

# Critical Pedagogy Is Too Big to Fail

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*ABSTRACT: This essay responds to Jane Danielewicz's and Peter Elbow's recent piece on contract grading in College Composition and Communication (December 2009). I discuss the similarities of their approach to my own contract process, finding that we share a quantitative/performative method for grading. I also explore our differences. While they guarantee students a B grade for meeting quantitative minimums and do not judge writing quality unless it is "better than B," I grade writing along the full spectrum A-F. I also negotiate the syllabus and grading system instead of announcing it unilaterally, so as to position students as stakeholders who co-author the terms of the contract. Finally, I argue the value of negotiated contracts in light of the neo-liberal capture of school and society.*

*KEYWORDS: contract grading; critical pedagogy; negotiating the syllabus; democratic education; public spheres; social class; market discipline; neo-liberalism*

"Education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers *and* students."

—Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 53

"We are always writing the history of the same war, even when we are writing the history of peace and its institutions."

—Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 16

"What lies at the root of what I am calling *everyday discursive practices* is a fundamental belief that the language, literacy, and cognitive functioning of working-class students of color are simply inferior. . . . I am not interested in proving my and my students' literacy and intelligence but in examining the political dynamics that deny it."

—carmen kynard, "New Life in This Dormant Creature," *ALT/DIS*, 32, 33

It's easy to be a bad teacher but hard to be a good one, no matter what kind of pedagogy we use. Good teaching is labor-intensive and immensely rewarding when it "works." Of course, no pedagogy works all the time, and

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all face student resistances of one kind or another. But with many classes over-enrolled and many students needing deep attention to literate skills, providing good writing instruction can be daunting. What can make the task more productive? One tool I use, grading contracts, is also employed by two esteemed colleagues, Jane Danielewicz and Peter Elbow. They report that contracting enhances their classes, in “A Unilateral Grading Contract to Improve Learning and Teaching” in the December 2009 issue of *College Composition and Communication*.

Their thoughtful essay accurately describes grading contracts as a “subterranean presence in our field” (245), on which they shine needed light. Teachers experimenting with contracts sometimes e-mail me, and I encourage all to write about it, but few do. So, Danielewicz and Elbow perform a service by putting this method prominently on the table. I admire their plain English and the transparency of their grading policies. I thank them for generously citing my *When Students Have Power* (1996) as well as the work of critical teachers William Thelin and Isabel Moreno-Lopez. Below, I address similarities of their practice to my own along with two main differences: (1) I grade the *quality* of student writing broadly A-F while they do so only if “better than B”; and (2) I negotiate grading contracts with students to construct the classroom as a public sphere for democratic arts. Lastly, I discuss a common misperception in Danielewicz’s and Elbow’s essay regarding polemics in critical pedagogy.

Danielewicz and Elbow use grading contracts to improve teacher-student relations and to strengthen student writing. Given that Paulo Freire (53, 56, 60-61) described teacher-student alienation as the first problem of pedagogy, this is a consequential item. Their contracts encourage reconciliation by making the teacher’s expectations clear and hospitable. To frame the problem of reconciliation, they quote Robert Brooke’s notion of student “underlife” (unauthorized student behaviors while the teacher enacts her lesson plan). Danielewicz and Elbow suggest that much “underlife” relates to the mystifying vagaries of grading. Students often whisper among themselves, typically asking nearby peers about the teacher’s remarks, “What does she want us to write?” “What did she say we should do?” “Is she collecting this?” “Does this count?”

These generic utterances and other signs of underlife preoccupied me as well in *When Students Have Power*, where I humorously named it “the Siberian Syndrome.” The Siberian metaphor expresses how detached the official syllabus can be from student interests, exiling them to underlife in the far corners of the classroom. The phenomenon of underlife—where unofficial

discourses parallel official talk by the teacher—has also been studied by ethnographer James Scott, who saw in unequal social relations (Pratt's asymmetric "contact zones") an ensemble of furtive discourses enacted "offstage" by the subordinate. Scott called this suite of fugitive behaviors "the hidden transcript" (124-28). The three metaphors—underlife, the hidden transcript, Siberia—represent conflicted relations partly due to grading standards that puzzle and threaten students, who perceive each new teacher as a new discourse of expectations, according to Lucille McCarthy (1987), provoking students to buzz among themselves until they decipher the standards, a distracting anxiety, Danielewicz and Elbow correctly assert.

