

ENGLISH FOR THE MASSES: ENGLISH INSTRUCTION AT NONTRADITIONAL  
EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

By

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To the Faculty of Washington State University

The members of the Committee appointed to examine the dissertation of Paula Webb Battistelli find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I dedicate this work to my husband, my mother, and my father.

Your love made this happen.

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NON-TRADITIONAL EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

Abstract

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The premise behind this book is that Working Class/Poverty Class students of today lack a voice in the social and political structures that govern our world. I explore the English methods and subject matter used to instruct Working Class/Poverty Class people of past eras who also struggled to find their voice amidst such foes as class discrimination and racial injustice. By exploring this work and delving into pedagogies of the past, I will illustrate some key methods that can be used to empower students today. The first chapter of the dissertation examines definitions of class, class problems, and Working Class/Poverty Class manifestations in the classroom today. The second chapter explores the history of Brookwood Labor College, an educational institution which was founded in 1921 and had a goal to educate labor union organizers. Chapter 3 provides an analysis of the dominant pedagogical theories and techniques at work in the Brookwood Labor College. In Chapter 4, I examine the historical events that led to the foundation and success of the Citizenship Schools. Also explored is the role that the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee played in furthering the schools. The next chapter examines the pedagogy at work in the Citizenship Schools. In the final chapter, I use the knowledge acquired by analyzing the Citizenship School and Brookwood Labor College courses to construct a hypothetical English

course that would meet the needs of classrooms where Working Class/Poverty Class students make up the majority of the population. The conclusion argues for a stronger and more in-depth exploration of the potentials of community learning for helping Working Class/Poverty Class students develop into active citizens.

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## INTRODUCTION

The Working Class/Poverty Class (WC/PC) students of today lack a voice in the social and political structures that govern our world. Those social and political structures do not just limit the wages that WC/PC individuals can earn. They limit much more. Individual autonomy, the ability to make one's own path, speak one's own truth, and demand basic human rights are all limited. So what can English instructors in higher education do to assist working/poverty class students in taking back their voice? The focus of this dissertation is on the methods and subject matter used to instruct WC/PC people of past eras who also struggled to find their voice amidst such foes as class discrimination and racial injustice. Namely, I examine English instruction provided by Brookwood Labor College and Highlander Folk School's Citizenship Schools. By focusing on such institutions, my hope is that I will be able to illustrate some key methods that past instructors used to empower WC/PC students.

Brookwood Labor College was an independent nontraditional educational institution that provided instruction for future leaders of the various unions that existed during the 1920s and part of the 1930s. Highlander Folk School's Citizenship Schools provided literacy instruction to illiterate adult African Americans so that they would possess the necessary abilities required to pass the strenuous literacy tests required to become voters in the racist South. The school also made students aware of their rights as United States citizens and it encouraged them to become active community participants. Both schools worked toward a more empowered Working Class/Poverty Class. The only differences between the two were that Brookwood was more heavily modeled after traditional educational institutions but geared itself toward students who

were active members of labor unions. The Citizenship Schools, in turn, were less traditional and focused on educating largely Working Class/Poverty Class African-Americans.

In order to analyze and describe the pedagogies utilized at Highlander Folk School and Brookwood Labor College, I did not limit myself to typical published texts, though such text do have their place in research. The reason why I did not rely upon such research is that because, by and large, both schools seem to have been gripped by the social amnesia that surrounds the Great Depression, in Brookwood's case, and that which surrounds Highlander Folk School. The richest resources on these two institutions have been found scattered throughout the archives of our nation's libraries. The libraries I visited for this dissertation had large representative collections for each school. For Brookwood, I relied heavily upon the materials available at the Walter P. Reuther Library at Wayne State University. For Highlander, I turned to the archival material available at the Wisconsin State Historical Society. I am grateful to both institutions for allowing me to delve into their wonderful materials. As I researched, I looked for materials that would reveal the English pedagogies at such institutions such as syllabi, letters written by students or teachers describing their experiences, lesson plans, class lecture recordings, study aids, and any other text that might cast light on the schools. It was an honor to peruse the handwritten notes of such figures as Rosa Parks, Septima Clark, Helen Norton Starr, Myles Horton, and A.J. Muste. Without such archival materials, the pedagogies of Brookwood and Highlander would remain lost in the past.

By focusing on two historical educational institutions in my dissertation, I also make an implied argument about the worth of historical and archival research to English Studies. Compositionists and Rhetoricians have been forced to reinvent the wheel, so to speak, for the past fifty years. We have struggled to design curricula and pedagogies within a historical

vacuum. It is only recently that Compositionists like Susan Kates have begun to research the history of our field by delving into historical records. Professors of Literature, unfortunately, continue to remain relatively aloof from the pedagogies and the curricula of their field.

Numerous other innovative schools like Highlander and Brookwood are just waiting to be discovered in rich treasure troves of archival sources throughout the United States libraries. I encourage English instructors everywhere to rediscover our history by exploring their libraries' archival resources, to demand that our fields do not succumb to the social amnesia that plagues several periods and radical movements throughout our nation's history.

The first chapter of this dissertation argues that Working Class/Poverty Class studies have a place in the English classroom. Section one explores the concept of class and working class poverty by looking at the work of Stanley Aronowitz and Michael Zweig, two authors who have proved integral to this author's conception of the WC/PC. The next section explores the ways in which class discrimination permeates the lived experiences of the WC/PC. Awareness of class is the focus of section three. One of the largest problems facing the WC/PC is the insulation between members which often leads disidentification. Section four explores the current educational experience for the WC/PC while section 5 explains the ways in which class reveals itself in the classroom. I conclude by arguing that if our WC/PC students are to succeed in college classrooms, today, we need to keep issues of social class in mind and we need to provide the empowering education that WC/PC students need in order to form a powerful interest group that has the abilities necessary to argue for their communities' rights.

The second chapter explores the birth of the Brookwood Labor College. The school was founded during the 1920s, a period of great struggle for Working Class/Poverty Class populations. I explore some of the difficulties that workers and unions faced during this period.

