EMPOWERING EDUCATION

Critical Teaching for Social Change

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Introduction

The First Day of Class: Passing the Test

Like many kids, I loved learning but not schooling. I especially dreaded the first day of class. I would wake up early, jump nervously out of bed, and run to open the window. From my fifth-floor apartment in the South Bronx, where I grew up, I would lean out and see my old public school across Bruckner Boulevard, a street busy with a stream of traffic on the way to Manhattan. Sometimes, if I was lucky, a big gray fog bank rolled in from the Long Island Sound, covered the weedy flats behind the school where Gypsies camped and veterans once lived in Quonset huts, and swallowed P.S. 93. My dreams were answered. Miraculously, the school had disappeared.

Years later, as a college teacher, I was walking to the first day of my basic writing class. I had a black book bag on my shoulder, a lesson plan in hand, and butterflies in my stomach.

I entered B building on our concrete campus and climbed the stairs, passing students smoking and talking loudly to each other. My writing class was in room 321, a place I knew well, with its gray tile floor, cinder-block walls, dirty venetian blinds, fiberglass chairs, and cold fluorescent lights. Since I began teaching English at this low-budget public college in New York City in 1971, I had spent a few semesters in the long, narrow rooms of B building.

On this first day, I wondered what would happen in class. I always bring a plan and know what I want to do, but what would the students do? I had been experimenting for some time with "student-centered teaching," hoping to engage students in critical learning and to include them in making the syllabus. But they came to class wary and uninspired, expecting the teacher to tell them what to do and to lecture them on what things mean. I knew their intelligence was strong, but could I convince them to use their brains in school?

My confidence was shaken a little that first day when I reached the open door of B-321 and heard not a sound. Was this the right classroom? Had my room been changed at the last minute?

I took a step forward, peeked in the doorway, and saw twenty-four students sitting dead silent in two long rows of fiberglass chairs. They were staring straight ahead at the front desk. They were waiting for the teacher to arrive and do education to them, I thought to myself—one more talking head who would shellack them with grammar and knowledge.

Just then, as I stood in the doorway, all eyes turned in my direction. There were many eyes, but no smiles. New York, my home town, is famous for its tough faces, but these were some of the toughest I had ever seen on students. The class was made up mostly of young white men from Brooklyn, with some women and a few minority students. I looked away from their eyes, quietly took a breath, and strode to the desk, where I put down my shoulder bag and said, "Hello! Welcome to English One. My name is Ira Shor. Why don't we put the chairs in a discussion circle, to make it easier to talk to each other?"

No one moved. I wondered if I should give up on the circle. But maybe it was too soon to retreat. So I stepped forward and asked them once more to form a circle, but deep in my heart I asked myself if it was time to change careers. Should I go sell computers in the suburbs?

The students waited for me to make my move. I reached for one empty chair and turned it around, to confirm my resolve. Then I stood close to some students in the front row and gestured to help them turn their seats. Grudgingly, one, and then another, inched their chairs around into a loose circle, actually more like a wandering amoeba than a circle. The sound of the chairs banging and scraping was a relief from the silence.

I sat down in the circle. I said hello again and asked them to spend a few minutes interviewing each other and then to tell us something about their partners, so that we could get to know who was in the room. This was supposed to be an icebreaker. But some ice can survive August in New York. Their aggressive silence once again greeted my request, so I began pointing out partners for people to work with and nudged them to begin. A few did start talking in pairs, and then a few more, but their conversations crawled, then died.

I was getting impatient, which felt better than anxiety, and I decided to run at the problem instead of away from it. I followed an intuition to make their resistance itself the theme we talked about. I had been developing "critical teaching" and "dialogic pedagogy" that posed problems from student experience for class inquiry. I thought to pose the problem of their silence. Why not have a dialogue about the absence of dialogue? Would they be willing to communicate with me about why they weren't communicating? Who knew? Anyway, I was getting nowhere

fast. Confronting their resistance to dialogue might warm up a critical discussion about our icy situation.

I took a small risk and asked them about their silence, saying something like this: "What's going on here? I walk in and nobody wants to move a chair or talk or relate to me. What's the story? You don't even know me. At least get to know me before you decide you don't want to talk. Maybe I'll do a lot of things to make you angry, maybe I won't. Now, who'll tell me why you're sitting so silent?"

After a moment that felt like an hour, one of the bigger guys in class suddenly spoke. His voice was loud and direct. I was so startled to hear even a word that I didn't catch what he said. "What was that?" I asked. He replied, simply, "We hate that test."

"What test?" I asked.

"That writing test," he answered.

"The one you took for the college?"

"Yeah."

"What's wrong with the test?" I asked him.

He looked me dead in the eye and answered, "It ain't fair." I glanced away and saw a few heads nodding in agreement, so I put the question to the class, "Is anyone else angry about the writing test?" Hands shot up around the room.

I should say here that soon after tuition was forced on the City University of New York for the first time in 129 years, in the fiscal crisis of 1976, standardized examinations in writing, reading, and math were also imposed. Since then, these examinations have been given to entering freshmen, producing an enormous amount of failure and frustration as well as a record-keeping nightmare and an expanding empire of remedial classes. More students have had to spend more time and tuition dollars in low-credit remediation, which delays their accumulation of course credits toward a degree. In a few years, the single remedial course in my English department of 1971 had grown to ten separate courses and a college testing program.

After a number of hands shot up in class when I asked if anyone else was angry at the writing test that had landed them in this basic writing course, I asked, "What's wrong with the test? Why is it unfair?"

To my amazement, this silent group began an avalanche of remarks. The students found their voices, enough to carry us through a ferocious hour, once I found a "generative" theme, an issue generated from the problems of their own experience. When I first said hello to them, no one wanted to speak. Now they all wanted to speak at once. My teaching problem shifted from no participation to wrestling with a runaway discussion. They began complaining in outbursts that con-

firmed each other's feelings. They interrupted each other. They spontaneously broke off into small groups that talked to themselves. It was dizzying until I managed to assert some order. What emerged was a collective sense that the imposed writing exam and this remedial class were unfair punishments.

To give some structure and depth to this perception, I asked them to write for a while, explaining why they thought the requirement was unfair and what should be done about it. I said something like this: "I agree with you that the exam is unfair. I also oppose it. But it's not enough to yell and complain. You have to take your ideas seriously, explain how you see the situation, and come up with an alternative you think makes more sense." I suggested they each write two pages or so about the writing exam. To my great relief, they agreed. For the next twenty minutes, the room was quiet and busy.

When they had finished rough drafts, I asked them to practice writing exercises I'd be asking them to do during the term, exercises which I will explain in a later chapter on the structure of "problem-posing dialogue." Basically, I said that they had powerful voices, as anyone could tell from the talk that had raged around the room a few minutes earlier. They had much to say, displayed broad vocabularies, and spoke fairly grammatically. I encouraged them to use the already existing good grammar in their speaking voices to help improve their less-developed writing hands. In this "voicing" exercise they read aloud their compositions singly or in pairs. By reading aloud slowly and carefully, they can become better editors of their written work, noticing and correcting the small errors usually left for the teacher to find. After voicing, I asked them to read their drafts in groups of three, to discuss the ideas, compare their criticisms, and choose one essay to read to the whole class for discussion. When they chose the material for class discussion, they were codeveloping the curriculum with me, a key idea for critical and democratic teaching, which I will be focusing on in this book. Students formed small groups and spent some time discussing their positions. The first session ended about then, and we picked up the project the next time the class met.