To calm this situation, their grading system is simple and lucid, but also *quantitative and performative*. Students in their courses are guaranteed a B for minimum performances such as missing no more than a week's worth of classes, meeting due dates and guidelines for assignments, editing final drafts into SWE (standard written English), attending conferences, submitting final portfolios, etc. (245-46). Guaranteed Bs and a transparent presentation of teacher standards take suspense out of grading and allow the teacher's substantive comments on student papers to compete for attention against the anxious buzz of underlife, they report.

Like them, I too center contract grading on performance minimums. I also propose minimum work levels for a grade, like one absence for A and two for B, like different lengths of papers for A-level versus B- and C-levels, like more class participation for A, less for B and C, like no late papers for A, one for B, two for C, etc. (See Appendix for details.) Mostly, I give one of three grades on written work—A, B, or C—earned first by meeting quantitative minimums for each grade and second by my judgment of *quality in the writing*. I also use the grade R for "Rewrite Required, No Credit" when a paper is poorly written (what I judge as D or F). I offer students feedback and tutoring to encourage rewriting. If *no* revision is handed in, the R grade turns to D or F.

While I grade quality of student writing from A to F, Danielewicz and Elbow guarantee a B for doing the specified requirements for each assignment irrespective of quality; they install the teacher as a judge of writing quality in only a single instance—work that is "*better than B*." Where they teach, B is an honors grade, they report, so it has distinction. They add, "We don't distinguish among grades higher than B until the end of the semester when we have student portfolios in hand" (246), though Danielewicz does respond privately if students ask how they are doing (253). Except for my judgment of quality at all levels, our grading systems are similarly quantitative and

performative, it seems to me; their grades—better than B and less than B—are roughly comparable to my A (“excellent”), which means “better than B,” and my C (“average”), which means “less than B.” In addition, we both use low-stakes writing activities and multiple revisions of longer compositions.

However, two significant differences separate our practices. First, as I mentioned above, I judge *writing quality* at all levels, not only “better than B.” Second, rather than publishing a unilateral protocol for grading, I hand out during the first class a *teacher’s proposed plan* for earning A, B, and C grades, and invite students to negotiate both the grading proposals and the larger syllabus (see the Appendix for a sample proposal sheet).

To begin with my grading from A-F: I grade quality of writing along this range in response to local conditions. I teach in a non-selective, mostly-white, working-class college with no endowment subsidizing teaching or research. At this public campus, I meet smart, complex students who bring to college non-academic cultures and non-standard literacies. Patricia Bizzell reported a similar situation when she taught at a state university: “I had plenty of students who had trouble with Standard English and academic argument but they did not seem impaired in any way at all. . . . They struck me as extremely bright. . . . They just had trouble doing college writing” (176). Intelligent students who have trouble writing are common enough across academe, but the “B-quality” skills that Danielewicz and Elbow can count on are not common at non-selective campuses, which poses special teaching problems.

The lack of B-minimum skills among my first-year comp students primarily results from their social class identity. About social class producing unequal educational outcomes, the late progressive reformer Ted Sizer declared, “Tell me about the incomes of your students’ families and I’ll describe to you your school” (6). Working-class students from under-funded, over-regulated schools develop lesser-valued cultural capital and little control of high-status linguistic practices (what Pierre Bourdieu called “legitimate culture and legitimate language” in *Distinction*). Non-elite speech, knowledge, and “know-how” (called “bricolage” or “making do” by Michel de Certeau) are invalidated in K-12 and in college, where middle-class usage and high culture rule. It’s easy for working-class students to feel that education is at war with them, and many go to war with it.

Danielewicz and Elbow guarantee students a B “just for showing up,” as they put it (260), though their high expectations are indeed rigorous. At my working-class site, situated as it is in an ongoing class war (and race war for those students of color), announcing a guaranteed B “just for showing

up” is risky, because student writing skills are all over the map, from A to F, and because student commitment to college is erratic.

In my comp classes, the majority who write poorly often hand in work with little punctuation, capitalization, or paragraphing—deviations they do not use for stylish effect. Grammar drills can’t develop them into competent writers. So, I count on compelling generative themes and vital reading matter close to the students’ interests to spur intensive writing and revision, discussion and inquiry. But some eighteen-year-olds just out of high school think the first “marking period” doesn’t count so they don’t hand in writing until the fifth week. Sitting next to them are forty-year-olds who dash in from work and would rather die than miss assignments; some who dash in are adult women returning to college after dropping out before and are now raising kids. In addition, some students in the room are immigrants whose first language is not English while others are in class because entitlement programs require attendance. Few in night classes have eaten supper after a day at work (I bring cookies to every session); few read newspapers in print or online. These built-in disparities make guaranteeing a B “just for showing up” difficult.