Other topics touched upon are the unique curricula, students, and teachers at Brookwood that, when combined, led to one of the most innovative schools during this era. I also explore the relationship between Brookwood and the most powerful union, the American Federation of Labor. The conclusion explores the significance of not only the period but also the institution and what this might reveal about the education provided at Brookwood.

In Chapter 3, I explore the dominant pedagogical theories and techniques at work in the Brookwood Labor College by examining course materials provided by Elizabeth England, Josephine Colby, and Helen Norton Starr. In order to analyze the pedagogies of these three women, I explicate and analyze several of the handouts created by them and I discuss the significance or ramifications of each woman's pedagogy. I conclude by summarizing the similarities and differences between the three and I begin to construct a framework for a Working Class/Poverty Class pedagogy suitable for today's classroom.

Chapter 4 examines the historical events that led to the foundation and success of the Citizenship Schools. The chapter begins with a portrait of Myles Horton, a director who proved seminal to the school's pedagogical approach, and an exploration of how Highlander Folk School (future benefactor of the Citizenship Schools) came to exist as a labor school in the South during the turbulent years of the 1930s. The next section examines the life of Septima Clark, the director of the Citizenship schools, and how that life impacted her approach to education. Also of interest is the process by which Highlander went from a labor education institution to an almost exclusive focus on racial justice in the 1950s and 1960s. Also explored is the role that the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee played in furthering the schools. I conclude by discussing the significance of this history in relation to the education provided to the students in the Citizenship Schools

The next chapter examines the pedagogy at work in the Citizenship Schools. Several instructor materials are examined, oftentimes from anonymous teachers. Much of the pedagogy of the schools is analyzed by exploring the taped class lectures of the Citizenship School classes. I also explicate the handouts used in the Citizenship School classes and analyze the messages and focus of those handouts. Another area of interest is the training classes for Citizenship School teachers. Because the training classes were largely structured like the actual Citizenship School classes, the audiotapes prove very revealing in that they demonstrate the instructor role that the schools expected the teachers to acquire. The successes and failures that came about because of the schools is discussed. Student critiques and sentiments are examined to show the impact the school had on student lives. I conclude by arguing that the Citizenship School pedagogy centered on democratic education and student empowerment and it included elements of Critical Literacy.

In the final chapter, I use the knowledge acquired by analyzing the courses at Brookwood Labor College and Highlander Folk School to develop a list of goals or objectives to meet the needs of classrooms where Working Class/Poverty Class students make up part of the population. Topics that I explore are Community Learning, discourse communities, Critical Literacy, WC/PC student attitudes, literature with a working class focus, and other topics of interest. I offer two examples of the type of Working Class/Poverty Class pedagogy that I envision and I summarize the goals and objectives that I promote.

I do not want to suggest that the courses and goals I propose are *the* answer. After all, as educators and writers, we all know that almost everything in the world is a work in progress from our manuscripts to paintings. Consider this study to be just such a work in progress. Let us, in the spirit of collaboration, work to test and refine the ideas that I have presented and reanalyze

the documents that I have examined so that we may continue to revise and improve the techniques and pedagogies that we use to instruct our Working Class/Poverty Class students. After all, the goal is not to find the right or wrong answer but to work better toward educating Working Class/Poverty Class students who can speak and write with the skill and finesse necessary to be their own strong advocates in an oftentimes unequal world.

## **CHAPTER 1:**

### **THE WORKING CLASS TODAY: WHAT INSTRUCTORS NEED TO KNOW**

Many may wonder why I have chosen to focus on “obscure” labor colleges in the first half of the twentieth century. Still more may wonder why I have chosen to focus on Working Class/Poverty Class (WC/PC) students. After all, many believe that class no longer plays a role in United States society. In fact, the line of argument most frequently used is that there is no such thing as class because we all have the same opportunities. Society must dispel such myths of classlessness that merely serve the status quo and prevent many from achieving autonomy. Not only does social class exist but class discrimination exists and its most devastating effects may be seen in the education that the WC/PC receive. In order to explore this myth of classlessness, I examine the work of two scholars who discuss the implications of class in society. I then discuss evidence of class, the need for better English instruction for the WC/PC, and I tie all of this into a discussion of the effects of class in the classroom.

#### **Exploring Class**

Why should instructors understand social class as it pertains to Working Class/Poverty Class students? What can an understanding of the WC/PC provide to those who teach WC/PC students? Imagine standing before a classroom of WC/PC students. You are their instructor and you try to understand the experiences and limitations that such students bring with them to the classroom. If you tried to comprehend the antagonisms between smaller groups within the class as simple cliques, not connected to race, ability, religion, or other social identifications, you may not be able to assist the students in making connections with each other through building common ground. If you try to limit your understanding of their differences to simple wage



earnings, you would not be able to assist those students in understanding and working against all of the various types of discrimination that they experience and you would not feel inclined to address the very real discrimination operating within the classroom. But if you attempted to understand your students from a class perspective, you would be able to see far and wide. You would be able to see the various types of discrimination in that classroom and call out those discriminations. More importantly, you would be able to help the group connect to each other and assist each other in their struggles. This potential cross cultural connection is the benefit of social class theory that interrogates other divisive issues. Being able to recognize the social ties and divides that exist will assist you in helping students work to comprehend those ties and divides. In short, awareness of social class issues helps the WC/PC students build a community and identify with fellow social class members while also working to resolve interior discriminations.

Key to our exploration of Working Class/Poverty Class English instruction in two nontraditional institutions is a definition of working class/poverty class that suits the experiences of the WC/PC students in classrooms today. Stanley Aronowitz is integral to the definition of WC/PC as used in this dissertation. Through critiquing competitive social organizations, he works to argue for the usefulness of social class as a framework for social organization in the United States.