In the ensuing classes, I took notes as the students read their selected essays. Using my notes, I re-presented to them some of the key issues, so that they could reflect on their thoughts, which is one way to develop a critical habit of mind. As it turned out, that basic class evolved an alternative policy for the writing exam which they thought was more sensible and equitable. First, they disagreed with the fifty-minute time limit. They said that students should have as long as they needed to write the best essay they could. This sounded reasonable to me. The

fifty-minute limit is a bureaucratic convenience to control costs by fitting the test into a single class hour. If the time was open-ended, special proctors would have to be hired to monitor the students. The time limit, then, benefits the institution, not the students. A developmental writing process requires time to think over the issues, discuss them with other people, write notes and rough drafts, share them with peers, get feedback, do relevant reading, and make revisions. The administrative time limit blocks this process. Further, the students thought that they should not have required topics. In their opinion, they wrote at their best not only when they had as much time as they needed but also when they wrote about what they knew and liked. Sitting down to write about themes out of the blue, like "Does TV make children violent?" may make it harder for many of them to write at their best. They proposed that the two prompts offered on the writing exam should be kept for those students who wanted to use them, but the others should be free to pick their own themes. Put simply, the prompt questions on the exam are often experienced by them as issues without a context. Lastly, they wanted the exam given at a different point in their academic lives. Many had taken it in the spring or summer of their senior year in high school when "senioritis" had set in, jeopardizing the seriousness with which they do academic work. They thought the exam should be given in the fall of their senior year, while they were still focused on schoolwork.

Their policy proposals for the writing exam made sense to me. This basic skills class of twenty-four students had been unable to pass an apparently simple writing exam, but they were able in a student-centered classroom to critique the policy and come up with alternatives. The exercise was not only centered in their thoughts, language, and conditions, but it also focused their critical intelligence on an issue they had not thought about in depth before. Though they had bad feelings about the test and the remedial class, they had not reflected on the situation. They had simply acted out their bad feelings by refusing to participate in class. By reflecting critically on the problem, they went beyond mere opinions or bad feelings.

But some things did not work out well. For one thing, in this class, student-centered teaching sometimes left me overtaken by events, trying to catch up with student expression. When students codevelop themes for study and share in the making of the syllabus, the class dialogue sometimes moves faster than I can understand it or organize it for academic study. Finding a generative theme, that is, a theme generated from student conditions which is problematic enough to inspire students to do intellectual work, can produce a wealth of student expression. I listen carefully in class to students so that I can develop critical study

based in their thoughts, but I often need to go home to mull over what they said and to figure out what to do next. For example, in the exercise over the required writing examination, I would have liked a slower pace to give me time to find material on its history and to bring in articles and documents for the students to discuss. This would add outside texts to the critical dialogue in class, so that the students' essays would not be the only reading matter we examined. When projects emerge in-progress from student themes, the opportunity to deepen academic inquiry about them is often limited by the pace of student-centered dialogue. I kept this in mind for the next round of projects we undertook in this class, to make sure that reading matter would be built into the work.

A second problem was the small participation of the few minority students in class. I encouraged them to speak, met with them after class, and kept in touch with their work. They did their assignments but were reluctant to speak in class. As I will discuss later, this reluctance is understandable on a campus and in classes that are predominantly white and in an area where race relations are tense.

A third problem emerging from this project on the writing examination is that understanding reality is not the same thing as changing it. Knowledge is not exactly power. Knowledge is the power to know, to understand, but not necessarily the power to do or to change. The learning process we shared helped reduce the students' alienation from intellectual work. They gained an empowering relationship to the teacher, to writing, and to the act of studying. But while their writing and thinking developed, the testing policy remained the same. Literacy and awareness by themselves do not change oppressive conditions in school and society. Knowledge is power only for those who can use it to change their conditions.

To face this problem, I invited the class to consider acting on their new knowledge, perhaps to change their oppressive reality while also developing their thinking and writing. If they thought their policy proposals made more sense than the existing ones, why not publish them in the school newspaper, take them to the student government for support, and campaign for them among faculty and other students who might agree with them? I suggested that there were outside arenas where their proposals might have an impact.

A few mulled over my suggestion, but the group as a whole was unenthusiastic about becoming activist. They had never done anything like that before and were not yet ready to try it. In my heart and thoughts, I was a little disappointed but not surprised, given the conservative climate in the country, on our campus, and in their community. So I dropped my proposal, but I did mention that I would talk about

their policies whenever I could in faculty meetings, because they were good ones.

For the rest of the term, that class took on ambitious projects. They formed project groups on such self-selected issues as abortion, child abuse, unemployment, education, women's equality, and drugs. Students chose which committee to join. I asked each group to do research and bring to class something for us to read on their theme, to make sure that this next round of projects would integrate outside texts into the discussion. I also brought in reading matter relevant to each of the themes. The groups did research, organized their work during class time and also outside, and then took over a class session. I had wanted them to chair the sessions, to develop their authority and leadership skills, but they were shy and inexperienced in running the class, so I had to sit with each committee and act as chair. During their sessions, the committees offered their readings for discussion, then posed a problem for the whole class to write on for twenty minutes, after which we did some literacy exercises and then had discussion. The committees took home the student papers after class, to read, respond to, and return next time. This way, they became readers and evaluators of each other's work. I read their papers as well, asked for some to be revised at home, and offered exercises when I noticed recurring writing problems in their essays.

I also led discussions on themes and readings of my own choosing. One topic was particularly challenging. I wondered if this basic writing class would participate in the nuclear arms debate then under way in many places but not visible at my college or in their communities. Around the world, many people were alarmed at the spread of nuclear weapons and at the vast sums spent on militarism. To raise this social concern with my students, I read with them various materials, including an excerpt from Thompson and Smith's *Protest and Survive* (1981), about the "destructivist" consciousness spreading as nuclear weapons became a way of life. They struggled with the conceptual frameworks, evaluating their own positions in terms of being destructivist or activist. In general, I was gratified by the seriousness with which they took on this difficult issue. My suggesting an outside social theme like the arms race did not silence the students. I did not lecture them on my point of view but followed the discussion format of their own project groups. During these weeks, one young veteran in class decided to write a critical narrative of his military service, which he had not examined before. He shared a strong essay with the class, which I later published in a professional volume of student writing.

