her relative unpreparedness to write in the dominant code, and her perspective on American racism. He then skips to the end of the semester to describe Ellen’s final essay which, he argues, represents significant growth in terms of his specific class objectives.



Part One

An Early-Semester Homework Paper: White Teacher, Black Student, and Their Conflicting Discourses

STEVE FISHMAN

As was the case with Neha Shah, I was dismayed by Ellen’s early papers, compositions that, once again, made me feel that this student was underprepared for my “writing intensive” philosophy course and that I, in turn, was underprepared for her. As an example of Ellen’s early work, I reproduce her first paper of the semester, a homework response to a five-page excerpt from Stokely Carmichael’s essay, “What We Want” (1966/1995). The Carmichael piece was the second of three readings in my opening unit, a section dealing with racism that featured the work of Fanon (1965/1995), Carmichael (1966/1995), and hooks (1981/1995). I began the course with this topic in an effort to get my students’ attention, to let them

know that we were going to be dealing with important social issues and that the readings in the class were intended to challenge beliefs which may be so deeply held that, as Gramsci (1971) tells us, they are invisible.

For homework, I asked students after they read Carmichael's essay—a critique of integration as a subterfuge for maintaining White supremacy—to respond to the following prompt:

Please type a brief summary of Carmichael's argument against racial integration of White and Black in America. Conclude your summary with a question about Carmichael's position which you would be willing to present to the class as discussion leader.

In this prompt, I was asking, first, that students summarize Carmichael's argument (objective 1) and, second, that they question or evaluate it (objective 2).

Ellen's response to this assignment, which I reproduce below just as she typed it, is satisfactory because she accurately summarizes Carmichael's argument about the negative consequences of desegregation. I was pleased that she was strongly engaged with the topic, apparently really wanting me to know what she believed. However, as I explain below, there are two aspects of Ellen's homework—the unusual number of surface errors and a style of argumentation characterized by numerous non sequiturs—which drew my critical attention. Ellen writes,

Stokely Carmichael's

Carmichael believes that black America has two problems. First they are poor and second they are black. This country does not function by morality, love or non violence, but by power and black people have no power. Name ten black millionaires

He believed that integration speaks only to the problem of blackness. Integration means the man who becomes successful and makes it leaving his black brother behind in the ghetto. It says in order to have a decent house or education blacks must move in to a white neighborhood or go to a white school, and this only reinforces among black and white that white is better and black is inferior. It just allows the nation to focus on only a handful. This situation will not

change until black people have power to control their own schools, and communities, when Negroes will become equal. That is when integration ceases to be a one way street. It means white people moving into black communities. White people joining groups such as NAACP that is when integration becomes relevant. A lot of people like my mother will tell you that we as a people have come a long way ,she will also tell you how she remembers being ordered to get to the back of the bus .Now a days many black people that ride the bus every day may not have ever sat in the back of the bus. I look for the times when blacks and whites will come together as a people ,but I really donot belive it would happen at least not in my life time.

The laws are not govern for the black people Who made the laws the white man You can only get as far as someone lets you, especially if you are poor. If you are a poor black man and in the wrong place at the wrong time you can kiss your freedom good bye for a while.

That semester I was using an evaluation scheme of “high pass,” “pass,” “low pass,” and “fail,” and I gave Ellen a “pass” on this assignment because of her satisfactory summary of Carmichael’s main point. At the top of Ellen’s paper, however, I made no comment about the content of her homework. Instead, I suggested, “Please try to get help with your writing at the Writing Center,” a remark that reflected my uncertainty, once again, as with Neha, about how to respond to this sort of work. At a loss about what else to do, I circled or marked 38 errors or mismanagements—punctuation, sentence boundary problems, and misspellings—and, in the margin just above the final paragraph, I queried, “transition?” At the time, I told McCarthy,

Ellen’s writing is shaky but passable when she is following Carmichael’s text, but when she gets to her own comments, her mechanical errors and non sequiturs make it tough for me to follow her thinking. I’m keeping my fingers crossed that pointing out her surface problems will be of help to her.

The one substantive comment I did write on Ellen’s paper was a marginal note in response to her command at the end of her first paragraph to name 10 Black millionaires. Although she implies that

this is an impossible task, in my comment I disagree. I say there are many Black millionaires today but that Carmichael's conclusion still holds, namely, that integration means that many of these people leave the ghetto to join upper class American life, thus depleting the resources available to those who remain behind. To prove my point, I list 10 Black millionaires, all of them professional athletes, all of them living among Whites.

As I discussed my marginal note with Lucille at the time, I worried about directly disagreeing with a student. This is something I try to avoid, both in class and in my comments on student writing, because it makes me a combatant in the discussion rather than a questioner or a facilitator, the roles I prefer to play. In fact, on Ellen's first day in class (the third meeting of the semester), I had succeeded in backing away from this very argument with her when she contradicted my claim that things have gotten worse in the ghetto since the 1960s when Carmichael wrote. When she took issue with me, saying "No, things have always been as bad as they are today," I replied, "Well, Ellen, you may be right. I'm only quoting from some books I read" (Gibbs, 1988; Wilson, 1996).

However, when I responded to Ellen's homework, I found myself unable to hold my tongue in face of the absolute certainty of her tone. I told Lucille, "Ellen's voice in this piece seems so loud and angry that she makes me nervous." I was concerned because I knew from past experience that students who believe they have the truth and seem uninterested in questioning can make class discussion—the careful philosophic exploration of alternative positions I try to orchestrate—very difficult. My taking Ellen up on her challenge to name 10 Black millionaires, I told Lucille, was my way of trying to slow her down. I wanted Ellen to see that things were more complicated than she made them out to be.

A White Professor's Blindness to White Privilege

Looking back at my response to Ellen's first homework from the distance of 2 1/2 years, I see things differently. I now believe there are those who could legitimately charge me with being "color and power

evasive,” that is, with being blind to the racialized nature of American society, my university, and my own classroom (Frankenberg, 1993, p. 14; see also Barnett, 2000; Dyer, 1997; Fordham, 1988, 1997; Gilyard, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Omi & Winant, 1994). These race cognizant critics would likely dismiss my justifications for my responses to Ellen—my claim that I was acting to promote improved writing and a philosophic exploration of alternatives—as simply a self-deceptive effort to remain blind to my White privilege.

Evidence of my blindness can be found, these race-cognizant commentators might continue, in my failure to openly acknowledge and dignify the anger Ellen vents when she asks her reader to name 10 Black millionaires. In this rhetorical imperative, Ellen is, of course, not really asking for 10 names. Rather, she is virtually shouting her frustration at the fact that, although some of the details of the canvas of American race relations have changed in the last 50 years, most of the larger picture has not.

Not only can evidence of my blindness to White privilege be found in my sidestepping Ellen’s real point but also in my failure to suggest ways she (and the class) might explore the roots of her anger. Such exploration might have focused on articulating the many advantages that Whiteness confers on America’s dominant class, advantages that are invisible to most Whites and often left out of conversations about racism. In fact, even Ellen herself, in the final section of her Carmichael paper, attends only to the negative side of racism for Blacks, not mentioning the positive consequences for Whites. Specifically, she notes America’s insensitivity to the history of discrimination against Blacks (“Now a days [sic] many black people that ride the bus every day. . .”), the absence of African Americans in lawmaking bodies (“The laws are not govern [sic] for the black people. . .”), and the injustice of racial profiling by law enforcement agencies (“If you are a poor black man and in the wrong place at the wrong time you can kiss your freedom good bye for a while.”) To summarize, my critics might say I committed a grievous mistake, one made by many White educators (as well as some non-White), by analyzing the essays of Fanon, Carmichael,

and hooks for what the authors say about different sorts of racism and their negative effects on America's minorities while failing to explore their points about racism's favorable consequences for America's Whites (see Fine, Weis, & Powell, 1997).

Now, 2 1/2 years later, I see the wisdom of these potential charges against me by Critical Race Theorists and Whiteness studies scholars. Although I am embarrassed by my shortsightedness—the missed opportunities to decenter Whiteness—at the time I read Ellen's first homework paper, a number of other concerns were at the center of my attention. For better or worse, I was focusing on Ellen's writing mechanics and her rhetorical strategies. Not only did I want to help move her papers closer to the dominant code, I also wanted to assist her with the way in which she argued. I believed she needed to balance her strong feelings and opinions with a more critical, detached way of knowing. Thus, what could be seen as small mindedness and blindness to White privilege on my part—my naming 10 Black athlete millionaires—was, as I saw it then, my attempt to say to Ellen, in effect, “Philosophers back up what they say. Please don't shoot from the hip so much.” After all, the discourse that is most important to the history of Western philosophy, as I have noted, is careful Socratic questioning and argumentation, an effort to explore as many sides of an issue as one can bring forward. In short, Ellen's paper showed me she could meet the first of my specific objectives for students, summarizing an author's argument with substantial accuracy. But I wondered about her ability to ever meet my second and fifth goals, argument evaluation and coherent writing in Standard American English.