According to Aronowitz, one of the most pervasive arguments against social class posits that society is made up of a number of different stratifications or layers of people from different walks of life. An example of a text that promotes strata as a concept of social organization can be found in the text, The Death of Class, by Jan Pakulski and Malcolm Waters. The sociologists argue that class is dead because economic categories have failed to substantiate class, that gender

and race are much more popular identification systems, that class politics have also ceased to exist, and that there are better ways to study the social organization of society. Approaching such an issue from a sociological standpoint, they argue that class theory is irrelevant to the current system and that class analysis is equally invalid in studying and making sense of hierarchies in society. One of the key arguments of Pakulski and Waters and others who share their belief, stratification theorists, is that a class hierarchy doesn't exist because determining class boundaries is simply too difficult (15). Stanley Aronowitz disagrees with such arguments by stating that this type of focus may actually prove detrimental. He articulates one significant problem with stratification. The problem according to Aronowitz is that stratification downplays the differences and antagonisms between classes. Animosity between classes can be very divisive for society in that stratification minimizes antagonisms between classes. Stanley Aronowitz asserts:

Stratification designates distinction without conflict. Those who replace class with strata deny that society is propelled by social struggles; for the stratification theorists, people are arranged along a social grid by occupation or income. The category is merely descriptive of status and differential opportunities for jobs and goods. (1)

By making such an argument, Aronowitz implies that an awareness of antagonisms that exist between various groups is key to improving the social relationships that currently exist within society.

Michael Zweig, in his book The Working Class Majority, agrees with Aronowitz in his critique of stratification. However, Zweig readily admits such complexity among the Working Class/Poverty Class when he explains:

Each class is diverse—in skill, authority, occupation, race, gender, ethnicity, and every other characteristic human beings possess. It even happens that individuals in one class can have attributes most often identified with another class, as when some skilled workers make more money than some professionals, or some managers work longer hours and have more stress than some production workers.

(35)

The issue at stake in critiquing stratification is not that Zweig and Aronowitz wish to simplify the various differences that exist between groups. They willingly accept such differences and work to incorporate that complexity into their analyses of class.

In order to salvage the concept of social class, Aronowitz argues further that social class can be found in the material sediment that it leaves behind in the lived experiences of those belonging to the various classes. Aronowitz contends:

Class practices leave material sediments in the labor process, in institutions, in everyday life, and in vernacular speech even when the goals of the actors are not fully realized or are not manifested as overt forms of political or social conflict.

(8)

He argues that, regardless of arguments about class identification (i.e., whether a person willingly identifies with a particular class), class in itself continues to exist in lived experiences and in the cultures developed amongst the various classes. Of particular concern to him is the belief that class does not exist due to the supposed wealth of all American citizens. Referring to this argument as pluralism, Aronowitz defines it as:

... [T]he theoretical expression of the combined theses of American exceptionalism and American classlessness...In concert with its positivist

assumptions, what you see is what you get, that is, the visible is the only meaning of the real, and such abstractions as capitalism, class, and class struggle have nothing to do with social reality. (96)

Aronowitz argues that the evidence used to prove this theory is largely that class doesn't exist because class conflict doesn't exist. According to those who believe in this equality, voices of dissent *seem to* fade in society because the quality of life in America is so wonderful that no one has reason to complain. Stanley Aronowitz questions this argument. He claims:

The question to be investigated is, Do these periods of calm constitute integration, signaled by the loyalty and complicity of the subordinated groups within dominant relations? or is the relative silence of the subalterns a product of fear and an unquiet acknowledgment of the superior force of the prevailing power? (57)

I remember the 1980s as a time when the outside world, the world projected by television and the middle to Upper Classes, seemed to be doing exceptionally well. Outer appearances suggested that all people during this time were happy. Yet in the confines of my home, the situation was different. President Reagan wasn't viewed as the "Great Communicator." He was seen as a puppet for some malignant force that only wanted to make my family more poor, more tired. But our opinions (what I now suspect to be the opinions of many Working Class/Poverty Class people during those times) weren't heard. Yet even today the mythos surrounding Reagan is that the 1980s were years of prosperity for all. As illustrated by this brief memory, Aronowitz would argue that just because the voices of dissent are not as loud as they once were doesn't mean that their reasons for dissent are not valid or that they don't exist. Silence certainly doesn't mean that all is well in the world. Even silence can act as a form of criticism and disagreement, however weak some may consider this type of argumentation to be.

Aronowitz instead argues that the real issue and perhaps the real determinant of success in society can be found in what a human is forced to do without. The level of powerlessness in a person's life affects the ways that she behaves in society--from the institutions she visits to the type of language that she speaks. Aronowitz argues that what we should focus on when it comes to class identifications is power. Aronowitz explains this theory further:

I propose a shift in the concept of class from a cleavage based exclusively on relations of ownership of capital ...to relations of power in all of its domains, including the power to construct historical memory. (58-59)

Social Class theory considers more than just wages and property. It considers the essential function of power and how some people come to have more or less power. More importantly, it considers the ways in which those who have little power may acquire more. Aronowitz goes on to describe a framework for this social power. He describes it in three points:

I understand power in three principal dimensions: who constructs the rules of inclusion and exclusion in institutional and social life; who tells the story of past and present, what Antonio Gramsci calls common sense; and who has power to define the future. (53)

When we analyze this description according to social class, we soon find that the Working Class/Poverty Class scores poorly on all three points. The WC/PC has not been allowed to tell our stories (This powerlessness is why worker movements have succumbed to social amnesia); The WC/PC is often excluded from various institutions; and, finally, the WC/PC has very little control over its future.

Michael Zweig supports Aronowitz in his framework for class. Zweig writes that despite the vast differences between each person, classes are still useful categories because the overall

differences between classes are clear and distinct. Those differences all boil down to different levels of access to power (Working 36). Because those different levels of access to power often result in discrimination and inter-class strife, Zweig and Aronowitz believe that it is important to maintain class as a social category.

The major premise made by Aronowitz and Zweig is that social class is still an extremely viable category for social identification. Moreover, the current social class system recreates various inequities that can't be ignored through arguing against class. Instead, this dissertation operates from the standpoint that a recognition of the effects of social class is imperative in order to do battle with social inequities. In addition, the Working Class/Poverty Class is defined according to Aronowitz' framework for class in this dissertation. This group is seen as that social class which wields the least amount of power in society. Power in this dissertation refers to more than just economic power. It includes cultural and political power.