Overall, the class developed an emotional tone which made it attrac-

tive. We laughed. We spoke about our differences. The students got down to work in class and organized trips to the beach after class. Attendance was high. I brought a colleague or two to sit in and enjoyed seeing the students emerge as distinct personalities as well as writers and thinkers. There were some memorable moments, too. When the women's group led class, several of the men said that women couldn't do men's work. One tall, muscular guy was especially angry at the city for lowering the physical strength standards for firefighters so that females could qualify. Some male students made the case that women were too weak and unmechanical to do the work of real men, like construction, truck driving, and so on. At that point, Marie, about twenty-two, turned to the men and announced that she was an auto mechanic. For weeks she had kept this to herself. She did not look like the men's idea of a mechanic, but she spoke with confidence when she said that she could tune a car better than any of the guys in the room and was ready to prove it. We looked at her in awed silence. None of the men took up her challenge. Marie's intervention was a real-life rebuttal to the men's sexist prejudice, coming at just the right time. It reminded me that the students are complicated people whose authentic personalities can emerge in the context of meaningful work.

Later on, Marie's authenticity left me in awed silence again. During the abortion committee session, one question was "What would you do if your teenage daughter came home one day and announced she was pregnant?" Students debated various answers. When I turned to a silent Marie and asked her opinion, she said without hesitation, "I'd break both her legs." The class roared with laughter at her matter-of-fact response. I was left speechless by her casual brutality, because I thought of her as a natural feminist who would have an enlightened opinion on teenage pregnancy. Instead, she stood by her position that her daughter would have two broken legs to go along with being pregnant. This reminded me again not to take students for granted. I learn a lot about them, but they are always capable of surprising me with something new. I was stumped by Marie's answer. Not knowing how to respond, I re-presented it to the class and was relieved that few people agreed with this mechanic's solution.

By the end of the term, six of the original twenty-four had dropped out of the class, and I was sorry to see them go. I had a chance to consult with some of them and got a feel for why they left. One student had no front teeth and was ashamed to talk in class. I told him he didn't have to, that he could talk to me in private until he felt ready to speak publicly. But then I discovered that he didn't want to write in class or out, because

he was a poor writer. I worked tutorially with him, but he missed appointments and didn't hand in assignments. Apparently he had gotten through high school with very little expected of him, and now was unable to face a serious class. A couple of other students also dropped out when I expected them to rewrite poorly written work.

Eventually, sixteen of the eighteen remaining students passed the writing exam when they took it again at the end of the term. The two who failed made another try a week later. One was Tommy, a bright young guy who handed in work late all term. He was behind in his assignments but produced passing material when I pushed him to get the writing done. On the writing exam in class, he froze and handed in a blank booklet, something I had never expected. Afterwards, to prepare for the exam again, I counseled him on ways to get started when he felt a block. But he failed the test once more, didn't hand in all his missing course work, got an *F* for my class, and took a second-term basic skills class. After that, he finally passed the writing exam and went on to get a *B* in freshman composition.

The other student who failed the exam at the end of my course was Marie, the mechanic. I tutored her, too, before her next try at it. When we finished discussing her failed test paper, she stood up, shook my hand, and said, "Mr. Shor, I ain't gonna write no more comma splices." She then took the exam once more and failed yet again. Apparently resourceful, Marie managed to bypass the exam and another term of basic skills. Instead of prolonged life in the remedial empire, she found her way directly into freshman composition and got an *A*. The next term she took creative writing and got a *B*, all without having passed the entry exam in writing. Good for her. But I still wonder if she will break her future daughter's legs and if she was influenced by our discussion of militarism.

Because most students got through an exam that frustrated their progress in college, the overall results were acceptable to me, but I think many of them could have passed the first time if the test had been structured the way they wanted and if their education had helped them perform at their peak abilities. They also could have gone directly on to freshman composition and, like Marie, passed without the obstacle of remediation. Something is very wrong with their education when it suppresses instead of develops their skills and intellectual interests. They need a different kind of learning, critical and democratic, the kind that will be discussed in this book.

Some classes turn out well enough, like the basic writing group I've discussed here. Others don't. Some groups of students resist all term.

They remain too unhappy with education or too distracted by jobs, commuting, other courses, money problems, family life, or relationships to focus on learning.

Over the years, the classes that resist and those that open up have kept me asking what kind of learning process can empower students to perform at their best. Many teachers want a learning community in class that inspires students whose creative and critical powers are largely untouched. A democratic society needs the creativity and intelligence of its people. The students need a challenging education of high quality that empowers them as thinkers, communicators, and citizens. Conditions in school and society now limit their development. Why? How can that be changed? What helps students become critical thinkers and strong users of language? What education can develop them as active students and as citizens concerned with public life? How can I promote critical and democratic development among students who have learned to expect little from intellectual work and from politics? These are the questions underlying this book.

Education Is Politics

An Agenda for Empowerment

1

Schooling and the Politics of Socialization

What kind of educational system do we have? What kind do we need? How do we get from one to the other?

Can education develop students as critical thinkers, skilled workers, and active citizens? Can it promote democracy and serve all students equitably?

These big questions preoccupy many people because schooling is a vast undertaking and mass experience in society, involving tens of millions of people, huge outlays of money, and diverse forces contending over curriculum and funding. All this activity converges in schools, programs, and colleges, where each generation is socialized into the life of the nation.

About the role of education in socializing students, Bettelheim said near the end of his life, "If I were a primary-grade teacher, I would devote my time to problems of socialization. The most important thing children learn is not the three R's. It's socialization" (quoted in Meier 1990, 6).

He urged teachers to encourage students to question their experience in school: "You must arouse children's curiosity and make them think about school. For example, it's very important to begin the school year with a discussion of why we go to school. Why does the government force us to go to school? This would set a questioning tone and show the children that you trust them and that they are intelligent enough, at their own level, to investigate and come up with answers" (Meier 1990, 7). A school year that begins by questioning school could be a remarkably democratic and critical learning experience for students.

Bettelheim's concern for the critical habits of students also preoccupied Piaget, who emphasized the restraint and imposition in the socializing function of schools:

To educate is to adapt the child to an adult social environment. . . . The child is called upon to receive from outside the already perfected products of adult knowledge and morality; the educational relationship consists of pressure on the one side and receptiveness on the other. From such a point of view, even the most individual kinds of tasks performed by students (writing an essay, making a translation, solving a problem) partake less of the genuine activity of spontaneous and individual research than of . . . copying an external model; the students' inmost morality remains fundamentally directed toward obedience rather than autonomy. (1979, 137–38)

Piaget urged a reciprocal relationship between teachers and students, where respect for the teacher coexisted with cooperative and student-centered pedagogy. "If the aim of intellectual training is to form the intelligence rather than to stock the memory," Piaget wrote, "and to produce intellectual explorers rather than mere erudition, then traditional education is manifestly guilty of a grave deficiency" (1979, 51). The deficiency is the curriculum in schools, which he saw as a one-way transmission of rules and knowledge from teacher to students, stifling their curiosity.

People are naturally curious. They are born learners. Education can either develop or stifle their inclination to ask why and to learn. A curriculum that avoids questioning school and society is not, as is commonly supposed, politically neutral. It cuts off the students' development as critical thinkers about their world. If the students' task is to memorize rules and existing knowledge, without questioning the subject matter or the learning process, their potential for critical thought and action will be restricted.