Another way to look at Ellen's situation in my course is that the cultural and linguistic capital she brought to my classroom worked for her both as an advantage and a liability. As Lucille will show, the force and conviction behind Ellen's oral contributions ultimately had a positive effect on class discussion. However, in this early piece of writing, her tone—her certainty that her interpretations were correct and her apparent unwillingness to allow any room for doubt or alternative positions—was, in my view, a disadvantage, so far off was it from the careful, openminded inquiry I value. Although at the

time Ellen's voice seemed "loud" and irrational to me, I now see her confrontational and narrative stance as resembling that of Alice Walker's (1983) "womanist," Black feminist (p. xi). Such a woman is "audacious," "courageous," and inquisitive, according to Walker, adopting a combative style that researchers argue is common among African American students in general and reentry Black women in particular. These researchers also note that this discourse may, in the school situation, lead to misunderstanding between Blacks and Whites (see Ball, 1992; Fordham, 1988, 1997; Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 1996; Kochman, 1981; Laden & Turner, 1995; McCrary, 2001; Thompson, 1998).

Although the academic discourse I value has its roots in a very different culture, that of White European males, it is, nevertheless, the way of speaking and writing of many minorities, as well. The readings I assign—including those by Black men and women like Fanon, Carmichael, and hooks—all display this careful, step-by-step effort at persuasion. This style of composing and argumentation might not have been the most comfortable for Ellen, but I felt that it was my responsibility to encourage her to give it a chance and to practice it. Although I was not sure initially that Ellen would be open to such practice, it turned out that there were enough instructional supports in place in my class—and Ellen open enough to them—to allow her to make noteworthy strides in this direction.

For evidence of what I consider to be Ellen's progress in achieving my objectives for student thinking and writing in philosophy, I now turn to her final paper of the semester.

A LATE-SEMESTER PAPER: VISIBLE SUCCESS IN ACHIEVING SOME OF THE PROFESSOR'S OBJECTIVES

Ellen Williams's final piece of the semester was the multi-draft essay I require of all my Intro students. I ask them to write about a moral dilemma they face and to consider the philosophic assumptions behind alternative solutions to their dilemma. I respond to their initial drafts by talking aloud into an audiotape cassette for 5 to 10 minutes, giving no grade evaluation. In these tapes I offer students

my reactions to their drafts and make suggestions about how they might complexify, enrich, and/or better organize their essays.

In Ellen's final paper, which I reproduce below, she makes progress toward achieving four of my five class goals: argument extraction, argument evaluation, intellectual reconstruction, and application of philosophy. In particular, her essay illustrates what was, as I have said, Ellen's most striking achievement in the course: her ability to apply philosophy to her own concerns (objective 4), in this case, to bridge between my subject matter and her professional life. Ellen's paper is, as I see it, her effort to take what she has learned about the historic philosophic discussion of freedom and responsibility and relate it to her own and others' views of capital punishment.

A second feature of Ellen's paper that stands out for me is her willingness to adopt a Socratic, questioning stance, the very discourse I feared at the beginning of the semester she might never attempt. As she presents her reader with the results of interviews she conducted with her mother and Carolyn, an inmate at the prison where she works, Ellen is offering points of view with which she totally disagrees. And not only does she try to be philosophic by looking at capital punishment from a variety of perspectives, she also engages in the difficult work of intellectual reconstruction (objective 3). That is, Ellen tries to reconstruct the assumptions about human nature and the world which lie behind her own pro-capital punishment position as well as those behind her mother's and Carolyn's rejection of the death penalty.

In praising Ellen's essay for its achievement of some of my objectives for student thinking and writing, I am also pleased to note that this piece retains many of the features of Ellen's discourse that initially made me nervous and wary. For example, in this essay, I hear again Ellen's strong voice, her use of rhetorical questions, and her commitment to personal experience. In addition, there is in this last piece, like her first, an undeniable earnestness about the importance of the social issue she is discussing.

I now reproduce the final draft of Ellen's term essay just as she typed it.

The Death Penalty

The crime rate has tripled within the last five years and more and more people are being murdered. It is not just adults that are committing these crimes, we have children as young as ten committing hideous crimes. We have a problem when you have more prisons than you do schools. We have a problem when someone that was released from prison within one year has committed another hideous crime after serving twenty years of prison time. What message are we sending? You have police officers being gunned down for no reason.

I have worked in the prisons for over twelve years and it is just another world inside of a world. Often it is inmates killing inmates. There is nothing that you really can not get if you want it bad enough. Society says that this is your punishment. Some people live better in prison than they do when they are free. I have had a man tell me that he comes to prison every winter so he can have free rent, food, cable television, and heat.

(not to mention the other luxuries)

I often hear the people saying we send people to prison to get rehabilitated. I am here to tell you that if someone does not want to be rehabilitated then they will not no matter what you try to do. Prisons have become a holding cell with a revolving door which is often used, because many people often come back. These are just some of the serious problems that we are facing. Something must be done, or it will only get worst.

Section II

Here are some alternative views towards the capital punishment Made by different people.

1. Against the death penalty?

Women named Carolyn whose mother was murdered for no possible reason asked me these questions.

When does murder constitute justice?

Did the Ten commandments say thou shall not kill?

Why does a legal system that doesn't condone murder try to use it as a mechanism of punishment?

Carolyn stated to me that God gave life and only god can take it away. She stated that she does not wish for him to receive the death penalty basically because of this fact.

My mother states that two wrongs just do not make a right. Could he just be put into prisons and be rehabilitated?

2. In favor of the Death Penalty whenever some one kills another. The old saying an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.

Section III

My position of why I believe that the death penalty is Superior to the maximum life sentence.

Prisons are just a world inside of another world anything an inmate wants they can get. Some prisons are made better than some inmate's place of residence. Some people do not care about any thing or anybody and therefore start killing more innocent people in the prisons. What do you do with this person? Do you add more time to there one hundred and thirty-year sentence?

Where is the punishment?

Where is the deterrent?

What about the children that think killing makes you a man.

So many children have watched people get killed and often see the person that has committed the crime walking freely. People say that I will go to prison that is not a problem, they can not hold me forever.

Assumptions people often believe.

People are given many assumptions about prisons. A lot of people assume that if you go to prison then you can be rehabilitated and can come out a change person. That is not true especially if the person does not want to be rehabilitated, you can be in prison for twenty years and never change if you choose. That person could come back out the same way that he came in I have personally Witnessed this. Another assumption is that inmates are treated badly and are often feed the worst food. That is another misconception some times inmates may have steak, the are feed very well, some times better than the man that makes minnum wages.

I gave Ellen a C+ for this paper, and, ultimately, a C for the course, but I confess that, despite the strengths I noted above, as I review this essay from a substantial distance in time I am still dismayed by its surface errors, lack of transitions, and absence of topic sentences. In other words, as with Neha's work, I believe that an outside evaluator, reading Ellen's paper out of context, might accuse me of having lowered my academic standards and done Ellen a disservice by passing her, especially in a class that is one of two capstone writing courses. Although I continued throughout the semester to mark her surface errors and transition problems, when I saw little improvement by mid-October, I began to focus more on the positive changes that

were occurring in the content of Ellen's papers: their increasingly openminded tone and serious attempt at philosophic argumentation. Thus, given what I saw as Ellen's efforts to practice philosophic ways of knowledge construction, and understanding how far she had come in this regard, I believe the grade is justified. That is, given where the two of us started—the clash between our goals and discourses, between her cultural, linguistic, and academic capital and my own—I see this paper as a triumph.

For Ellen's part, she too was pleased with her essay, expressing satisfaction at having experimented with new ways of thinking and inquiring. She told McCarthy a few days after she completed the paper that as she questioned her mother and Carolyn, she heard herself "sounding like Dr. Fisherman [*sic*]:"

I was doing what he does in class: listening to people and then asking Why? Why do you believe that? Why do you think that? It took me a while to learn to question, to be tactful like Dr. Fisherman, but I now do it a lot. . . . I've learned it's good to hear what other people think—even if you do think their ideas are strange. You never know what you can learn.

In fact, Ellen said, she now models a questioning form of inquiry with her sons, asking them such questions as "Why do you think you did that?" or "Why do you think people behave that way?"

In my view, then, despite significant remaining mechanical and rhetorical writing problems, Ellen made substantial progress toward my classroom goals. What were the instructional supports that facilitated her positive experience? That is, what happened during the many contacts between Ellen and me and among Ellen and her classmates that made her feel safe enough to risk trying new ways of thinking and writing? Lucille McCarthy will now address these questions. In doing so, she draws upon data we collected during the semester that Ellen took my Intro course as well as data she collected as she followed Ellen in the three subsequent semesters leading to her graduation.