Secondly, in colloquial parlance where I teach, the phrase “just showing up” means “blowing off” the activity at hand, in this instance, “blowing off” the unpopular comp requirement as well as the enforcer of this requirement, the comp teacher. This kind of “just showing up” is practiced by about a third of the students in my large comp classes. Here is what their blowing off can look like: students sleeping in class, or texting, or cell-phoning, or playing iPod games, or listening to music via earplugs, or engaged in whispered conversations, or applying makeup, or reading a book due for another class, or doing homework while my class is in session (sometimes furtively at the back, sometimes brazenly in front, until I approach and stop it). Such student habits are learned before they reach my class, of course.

The phenomenon of “blowing off” the class affects my teaching and my relations with a sizable number of students, but some of those students may be good writers who simply can’t stand writing, or can’t stand English classes, or can’t stand schooling (working-class life is generally over-disciplined). Vocationally-oriented by class identity (the prime necessity to earn a living), they know their future jobs will require little reading and writing, and not much in the way of fine literature. Those few undergraduates en route to graduate or professional schools do need SWE, research writing, and exposure to belles-lettres so they can read closely as well as display the

cultural capital required to circulate among professionals. But this is not the life path of the majority of students at my college. As Mike Rose wrote, “It is hard work to teach creatively in the intersection of the academic and the vocational. . . . It means developing classroom activities that authentically represent the intellectual demands of the workplace, and, conversely, bringing academic content to life through occupational tasks and simulations” (*Mind at Work* 191, 192). Rose specifically addressed vocational schools here, but the vocational orientations of my undergraduates make his observations relevant.

My college students, like the vocational students Rose observed, have little access to privileged discourses, so their weak writing skills are obviously social products. Where all students arrive with at least B-level skills and academic commitments, teachers can start like Danielewicz and Elbow do, taking B as a default and robustly moving students from B to A: “Experience with contracts led Jane to articulate specific features of writing as a way to handle grades higher than B. . . . [S]he publishes a list of features with examples drawn from common readings. On these lists appear qualitative criteria such as ‘richness of detail’ and ‘voice’ ” (264). Where few students present B-level competence, teachers must address, I think, the wide spectrum of abilities in each class as well as the cultural clash of working-class student identity with middle-class academic culture. For sure, good teaching is labor-intensive everywhere, but teaching and learning are always situated *somewhere*.

Danielewicz and Elbow are sanguine about widely situating their grading plan elsewhere. In fact, they specifically identify “basic writers” as a particularly useful population for their approach because letter-grading is typically set aside in BW in favor of pass/fail:

Contracts are promising here because basic writing courses so often stress quantity of work, fluency, and a supportive climate. Teachers of basic writing are usually not preoccupied with fine-grained distinctions between degrees of excellence or poorness in texts but instead focus on issues such as generating and developing text. For just this reason, many basic writing courses already use pass/fail grading. In fact, pass/fail systems usually boil down to a tacit contract—but one that lacks specificity and rests on unarticulated assumptions. A pass/fail system would benefit greatly from the explicitness and teeth of a contract. (259)

I agree that pass/fail BW can benefit from the transparency Danielewicz and Elbow bring to contracting. Pass/fail did reduce student fixation on grading in my fifteen years of teaching basic writing, where I emphasized fluency thanks to Elbow's "freewriting" methods. However, a big problem I had in BW teaching is common enough and complicates contracting between teacher and students. My judgment and practice were over-ruled by a bogus exit exam imposed top down university-wide. I preferred student-centered methods that did not "teach to the test" (see my *Critical Teaching and Everyday Life* for details). But the exit exam (imposed after 1978) loomed large all term. As end-term approached, anxiety consumed students, and me. I found myself suspending the "critical literacy" syllabus we evolved in favor of a three-week non-stop crash drill in test prep. At the end, I chose to pass some marginal students who failed the exit exam, but they could not legitimately enroll in regular comp, because the institution stopped it, not because I judged them unprepared. Invasive instruments, like centralized entry and exit exams, undermine writing teachers' authority.