In a curriculum that encourages student questioning, the teacher avoids a unilateral transfer of knowledge. She or he helps students develop their intellectual and emotional powers to examine their learning in school, their everyday experience, and the conditions in society. Empowered students make meaning and act from reflection, instead of memorizing facts and values handed to them.

This kind of critical education is not more political than the curriculum which emphasizes taking in and fitting in. *Not* encouraging students to question knowledge, society, and experience tacitly endorses and supports the status quo. A curriculum that does not challenge the standard syllabus and conditions in society informs students that knowledge and the world are fixed and are fine the way they are, with no role for students to play in transforming them, and no need for change. As Freire (1985a) said, education that tries to be neutral supports the dominant ideology in society.

No curriculum can be neutral. All forms of education are political

because they can enable or inhibit the questioning habits of students, thus developing or disabling their critical relation to knowledge, schooling, and society. Education can socialize students into critical thought or into dependence on authority, that is, into autonomous habits of mind or into passive habits of following authorities, waiting to be told what to do and what things mean.

From another point of view, the politics of education have been discussed by Apple (1979, 1982, 1988), who emphasized two aspects of teaching which make it *not* neutral:

First, there is an increasing accumulation of evidence that the institution of schooling itself is not a neutral enterprise in terms of its economic outcomes. . . . While schools may in fact serve the interests of many individuals, empirically they also seem to act as powerful agents in the economic and cultural reproduction of class relations. . . . [Second], the knowledge that now gets into schools is already a choice from a much larger universe of possible social knowledge and principles. . . . Social and economic values, hence, are already embedded in the design of the institutions we work in, in the "formal corpus of school knowledge" we preserve in our modes of teaching, and in our principles, standards, and forms of evaluation. (1979, 8–9)

The contents included and excluded in curriculum are political choices while the unequal outcomes of education are not neutral either. But even though the subject matter and the learning process are political choices and experiences, Apple also observed that there was no simple socialization of students into the existing order and no automatic reproduction of society through the classroom. Education is complex and contradictory.

Questioning the Status Quo: The Politics of Empowerment

Education can be described in many ways. One way, suggested above, is to say that education is a contested terrain where people are socialized and the future of society is at stake. On the one hand, education is a socializing activity organized, funded, and regulated by authorities who set a curriculum managed (or changed) in the classroom by teachers. On the other hand, education is a social experience for tens of millions of students who come to class with their own dreams and agendas, sometimes cooperating with and sometimes resisting the intentions of the school and the teacher.

The teacher is the person who mediates the relationship between outside authorities, formal knowledge, and individual students in the classroom. Through day-to-day lessons, teaching links the students' development to the values, powers, and debates in society. The syllabus

deployed by the teacher gives students a prolonged encounter with structured knowledge and social authority. However, it is the students who decide to what extent they will take part in the syllabus and allow it to form them. Many students do not like the knowledge, process, or roles set out for them in class. In reaction, they drop out or withdraw into passivity or silence in the classroom. Some become self-educated; some sabotage the curriculum by misbehaving.

To socialize students, education tries to teach them the shape of knowledge and current society, the meaning of past events, the possibilities for the future, and their place in the world they live in. In forming the students' conception of self and the world, teachers can present knowledge in several ways, as a celebration of the existing society, as a falsely neutral avoidance of problems rooted in the system, or as a critical inquiry into power and knowledge as they relate to student experience.

In making these choices, many teachers are unhappy with the limits of the traditional curriculum and do what they can to teach creatively and critically. Whether they deviate from or follow the official syllabus, teachers make numerous decisions—themes, texts, tests, seating arrangements, rules for speaking, grading systems, learning process, and so on. Through these practical choices, the politics of the classroom are defined, as critical or uncritical, democratic or authoritarian.

In class, as Apple suggested and as Giroux (1983) and Banks (1991) have also argued, the choice of subject matter cannot be neutral. Whose history and literature is taught and whose ignored? Which groups are included and which left out of the reading list or text? From whose point of view is the past and present examined? Which themes are emphasized and which not? Is the curriculum balanced and multicultural, giving equal attention to men, women, minorities, and nonelite groups, or is it traditionally male-oriented and Eurocentric? Do students read about Columbus from the point of view of the Arawak people he conquered or only from the point of view of the Europeans he led into conquest? Do science classes investigate the biochemistry of the students' lives, like the nutritional value of the school lunch or the potential toxins in the local air, water, and land, or do they only talk abstractly about photosynthesis?

Politics reside not only in subject matter but in the discourse of the classroom, in the way teachers and students speak to each other. The rules for talking are a key mechanism for empowering or disempowering students. How much open discussion is there in class? How much one-way "teacher-talk"? Is there mutual dialogue between teacher and students or one-way transfers of information from teacher to students?

What do teachers say about the subject matter? Do students feel free to disagree with the teacher? Do students respond to each other's remarks? Do they act like involved participants or like alienated observers in the exchange of comments in the classroom? Are students asked to think critically about the material and to see knowledge as a field of contending interpretations, or are they fed knowledge as an official consensus? Do students work cooperatively, or is the class a competitive exchange favoring the most assertive people?

In addition, the way classrooms, schools, colleges, and programs are governed is political. Is there a negotiated curriculum in class, or is a unilateral authority exercised by the teacher? Is there student, teacher, and parent co-governance of the institution or an administrative monopoly on power?

School funding is another political dimension of education, because more money has always been invested in the education of upper-class children and elite collegians than has been spent on students from lower-income homes and in community colleges. Moreover, testing policies are political choices, whether to use student-centered, multicultural, and portfolio assessments, or to use teacher-centered tests or standardized exams in which women and minorities have traditionally scored lower than men and whites.

In sum, the subject matter, the learning process, the classroom discourse, the cafeteria menu, the governance structure, and the environment of school teach students what kind of people to be and what kind of society to build as they learn math, history, biology, literature, nursing, or accounting. Education is more than facts and skills. It is a socializing experience that helps make the people who make society. Historically, it has underserved the mass of students passing through its gates. Can school become empowering? What educational values can develop people as citizens who think critically and act democratically?

Values for Empowerment

Empowering education, as I define it here, is a critical-democratic pedagogy for self and social change. It is a student-centered program for multicultural democracy in school and society. It approaches individual growth as an active, cooperative, and social process, because the self and society create each other. Human beings do not invent themselves in a vacuum, and society cannot be made unless people create it together. The goals of this pedagogy are to relate personal growth to public life, by developing strong skills, academic knowledge, habits of inquiry, and critical curiosity about society, power, inequality, and change.

The pedagogy described in this book is student-centered but is not

permissive or self-centered. Empowerment here does not mean students can do whatever they like in the classroom. Neither can the teacher do whatever she or he likes. The learning process is negotiated, requiring leadership by the teacher and mutual teacher-student authority. In addition, empowerment as I describe it here is not individualistic. The empowering class does not teach students to seek self-centered gain while ignoring public welfare.