Part Two

*Instructional Supports That Helped: Class Discussions,
Ungraded Writing, and Audiotaped Teacher
Responses to Essay Drafts*

LUCILLE McCARTHY

My first reaction to the two papers that Steve Fishman has just discussed is to side with Critical Race Theorists and Whiteness studies scholars and agree that Steve was blind to White privilege. The consequence of this blindness that stands out for me is not only that he failed to help Ellen and her classmates properly explore Ellen's anger but also that he unwittingly robbed Ellen of her voice by insisting she speak in a way that put her at an enormous disadvantage relative to him and most of her peers. When I first interviewed Ellen in early September, her alienation from Fishman's discourse was obvious. She explained,

It's like the teacher in that class is from another planet. He looks different from other professors, you know: his hair everywhere, his hand motions. . . . I'm not saying he is bad looking, just unusual. . . . And when he talks, I can't understand a word he's saying.

Just as Ellen Williams was mystified by her professor's looks and language, so she was equally puzzled by his syllabus. When I asked her why she thought Fishman assigned the texts he did, she responded,

A philosopher is someone who goes any way the wind blows. Maybe it was something he read the night before. I don't know. His ways and my ways are not the same.

I originally took Ellen's comments about how foreign Steve's class felt as further evidence that he was trying to silence her, resisting what Critical Race Theorists might view as her efforts to transform his White, hegemonic language. That is, at first it seemed to me that

both in Ellen's papers and class discussion Fishman was discouraging her from using the genre and tone she knows best—personal storytelling with a strong confrontational feel. However, when I reviewed the class videotapes and other data from across the semester, I found this was not the whole story. To the contrary, Fishman actually provided Ellen and her classmates with many opportunities to articulate their personal experiences in their own ways. Furthermore, he established a safe discursive space for students to do this in part by offering his own personal disclosures, stories that were often funny and self-mocking, reflective of a long history of Jewish humor. The opportunities Fishman offered students for narrative and personal disclosure underlay all three of the instructional supports Ellen named as most helpful. I now describe the first of these.

Instructional Support #1: Class Discussion

The class videotapes show numerous occasions on which Steve did a better job of acknowledging the import of Ellen's stories and helping her explore their broader meaning than he did when responding to her Carmichael paper. However, before turning to these positive class discussions, pivotal moments in which Ellen developed sufficient trust to try out some philosophic exploration, I describe an early class discussion in which Ellen's and her classmates' stories were not productive. This is because competing student stories were left unconnected and decontextualized and, thus, led not to collaborative inquiry but to a hardening of positions and a maintenance of the barriers that separated Steve and his pupils along race, class, and gender lines.

Ellen was one of four African Americans in Fishman's Intro class of 25 students in fall 1998, and on the first two days she attended (days 3 and 4 of the semester), she said a number of things that seemed to draw a line in the sand indicating she was different from her White classmates. She told them that they would never get to know who she really was, and, further, she told Steve, she would leave his class unaffected by the work he would ask her to do.

*An Unproductive Class Discussion: Competing Stories
Left Unconnected*

On Ellen's second day in class, September 3rd, as students discussed an article by hooks (1981/1995) and the current status of racism in America, a White student, 19-year-old, sophomore business major, Kathy Curtis, raised her hand. "Things have gotten better between the races," Kathy volunteered. "In my high school we had a whole month devoted to Black history." Sitting directly across the circle from Kathy, Ellen glared at her and snapped,

I'm supposed to be grateful!! I don't care how many Black history months you have, you'll always see me first and foremost as a Black woman. And if a Black man comes toward you at night, you'll clutch your pocketbook and walk faster. . . . And if you're right that things are so much better, why are there so few Black judges, lawyers, and doctors?

Ellen then added an afterthought that made the class titter. Her body turned sideways in her chair, her face indicating disgust, Ellen launched her final salvo at Kathy: "You and I are different. You wash your hair every day; I don't."

With these comments Ellen succeeded in silencing Kathy Curtis. However, Keith Falls, a 21-year-old, White, senior psychology major, sitting four seats to Ellen's left, was not so easily vanquished. He leaned forward and turned to face Ellen. "You gotta stop this 'us and them' talk!" he advised her in a loud tone. "If you really want to end racism, you gotta stop being so divisive."

How did Fishman handle this exchange among Kathy, Ellen, and Keith? Apparently unsure what to do with these students' emotionally charged and conflicting stories, he retreated. Instead of picking up on their comments, he directed the class back to what he saw as the main purpose of hooks's article: distinguishing between personal and institutional racism. He asked if anyone could name examples of institutional racism, but no one could, and students continued to talk about racism as it exists on a personal level. Class ended with Tonya McInnis—the 30-year-old, African American, pre-nursing student who later that semester would befriend Neha Shah—telling

a story about the overt bigotry she experienced in San Francisco as a young child. Tonya then offered her own assessment of the progress that has been made regarding discrimination in the 35 years since Carmichael wrote his text: "It is no better than it was in 1960s," she said. "It's just better hidden."

As I analyze the three-way exchange among Kathy Curtis, Ellen Williams, and Keith Falls from a Critical Race Theory and Whiteness studies perspective, I get disappointing results. I conclude that these students were, at the end of their conversation, as far apart as they started. None appeared to have learned from it; none appeared to see his or her position regarding race in new light. Both Kathy Curtis and Keith Falls seemed to be feeling positive about their positions and were trying to explain to Ellen that they are not prejudiced or racist. In fact, however, both invoked what Critical Race Theorists and Whiteness studies experts would say is the color and power evasive tale that many contemporary Americans tell (see Frankenberg, 1993). This tale is that there once was a time when Whites thought themselves superior to people of color and made rules to exclude them from economic, political, and cultural power, but that time is past. Because of the Civil Rights movement, Jim Crow laws are no longer on the books, and good Americans are now color-blind, treating everyone the same regardless of race, creed, or ethnic origins. Put another way, Kathy and Keith were implying, "You've got it wrong. Times have changed. Whites no longer think Blacks are inferior. Everyone is being treated equally." Kathy went a step further when she invoked multiculturalism, suggesting that Whites, by sponsoring Black History Month, are now not only tolerant of but also interested in minority cultures.

Kathy's and Keith's statements corroborate Frankenberg's (1993) contention that discussions about race in America occur in the shadow of the view held by our country's forefathers and dominant until the early 20th century. Races, it was believed, are biologically and genealogically distinct and located on a hierarchy with Whites at the top. However, Kathy and Keith appear to feel that since they no longer believe in such a hierarchy, they are off the hook. They imply that racism in America would end if only everyone would take the

color-blind view they have adopted and devote at least token attention to minority cultures. What Kathy and Keith fail to understand—that Ellen apparently does understand—is that color-blindness and multiculturalism are doing little to upset the balance of power that remains so overwhelmingly in favor of Whites and that Kathy and Keith are the beneficiaries of several centuries of racial discrimination. Ellen’s rhetorical question to Kathy about Black History Month—“I’m supposed to be grateful?!!”—thus represents her felt sense that, given the pervasive social segregation of our society, Kathy’s and Keith’s White privilege is, in Frankenberg’s (1993) terms, “a lived but not seen aspect of [their] white experience” (p. 135).

When I analyze this same exchange among Kathy, Ellen, and Keith from a social class rather than race perspective, I get equally negative results: a disappointing maintenance of unarticulated class barriers. Freire might categorize the comments by Kathy and Keith as acts of naive *noblesse oblige*, offerings that only serve to keep the bourgeoisie in power. That is, Kathy and Keith, despite their good intentions, may not really be in solidarity with Ellen at all. Rather, they appear to remain sequestered in their own middle class worlds, unable to step across class boundaries to understand Ellen and, perhaps, work with her for greater social justice. For Ellen’s part, she holds fast to her position that not only do the White students in the class fail to understand her history as an excluded Black person, neither do they have any desire to understand her situation in economic terms.

Student and Teacher Reactions

When I spoke with students about the September 3rd discussion in separate interviews a few days later, I found that each recalled it very differently. Ellen said that when she left class, she promptly forgot it. Referring to Kathy Curtis, she explained, “I can’t let people like that bother me. I wasn’t upset at all.” By contrast, Kathy said she felt bad about the exchange and wondered if she had offended Ellen. Keith rolled his eyes about Ellen’s “hair comment,” and Tonya said, “Ellen’s right about some things, but she just wants to fight. She may be a girl from the projects.” This latter comment was especially interesting to me since it illustrates what some researchers call the “nonsynchrony” of race, class, and gender. That is, Tonya, as an

African American, identified with Ellen regarding race and gender but distinguished herself in terms of social class (McCarthy, 1988, 1993; Hicks, 1981).

When I asked Fishman about the hooks class discussion, he said he felt the tension in the group and worried about where it might be headed. He was uncertain, he said, about how to respond to Ellen's apparent disdain for opinions that differed from her own. He remarked,

Although I value her perspective as an African American woman who has experienced racism, I fear that her hostility may intimidate the other students. She may make those who want to disagree with her fearful to do so. . . . As much as I want her in the class, I hope she does not make it impossible for me to generate the open give and take I want.