Such complications do in fact come to Danieliewicz's and Elbow's attention. In the following excerpt, they recognize the limits which variant conditions can impose on their B-based contract grading:

We developed our contracts while working at strong public universities. But we don't believe our good results depend on institutions like ours. Shor and his colleagues used their grading contracts with working-class students at urban, commuter colleges. Contract grading lends itself to variation. Teachers or programs can easily customize their contracts to fit their particular goals, priorities, and situations. . . . (It would take experimenting to see if contracts would work for ten-week terms or short intensive courses or for open admissions first-year writing courses or first-year calculus or chemistry.) . . . In our contracts, we've tried to work within two demanding but exciting constraints: first, the B should be available to *every* student—that is, not dependent on skill or prior training. (We couldn't retain this claim if some of our students were radically unable to handle written English.) Second, all decisions about what is acceptable for the B must be made without regard to writing quality. (257, 250, 258)

The issues in parentheses above (appearing in the original) address how teaching and learning are situated activities, what I call *the impact of place*

*on practice*, which is the first big difference between their method and mine, insofar as my work site led me to grade writing quality along a wide spectrum of student abilities, A-F.

A second major divergence between our contract methods is my choice of power-sharing. I initiate at the first class meeting a “constitutional assembly” through which the students and I negotiate grading and the syllabus. Danielewicz and Elbow informally “use class discussions to explore the student’s notions about what constitutes ‘exceptionally high quality’ writing and . . . can often derive our criteria from students’ comments” (246). They add, “We try to make these criteria as public and concrete as possible. . . . But we don’t profess to give students any power over these high-grade decisions” (246). Thoughtful, they bring love of learning, curiosity about language, and student-centered approaches to class. Yet, can a process be called a *contract* if it is *unilateral*? And, is anything valuable lost by foregoing negotiation with students?

A “contract” requires “a meeting of the minds,” that is, a covenant of explicit understandings between all parties affected by the terms. In this construction, no contract exists if one party unilaterally obliges another to abide by terms to which the second party did not formally consent. Perhaps because this understanding of a “contract” is common, Danielewicz and Elbow themselves note their peculiar use of the term: “In one sense, the word ‘contract’ doesn’t fit something we impose so unilaterally on students. But in another sense the word is right: we want to give students written evidence that we *contract* ourselves to keep this unusual promise to award a B for doing things rather than for writing quality. And the term ‘contract’ aptly describes the type of written document that spells out as explicitly as possible the rights and obligations of all the parties—a document that tries to eliminate ambiguity rather than relying on ‘good faith’ and ‘what’s implicitly understood’ ” (247). This is good practice, to encourage “doing things” and to eliminate squishy reliance on “good faith” in teacherly judgement, certainly better than my first efforts to explain to students how I judge A, B, and C quality in writing, which Danielewicz and Elbow rightly drew attention to from *When Students Have Power*. But can we call *obligation without negotiation* a contractual relationship? Negotiation counts because it involves the *co-authoring of mutual obligations*; I claim here that co-authoring underlies a “meeting of the minds” and is not expendable because it is a civic foundation of strong democracy.

If a teacher announces rules and expectations which students must follow, then the rhetorical setting is not contractual but non-negotiable.

Only one person is authorized to enunciate the terms of encounter: the teacher. A teacher's presentation of non-negotiable rules can be congenially delivered as a pledge—if students do what the teacher requires, then she will give students the promised grades. But genial delivery does not reinvent the rhetorical wheel; a *contract* still must answer to a “meeting of the minds,” which means that more than one rhetorical agent constructs the terms. When students deliberate on the protocol, there is a bona fide contractual discourse. However, without deliberation there can still be *friendly* social relations (the teacher is a good person who means well), or *bureaucratic* relations (the teacher is a collegiate official who certifies student work to award credits), or *master-apprentice* relations (the teacher is an elder/expert mentoring neophytes), or *faux domestic* relations (the teacher is a surrogate parent who holds students accountable for displaying good middle-class manners and linguistic habits, as Lynn Bloom and John Trimbur separately argued).