Students in empowering classes should be expected to develop skills and knowledge as well as high expectations for themselves, their education, and their futures. They have a right to earn good wages doing meaningful work in a healthy society at peace with itself and the world. Their skills should be welcomed by democratic workplaces in an equitable economy where it becomes easier each year to make ends meet. To build this kind of society, empowering education invites students to become skilled workers and thinking citizens who are also change agents and social critics. Giroux (1988) described this as educating students "to fight for a quality of life in which all human beings benefit." He went on to say, "Schools need to be defended, as an important public service that educates students to be critical citizens who can think, challenge, take risks, and believe that their actions will make a difference in the larger society" (214).

Further, McLaren (1989) discussed this pedagogy as "the process through which students learn to critically appropriate knowledge existing outside their immediate experience in order to broaden their understanding of themselves, the world, and the possibilities for transforming the taken-for-granted assumptions about the way we live" (186). Banks (1991) defined empowerment in terms of transforming self and society: "A curriculum designed to empower students must be transformative in nature and help students to develop the knowledge, skills, and values needed to become social critics who can make reflective decisions and implement their decisions in effective personal, social, political, and economic action" (131).

The teacher leads and directs this curriculum, but does so democratically with the participation of the students, balancing the need for structure with the need for openness. The teacher brings lesson plans, learning methods, personal experience, and academic knowledge to class but negotiates the curriculum with the students and begins with their language, themes, and understandings. To be democratic implies orienting subject matter to student culture—their interests, needs, speech, and perceptions—while creating a negotiable openness in class where the students' input jointly creates the learning process. To be critical in such a democratic curriculum means to examine all subjects

and the learning process with systematic depth; to connect student individuality to larger historical and social issues; to encourage students to examine how their experience relates to academic knowledge, to power, and to inequality in society; and to approach received wisdom and the status quo with questions.

For this empowering pedagogy, I will propose an agenda of values, each to be discussed in detail, which describe it as:

- Participatory
- Affective
- Problem-posing
- Situated
- Multicultural
- Dialogic
- Desocializing
- Democratic
- Researching
- Interdisciplinary
- Activist

A Door to Empowerment: Participation

In elaborating these items, I start with the participatory value because this is an interactive pedagogy from the first day of class. Participation is the most important place to begin because student involvement is low in traditional classrooms and because action is essential to gain knowledge and develop intelligence. Piaget insisted on the relation of action to knowing: "Knowledge is derived from action. . . . To know an object is to act upon it and to transform it. . . . To know is therefore to assimilate reality into structures of transformation and these are the structures that intelligence constructs as a direct extension of our actions" (1979, 28–29). With a Deweyan emphasis, Piaget reiterated that we learn by doing and by thinking about our experience.

People begin life as motivated learners, not as passive beings. Children naturally join the world around them. They learn by interacting, by experimenting, and by using play to internalize the meaning of words and experience. Language intrigues children; they have needs they want met; they busy the older people in their lives with questions and requests for show me, tell me. But year by year their dynamic learning erodes in passive classrooms not organized around their cultural backgrounds, conditions, or interests. Their curiosity and social instincts decline, until many become nonparticipants. It is not the fault of students if their learning habits wither inside the passive syllabus dominant in education.

Participatory classes respect and rescue the curiosity of students. As Dewey argued, participation in school and society is crucial to learning and to democracy:

> 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. (1963, 67)

Dewey emphasized participation as the point at which democracy and learning meet in the classroom. For him, participation was an educational and political means for students to gain knowledge and to develop as citizens. Only by active learning could students develop scientific method and democratic habits rather than becoming passive pupils waiting to be told what things mean and what to do.

Politically, for Dewey, participation is democratic when students construct purposes and meanings. This is essential behavior for citizens in a free society. Dewey defined a slave as someone who carried out the intentions of another person, who was prevented from framing her or his own intentions. To be a thinking citizen in a democracy, Dewey maintained, a person had to take part in making meaning, articulating purposes, carrying out plans, and evaluating results.

Dewey's connecting of participation with democracy underscored the political nature of all forms of education. Rote learning and skills drills in traditional classrooms do more than bore and miseducate students; they also inhibit their civic and emotional developments. Students learn to be passive or cynical in classes that transfer facts, skills, or values without meaningful connection to their needs, interests, or community cultures. To teach skills and information without relating them to society and to the students' contexts turns education into an authoritarian transfer of official words, a process that severely limits student development as democratic citizens.

Free public schooling and low-cost mass higher education are often celebrated as triumphs of democracy. Why, then, does the traditional curriculum in these institutions tilt toward authority rather than to freedom, participation, and mutuality? Silberman (1970) blamed it on "mindlessness," on the thoughtless functioning of a bureaucratic education system. But more than carelessness and bureaucracy are at work here. Clark (1960, 1978) spoke of a "cooling-out process" in mass colleges that depresses the aspirations of non-elite students in an economy with limited rewards. In an unequal society, there is simply not enough

to go around, and the bulk of students are encouraged to settle for less while blame is transferred from the college to them. Examining the economic system closely, Bowles and Gintis (1976) identified a "correspondence principle" between authoritarianism and inequality in the economy and in education. To them, schooling supports existing power and divisions in society by sorting students into a small elite destined for the top and a large mass destined for the middle and the bottom—an educational policy also studied carefully by Spring (1989) and by Oakes (1985). I would add that nonparticipatory education corresponds to the exclusion of ordinary people from policy-making in society at large. Students come of age in a society where average people do not participate in governance, in framing major purposes, in making policy, or in having a strong voice in media and public affairs. Banks do not hold elections on their investments or credit policies. Bosses and supervisors are appointed by owners and higher management; they cannot be voted in or out by the staffs below them. Hospitals are governed by appointed bureaucrats, not by delegates accountable to the clientele. General elections have become an alienating process that discourages people from voting, while politicians depend on the wealthy's contributions to finance their media campaigns. Expensive campaigns and restrictive electoral laws discourage new political organizations and thus protect the power of the two established parties. The mass media have become international conglomerates, detached from the communities they publish for or broadcast to.

About the weakness of democratic power in society, Apple comments: "To many people, the very idea of regaining any real control over social institutions and personal development is abstract and 'nonsensical.' In general . . . many people do see society's economic, social, and educational institutions as basically self-directing, with little need for their participation and with little necessity for them to communicate and argue over the ends and means of these same institutions" (1979, 163). In this social setting, passive curricula help prepare students for life in undemocratic institutions. Students do not practice democratic habits in co-governing their classrooms, schools, or colleges. There, they learn that unilateral authority is the normal way things are done in society. They are introduced in school to the reality of management holding dominant, unelected power. At the same time, they are told that they live in freedom and democracy.

While principals, teachers, and textbooks may lecture students on freedom, nonparticipatory classrooms prepare them for the authoritarian work world and political system they will join. In postsecondary education, nonparticipatory classes confirm the undemocratic experi-

ences of adults in school and society. Teacher-centered curricula in the classroom and administration-centered power in the school or college reflect the reality of other social institutions. Traditional schools thus prepare students to fit into an education and a society not run for them or by them but rather set up for and run by elites.