For the purposes of this work, the differences that exist between classes is of equal importance to the differences that exist within classes—especially when those differences pave the way for discrimination and hate. The Working Class/Poverty Class has a troubled history of such intra-class discrimination. According to Zweig and Aronowitz, many who promote class theory believe that if workers have access to better wages, then their lot in life will improve. And this scenario, of course, goes for people of color and women. When trying to explain why some forms of discrimination exist, an economic explanation simply doesn't work. An economic focus alone does not take into account the cultural beliefs and practices that result in discrimination against people of color, women, people with different abilities, or people with different sexual preferences. Such an omission can have negative effects. Michael Zweig writes:

Lack of clarity about class can lead to problems when addressing the concerns women and minorities raise in their social movements and can undermine the interests of the working class as well. When we take class to be a matter of income...we open the door to some of the most common and most pernicious misunderstandings about American society.... (What's 19-20)

Economic status and social status make up only part of our experiences as human beings. This identity is also forged in the various and sometimes arbitrary discriminations that some experience on a daily basis. Instructors must go beyond class theory and comprehension in order to understand the nature of various types of discrimination, rather than only one. Thus, by drawing from the work of Giroux, Aronowitz, and Zweig, I argue for a classroom that unabashedly addresses the issue of discrimination as it pertains not only to the Working Class/Poverty Class, but all of the various groups who also experience discrimination. Giroux argues for the importance of such an educational focus when he speaks on the subject of Critical Literacy:

Literacy in its varied versions is about the practice of representation as a means of organizing, inscribing, and containing meaning. It is also about practices of representation that disrupt or rupture existing textual, epistemological, and ideological systems. Hence, literacy becomes critical to the degree that it makes problematic the very structure and practice of representation; that is, it focuses attention on the importance of acknowledging that meaning is not fixed and that to be literate is to undertake a dialogue with others who speak from different histories, locations, and experiences. (367-368)

Critical Literacy reveals hidden structures and rules of language that would otherwise subordinate and weigh upon our students. Critical Literacy is necessary and vital for WC/PC students. Giroux further contends:

Students need more than information about what it means to get a job or pass standardized tests that purport to measure cultural literacy. They need to be able to critically assess dominant and subordinate traditions so as to engage their strengths and weaknesses. What they don't need is to treat history as a closed, singular narrative that simply has to be revered and memorized. Educating for difference, democracy, and ethical responsibility is not about creating passive citizens. It is about providing students with the knowledge, capacities, and opportunities to be noisy, irreverent, and vibrant. (374)

Critical Literacy and a respect for difference are necessary in education in order to establish the democracy that so many of us have dreamed of. Moreover, our students possess a right as citizens to be aware of the structures in this society that would do them harm and that often decide their life paths.

Many believe that little is lost when people begin to distance themselves from their social class community. Social class critics do not see class identification as a way to connect with others, as a way to achieve power, as a way to overcome gender discrimination, racism, ableism, or homophobia. In other words, class identification can empower its members, if allowed to. Being conscious of one's class may lead to more social activism and a will to fight unfair conditions. Class identification may help one question the existing structures that prevent access to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. It could allow Working Class/Poverty Class individuals to unite. It could empower our students.



## **The Case for Class**

At times, some seem to give up the argument against class. Instead, they argue that the Working Class/Poverty Class deserves no real attention or assistance because they are not really discriminated against. Moreover, they live comfortable lives in comparison to WC/PC groups in other societies. Aronowitz reveals the inherent flaw in this argument:

What is wrong with the argument against the urgency of addressing inequality and its most searing manifestation, poverty, is its failure to understand that people measure their well-being not on the living standard of an Indian peasant but according to whether their own situation is equal to the historical level of a material culture—the living standard needed to enjoy a decent life within a specific economic and cultural context. In terms not of the third world, but of what it takes to live decently in America and Western Europe, talk about the poor enjoying home ownership, cars, and television sets is beside the point. (35)

The WC/PC in the United States may have access to some resources that other WC/PC groups do not have access to. Yet, when we look closely at the lives of the WC/PC we can quickly find numerous areas in life where a sound education, strong group affinity, and rhetorical prowess can greatly help the WC/PC in improving their lot in life. In short, we can find several instances where the WC/PC would positively benefit from autonomy and power. For example, to those who argue that the WC/PC live fulfilled lives, Michael Argyle reports that the Middle Class enjoys more leisure activities and social gatherings. This unequal quality of life is probably so because white collar work isn't physically (note that I did not mention mentally) strenuous and they can afford to pay for leisure activities ( 77). The above example is one of many demonstrating the very real inequities that the WC/PC face in their day-to-day lives.

Home ownership is also a WC/PC benefit that is open to debate. Many people celebrate the supposed fact that more low-income (i.e., working and poverty class) people own homes than in the past (Pakulski & Waters 76). However, the validity of statistics on WC/PC home ownership is unclear due to numerous sources of conflicting evidence. Some note increased home ownership while others note less promising figures. Few question claims about the availability of housing by examining the quality of the home that WC/PC individuals experience. As Aronowitz explains:

In America millions of dwellings are trailers, small mobile homes, and flimsy prefabricated houses. In most instances the working poor must own their own homes because they live in areas in which rental housing is either nonexistent or offered at rents beyond their means. (35)

I know a couple who, at the age of 40, bought their first home in 1993. The purchase price was \$15,000. This was all that the couple could afford for their family. Some may say that at least this couple had four walls and a roof but, in this case, the home proved to be dangerous to their health. Their bathroom had a large mold problem. They often had no running water. The floor in the kitchen was decaying. At first, they were happy to have their own home because it provided a sense of ownership and pride. They eventually realized that they would have been healthier and perhaps more content had they been able to live in a home that was more solid and dependable. The family invested heavily in their home. They replaced the hot water heater three times. They continually replaced boards in the kitchen floor. And they often replaced the wall behind the bathtub faucet of the bathroom. In the end, though, the house was more expensive than they could handle. They sold it for \$3,000 and they were happy to get that much.