In advocating co-authorship as a standard for the “meeting of the minds,” I'm claiming a “strong” notion of *the contract*, which requires mutual negotiation and public deliberation to position students as rhetorical agents, that is, as enfranchised constituents of a democratic public sphere (the classroom). While I claim that unilateral protocols cannot qualify as “strong contracts,” I do see a “weak” version worth examining. This weak version of contractual relations emanates from neo-liberal politics. Neo-liberalism, the dominant ethos of both major parties, has a number of familiar markers: consolidation of enterprises into massive multi-nationals (“corporate conglomeration,” “globalization”); outsourcing of work to cheap labor sites anywhere in the world (“race to the bottom”); conversion of work from full-time to contingent and part-time staffing (adjunct abuse in English especially); defunding “public goods” like parks, public schools and public higher education, public housing, and public hospitals, in favor of “private goods” like fees for park use, health clubs and luxury spas, managed health care, vouchers and charters in K-12, condos and gated communities, and subsidized development (“privatization”); increasing inequality as wealth transfers from the public sector to the corporate one and from the bottom 60% of families to the top echelons (“end of the American Dream,” “death of the middle class”). These directions are far along in New York City, where CUNY urban scholar Michael Sorkin said, “There is this accelerating notion that not just parks but many aspects of the public realm have to be self-financing” (Cardwell NJ12). Education, like public parks, has been overtaken by market forces, transforming schooling from a social good into a consumer good (Giroux; Giroux and Giroux). The neo-liberal market agenda is distinctly transforming CUNY,

my university, which is rapidly re-branding itself upscale as an elite place of celebrity faculty and star students, including a privately-financed Macaulay Honors College with lavish benefits denied other faculty and undergraduates, distancing CUNY finally from its historic public mission as the tuition-free “working-class Harvard” and Open Admissions frontier.

*Higher education* in neo-liberal logic must function as a business in the *consumer marketplace*; colleges and universities are in the business of human capital development (credentialing) with universities producing intellectual property for sale as well. Colleges and universities market degrees and knowledge, which are sold at varying prices depending on the reputation of the institution marketing them (thus, as CUNY re-brands upwards, it can rationalize the upward march of its tuition while approaching corporate sponsors to underwrite some of its graduate students doing research). In modern markets, all exchanges are *monetized*, that is, everything has a price, everything is a commodity or service whose price varies according to the distinction or rarity of the brand. In neo-liberal terms, then, Danielewicz’s and Elbow’s unilateral grading plan might be framed as a seller’s warranty to customers, that is, a “producer contract” or “provider contract” or “supplier contract” to consumers in the market for a college writing course. This warranty metaphor from market relations informed Stanley Fish’s polemic against civic/moral advocacy in teaching, *Save the World on Your Own Time* (2008):

Teachers can, by virtue of their training and expertise, present complex materials in ways that make them accessible to novices. Teachers can also put students in possession of the analytical tools employed by up-to-date researchers in the field. But teachers cannot, except for a serendipity that by definition cannot be counted on, fashion moral character, or inculcate respect for others, or produce citizens of a certain temper. Or, rather, they cannot do these things unless they abandon the responsibilities that belong to them *by contract* in order to take up responsibilities that belong properly to others. But if they do that, they will be practicing *without a license*. . . . When that happens—and unfortunately it does happen—everyone loses. The students lose because they’re not getting *what they paid for*. . . . (14, italics added)

Here, Fish’s metaphors reformulate the banking model in market terms, that is, exemplary customer service means teachers living up to their end of the deal by transferring promised bodies-of-knowledge to students. Fish

of course raises serious questions about education's role in moral or civic development, what is sometimes referred to as the social construction of the self or the social formation of human subjects, as argued by John Dewey and a long line of scholars since (see Patricia Bizzell's rejoinder to Fish in "Composition Studies Saves the World!" and Donald Lazere's "Stanley Fish's Tightrope Act"). For now, I won't address Fish's arguments against advocacy or against democratic education, but will focus simply on the *syllabus* as a contractual relation.

In colleges, a course syllabus authored solely by the teacher and distributed by her on the first day of class is often a requirement posted in faculty handbooks. The well-developed syllabus stands traditionally as good professional practice. It is also an archived document perused by outside accreditors and by inside promotion committees. Between teacher and student, then, in terms following Fish, the syllabus is understood as a contractual guarantee for the professional services the teacher will render in exchange for the tuition that students are paying to the college for the course. The unilateral syllabus and grading contract are thus paper representations or bills of lading specifying goods and services guaranteed to buyers. In such market activity, sellers (teachers) are the sole rhetors enunciating to customers (students) the terms of exchange. As customers, students can exercise consumer agency: they can drop a class if disappointed and apply for a refund. Truly savvy consumers will size up the situation and simply not buy in the first place (not register for the class), taking their business elsewhere (a different class or instructor), shopping around for a better deal. The problem is that market relations such as these tilt the field to sellers. Customers, especially the working-class majority in college, cannot nimbly shop around for a better syllabus, a better grading plan, a better teacher, or even a better college. The cultural, economic, and social capitals needed to be effective consumers in higher education are accumulated mostly by students from affluent homes and affluent school districts. On the whole, then, the neo-liberal turn in American school and society privileges only the strongest consumers, the already-privileged, further empowering the already-powerful. As such, a market is a poor substitute for a constitutional democracy.