In subsequent weeks, as Steve and I talked further about the September 3rd discussion, and both of us read more deeply in the Critical Race Theory and Whiteness studies literature, Steve began to blame himself, not Ellen, for what he saw as the discussion's failure. He lamented that he had been unable to help students articulate and explore—"inventory"—the different assumptions about race relations behind the conflicting stories they told (Gramsci, 1971, p. 324). He said he believed that if he had only had the appropriate language and conceptual understanding, he might have been able to help students position themselves within an historical framework, seeing themselves not just as telling personal stories but as representing particular moments in the national dialogue about racism and ways to decenter White privilege.

For example, he believed that Keith's "we're-all-the-same" position represented the philosophic basis of the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 60s, a movement that used this credo to justify the elimination of group classifications from public policy. With regard to Kathy's multiculturalism, Fishman said he might have pointed out that she seemed to represent another stage in the national conversation, one that began in the early 1970s. The Black History Month she mentioned is a token response to some Americans' growing

realization that schools, in their historic role as vehicles of cultural assimilation, carried the not so hidden message that some cultures are better than others. From his later-in-the-semester vantage point, Fishman understood that critics of the program praised by Kathy would say that what is advertised in today's schools as multiculturalism is nothing more than a rebaked version of 1920s cultural pluralism. That is, critics of the Black History Month approach would argue that such recognition of ethnic difference, although it may promote understanding among members of diverse groups, does not really alter our nation's cultural hierarchy. What is required if White, middle class ways of thinking are no longer to be privileged in allegedly "culturally unbiased" classrooms is a thorough overhaul of school materials and instructional methods at all levels. A few add-on units attached here and there to the main curriculum will not suffice. (For more on the cultural pluralism-multicultural debates, see Dewey, 1915/1999; Feinberg, 1998; Schlesinger, 1992.)

With regard to Ellen, Fishman said he now realized that she presented a complicated amalgam of positions. When she disapproved of her White classmates' identifying her primarily as a Black woman and accused them of clutching their purses at the approach of a Black man, she seemed to be calling, like Keith, for color-blindness. However, when she spoke about the lack of Black judges, lawyers, and doctors, her comments could be seen as representing a later stage in our national discussion, one in which people came to understand that the color-blind policies of the 1950s and 60s could also function to hide and perpetuate White privilege, treating racism "as something that can be eradicated by simply ignoring it" (Thompson, 1998, p. 525). Given the failure of these color-blind policies to change the status quo—to bring about the proportionate representation of minorities in the professions and other centers of power—Ellen seemed, like current Critical Race Theorists, to call for color-consciousness. That is, she appeared to want her classmates to go beyond arguing for equal opportunities for all individuals and push for equal outcomes for all groups. In calling for equal consequences of economic competition as well as equal opportunity to engage in such competition, Ellen was echoing not only Critical Race Theorists

but also 20th century egalitarian liberals who argue that unequal consequences ultimately beget unequal opportunity (see Lichtenstein, 1984; Sandel, 1984).

Not only did Fishman lament his failure to position these students' comments within an historical context, he also realized he missed an opportunity to point out that Tonya McInnis's remark about racism's now being "better hidden" illustrated the central thesis of hooks's article, namely, how much easier it is to trace racism to individual bigotry rather than to identify its more insidious source in political and cultural institutions. That is, Tonya's comment suggested—mistakenly, hooks would say—that if we could just bring personal prejudice into the open so we could deal with it, the effects of 300 years of discrimination could be magically undone. In addition to interpreting Tonya's narrative as focusing on personal rather than institutional racism, Fishman also wished he had helped the class investigate the different philosophic assumptions underlying these two ways of explaining discrimination. These are the liberal assumption that individual agency determines human behavior, versus the Marxist assumption that economic and social structures play this role.

Of course neither Fishman nor I has any idea, since we cannot redo the class, whether, had he done what he wished, he could actually have altered what happened that day. What is clear, however, is that simply setting up a space in which students can tell stories does not guarantee collaborative inquiry or increased understanding by either the narrators or their listeners. In fact, stories that are simply presented and left unconnected, outside any larger framework to give them additional meaning, may lead people to turn deaf ears to one another.

A Productive Class Discussion: Competing Stories Put into Context

The next class discussion I describe took place three weeks later on September 24th and had very different effects on the participants. Whereas the early September session left Ellen dismissive of the course and Steve worried about it, the late September one, because Fishman could help students connect their narratives by placing them in a philosophic context, had positive residue for both.

On September 24th, the class was discussing a selection from Clarence Darrow's (1932/1973) autobiography in which Darrow attempts to refute William Paley's (1802/1973) teleological arguments for the existence of God. Ellen, to support her rejection of Darrow's atheist views, told the story of a serious car accident from which she walked away unscathed. She explained,

This proves to me there is a God. No one but God could have kept me out of harm's way because I had no seat belt on. I didn't see it coming, and I didn't brace for it. . . . God has a time for everyone, and He wasn't yet ready for me to go. . . . There's a reason for everything.

When Ellen concluded, Steve's student assistant, Warren Murray, a 23-year-old, African American, business major who was videotaping the class, challenged her story, offering an alternative explanation. Although usually silent behind the camera, Warren piped up asking Ellen if she had considered the fact that maybe she was just lucky. "You say it's by faith that you didn't get hurt in the accident. But what about the atheist who walks away from the same accident? He would say it was luck, not God."

Ellen did not reply to Warren but chose, instead, to express her disdain for this type of inquiry. Apparently directing her question to the class in general, and using phrases that became among the most memorable of the semester, she asked,

Why should I question my beliefs anyway when I am happy with them? If they're not broke, why fix them? Maybe if I was younger and didn't have other responsibilities. But I have a whole lot of other issues. I've got children. I work full time. If I was 21 years old, just hanging around with nothing to do, I too would suck this stuff up. But I've got other things to worry about.

The videotape shows students taken aback by Ellen's comments and then a moment of half-derisive laughter sweeping around the class circle. Fishman, however, instead of retreating from Ellen's challenge, as he had on September 3rd, reacted with a thoughtful nod. He was, in this situation, on familiar ground because Ellen had just sounded a theme well known to philosophers. Steve told the

class, “Ellen’s question is a good one,” and he urged students to take it seriously. “Lots of people would agree with Ellen,” he continued, “that philosophy is a waste of time,” and he described the strong American tradition that argues that action is more important than reflection. “Critics like Ellen say,” Fishman told the class, “I have my ideas, and I am content with them. Why upset me with new ones?” Referring to the two Platonic dialogues the class had read, Fishman concluded,

Remember Socrates going around disturbing people? Ellen’s right. Thinking is upsetting. It can even be dangerous. So how would you answer her? How would you justify philosophic thinking to people like Ellen and convince them of the merits of the questioning life?

In raising these issues, Fishman was encouraging his students to place Ellen’s story in philosophic context, specifically, to inventory the traces of anti-intellectualism, the historical celebration of a life of action rather than contemplation, that had left its deposit in Ellen’s account. In offering Ellen and the class new language with which to describe her unhappiness with reflective thinking, Fishman hoped to dignify Ellen’s story and give her and her classmates a chance to reexperience and reconceptualize her sense that philosophic thinking is a waste of time.

In the class circle that day, if one thinks of it as the dial of a watch, Steve was sitting at the 6:00 position with Ellen to his right at 3:00 and Tonya McInnis to his left at 9:00. Tonya, like Ellen, was a frequent class contributor, so the fact she raised her hand to speak at this point did not seem unusual. However, her answer to Ellen’s query, “Why question?” went down in the collective class history as something as striking—and as oft repeated—as Ellen’s comments earlier that class period. Tonya, in fact, borrowed one of Ellen’s phrases in a linguistic performance she herself later dubbed “Tonya’s Preach.” Tonya began,

I don’t know what anyone else thinks about what goes on in here, but I sucks it up! I sucks in everything you all say. Really. I’m a better person than I was when I came in here—the way I look at people,

listen to what they're saying. In here I've heard other people's beliefs, and I realize maybe mine isn't the only way of reaching the goal.

Pushing her chest out, shaking her shoulders, and laughing, Tonya pointed to Warren Murray behind the videocamera. "Hey, Warren, you keep that camera rolling," she said, and to the class she admonished, "Hey, y'all. Listen to me!" Once again picking up on Ellen's language, Tonya continued,

I'm like Socrates. I do not claim what I do not know. I tell my daughter and my father about the conversations we have in here, and they want to know more. I don't know about anybody else, but this class has made me stronger. My mind, my intelligence. I leave out of here big and strong and proud, and I'm just waiting to get back here next time. I sucks it up!

The class was delighted by Tonya's "preach," someone yelling "Go, girl!" in the middle of it, and even Ellen smiled.

In Tonya McInnis's testimony, I hear her speaking not only about the importance of reflection but also putting her own response to the course in philosophic context. That is, by aligning herself with Socrates, Tonya takes her differences with Ellen out of the realm of personal disagreement and places them on the much richer canvas of diverse intellectual movements. In addition, she testifies to the intrinsic value she is finding in the class. Tonya is saying, in effect, to Ellen and many other classmates who are instrumentalists, that she is not treating the course simply as a means to a degree, nor is she doing her work with her eyes focused only on the grade. Instead, course ideas and conversation are a means of personal growth important enough to carry home and take to heart.