Further evidence of inadequate living conditions is provided by Johnathan Kozel who reflects upon society's structural discrimination against the Working Class/Poverty Class and people of color. In his narrative on East St. Louis in Savage Inequalities, he writes of WC/PC African American families living within sewage damaged homes due to rampant environmental racism and classism. Recall also the horrendous living conditions of Cabrini-Greens, the low income housing projects in Chicago. Each situation describes a group of people who have been damaged by housing that has become an albatross, a heavy weight wearing them down. Had those individuals known of ways to wage battle through words both written and voiced, perhaps they would have been able to experience the freedom of living in a clean, well-functioning, adequate, and healthy home

Not only do the Working Class/Poverty Class often live in unsafe homes, they also eat unsafe food. This has been documented in numerous studies in which Working Class/Poverty Class populations demonstrate higher rates of obesity and heart disease. In a study on income, obesity, and diet, Drewnowski and Darmon write, "At the individual level, the prevalence of obesity is higher among groups with low education and low incomes" (900). The results of the study show that WC/PC choices in food were severely narrowed due to the price of more healthy foods (903). Many WC/PC families use canned foods to prepare their dinners. Moreover, they are more likely to choose quick and fatty snacks due to time constraints. Finally, many today can attest that, though fresh fruits and vegetables may seem readily available to all, the costs of such items have risen in the past few years, leading to less affordability. If a WC/PC mother were to choose between asparagus for \$3 a bunch or a large generic bag of potato chips for \$1.50, who could blame her for choosing the potato chips? The bag would last longer than the asparagus which might not have been cooked due to time constraints and it was good for only

one meal. Based on this information, one may surmise that the WC/PC can't afford to eat without endangering their well-being. In such a situation, the WC/PC would benefit from being able to write to their state representatives or organize cooperative grocery markets in order to gain access to readily available and inexpensive foods.

The Working Class/Poverty Class also has less access to safety. The U.S. Department of Justice reports that low income persons are robbed and assaulted more often than those in higher income brackets. Because of increased risk of experiencing violence, the mental health of low income people understandably suffers as a result of this exposure (Bureau). This impaired mental health due to increased risk of violence has been reported in a study on African American women living in low income neighborhoods of Detroit. The authors of the study write, "Patterns of mental health are clearly associated with life circumstances...including access to safe and supported neighborhoods" (Schultz, et al 511). They found that income can provide some buffer against fear of violence (519). However, income still cannot protect these women from the increased violence in their neighborhoods. Thus, the WC/PC would benefit from the ability to voice their needs and concerns in regards to neighborhood safety.

Finally, the Working Class/Poverty Class experience structural inequality and discrimination through inadequate access to health and dental care. Michael Argyle notes, "Working class people have much worse health, partly because of bad working conditions, bad housing and less access to medical care" (292). Jessica Banthin and Didem Bernard explain that healthcare costs have quickly risen over the past decade. Even families with employer insurance are paying more (2712). Because those without insurance must cover the costs themselves, those without the money to do so—the Working Class/Poverty Class—are forced to wait until the last minute to seek medical attention until their health is so precarious or they are in so much pain

that they must do something about it. And, in the end, they still suffer as they attempt to pay off mounting health care bills. In short, the WC/PC needs assistance in gaining equal access to healthcare.

All of the above-named conditions result in a quality of life that is severely lacking. Michael Argyle discusses the fact that psychological maladies are much higher in the Working Class/Poverty Class than in any of the Upper Classes due to such a poor quality of life. Studies have even shown that the WC/PC self identifies as having a low quality of life when compared to the Upper Classes. But, discrimination can be found in other aspects of WC/PC life.

Aside from the structural discrimination and inequality discussed thus far, the WC/PC also experiences more blatant discrimination. bell hooks traces a downward trajectory in the image of WC/PC and impoverished people. Before the seventies, society often treated the poor with respect (39). Now, society treats the WC/PC as an object of scorn and many people believe the poor only have themselves to blame (45-46). hooks believes that this has come about because the reified capitalist system has established the mantra of “more” as the philosophy of most Americans (46-47). To demonstrate her point, she explicates the type of television that US citizens watch. Invariably, the rich are portrayed sympathetically while the poor are often portrayed as criminals. Moreover, sitcoms that focus on WC/PC families struggle to stay on the air while the rich are often the demographics appealed to on television programs (72). The Working Class/Poverty Class is by and large allowed very little self respect amongst its peers and society at large.

A Working Class/Poverty Class person in the United States probably does have “more” than a WC/PC person in another country. But this doesn’t make either person’s situation of continued inequality and deprivation acceptable or justifiable. The WC/PC in the United States

struggle to get by on a daily basis. This struggle often follows our WC/PC students into the classroom. Instructors have an ethical imperative to assist students in conquering the gross inequalities that they experience. Helping them acquire a voice through English instruction is one way to help our students do this.

### **Class Signs**

The night of the 2006 elections, my husband and I were watching the news for election results. Repeatedly, the newscasters and politicians made some sort of reference to the “Middle Class.” The news anchors reported that the Middle Class was worried about access to Pell Grants, the Middle Class was struggling to obtain health care, the Middle Class was worried about social security.... I remarked to my husband that most “Middle Class” families do not worry about Pell Grant funding because their children aren’t eligible for Pell Grants. Income restrictions generally prevent most Middle Class students from qualifying. When I said this, my husband stated, “Well, when the working class stop seeing themselves as part of the Middle Class, the newscasters will start using “Working Class’.” He spoke a very important truth. Working Class/Poverty Class culture has become something hidden, like a dirty little secret. The WC/PC also disidentifies with itself because it cannot see the important commonalities of WC/PC people—commonalities that exist in conjunction with identifications like race, gender, sexuality, and ability.