Neo-liberalism (the supremacy of market relations, the transfer of wealth from public to private sectors, the displacement of democratic spheres and social services by commercial relations and private contractors) is **not** the logic Danielewicz and Elbow propose for classrooms. They are humanists who address students as whole people, not as market ciphers. Jane

Danielewicz is especially cognizant of the value of public spheres which she highlights in a remarkable essay, “Personal Genres, Public Voices”:

. . . through writing personal stories, many public issues have surfaced organically. . . —homophobia, religious fervor, parental divorce, racism, inequalities in education for athletes, interracial dating, immigrant labor conditions, and working mothers, to name a few. . . . [These issues] constitute public discourse because they are told by writers who in using “I” have agency and speak with authority. . . . *Their* stories have revealed, more effectively than any book they might read, the truth of the hard, theoretical claim that identity is constructed by institutions, groups, and other social forces, and that individuals, even in America, are not free to choose or determine their own destinies. (443)

She and Elbow teach for reflective human development. Why, then, bring up neo-liberal logic as one way to understand “weak” contracting that does not negotiate with students? Why should the march of neo-liberalism concern them or us or draw anyone to rethink democratic practice in grading contracts?

I describe the neo-liberal capture of school and society to emphasize why *strong contract relations*, strong democratic practices in classrooms, especially matter now. Market forces are undermining constitutional rights and public spheres of deliberation, information, cooperation, and education. When teachers choose unilateral contracts, we forfeit an opportunity for students to deliberate cooperatively on the terms of their experience, to develop democratic agency, which I claim is foundational for their ability to build a free and just society. Democratic deliberation in classrooms is counter-hegemonic, against the dominant market forces directing society. Negotiating the terms of grading and learning calls out complex civic behaviors. But the negotiating teacher does not stop being a teacher of writing when she becomes an agent of democratic arts. She also must be expert in advancing literate abilities from the cultural capital students bring to class. The challenge of critical-democratic teaching, then, is to advance knowledge, literacy, and civic arts in the same syllabus.

For democratic arts in the classroom, I offer formal mechanisms, including tools for students to contest my grading of the quality of their writing. One tool I announce on the first day is “protest rights,” which authorizes students to contest their grades with me. Another mechanism is a

rewrite provision where students can revise any piece as often as they like for a higher grade. A third mechanism is the A-B-C grading proposal sheet (see Appendix), handed out on day one for discussion and negotiation. A fourth tool of power-sharing is what I call the “After-Class Group.” Described extensively in *When Students Have Power*, the ACG is comprised of student volunteers who sit with me immediately after each class to evaluate the session just ended. This provides immediate feedback on my teaching and holds me, the institutional authority, accountable to students every week. It is a democratic sphere within a democratic sphere insofar as it is embedded in and parallel to the whole class process; it is also a site for composing a stakeholder rhetoric, the most intensive discourse for student co-governing of the syllabus. Each ACG member at each meeting reports on the successes and failures of the session just ended, as well as anonymously on other students’ unpublished feelings about the level of work, the course contents, the assignments, and my grading practices. Any change approved in the ACG is presented to the whole class for voting up or down.

Democracy, John Dewey said in *Experience and Education* (1938), is “more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living” (67), that is, a whole way of life. In *Democracy and Education* (1916), he characterized our society as “autocratically managed,” where “it is often a conscious object to prevent the development of freedom and responsibility; a few do the planning and ordering, the others follow directions and are deliberately confined to narrow and prescribed channels” (310). Instead of authority narrowly held by a few, he proposed widely-practiced decision-making in all corners of society, with people framing purposes/policies/plans, then acting on their articulated thoughts, then jointly reflecting on the outcomes of their actions, and then constructing new plans for action based on observed results from prior activities. For Dewey, participatory deliberation was central to both democracy and education:

There is, I think, no point in the philosophy of progressive education which is sounder than its emphasis upon the importance of the participation of the learner in the formation of the purposes which direct his activities in the learning process, just as there is no defect in traditional education greater than its failure to secure the active cooperation of the pupil in construction of the purposes involved in his studying. (*Experience* 67)

Dewey hoped democratic education would propel robust democracy in society at large, “a society in which every person shall be occupied in something which makes the lives of others better worth living” (*Democracy* 316). In our field, fortunately, such civic concerns refuse to go away.