Many students do not accept these limits, which is why teachers often face resistance in the classroom. Many teachers also refuse to be undemocratic educators, which limits the extent to which the official syllabus and authority can be imposed on students. In this conflicted setting, the empowering educator transforms the teacher's unilateral authority. She or he offers a participatory process to students with little experience in democratic learning, in institutions generally hostile to challenges to authority.

Participation challenges the experience of education as something done to students. This is key to the passivity and resistance produced by the traditional syllabus: education is experienced by students as something done to them, not something they do. They see it as alien and controlling. To reverse this passive experience of learning, education for empowerment is not something done by teachers to students for their own good but is something students codevelop for themselves, led by a critical and democratic teacher. Participation from the first day of class is needed to establish the interactive goals of this pedagogy, to shake students out of their learned withdrawal from intellectual and civic life.

That learned withdrawal evolves in traditional schooling as students spend thousands of hours hearing lectures, instructions, rules, interpretations, information, announcements, grade reports, exhortations, and warnings. Many withdraw from intellectual work because they are told so much and asked to think and do so little. Rote drills drain their enthusiasm for intellectual life, as do short-answer exams and standardized tests. These familiar methods disable their intellects in a process I call endullment, the dulling of students' minds as a result of their nonparticipation.

Resisting Endullment: The "Performance Strike"

In school and society, the lack of meaningful participation alienates workers, teachers, and students. This alienation lowers their productivity in class and on the job. I think of this lowered productivity as a performance strike, an unorganized mass refusal to perform well, an informal and unacknowledged strike.

Nonparticipatory institutions depress the performance levels of people working in them. Mass education has become notorious for the low motivation of many students (and the burnout of many teachers).

Large numbers of students are refusing to perform at high levels, demoralizing the teachers who work with them. At times, performance strikes become organized resistance to authority, with leadership and articulate demands. But most often the students' refusal to perform appears as low motivation, low test scores and achievement, and a "discipline problem." These manifestations of the performance strike keep authority at bay in class. They are ways to refuse cooperation with a system that invests unequally in students and denies them participation in curriculum and governance.

In classrooms where participation is meager, the low performance of students is routinely misjudged as low achievement. But the actual cognitive levels of students are hard to measure in teacher-centered classrooms where students participate minimally. An accurate picture of what students know and can do is possible only when students really want to perform at their best. In a participatory process, where students codevelop the course, teachers can learn better the actual cognitive levels of students from which to design forward development. Until students experience lively participation, mutual authority, and meaningful work, they will display depressed skills and knowledge, as well as negative emotions. Teachers will be measuring and reacting to an artificially low picture of student abilities.

This is where the affective value of empowerment, second on the agenda defined above, crosses paths with the first value of participation. Participation provides students with active experiences in class, through which they develop knowledge that is reflective understanding, not mere memorization. Further, participation sends a hopeful message to students about their present and future; it encourages their achievement by encouraging their aspirations. They are treated as responsible, capable human beings who should expect to do a lot and do it well, an affective feature of the empowering classroom that I will have more to say about shortly.

A participatory pedagogy, designed from cooperative exercises, critical thought, student experience, and negotiated authority in class, can help students feel they are in sufficient command of the learning process to perform at their peak. From Dewey to Piaget to Freire, many educators have asserted that learning works best when it is an active, creative process (Bissex 1980; Smith 1983; Wertsch 1985). The National Institute of Education (1984) cited student involvement as the most important reform needed in undergraduate education: "There is now a good deal of research evidence to suggest that the more time and effort students invest in the learning process and the more intensely they engage in their own education, the greater will be their growth and

achievement, their satisfaction with their educational experiences, and their persistence in college, and the more likely they are to continue their learning" (17). The NIE urged faculty to use more "active modes of teaching" instead of the familiar lecture method. In another report, the Association of American Colleges (1985) also focused on student participation in learning, departing from the conservative demands for more testing and traditional content that dominated the 1980s: "The prevailing spirit of pedagogy should reduce the possibilities for passivity in students and authoritarianism in faculties. Students should undertake a variety of pedagogical approaches—seminars, lectures, research, field study, tutorials, theses" (26). This study identified key interdisciplinary themes rather than narrow content as the foundation for undergraduate study, thus challenging the drift in the 1980s toward transferring more official information to students.

To take participation into an empowering terrain, I would add that the more involved the student, the more he or she wrestles with meaning in the study, exercises his or her critical voice in a debate with peers, and expresses his or her values in a public arena, where they can be examined and related to conditions in society. This is what Giroux (1988) emphasized as the "public sphere" of education, or education as an activity that could invigorate the life of a democracy if it became critical and empowering. When education is a participatory sphere of public life, meaning and purpose are constructed mutually, not imposed from the top down as orthodoxies. The participatory classroom is a "free speech" classroom in the best sense, because it invites all expressions from all the students. An empowering class thrives on a lively exchange of thoughts and feelings. The way students speak, feel, and think about any subject is the starting point for a critical study of themselves, their society, and their academic subjects.

Participatory learning also opens the possibility of transforming the students' powers of thought. For Freire, "transformation is possible because consciousness is not a mirror of reality, not a mere reflection, but is *reflexive and reflective* of reality" (Shor and Freire 1987, 13). When we participate in critical classes, we can go beyond merely repeating what we know or what we have been taught. We can reflect on reality and on our received values, words, and interpretations in ways that illuminate meanings we hadn't perceived before. This reflection can transform our thought and behavior, which in turn have the power to alter reality itself if enough people reconstruct their knowledge and take action. Freire explained the process: "As conscious human beings, we can discover *how* we are conditioned by the dominant ideology. We can gain distance on our moment of existence. . . . We can struggle to become free precisely because we can know we are not free! That is why we can think of transformation" (Shor and Freire 1987, 13). Human beings are capable of overcoming limits if they can openly examine them. The participatory class offers that possibility.

Integrating Cognitive and Affective Learning

As I have said, participation involves affective as well as cognitive development. Empowering education is not only rationalistic, as Peter Elbow (1986) argued in a critique of Freire's work. Contrary to Elbow's reading, critical learning in this model is emotional as well as rational. Critical thought is simultaneously a cognitive and affective activity. But if empowering education involves both intellectual and emotional elements, so does traditional, teacher-centered education. In its own way, the standard syllabus is also jointly rational and emotional. This is true because education is a social experience, as Dewey (1963) understood it, not a moment of disembodied intellect. Learning cannot be reduced to a purely intellectual activity. It is more than a mental operation and more than the facts or ideas transmitted by books or lectures. Education is a complex experience of one kind or another. As an experience of human beings in a specific community at a certain moment in history and in their lives, it is a social interaction involving both thought and feeling.