Some argue that class demonstrates no real physical characteristics or differences. Because of this lack of physical identification, how can it be said to exist? After all, clothing has become less expensive, allowing for the Working Class/Poverty Class to “pass” more easily and providing more avenues for social mobility than in the past. Yet when we look at the definition of culture and apply that definition to the Working Class/Poverty Class, we may find some very

general similarities across the WC/PC. I define culture here in the anthropological sense in which it describes “signifying or symbolic systems”, in effect, ways of living and knowing (Williams 91). Class culture can be demonstrated by the dialect one speaks and the structure or type of communication one prefers. It can be identified by music, food, and art, too. Michael Argyle argues:

The man or woman in the street assesses class...by accent, appearance, the friends people have, where they live, education and income as much as by occupation... (290)

In short, the WC/PC identify those who share their class by whether or not they seem to possess similar cultural, social, and economic habits.

Michael Argyle observes, “accent and language are the main ways of indicating and maintaining group identity, that speech style is a valued symbol of group pride” (139). Not surprisingly, Working Class/Poverty Class groups often identify with each other through their language. Patrick Finn, in Literacy with an Attitude, finds significant differences in the spoken language used by people in different social classes. For example, Finn found that most WC/PC families communicate by using implicit references while Upper Classes use more explicit references when communicating (90-91). Argyle discovers similar differences in speech but he connects those differences to varying occupations. While many WC/PC people are not required to communicate with others at work, the Upper Classes are often required to communicate with people of differing backgrounds and stations. Thus, the Middle Class seems more verbal and communicative than the WC/PC. He notes some of the differences:

...that working class speech has less complex sentences...has shorter sentences...has a smaller vocabulary...is less abstract...takes less account of the different perspective of listeners...[and] includes more tags. (128-29)

Unfortunately, the middle and Upper Classes hold more power than the Working Class/Poverty Class. They operate in a world where their views on education and proper behavior are considered the appropriate views. Those who do not conform to their views are often punished and made to feel inferior. Working Class/Poverty Class students who do not speak “Middle Class” are often rebuked. This is not to say that the WC/PC should “become like” the Middle Class, but rather that they should be offered avenues to decide for themselves what they feel is appropriate education or “proper” language. Most importantly, they should not be made to feel ashamed of who they are. Shame is one of the leading reasons that the WC/PC disidentify with their social class.

Though the idea that class is nonexistent is almost commonly accepted lore in today’s society, Argyle writes that “Classes are more like categories than groups, but they function as social groups since members are attracted to one another because of their similarity of lifestyle, values and the rest, and they are aware of being members of the same group” (289). Numerous books like Argyle’s and Finn’s provide weighty and convincing evidence that class does exist and—moreover—class is visible and audible—that there are class cultures. I once went to New Orleans for a three day weekend—before Hurricane Katrina. As I walked up and down those old, historic city streets, I was struck by the destitution and wealth that existed within feet of each other. On one street, I walked past a Saks Fifth Avenue as tall, thin, and tan individuals carried large bags from the store. When I turned down the next street, I passed a group of men who appeared to be homeless. They were dressed in worn and soiled clothing and they huddled



together as rain fell down. Each street reflected a class microcosm. When faced with such obvious class differences, I sometimes find it difficult to understand why people seem so eager to believe that class doesn't exist. As I have demonstrated, some individuals like Aronowitz, Zweig, and Finn are working to question such beliefs.

Though the Working Class/Poverty Class does seem to possess some very general cultural similarities, I do not want to take this conversation too far. Cultural appearances are not the issue at stake here. The issue at stake is the great divide among WC/PC individuals and the overall discrimination and inequity that these individuals could challenge if they could only find a way to grapple with demons of discrimination. So, acknowledging WC/PC cultures is important but the overall defining similarity between members of the WC/PC is their universal lack of power and voice.

### **Class in School**

The type of discrimination experienced by the Working Class/Poverty Class that is perhaps most appalling is the discrimination that WC/PC children encounter when they attend public schools. As Patrick Finn writes, WC/PC students are often taught to be docile and undemanding workers. The education they experience in class, mostly authoritarian and directive in nature, stands in stark contrast to the education of the Upper Classes in which students are encouraged to think for themselves and develop creative solutions to problems (17-18). In addition to this difference in education, the discourse taught in the school system is markedly different from the implicit language used in Working Class/Poverty Class communities, making it difficult for students to learn to read and write effectively in academic institutions. Therefore, WC/PC students are cut off from the paths to power that an “empowering literacy”—the literacy taught to the Upper Classes—would provide. To add insult

to injury, WC/PC students are often tracked into the authoritarian classrooms based upon their families and backgrounds, rather than their actual abilities (Argyle 182).

In a perfect world, this book would be able to refute and propose solutions to all of the problems experienced by Working Class/Poverty Class groups. But we must be more realistic. The intent of this particular text will be to locate ways to improve the English education of WC/PC students in today's institutions of higher education. But, before reviewing the labor colleges and before applying their ideas to the present situation of WC/PC students, a description of WC/PC students and the experiences they bring with them to the college environment is crucial in understanding what WC/PC students need to succeed in that environment.

Many educators and numerous scholars have argued that many Working Class/Poverty Class students are tracked into certain educational settings for no other reason than they are outwardly recognizable as WC/PC. As previously mentioned, Argyle has noted such tracking in his research:

Part of the reason for the emergence of class-linked school subcultures is that teachers categorise and label children. In a study of an American primary school it was found that the teachers have done this by the eighth day, and placed children at different tables, supposedly by ability, but actually more by appearance and knowledge of the families children came from. Being labelled [sic] affects the self-image and subsequent performance at school. (182)

Argyle also implies that WC/PC students are tracked into certain groups for the simple reason that many perceive WC/PC children to be less intelligent or prepared than children in the Upper Classes. Such preconceived notions follow WC/PC children into college. Joanna Kadi recalls battling such assumptions:

I spent hours wrestling with voices in my head telling me “You’re stupid,” and listening to trusted friends telling me “You’re not stupid. This system makes you feel stupid.” We figured out our own analysis: the university system is intricately linked with the capitalist system. People with power at the university will do their part to reinforce and promote the capitalist explanation for class difference—smart rich people, stupid poor people—in return for continued benefits and privileges from the current structure. (44)

The psychological effects of a system that judges you simply by appearance is devastating. However, WC/PC students struggle against more than just such bitter stereotypes when attending school.