Models for *civic and democratizing* practice come to us from colleagues who show what can be done even in the worst of times: Linda Flower’s extraordinary neighborhood project reported in *Community Literacy and the Rhetoric of Public Engagement* (2008); Paula Mathieu’s long-term public writing with homeless groups detailed in *Tactics of Hope: The Public Turn in English Composition* (2005) and in an essay with Diana George (2009); Jennifer Beech’s superb critical teaching about White identity at a Southern college, “Redneck and Hillbilly Discourses in the Writing Classroom” (2004); Linda Christensen’s inventive social justice curricula in *Reading, Writing, and Rising Up* (2000); Mike Rose’s long advocacy for working-class intelligence from *Lives on the Boundary* to *The Mind at Work*, and his recent essay “Writing for the Public” (2010); Donald Lazere’s brilliant text, *Reading and Writing for Civic Literacy* (2005); the ingenious activism of Eileen Schell, Stephen Parks, Harriet Malinowitz, Marc Bousquet, and William Macauley in professional and community contexts; the modeling of how rhetoricians can serve as agents of change, by Ellen Cushman, Susan Wells, and Nancy Welch; the incomparable example of Carmen Kynard in developing alternative discourse for writing and for teaching. Referring to the emergence of alternative discourse, Patricia Bizzell (2009) summarized the democratizing interest in our field:

Teachers and students alike found that what was needed was not a one-way acculturation process, but a two-way, indeed a multidirectional, process of collaboration and change whereby new forms of discourse were incorporated into academic ways of doing things, and new types of intellectual work were thereby enabled. (178)

Co-authorship in the classroom is an alt/dis for the downward distribution of authority in a time when power and wealth are rushing to the top.

*Strong* democratic practice, then, through negotiated contracts, is action against the market discipline invading education. But such practice is not a call for polemics in the classroom. In this regard, Danielewicz and Elbow say about me and critical pedagogy colleagues that “They make it clear to students that they are using the classroom to help resist capitalism. They see the classroom as a political arena where differences of power

should be highlighted and negotiated. As they describe their teaching, there are overtones of unrelenting struggle and a sense that conflict is both inevitable and appropriate” (248). Danielewicz and Elbow offer their own brief on capitalism, writing that “Capitalism (in our culture anyway) helps induce citizen compliance by obscuring the unfairness in how institutional power and authority determine success and failure. Whether winner or loser in this so-called meritocracy, you are supposed to accept the outcome as what you “earned”—your just desert” (248). From this critical start, they go on to explain:

While our contracts don’t directly counter the social injustices existing outside the classroom, they do resist the capitalism that seems to permeate the classroom air that students breathe. . . . In short, about behaviors, we take the gloves off; about quality of writing, we give students the power to decide (again up to the grade of B). Thus we see ourselves working very much alongside Shor and his colleagues in fighting a large, societal, and culturally enshrined system that looks fair when it is not.

We acknowledge the ideological dimensions in all pedagogical choices, but we don’t choose to foreground for discussion all the ideological implications in contracts. Our main goal is a system that can help teachers and students of all ideological stripes who want grading to be easier and fairer—who want to think more about writing and less about grades. (249)

Their decency and good sense make me eager to walk alongside them “in fighting a large, culturally-enshrined system that looks fair when it is not.”

Alongside, I’d like to propose one reservation. When Danielewicz and Elbow say that teachers using critical pedagogy “foreground for discussion all the ideological implications in contracts” and make clear to students that we are using the classroom “to help resist capitalism,” they misunderstand my practice. At conferences, workshops, and talks, I address class, race, gender, and homophobia, and do so in published writings. But my discourse among colleagues or in published work is not my discourse in the classroom. I don’t lecture students (except for the rare practice of “the dialogic lecture,” which I described in *Empowering Education*, 1992). I don’t address students about the need to resist capitalism, which would be an abuse of my position. Lecturing or sermonizing students will silence many and encourage others to mimic

the teacher's bombast to win As for being so "bright." Here is how I put it in *Empowering Education*:

Cultural action in a classroom is not like political action in an organization or a movement. A classroom in a school or college is rarely a self-selected group seeking social change. The mainstream classroom is a *mélange* of students with various motives in an institution structured against their empowerment. Most often, students do not come to class with a transformative agenda. Few are looking for empowering education. Some welcome a challenging democratic process while others resent it; some welcome an unsettling critical dialogue while others reject it. . . . Teachers who treat the classroom as a political meeting can expect stiffened resistance from students as well as more vigilant policing from administrators. . . . Dialogic, democratic teaching rejects sectarian posturing. Students cannot be commanded to take action and cannot be graded on their consciousness. (196-97)

A critical teacher earns the right to propose only if students exercise the right to dispose.