Not surprisingly, Tonya's testimony about the benefits of philosophic inquiry had no immediate impact on Ellen's resistant stance. As a matter of fact, at the close of that same period, Ellen once again contradicted Fishman in a seeming effort to distance herself from the course. When Steve tried to explain to students why he believes "writing intensive" courses are important, he mentioned that for him writing can be a "friend." As a person who lives alone, he said,

he frequently uses writing to help him clarify his thoughts and feel less isolated. When he finished, Ellen raised her hand and again disagreed. She declared,

You say writing is your friend. Well, writing is no friend to me. I might like it if I was just doing it for myself, but I have to do it for you. In here I'm pressured. The teacher is grading it, and that's a whole different thing.

Fishman nodded and said, "Yes, Ellen, I see your point. Ideally all writing would be voluntary, and there would be no grades." The class then concluded with Fishman handing out the assignment for next time.

Student and Teacher Reactions

When I spoke with Ellen three weeks later, in mid-October, I asked her what she recalled about this September 24th Darrow class session. She laughed as she described Tonya's preach and admitted that the class was beginning to make her think. She explained,

Dr. Fisherman keeps my mind spinning all the time. He keeps the class flowing with various questions; you never know what to expect. . . . But I like it in there. There's a family feel, and I can say whatever I want. . . . The teacher respects us, so we respect him. . . . And there are so many ideas on the table. It makes you open up your own mind—even if you don't want to. . . . I'm more like Tonya now. I won't miss class unless I have to.

The change that Ellen reported in mid-October—her gradual opening to new ideas—was corroborated by a number of her classmates. For example, Elizabeth Pritchett, a 19-year-old, White, sophomore music major, told me that she, Ellen, and Robert Bullerdick—the 30-year-old, White, junior, health and fitness major with whom Neha Shah had corresponded about Plato—had recently been in a small group discussing their homework papers. Elizabeth volunteered, "Ellen's great. She listened when I read my paper, and afterward she asked me some good questions." Tonya McInnis concurred:

Ellen shows why you can't judge a book by its cover: people aren't always what you think they are. Although she sometimes still spurts out things and steps on people's toes, Ellen listens. And I know she's not just acting like she's listening; she's really hearing.

When I interviewed Fishman about the September 24th class, he said he was pleased he could use Ellen's account of her car accident and her negative view of philosophic questioning in productive ways. That is, he believed that by contextualizing Ellen's criticism of reflection—by showing that her query, "Why question?" has a long history in philosophy—he was able to dignify her concerns and use them to advance the class's awareness of some of the pros and cons of a contemplative life.

Steve also noted something that other researchers have observed: students are able to say things to one another that no teacher would dare say (Landsman, 2001). In this case, Tonya, as a returning African American woman, could take up Ellen's language in ways Fishman could never have done and, in a positive fashion, invite Ellen and the rest of the class to look at a reaction to philosophy that was opposed to Ellen's. In mid-October, Fishman told me,

I have a sense we have all just gone through some test of fire, that we could have dismissed each other, and the class could have broken apart. But for some reason—and Tonya is important here—we have remained open to one another and are developing what I think Dewey would call likemindedness. We are able to communicate well enough now to feel some mutual care.

Thus Ellen's prophecy about always being an outsider in this academic setting was not fulfilled: her classmates did not, ultimately, see her only as a Black woman. To the contrary, they eventually saw her as a valuable contributor to class conversation, willing to listen to their stories and reveal aspects of her own life that many would hide. For example, she held her classmates spellbound as she recounted her trials and tribulations as a worker in the prison system, analyzed her own failed marriage, and described her deep affection for her mother who, as a young woman, had picked cotton in the fields of North Carolina.

The improved tone and productiveness of class conversation at mid-semester that was noted by Elizabeth, Tonya, Ellen, and Steve—their shared sense that students’ conflicting stories were now generating mutual understanding—continued throughout the term. This development was bolstered by the second instructional support I now describe.

Instructional Support #2: Ungraded Writing

In addition to class discussion, Ellen mentioned ungraded writing as being helpful in promoting her turnaround, her moving from saying in early September that Fishman was “from another planet” to describing in mid-October her growing comfort in, even excitement about, his course. Specifically, the Class Reflection Log and in-class freewrites offered Ellen additional opportunities to present her views and narratives. More important, however, these opportunities were structured to encourage Ellen to gain critical distance from them and practice philosophic thinking.

Class Reflection Log (CRL)

In a kind of ongoing written conversation between teacher and students, Fishman required pupils to answer a series of nine questions, one every 10 days or so, in their Class Reflection Logs. These questions asked students to reflect on class events and issues as well as on their own thinking and learning in the course. As Steve read these informal journals, he responded in marginal comments and endnotes, but he did not grade them. (CRL questions are listed in appendix C. For further discussion of the efficacy of informal, self-reflective writing for returning women, see Tarule, 1988.)

To illustrate the way in which the CRLs gave Ellen a chance to gain critical distance on her views, I turn to her first entry, written in early September: a two-page, typed reflection on the unit on race. Steve asked students three questions:

Please think back on our first unit, on your reading and our class discussion of the essays by Fanon, Carmichael, and hooks, and answer these questions.

- a) What idea, anecdote, or insight comes to mind as you recall these authors' pieces?
- b) What new insights, if any, did you get about racism from our class discussions?
- c) Is there anything left over from our class discussions that you feel you did not get to say and would like to say now?

In Ellen's response, she tells Steve that she did indeed learn something new: "There are even more deferent [sic] types of racism than I realized." In this comment, Ellen seems to be referring to the notion of personal versus institutional racism. Although she did not speak to this issue in class, and she never pins the distinction down clearly in her Reflection Log, Ellen offers what appears to be an example of institutional racism. She writes that she recalls a classmate's statement that racism is an "individuals choice [sic]." She disagrees with this view, she says, and to support her contention that racism is more than just an individual matter, she describes a test she once took for prospective police officers that works against Blacks by assuming that everyone turns "purple and blue" when they are suffocating. Thus, provoked by Steve's CRL prompt, Ellen seems to be seeing the police test in a new way. She writes,

There was a statement made by another student in class that "Racism was a human relations issue because it was a individuals choice." I remember taking many test that were very racism, for example On the N.J Police exam one of the question was if you arrived on the seen and found someone turning purple and blue what would you do? Many black people got this question wrong because of what? you tell me. It was tests like these that made Racism what it is which is not an individual, human relations issue.

In this entry Ellen is doing exactly what Steve hoped for. She employs the interplay between philosophic thinking and personal narrative to reconfigure the landscape in which she lives. That is, using Fishman's question to revisit her experience with the New Jersey police exam, Ellen is able to conceptualize it in new terms.

In a CRL question a month later, in mid-October, Steve again asked students to reexamine their experiences with America's racial

and social hierarchies, this time teacher-student relations in his own classroom. Specifically, he wanted to know how their similarities with or differences from him affected their experiences in the course. Steve's prompt reads,

Do you believe that my race, class, and gender give White, middle-class, male students in my classes an advantage over female students, students of color, or working class students? Please explain.

Ellen responds,

I really do not believe that the teacher caters to any specific gender, race, or class. He appears to be very fair and open minded. To be honest, I have not had the time to think or concentrate on him treating people different. Now that I have had some time to think about this. I feel as though he really treats everyone equal.

This CRL question gave Ellen an opportunity to focus on an aspect of race and social relations—that between teacher and student—that she says she had not previously considered. Although this is somewhat surprising since she had immediately noted the contrast in financial and social capital between herself and her younger White classmates, I speculate that there are three possible reasons for her claim she has not focused on Fishman's and her differences. The first of them may result from Ellen's seeing Steve, as I reported earlier, as so different from her that he seemed to be "from another planet." That is, the fact that Steve is White may have been insignificant compared to the numerous oddities she named that made him seem to her so Other: his hair and hand motions, his strange language and choice of reading assignments. A second reason for Ellen's not having considered this question may lie in her own complex amalgam of views on race relations. That is, her own juggling of color-blind and color-conscious positions may lead her, on the one hand, to berate her White classmates and, on the other, to believe that despite all the social and cultural differences that separate her and Fishman, it is possible for him to understand her and treat her fairly. A final interpretation of this CRL entry is that Ellen is not being

candid about the racial situation in which she finds herself since she knows that Fishman will read what she writes.

Because of this latter possibility, I pressed Ellen about this CRL entry in an interview in mid-November. She did not waiver from her position that a professor can be color-blind in the best sense, viewing all his students as equally worthy human beings. She explained, “I just picked up on that Dr. Fisherman was a teacher, doing what he had to do, not that he was White. I always thought he had the best interests of his students in mind. It never occurred to me that he was singling me out or grading me unfairly.”