A long tradition has been established regarding the best educational environment for Working Class/Poverty Class students. In short, many educators feel a need to control such students. Authoritarian environments like this have been described by Patrick Finn when he reflects on the research of Jean Anyon. He notes that students in the affluent schools studied by Anyon were taught to be creative and to acquire creative employment after graduation. Their future work would allow for some autonomy and collaboration with others through jobs that required a significant degree of negotiation (17-18). Middle class students in Anyon’s study knew they would do well if they treated knowledge as a commodity that can be bought and sold. Not surprisingly, in Middle Class schools, they often took multiple choice tests with distinctly right or wrong answers (14-15). However, Finn notes that in Anyon’s study, knowledge at WC/PC schools were separated into distinct categories or “fragments.” In such schools, a “right” or “wrong” process governed all school work, allowing for little creativity or adaptation in steps used to complete work. Finn and Anyon both believe that the schoolwork encouraged students

to be good workers—not good speakers or readers or writers. As a result, the children resisted schooling much in the same way as their parents would resist abusive employers through sabotage and other work slow-down methods(12). WC/PC students were controlled to ensure that they would grow up to become obedient workers.

Pakulski and Waters question the claim that “schooling reproduces class by fragmenting it” (103) using a concept put forth by Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu introduced the notion of “cultural capital” by stating that those who could attain cultural capital through education would gain more power. Cultural capital is the idea that the middle and Upper Classes establish several cultural rules or norms that become a form of capital. By acquiring such Middle Class rules or norms, a person gains a type of capital that may be traded for certain goods, services, or better treatment. But Pakulski and Waters argue, “Ultimately, the inheritance of economic capital is a far more solid guarantee of social reproduction than is inheritance of cultural capital” and go on to say,

On the basis of this overwhelming evidence, there can be no doubt that education differentially reproduces labour [sic] power, in the sense that it provides skills and attitudes that are employed in different areas of systems of production, but there must remain real doubt that it reproduces class. (105)

In fact, they claim, “Education attacks the class-reproductive effects of domesticity....” They base this evidence on their belief that,

[C]ontemporary patterns of knowledge no longer originate in or structure class milieux. More importantly, no form of knowledge now has the smack of absolute truth. The worth and validity of knowledge are established by the context of its

consumption rather than the context of its production. It long ago ceased to be the preserve of any class. (116-117)

In short, Pakulski and Waters argue that middle and Upper Class cultural capital do not hold as much power as it used to. Instead, they argue that with enough money, one can acquire just as much equal treatment as any other person. In short, they believe that cultural capital is not as important as some believe it to be. Instead, knowledge is available to all.

Pakulski and Waters' argument against cultural capital seems dubious when exploring a Working Class/Poverty Class student's struggle to acquire literacy and the dominant discourse. Joanna Kadi describes one of the greatest difficulties—representation in the texts students read,

But equally profoundly, books, and the children who inhabited their pages, betrayed me by ignoring my world. Where was I? Where were workers? Arabs? Rarely to be found. And if found, never a good word. Stupid janitors who couldn't think, idiotic truck drivers who couldn't write, dirty Arabs who couldn't be trusted. (9)

Aside from this lack of representation in texts, as previously discussed, the primary discourse of WC/PC children is often in conflict with the dominant discourse. The dominant discourse acts as a form of cultural capital. Resumes and applications require the Standard English used in dominant discourses. Many people would not be employed if they did not use it. Because of this, WC/PC students need access to the dominant discourse in order to acquire cultural capital. They also need a certain type of literacy. Finn believes we should not teach students to assimilate but rather to learn powerful literacy by inquiring into literacy's effects on the students' cultures—much like Paulo Freire suggests (126-127). Such literacy, though, must be appealing to WC/PC students. It must offer them something. Finn recounts how Freire taught literacy by

first discussing justice and how students could get justice. The students then began to understand the role literacy could play while trying to get justice (2). Finally, WC/PC students also need to be taught the writing required of the dominant discourse. Graff believes the basic writing abilities called for in our culture are as follows:

Whatever the differences between their specialized jargons, they have all learned to play the following game: listen closely to others, summarize them in a recognizable way, and make your own relevant argument. This argument literacy, the ability to listen, summarize, and respond, is rightly viewed as central to being educated. (2-4)

Most WC/PC students are unfamiliar with this form of arguing. They should be allowed to learn the skills necessary for this. More importantly, WC/PC students must learn to be explicit in dominant discourse settings in order to succeed. Because an essay is designed for an audience, the language must be very explicit. Thus, such a writing activity would be more familiar to Middle Class or Upper Class students who use explicit language (Finn 125).

The primary goal of literacy for Working Class/Poverty Class students should be an empowering literacy that provides students with the skills they need to question and critique in order to advocate for more equal rights in life. Finn believes that most literacy education lacks this empowerment. He describes the different stages of literacy provided in classrooms:

The lowest level [of literacy] is simply the ability to “sound out” words and turn sentences that are typical of informal face-to-face conversation into writing...The next level is the “functional level.” It is the ability to meet the reading and writing demands of an average day of an average person...The third level is the “informational level.” This is the ability to read and absorb the kind of

knowledge that is associated with the school...The fourth level is “powerful literacy.” Powerful literacy involves creativity and reason—the ability to evaluate, analyze, and synthesize what is read. (124)

The reason why empowering literacy is needed is that “basic literacy does not lead automatically to higher forms of thinking, either in societies or in individuals” (123). A type of literacy that interrogates dominant society and encourages critical thinking will lead to WC/PC students who can think autonomously and make wise choices on behalf of their communities.