In sum, then, grading is a social practice in a public place, the classroom. Grading is one practice which forms us into the people we become. Because formative practices are also power relations, I would judge all teaching and learning as already-embedded in "unrelenting struggle," while Danielewicz and Elbow see "unrelenting struggle" as the signature of critical pedagogy. I propose, instead, that conflict is the signature of our way of life from which all classrooms emerge and into which they all feed. Critical teachers explicitly question these conflicts in their practice.

Writing in the cold winter of 2010, I learned that 16,500 New York City children are homeless (Brosnahan; Bosman), and food-banks are running low. Not far from shelters packed with children, the biggest investment bank on Wall Street, Goldman Sachs, gave out \$16.2 billion in end-year compensation (Story and Dash; Dash; Bowley). Billionaire Mayor Michael Bloomberg imposed budget cuts on schools but handed over \$1-billion-plus in subsidies for new stadiums, one for the Yankees, the richest sports franchise in the world (Dwyer). The U.S. Supreme Court just ruled that corporations like the Yankees can spend unlimited funds to influence elections (Liptak; Kirkpatrick; "The Court's Blow to Democracy"). I suggest again, therefore, that unrelenting conflict is the signature of our lifeworld to which critical

pedagogy responds. Somewhere, all children sleep well-fed in their own warm beds, and unrelenting struggle falls happily asleep beside them. I am looking for that place.

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**Appendix**  
**Proposed Grading Plans from the Teacher**

**Please read and suggest any changes you think are needed:**

PROPOSED PLAN FOR an A (Excellent) GRADE:

1. **ONE absence okay** but NOT when main essays due or conference scheduled with teacher. 2nd absence: Grade drops to B+; 3rd: C+; 4th: F. **If absent, fax or e-mail HW due next day.**
2. ONE lateness okay (6:40 is late).
3. Stay to end of every class except for emergency. If leaving early, tell teacher.
4. All HW handed in when due; all reading done in time for class.
5. A-level quality on all written assignments.
6. A-level word count on HW. (HW will have different word minimums for each grade plan.)
7. A-level participation in classwork and every class discussion (but don't interrupt people or insult anyone).
8. Give useful feedback to other students in editing groups.

PROPOSED PLAN FOR a B (Very Good) GRADE:

1. **TWO absences okay** but NOT when main essays due or conference scheduled, and **NOT 2 weeks in a row**. 3rd absence: Grade drops to C; 4th: F. **If absent, fax HW next day as above.**
2. TWO latenesses okay (6:40 is late).
3. Stay to end of every class except for emergency. If leaving early, tell teacher.
4. One HW can be handed in a week late.
5. B-level quality on all written assignments.
6. B-level word count on HW.
7. B-level participation: do all classwork, join in most discussions (but don't interrupt or insult anyone).
8. Give useful feedback to other students in editing groups.

## Critical Pedagogy Is Too Big to Fail

### PROPOSED PLAN FOR a C (Average) GRADE:

1. **THREE absences okay but NOT 2 or 3 weeks in a row.** 4th absence: Grade drops to F. When absent, bring HW due to next class.
2. TWO latenesses okay (6:40 is late).
3. Stay to end of every class except for emergency. If leaving early, tell teacher.
4. One HW can be handed in a week late.
5. C-level quality and word count on written assignments.
6. C-level participation: do all classwork; no participation required in class discussion.
7. Give useful feedback to other students in editing groups.

### GENERAL ITEMS:

1. **E-Mail teacher for HW when absent: professorshor@comcast.net.**
2. HW done on time can be rewritten for higher grade if re-done in a week.
3. Plus and minus grading used.
4. For all HW: type, proofread, correct errors, put page numbers on all pages, indicate number of words, separate sheets if you use a cut-sheet printer.
5. A-plan students can volunteer for the AFTER-CLASS GROUP which meets after each class for 20-30 minutes. ACG members get a pass on 1 weekly HW.
6. Class rules: no side talking; respect for all; don't leave room during class but wait for 15-minute break; turn off phones/beepers; food/drink okay if you clean up.

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