In-class Freewrites

In addition to the CRLs, a second type of ungraded writing Fishman required was in-class freewrites. In about half of all classes, he asked students to do 10 minutes of writing at the start of class as a way of collecting their thoughts about an issue or assigned text. Ellen did not always do these freewrites because, as she explained to me, when she had not read the assignment, she was not going to pretend to know it.

However, on one occasion Ellen’s in-class freewriting proved extremely valuable for her. In early November, Steve had students freewrite about a possible topic for their term essay. As he has already explained, these papers were intended to focus on a moral dilemma the student faced and/or cared about deeply as well as alternative solutions to it. As the freewrite began, Ellen whispered to Steve she had no idea what to write about. Steve responded, “Please give it a try.”

As Fishman observed his students writing in the class circle, he noticed, as the 10 minutes drew to a close, that Ellen had become animated. In fact, the videotape shows her bouncing up and down in her seat as discussion began, barely containing her excitement. She raised her hand, and when Steve called on her, she told everyone, “I’ve got a great idea. I’m going to write about capital punishment—the freedom and responsibility thing we’ve been discussing.” Indeed, class conversations the previous week had focused on human agency and the different theories behind punishment as retribution versus punishment as rehabilitation. During these sessions, Ellen had

expressed her strong support for capital punishment and defended her position by telling stories of hardened criminals she had encountered as a prison guard. She also had a chance to hear students take opposing views. This oral practice prepared Ellen for her freewrite which, in turn, crystallized her thinking and jumpstarted her essay. Taken together, the class discussions and the freewrite were crucial to this novice writer's success with the term essay.

The in-class freewrites, then, in ways that paralleled the CRLs, gave Ellen a chance to practice reflective thinking and composing without worry about grades and, in many cases, without having to read and understand an assigned text. In the pre-essay freewrite I have just described, Ellen got support for her essay project, an assignment she repeatedly told me “intimidated” her, one she was far from eager to begin.

Instructional Support #3: Audiotaped Responses to Students' Essay Drafts

The third instructional support that Ellen mentioned as being helpful was Fishman's audiotaped response to a draft of her capital punishment paper. This audiotape, like class discussion and ungraded writing, helped Ellen contextualize her stories. In Fishman's 12-minute taped response, he described his reactions to her draft, posed questions, and offered revision suggestions. Giving Ellen the same sort of help with philosophic exploration that he provided in class, he urged her to relate her story about capital punishment—that some criminals deserve to die—to alternative views and then see that all of these positions reflect certain underlying attitudes and assumptions. In recording oral responses to students' drafts rather than writing them, Fishman's intention was to model the sort of questioning and theorizing he wanted pupils to engage in. He also believed that through the expressiveness of his voice, he could better convey his enthusiasm for those aspects of student papers he found successful as well as make clear that his comments were suggestive rather than prescriptive. (For more on this response technique, see Fishman & McCarthy, 1998, chapter 10.)

When I met with Ellen a week before the final draft of the essay was due, I asked her about Fishman's tape. In response, she patted her pocketbook and said,

It's right here. I've been carrying it around for a week but haven't had the courage to listen to it. I dread hearing what he has to say. . . . All this writing is driving me crazy. I procrastinate and procrastinate. I'm a person who prefers speaking. Give me a topic, and I'll have a speech ready for a hundred people in no time.

Despite Ellen's dread of what she imagined would be Fishman's suggestions for major revisions, when I compare her draft with her final paper, it is clear that Steve's tape was an effective way of communicating with her. She was able to make good use of a number of his suggestions, rendering the piece more coherent than it had been in draft form. My inferences from Ellen's finished essay about the tape's effectiveness were confirmed when, in a post-semester interview, she told me that when she finally listened to the tape, she found it more useful than she expected. Particularly helpful, she said, was Fishman's thinking aloud about the questions she might ask of people who hold views different from her own.

In sum, I believe that for novice writers who, like Ellen, prefer oral to written communication, the taped response works especially well. When Ellen finally did listen to the tape, she told me, it was in her car going home from school. "It was odd," she said, "to have Dr. Fisherman speaking to me while I was driving. But I liked it. I played it several times."

TEACHER AND STUDENT MEET AGAIN A YEAR AND A HALF LATER: THE IMPORTANCE OF STUDENT GOALS, MOTIVATION, TIME, AND TRUST

Although the three instructional supports I have just described—class discussion, ungraded writing, and audiotaped responses to drafts—helped Ellen with her compositions for Fishman's course, an irony is that Steve and Ellen had their best success with her writing a year and a half after the course was completed. The trust that Ellen

developed in Steve's class that enabled her to experiment with new ways of knowing never led her to confide in him fully about her writing. She never admitted to Steve—as she did to me—that she struggled with her papers and had little confidence in her skills. In fact, when he approached Ellen early in the semester, urging her to get help at the Writing Center, he described her attitude as “I have no problem.” According to Fishman, she said, “Oh, I didn't know you cared about the way I wrote. I can write well if I want to.” Ellen did stop by the Writing Center on three occasions that semester, but the tutors reported that she was in such a hurry—and seemingly unwilling to think deeply about her pieces—that they made little progress.

By contrast with Ellen's “no problem” comments to Steve, she admitted to me from the beginning that her writing was “rusty” and she “could really use some help.” However, at the same time, she confessed she had little interest in composing. She told me, “When I got into his class, and he said you gotta write, I was like, write? I'm not in here to write! Writing is just not me.”

However, in spring 2000, nearly a year and a half after Fishman's course concluded, and as I continued to follow Ellen in subsequent semesters, she told me once more in a phone interview about her writing difficulties. She was struggling that semester, she said, in two courses that required a number of papers, a class in leadership and her senior research seminar in her major, criminal justice. After listening to her genuine distress, I took a chance and offered, “Dr. Fishman might be willing to talk with you about your writing for these courses.” Although Steve and I had never mentioned such a plan, I knew he regretted having made so little headway with Ellen's writing mechanics and rhetorical understanding during his course. I also knew that in the intervening period he had worked extensively with another underprepared writer in a one-on-one situation (a tutorial we report in the following chapter).

Ellen, to my surprise, was open to my offer. Because she had decided to dip into her savings, she told me, she was not working this semester, and, thus, she “finally [had] time for this.” So Ellen and Steve met for an hour on two occasions in February and March 2000, three months before her graduation. Together they focused on

Ellen's assignments, and, according to Steve, working with her this time was totally different. She was less defensive, he said, probably because he was not grading her, and he felt that for the first time they could both be honest about her compositions. He could show Ellen the difficulties he had reading them, and she no longer had to try to convince him, as she often had done in his class, that her writing was fine and deserved high marks and/or extra credit. Ellen told me she finally understood the value of Fishman's advice about being more careful of her audience, specifically, about paying close attention to the teacher's prompt and making herself clear in topic sentences as she moved from one idea to the next. She also claimed that she profited from Steve's advice about indenting paragraphs and marking quotations. And, indeed, her revised papers do show improvement in these areas.

In my final interview with Ellen in May 2000, a week before she graduated, she described these individual sessions with Fishman:

When Dr. Fisherman read my papers, he said, "What are you talking about?" He didn't say it in those words; he was tactful. But he's like, "Ellen, you leave out so much. You can't assume that people know what you're talking about. You have to tell them what you're going to say and then relate it to the question the teacher is asking." . . . I could see why he was having trouble. I thought, "Girl, no one would even believe you have a two-year degree."

Why could Ellen and Steve work together fruitfully on her writing in spring 2000 when, during his course in fall 1998, they could not? By the time Ellen met with Steve a year and a half after she completed his Intro course, a number of changes had occurred. First, she had come to see the value of effective written communication for personal growth and career preparation. That is, she wanted, as she put it, "to be able not just to talk to people but also to put [my] ideas in writing." This meant that she was no longer just trying to get through her written work as quickly and painlessly as possible. Instead, she had her own motives and goals for doing the work, not just the ones imposed by the teacher. (For the importance of motivation in underprepared students' learning to write, see Lazere, 1992; Leki, 1992.)

Second, by spring 2000 Ellen had decided to alter her priorities, quitting her job and “tightening [her] belt” so she could devote more time to her school work, and, as she said, “finally put my heart into it.” Reducing out-of-school work hours was something that Neha Shah, as we have noted, was able to afford much earlier: back in the fall of 1998.

Finally, there was the trusting relationship Ellen had developed with Steve. A week before graduation, she told me,

I really appreciated knowing there was one teacher I could talk to if I needed to who said “If you need help, I’ll be there.” And I was glad he didn’t sugar-coat [his evaluation of my writing] and say, “Oh you’re okay.”

To summarize, teacher and student made progress in this post-class, non-graded, tutorial setting because Ellen came voluntarily with significant personal and professional goals. She was, thus, more motivated and willing to make changes in her writing strategies.

FOUR EVALUATIONS

Because we have focused in this chapter on the racial dynamics of Fishman’s class, I will evaluate the teaching and learning that took place there in terms of Critical Race Theory and Whiteness studies. Then, following my pattern in Chapter 2, I will also assess Fishman’s teaching and Ellen’s learning in terms of Gramscian, Freirian, and Deweyan objectives.