The difference between empowering and traditional pedagogy has to do with the positive or negative feelings students can develop for the learning process. In traditional classrooms, negative emotions are provoked in students by teacher-centered politics. Unilateral teacher authority in a passive curriculum arouses in many students a variety of negative emotions: self-doubt, hostility, resentment, boredom, indignation, cynicism, disrespect, frustration, the desire to escape. These student affects are commonly generated when an official culture and language are imposed from the top down, ignoring the students' themes, languages, conditions, and diverse cultures. Their consequent negative feelings interfere with learning and lead to strong anti-intellectualism in countless students as well as to alienation from civic life.

The competitive practices and emotions dominating traditional education also interfere with the cognitive development of many students. Sapon-Shevin and Schniedewind (1991) point to this affective and cognitive impact of competition on students:

> The typical classroom is framed by competition, marked by struggle between students (and often between teacher and students), and riddled by indicators of comparative achievement and worth. Star charts on the wall announce who has

been successful at learning multiplication tables, only children with "neat" handwriting have their papers posted for display. . . . Competition encourages people to survey other people's differences for potential weak spots. . . . We learn to ascribe winner or loser status based on certain perceived overt characteristics, such as boys are better at math. . . . The interpersonal outcomes of competition—rivalry, envy, and contempt—all encourage blaming the loser and justifying their "deserved" fate. (164–65)

They conclude that "this competitive orientation leads to isolation and alienation" among students, encouraging a handful of "winners" while depressing the performance of the many, especially female students and minorities, who withdraw from the aggressive affect of the classroom.

In class, then, teacher-centered competitive pedagogy can interfere with the positive feelings many students need to learn. The authoritarian traditional curriculum itself generates bad feelings which lead many students to resist or sabotage the lessons.

In contrast, an empowering educator seeks a positive relationship between feeling and thought. He or she begins this search by offering a participatory curriculum. In a participatory class where authority is mutual, some of the positive affects which support student learning include cooperativeness, curiosity, humor, hope, responsibility, respect, attentiveness, openness, and concern about society. There are, of course, conflicts in empowering classrooms, chiefly among students with different values and needs, and between students and the teacher in the negotiation of meaning and requirements. In addition, the participatory class can also provoke anxiety and defensiveness in some students because it is an unfamiliar program for collaborative learning and for the critique of received values and taken-for-granted knowledge.

I will have more to say on student resistance to empowering classes in a later chapter, because the positive affect sought by critical teachers is not a simple objective. For now, I want to suggest that conflicts cannot be prevented and cannot always be negotiated successfully even in a participatory classroom. But a democratic and cooperative process provides the best chance for the constructive resolution of conflict between teachers and students, as Schniedewind and Davidson (1987) and Sapon-Shevin and Schniedewind (1991) have argued in their reviews of classroom research and in their models for cooperative learning. In a participatory, collaborative class, conflicts and complaints can be expressed openly and negotiated mutually, which increases the possibility of solving them or at least maintaining a working relationship in the group. In teacher-centered classes, student alienation is provoked and

then driven underground, where it becomes a subterranean source of acting out. The traditional learning process lacks a mutual dialogue through which all sides can negotiate their positions. This bottling up of bad feelings undermines the transfer of knowledge in the official syllabus.

The affective atmosphere of a participatory classroom also aims for a productive relationship between patience and impatience. On the one hand, the critical teacher has to balance restraint and intervention. She or he must lead the class energetically while patiently enabling students to develop their thoughts, agendas, and abilities for leading. The teacher has to offer questions, comments, structure, and academic knowledge while patiently listening to students' criticisms and initiatives as they codevelop the syllabus. The patient critical teacher is also impatient to propel students' development so that they take more responsibility for their learning. This tension between patience and impatience also suggests an evolving willingness in students and teachers to study deliberately while desiring to act critically on the knowledge gained. As Freire pointed out, the "patiently impatient" student or teacher does not act unilaterally or impulsively. But neither does she or he reflect forever. Patience and impatience are part of the challenge of gaining critical knowledge and using it to transform learning and society. Put simply, it takes impatience with the way things are to motivate people to make changes, but then it takes patience to study and to develop the projects through which constructive learning and change are made.

Further, regarding the affective side of empowering pedagogy, in Freire's conversations with Myles Horton, the legendary founder of the Highlander School in Tennessee, both men insisted on the relationship of play and joy to critical thought and social change. Here they are talking about the labor workshops at Highlander in the 1930s, which included role-playing about workplace grievances and about organizing strikes:

Myles: We tried to involve everybody in singing and doing drama and dancing and laughing and telling stories because that's a part of their life. It's more of a holistic approach to education, not just a bunch of unrelated segments. The way people live was more important than any class or subject that we were dealing with. . . . They had that learning experience, making decisions, living in an unsegregated fashion, enjoying their senses other than their minds. . . .

Paulo: No matter where this kind of educator works, the great difficulty (or the great adventure!) is how to make education something which, in being serious, rigorous, methodical, and having a process, also creates happiness and joy. . . .

Then for me one of the problems we have as educators in our line is how never, never to lose this complexity of our action. . . . I cannot understand a school which makes children sad about going to school. This school is bad. But I also don't accept a school in which the kids spend all the time just playing. This school is also bad. The good school is that one in which in studying I also get the pleasure of playing. (Horton and Freire 1990, 168–72)

The denial of positive feelings begins in the traditional curriculum, not in critical programs oriented for empowerment. This state of bad feeling was confirmed by John Goodlad (1984) in an eight-year study of schools in the United States. Goodlad found many problems, among them a remarkable lack of positive emotions in the classroom. Twenty-five years earlier, Jerome Bruner (1959) had toured American classrooms, where he found a similar lack of passion for learning.

In traditional classes, affective and cognitive life are in an unproductive conflict. Students learn that education is something to put up with, to tolerate as best they can, to obey, or to resist. Their role is to answer questions, not to question answers. In passive settings, they have despairing and angry feelings about education, about social change, and about themselves. They feel imposed on by schooling. They expect to be lectured at and bored by an irrelevant curriculum. They wait to be told what to do and what things mean. Some follow instructions; others go around them; some manipulate the teacher; still others undermine the class. In such an environment, many students become cynical, identifying intellectual life with dullness and indignity.

To help move students away from passivity and cynicism, a powerful signal has to be sent from the very start, a signal that learning is participatory, involving humor, hope, and curiosity. A strong participatory and affective opening broadcasts optimistic feelings about the students' potential and about the future: students are people whose voices are worth listening to, whose minds can carry the weight of serious intellectual work, whose thought and feeling can entertain transforming self and society.

Student Participation and Positive Affect: The Teacher's Role

The teacher plays a key role in the critical classroom. Student participation and positive emotions are influenced by the teacher's commitment to both. One limit to this commitment comes from the teacher's development in traditional schools where passive, competitive, and authoritarian methods dominated. As students, teachers learned early and often that to be a teacher means talking a lot and being in charge. Prior school experiences leave teachers with what Giroux (1983) called "sedimented" histories and Britzman (1986) "institutional biographies"—the values layered into professional behavior from years of traditional education. The heart of the problem is that teachers are taught to lecture and give orders. These old habits have been overcome by many creative and democratic teachers now practicing in the classroom, but the change is not easy.

To help myself and the students develop participatory habits, I begin teaching from the students' situation and from their understanding of the subject matter, in line with Bettelheim's suggestion that students should start out by questioning the material and the process of schooling. I often ask students to tell me in writing why they took the class, what they want from it, and what suggestions they have for running it or improving their education at the college. In a Utopian literature class I teach, a student once suggested that there should be no required attendance in our class or in others. She argued that attending class in her other courses had been a waste of time because she was able to do the work on her own. Instead of responding immediately, I posed her ideas back to the class, to see what other students thought. Some agreed with her strenuously, saying that they should not have to come to class if they could do the work on their own. I then asked, "Is there nothing special to be gained by students and teachers meeting in class to talk over ideas? How often in life do you set aside time just for intellectual growth?" They were not impressed. They reported being bored and silenced by didactic lectures in classes where teachers raced to cover the material and ignored their questions. They were convinced that if they could copy a friend's class notes, read the textbook, and talk to each other on the phone, they would get just as good an education as they got by coming to class. Their alienation from the traditional learning process surfaced early and became the starting theme for negotiating our own class. I argued for required attendance because I was, as I told them, committed to a mutual learning community, a concept I briefly explained, but I offered them the right at any moment to complain, object, protest, and announce that they were bored, impatient, angry, or unhappy with the process. I said that when they felt bad about the class, they should speak up, explain why, and suggest a change in the day's work or the syllabus, which we would then discuss. After debate, students accepted my proposal for required attendance but built into it allowable absences and lateness. In the following months, they asserted their protest rights a few times and stopped class dialogue that bored them. They also complained to me outside class individually and in a special "after-class" group I set up to discuss the work of the session, to

evaluate the learning under way, and to make changes for the next class. I will have more to say in a later chapter about this special group, as a means to democratize authority, but I can report here that it stimulated an unusual amount of participation.

In the first session of an introduction to journalism class, to encourage immediate participation and questioning I routinely ask students to define what "news" means to them and to write down questions they have about the news. Their definitions and questions launch our class discussion, not a lecture by me. I record their questions and statements, collate them, and then re-present them for students to decide which are the most important. Here are some key questions chosen by one class as their starting issues for class discussion:

- Is there a body that regulates the ethics of newspapers? Why isn't the media more accountable for its actions? How can one be certain that the news is accurate?
- Why are the owners of news media allowed to set the tone and make their papers or stations slanted?
- If it's true that news media lean to the left or the right wing, isn't it likely that those presenting the dominant opinion are the more successful? If so, how do opposing views survive?
- What can journalism teach me if I don't go into the field?
- Is TV news driven by entertainment values? Is that happening more as people go directly into TV without having training in print?

Their questions provided some wonderful launching pads for our study. Instead of answering their questions in brief lectures, I posed them one by one, so that students could participate more, answer their peer's questions as best they could, practice thinking out loud, and display what they already knew—all this before I provided any academic response. The syllabus was built upward from student responses instead of downward from my comments. This political change of direction in the making of a democratic curriculum is a way to authorize students as co-developers of their education. With some authority, they can feel co-ownership of the process, which in turn will reduce their resistance.

In another class, a literature course on the American Dream, I began by asking students to write their definitions of the American Dream and a short essay on whether they believed in it or not. The class held divided views on this issue and debated their differences. Their compositions became the initial texts for class discussion and for entry into literary works. Again, I did not begin by lecturing on the subject, for I did not want to pre-empt their participation or thinking by giving them a definition of the American Dream. Further, I avoided communicating

my own affect in relation to the theme. By keeping my emotion and intellect low-profile, I tried to avoid provoking their desire to copy my words and values for a good grade. After they had established their own positions, I joined in the discussion with mine.

In short, their words and their ideas are the points from which the class begins a critical journey forward. For me to provide lectures first would risk provoking passivity or hostility in students. It would also cheat me and the students from making contact in class with student subjectivity—their real language, feelings, and understandings. The participatory opening draws out students' knowledge, literacy, and affect toward academic work. I need exposure to these factors as the base on which to structure the subject matter. In traditional classrooms, teachers routinely begin by defining the subject matter and the proper feeling to have about the material rather than by asking students to define their sense of it and feeling about it, and building from there.

Overall, it would be hard to exaggerate the crucial role participation plays in the teacher's attempt to encourage positive feelings toward learning. In participatory, cooperative classrooms, the walls between teacher and students have a chance to become lower. Freire referred to the separation of teachers and students as the first obstacle to learning. To bring them together, teachers can identify themes and words important to students and ask them to be coinvestigators of that material with the teacher. Freire (1970) argued the case for coinvestigation: "Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teachers cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers. . . . They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow" (67). Participation and affective growth are not, of course, brought about by lecturing students on the value of participation and good feelings. The class hour itself is structured so that students reflect on meaningful questions and influence the direction of the syllabus.

While a participatory classroom cannot transform society by itself, it can offer students a critical education of high quality, an experience of democratic learning, and positive feelings toward intellectual life. That experience may spread through many classrooms if enough teachers undertake it as a project in a single institution. In turn, if participatory approaches become a leading response to student alienation and teacher burnout, the progressive impact of democratic learning may be felt broadly in education, and eventually outside education, by orienting students to democratic transformation of society by their active citizenship. The more widespread the practice of participatory empowerment in classrooms and schools, the greater will be the challenge to

unilateral authority in and out of educational institutions. As teachers see other teachers and students experimenting, more may be encouraged to test participatory empowerment in their own classrooms, and in the process promote the positive emotions that students need in order to embrace critical and democratic learning as the politics of their education.

Problem-Posing

Situated and Multicultural Learning

2

The Teacher as Problem-Poser

To build an empowering program, the participatory and affective values discussed in the last chapter are foundations for teacher-student cooperation. Another means to engage students in critical and mutual learning can be found in the third value on the agenda, problem-posing. In this chapter, I will survey some aspects of problem-posing and will later offer a detailed model for using it in the classroom.

Problem-posing has roots in the work of Dewey and Piaget, who urged active, inquiring education, through which students constructed meaning in successive phases and developed scientific habits of mind. They favored student-centered curricula oriented to the making of knowledge rather than to the memorizing of facts. Many educators have agreed with this dynamic approach, including Freire, who evolved from it his method of "problem-posing dialogue." In a Freirean model for critical learning, the teacher is often defined as a problem-poser who leads a critical dialogue in class, and problem-posing is a synonym for the pedagogy itself.

As a pedagogy and social philosophy, problem-posing focuses on power relations in the classroom, in the institution, in the formation of standard canons of knowledge, and in society at large. It considers the social and cultural context of education, asking how student subjectivity and economic conditions affect the learning process. Student culture as well as inequality and democracy are central issues to problem-posing educators when they make syllabi and examine the climate for learning.

Freire (1970) used his well-known metaphor of "banking education" to contrast the politics of traditional methods with problem-posing. Banking educators treat students' minds as empty accounts into which they make deposits of information, through didactic lectures and from commercial texts. The material deposited in students is drawn from the "central bank of knowledge." The central bank in any society is a meta-