An Evaluation by Critical Race Theorists and Whiteness Studies Scholars

Critical Race Theorists analyze apparently neutral institutional practices and language in order to reveal their underlying ideological and cultural biases. An important foundation of this scholarship is “legal realism,” an approach to jurisprudence that has, interestingly, been strongly influenced by the work of John Dewey (see Horwitz, 1992; Schlegel, 1995; Summers, 1982). Proponents of legal realism

are skeptical that judicial decisions are simply the result of the logical application of self-contained legal principles. Rather, such decisions are shaped, they argue, by social and psychological forces outside the law.

One aspect of Critical Race Theorists' critique is their contention that legal language and reasoning marginalize people who prefer other ways of knowing. Thus, these theorists emphasize alternative discourses—for example, story, allegory, and personal narrative—as a means by which minorities gain voice (see Bell, 1992; Delgado, 1989/1995, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Williams, 1991). In this regard, I believe Critical Race Theorists would applaud the heteroglossic nature of Fishman's classroom discussions, his welcoming of stories and alternative ways of talking in class discussion. In addition, they might approve Steve's curriculum because of its inclusion of works by anti-racists like Fanon, Carmichael, and hooks.

On the other hand, these theorists, along with Whiteness studies scholars, would criticize Fishman's reliance on what he calls "careful, openminded, step-by-step argumentation" as the sole acceptable way to write in philosophy. They would fault him for ignoring the power of other written forms, including narratives, to explore philosophic issues and persuade readers.

Further, Critical Race Theorists would deplore Fishman's general color and power evasiveness. That is, they would criticize his failure to show students the bankruptcy of the color-blind, assimilationist model of race relations and the inadequacy of so-called multicultural curricula. They would also say he perpetuated White privilege by not explaining to students that the century-and-a-half-long effort by minorities to gain full legal rights in America has not only failed to ensure social justice for all Blacks, it has, paradoxically, accrued further advantage to Whites (see Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 13). Specifically, Fishman never directly tells his class what Fanon, Carmichael, and hooks know very well: that simply letting Blacks and other American minorities have free access to compete in the American marketplace leaves the economic and political distributions of power just as they are. Given the institutional structures and pervasive cultural practices which favor Whites, there is no way that simply eliminating *de jure* racial segregation—or implementing

token affirmative action programs—will significantly reduce the poverty and social inequities which plague America's minorities.

Finally, Critical Race Theorists and Whiteness studies scholars would likely be disturbed by Fishman's grading methods. He does nothing, they would say, to make up for the unequal playing field on which Ellen Williams has to compete. That is, he does nothing to reduce White privilege when he grades Ellen on what she does not know rather than what she does. Specifically, he evaluates her on an area of her weakness, her academic writing, rather than on her areas of strength, her oral and social skills and her preferred, confrontational style of debate.

Gramscian Evaluation

Gramsci would, like the Critical Race Theorists, find some things to praise in Fishman's teaching as well as much to criticize. On the positive side, Gramsci would be pleased that Steve's course improved Ellen's attitude, at least in limited ways, toward book learning, theory, and the power of contemplation to make everyday life more meaningful. Gramsci would, that is, appreciate Ellen's comments a week before she graduated when, in our final interview in May 2000, she said,

You know what my thing always was. I was just here because I had to be, and I wanted to be left alone. I always felt like life experience just outpowered book learning, but now, where I am today, I don't think that as much. When I read something, I still want to know how I can apply it to my job or my life, but the two sorts of learning are now closer to each other.

On the negative side, Gramsci (1971) would point out that Ellen did not appear to be headed in the direction of becoming the "organic intellectual" he wants, the working class person who takes on the physical and intellectual discipline necessary to understand the history of intellectual movements and ideas (p. 6). That is, Ellen did not get a classical education in Fishman's course that enabled her to articulate values and ideologies that would counter the cultural

hegemony of the dominant class and lead to social transformation. In fact, Ellen admitted, because of her “crazy, too-full” schedule, she often did not read Fishman’s assignments carefully and sometimes did not read them at all.

Freirian Evaluation

Like the evaluations of the Critical Race Theorists/Whiteness studies scholars and Gramsci, Freire’s assessment of Ellen’s experience in Fishman’s course would, I believe, be mixed. He would be impressed with the solidarity that actually developed among Ellen and her peers. Ellen spoke regularly on the phone with several classmates, including Tonya McInnis and Robert Bullerdick, discussing personal and philosophic issues, and these students often extended class discussion as they left the classroom, talking among themselves about the issues with which the class had just been engaged. In addition, Ellen arranged to meet with Tonya and Robert for dinner the night before the final exam so they could study together. Freire would also be pleased with the relationship that Ellen and Steve ultimately shaped. By mid-semester they were working well together in class discussion, and, a year and a half later, they collaborated in investigating Ellen’s writing.

However, after praising the solidarity Ellen developed with classmates and the relationship she and Fishman forged, Freire, as in chapter 2, would criticize the texts or “codifications” in Steve’s class. Fishman presented many readings, Freire would say, that were not particularly relevant to a working class, Black woman. Although Freire might agree with Critical Race Theorists that the readings by Fanon, Carmichael, and hooks were a step in the right direction, he too would criticize the way Fishman handled them, but for different reasons. Whereas Critical Race Theorists and Whiteness studies scholars would be upset by Fishman’s failure to bring White privilege to the forefront of class discussion, Freire would focus on Steve’s failure to speak about class conflict. Specifically, Freire would excoriate Fishman’s failure to help Ellen see the many class contradictions in her own life, for example, the contradictions that pitted her need to

work against the likelihood of getting the degree she needed to progress at work.

Deweyan Evaluation

As for Dewey, his evaluation of Ellen's learning and Steve's teaching would be significantly more positive than the assessments I have just outlined. Although Dewey would be unhappy with Ellen's failure to develop a strong interest in learning about the history of Western thought—Dewey believes that one aim of education should be transmission of the seminal texts and ideas of the culture—he would be pleased about a number of other features of Ellen's and Steve's interactions.

Along with Freire and the Critical Race Theorists, Dewey would applaud the opportunities Ellen had to teach her classmates as well as Fishman and, thereby, to establish solidarity with them. He would be even more gratified, however, that Ellen was able to integrate philosophic theory with her personal and professional lives. Dewey would be proud of this integration as well as of the critical attitude that Ellen adopts in her term essay and that she took with her from Steve's class. It is a deeper, more pervasive residue than anything Neha Shah took with her. Finally, Dewey would be pleased that Ellen and her classmates and teacher, at least at times, managed to communicate well enough across race, class, and gender lines to blend their various discourses so they could create a classroom space for cooperative inquiry.



Conclusion

STEVE FISHMAN AND LUCILLE McCARTHY

As a Deweyan, Fishman was, despite all the criticisms from various perspectives that McCarthy has just outlined, quite pleased with Ellen Williams's experiences in philosophy. As we have shown, Ellen, like Neha Shah, started out in Fishman's class reluctantly, seeing it as

an annoying and insignificant means to her careerist ends. In fact, if anything, Ellen was more opposed than Neha to being in philosophy, and her expressions of opposition were directed not only at the subject matter and teacher but at many of her classmates as well. All this notwithstanding, Ellen, like Neha, found sufficient assistance from instructional supports in Fishman's class to achieve some of his specific objectives for students.

In Ellen's case, we have argued that her success was based upon Steve's acceptance of her preferred discourse—storytelling and accounts of personal experience—in class discussion, ungraded writing, and her final essay. However, we have also shown that Steve did not accept (or reward) Ellen's stories without asking her to work with them, to question them and/or place them in philosophic contexts so they could become exploratory tools for her and, at times, for her classmates as well. The result of Fishman's asking Ellen to use her stories in this way was twofold.

First, Ellen came to see the value of questioning as a means of knowledge construction, its usefulness in helping her reconceptualize her own experiences. Second, she developed a caring relationship both with her classmates and Fishman. That Ellen believed Fishman cared about her was evidenced by the fact that, in the three semesters following her course in philosophy, she turned to him twice for letters of recommendation and, in her final semester, for help with her writing. And Fishman felt that this care was not just one way—from him to her. On several occasions when Ellen came to his office or they met by chance on campus, she inquired about his well-being, smiling as she urged him to be less reclusive and work-oriented.

Fishman's and Ellen's ability to develop enough likemindedness—despite the obvious differences between them—to form a productive community of two is noteworthy. We say this because some educationists have suggested that the best way to overcome oppositions between White teachers and Black pupils is for teachers to immerse themselves in and identify with the culture of their students. For example, Ladson-Billings (1994) concludes that most of the White teachers she studied who were successful with African American pupils lived in Black neighborhoods, joined Black churches,

and/or attended students' community events. Because these teachers altered their community identification, they were able to engage in what Ladson-Billings (1994) calls "culturally relevant teaching."

Fishman, however, made no such changes in his lifestyle and habits, and yet he and Ellen managed to develop a shared language, understanding, and friendship. In saying that Steve and Ellen succeeded in relating to one another without Fishman's doing what Ladson-Billings recommends, we do not mean to deny the significance of Ladson-Billings's call for White teacher transformation. But given the fact that the vast majority of American school teachers is White, and given the unlikelihood that many of these teachers would—or could—follow the implications of Ladson-Billings's research, we believe that careful study of successful community building of the sort that developed between Steve and Ellen is worthwhile.



Coda

The Researchers Continue to Converse

STEVE FISHMAN AND LUCILLE MCCARTHY

Although as co-researchers we agreed that Ellen Williams made significant progress toward achieving Fishman's goals, there remained, as in our study of Neha Shah, lingering and significant disagreements between us about Fishman's approach to underprepared students. With regard to Neha, as we outline at the close of chapter 2, McCarthy's conflicts with Fishman focused primarily on his failures to adjust his curriculum. That is, McCarthy thought Fishman showed little respect for the cultural diversity Neha brought to his classroom and the borderland perspective she applied to her homework and exam papers. With regard to Ellen Williams, McCarthy's disagreements with Fishman focused less on his curriculum and more on what she saw as inappropriate grading policies and ill-designed reading and writing assignments.

Regarding Steve's grading, McCarthy's frustrations were twofold. First, she thought Fishman made a mistake in *what* he evaluated: his focus on Ellen's academic achievements to the exclusion of her moral and social ones, such as expenditure of effort and improved interpersonal skills. Second, McCarthy thought when Fishman did focus on Ellen's academic achievements, he was mistaken in *how* he evaluated them. Specifically, she criticized his use of an across-the-board standard rather than an individual one, that is, a standard which would have measured the distance Ellen had travelled from her own baseline at the start of the semester. As McCarthy complained to Fishman during one of their more heated exchanges, "If you're such a Dewey man, you should be just as interested in rewarding Ellen for how far she has come as you are in maintaining some elitist, Ivy League standard."

For his part, Fishman admitted that he did indeed, in his grading, emphasize academic achievement over moral and social development. Although he granted that the latter are vitally important, he tried to justify their absence from his evaluation procedures by claiming that he lacked the ability to accurately measure them. However, in response to McCarthy's charge that he clung to a rigid, across-the-board standard and, thus, failed to properly reward Ellen for her individual academic growth, he strongly disagreed. To the contrary, he reminded McCarthy that in assigning Ellen Williams a "C" for his course, he actually worried he might have put too much weight on Ellen's personal growth, what he saw as her courageous 180 degree turn from disdain for critical reflection to its wholehearted practice. He added that he tried to balance an individualized standard of academic progress for Ellen, as he did for all his students, with a more generalized one. In other words, he tried to look at each student's individual starting point and development while also comparing his or her work with that of other undergraduates. He was concerned that, to do otherwise, to omit all comparison to other students, might lead pupils, like Ellen and Neha Shah, down a primrose path to a false sense of their relative academic skills and accomplishments.

Regarding McCarthy's criticisms of Fishman's assignments, she complained that when he designed them he was insensitive to Ellen's academic level, interests, and need for feelings of success. Although McCarthy ultimately found that Fishman gave Ellen opportunities to present her own stories and opinions, McCarthy thought it foolish and self-defeating that Steve continued to insist that Ellen read original sources in philosophy. This material, McCarthy argued, was appropriate for most of Fishman's students but questionable for underprepared pupils like Ellen. Instead, McCarthy urged him to substitute selections from secondary sources since Ellen's difficulties with primary ones often led her to avoid doing the philosophy homework.

In addition, McCarthy believed that Ellen's academic confidence would have been bolstered, and her personal needs better met, if Steve had spent less time on enlightening Ellen and more time on nurturing and supporting her. In particular, McCarthy thought it unwise that Fishman required Ellen to discuss her personal narratives in relation to philosophic concepts and recast them in "academic" prose. In line with a number of sociolinguists (eg., Smitherman, 1989/2000), McCarthy thought Fishman's stance showed little sensitivity to the ideological cargo of Standard English and the historical role that Ellen's mother tongue, African American Vernacular English or Ebonics, has played in the struggle for social liberation. Thus, according to McCarthy, instead of requiring Ellen to place her personal narratives in academic context, Fishman should have allowed Ellen to present them in her own style.

Further, in McCarthy's view, Ellen should have been provided with alternative ways of demonstrating her philosophic understanding, perhaps through oral presentations or posters as substitutes for written work. As evidence of need to provide students like Ellen with alternative way for displaying their mastery of philosophic ways of thinking, McCarthy pointed to Ellen's ongoing resistance to his writing assignments. At one point, McCarthy, barely masking her deep frustration, asked Fishman,

Why in the world won't you set up activities that build on Ellen's strengths so she can succeed and feel good about being back in

school? It isn't as if you teach math or biology where the subject matter needs to be taught in a definite sequence and students must have certain basic information before they can do advanced work. Quite the opposite, you have *carte blanche* in philosophy.

In attempting to defend his assignments, his requirement that Ellen read original sources and be graded on her writing about them in Standard English, Steve talked about the difficulty of tailoring his readings and homework for individual students. But more than that, he spoke of his unwillingness to water down his subject matter or alter his aims for students. Nevertheless, Fishman did admit it would be ideal if he could, as McCarthy suggested, impart philosophic ways of thinking to students like Ellen by focusing on their own narratives written in their own styles rather than on canonic materials. But, as Fishman recalled for McCarthy, his experiments in the past with using students' lives and stories as course texts, while downplaying primary materials, had felt like failures to him. Without primary source materials, he explained, he had found it hard to raise class discussions above the level of dorm bull sessions or help students challenge their own ideas by seeing them as part of broader historic and philosophic conversations (see Fishman & McCarthy, 1995). That is, Fishman said he discovered that so-called "philosophic ways of thinking" could not so easily be separated from the classic texts, conversations, and rhetorical styles in which they were embedded.

Not only did Fishman reject McCarthy's suggestion to focus primarily on students' own narratives, he also rejected her recommendation to substitute secondary sources for primary ones. He told her he feared such a substitution would imply that the point of the assigned readings was not to grapple with philosophic thinking but, rather, to memorize "predigested" material, learning, for example, five features of Platonism or six characteristics of American pragmatism. This desire to have his students stay away from what he called predigested summaries and, instead, confront the complexity of primary material was rooted, Steve said, in his own undergraduate experience. He described for McCarthy the seriousness that he observed in his own teachers who seemed uncompromising in their desire to pass on the best of philosophic inquiry. Although Fishman

acknowledged that Ellen came to philosophy with different interests, skills, and resources than he did as an undergraduate, he said he did not want to shortchange her. “I believe,” he told McCarthy, “that Ellen will have important positive experiences in my class if I can convince her of both my commitment to my field and my commitment to her.”

McCarthy could only shake her head. But rather than give up, she tried again to convince Fishman of the rightness of her criticisms by backing them up with appeals to research. She told Steve he sounded like those hidebound teachers whom educationists and compositionists sometimes study, teachers who, under the banner of maintaining standards and allegiance to their disciplines, refuse to adjust to changing student populations. By contrast, adaptable teachers, those who see their disciplines as dynamic rather than fixed and who take their students’ moral and social development as seriously as they take their academic progress, have significantly greater success with their students than instructors who avoid experimentation (see Ball, 1999, 2000; Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Fox, 1990; Katz, 1999; Mahiri, 1998; Stodolsky and Grossman, 2000; Sylvester, 1994).

Despite what McCarthy saw as the reasonableness of her arguments, Fishman held fast to his belief that he had an obligation to acquaint pupils with primary sources from his discipline’s canon and to require them to practice philosophic writing. Neither would he surrender his doubts about the possibility of fairly measuring Ellen’s, or any other student’s, moral and social progress. As a consequence, the two of us continued to hold conflicting views of the academic demands that Steve made upon Ellen and the grades he assigned her. What Fishman saw as his obligation to give students a taste of the rigorous and noble adventure of philosophy, McCarthy saw as a mark of Fishman’s narrowmindedness, his projections onto his students of his own idiosyncratic longings and personality. Conversely, what McCarthy saw as grading policies that would be fairer to Ellen’s actual achievements and course requirements that would be more sensitive to her real needs—adjustments McCarthy believed would promote Ellen’s feelings of success—Fishman viewed as lowering his aspirations for students.

In a final effort to justify his pedagogy, Fishman told McCarthy that despite all that went wrong, he believed something important went right between Ellen and him. He then recalled the last conversation he had with Ellen in fall 1998.

She came by my office at the end of exam week to drop off her term essay. She told me she was running late, yet we talked a little about her own plans and about her children's schooling before she said goodbye. When she went to leave, she paused at my door, turned to me and said, "I'll never forget you, Dr. Fisherman. I really mean that."

Steve told McCarthy that he was not exactly sure what Ellen intended, but he thought she was acknowledging that, although he made her work hard, she was grateful about where it had taken her.