Working Class/Poverty Class children are predisposed to using implicit language and discourse, making it more difficult for them to succeed in school. Finn argues that this is because their home life is more authoritarian. In authoritarian environments, implicit language is used while collaborative environments require more explicit language (83-4). In addition, in describing WC/PC relationships, he notes that the WC/PC groups are very insulated. In more insulated groups, implicit language is more common while the opposite is true of less insulated groups (85). Moreover, implicitness can improve shared identification in WC/PC groups. Argyle writes, “The habit of communicating through implicit reference to shared information reinforces feelings of intimacy” (86). When describing the intent or significance of this implicit language, Patrick Finn argues:

Of course, you see where all this is going. If you’re poor, you’re likely to feel powerless and be accustomed to a society of intimates where conformity is expected and where parents, teachers, and bosses are authoritarian. As a result you are likely to be accustomed to using implicit language and unaccustomed to using explicit language. (88-89)

Unfortunately, due to WC/PC affinity for implicit discourse and because the dominant discourse is explicit, WC/PC children easily acquire functional literacy but have trouble moving up into informational or powerful literacy (126). Some WC/PC students may also have some problems with collaborative environments because they may seem more chaotic. Moreover, books often don't help in acquiring this discourse. Schools use explicit language whereas WC/PC children generally use implicit language. Books also use explicit language that WC/PC children aren't familiar with. This is demonstrated in the ever descending reading scores of WC/PC children taking standardized tests. Finn strongly believes that if they were introduced to reading in more collaborative environments using more explicit language they may acquire the dominant communication method earlier on (90-91).

It must be clearly stated that Working Class/Poverty Class children don't have difficulty learning because they are naturally less intelligent than their peers. They have difficulty because the system is designed to be difficult for them. If the tables were turned and the WC/PC's implicit discourse became dominant, Upper Class children would fare no better than WC/PC children currently fare but then again, their class positions would probably be reversed. WC/PC children are taught to obey. This fact alone could explain why they haven't learned (or even been allowed to learn) empowering literacy and why the WC/PC remain objectified and powerless.

## **Conclusion**

I grew up in a surprisingly diverse town in Oklahoma. Despite that diversity, the town was segregated not only by race but by income. Working Class/Poverty Class African Americans populated one portion of town. The Middle Class portions were more mixed. The Upper Class (actually upper Middle Class) was populated almost solely by whites.



As a child, I lived in a somewhat isolated part of town. My family lived in a low income apartment complex commonly referred to as HUD Housing (for the Housing and Urban Development Department of the government). Many families paid either lower rent or no rent thanks to government housing subsidies. The apartment complex was surrounded on two sides by fields and on the third side by a lower Middle Class neighborhood where people were able to purchase their own homes. This separation seemed to symbolize the situation of our lives—separated from social mobility and feared by those who had more.

The apartment building my family lived in was equally diverse. Four apartments made up our building. Our neighbors above us were Native American—a middle-aged single mother of four. Next to them was a middle-aged African American couple who had raised their children. On the ground floor, our next door neighbor was a young African-American single mother of two. Such racial diversity repeated itself in each building of that complex where Latinos and people of Asian descent were also often present. But we were all Working Class/Poverty Class.

The people of this apartment complex may seem like they didn't have much in common. But our lifestyles and obstacles were more similar than many would like to admit. We were all living at this housing complex because we couldn't afford to live anywhere else. All of the adults struggled to attain and keep jobs that didn't pay well. We shopped at the same inexpensive stores. If we ate out, we went to similar inexpensive fast food restaurants. The children experienced the same type of education where, though our classrooms were mixed as far as race and income were concerned, we often found ourselves sitting at the same reading tables. Our teachers had already decided students from our neighborhood would have more difficulty learning how to read than the other children. We even had similar dreams of someday not

worrying about money, of moving out of the apartments into a real and decent home. I have a sneaking suspicion that few of us were allowed to realize those dreams.

The occupants of this housing complex shared a culture. Moreover, we shared a lifestyle and environment. We were uncomfortably aware of our racisms, sexism, and classism and, believe me, we had our struggles. But, nonetheless, we were connected.

This experience (among numerous others) is why I am so adamant that class—especially the Working Class/Poverty Class—exists and that racial minorities, people with varying abilities, and people with different sexual preferences share this existence. The WC/PC exists and it experiences discrimination that must end by first working on the type of education WC/PC students—in the case of this book, college level WC/PC students—receive. The labor colleges may help to improve such schooling by demonstrating the sort of writing and literacy skills that worked best for their WC/PC students. The circumstances were different but such schools still shed light on better practices in English instruction today.

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## **CHAPTER 2: EXPLORING THE HISTORY OF A LABOR COLLEGE**

The 1920s were marked by very sharp differences. The gap between the earnings of the rich and poor was vast. One part of society enjoyed the heights of our nation's prosperity while the other struggled with high unemployment rates, increased mechanization, and unfathomable anger and violence against the worker who tried to improve her lot through unionization. Workers were viewed as commodities. Business—capitalism—was a demigod. Thus, capitalists were the select group who enjoyed the fruits of the nation. Workers did not fare as well (Bernstein Lean 47).

Amidst all of the hardships for labor unions, one institution of labor was making remarkable strides—the labor college. Throughout this chapter, we will explore the development of one such labor college, which proved to be a beacon of light for labor education initiatives of the 1920s. While exploring the development of the Brookwood Labor College, I will intersperse its history with information regarding what was occurring in society at large during this period. The story of Brookwood is that of a radical labor education institution educating its students to become effective and empowered workers in the labor movement. As a final note, because the common terminology for the Working Class/Poverty Class was only “Working Class” during the historical period under examination, I shall remain true to the historical terminology in this chapter.

### **Working Class Troubles**

Working Class populations grew during the 1920s making them the majority population of the United States. In Addition, Denning writes, “By 1930, two-thirds of the people in the great

cities of the United States were foreign-born or the children of the foreign-born” (7). This new Working Class “was marked by a sustained sense of class consciousness and a new rhetoric of class, by a new moral economy, and by the emergence of a working–class ethnic Americanism” (8). Due to the large number of races and ethnicities within this Working Class, the labor movement was able to assist in presenting a more diverse America and it was able to legitimate the sometimes undervalued backgrounds of migrants and immigrants (9).

Workers of the 1920s struggled with a high level of unemployment though they supposedly lived in a world of immense prosperity. Many visitors to the United States often remarked upon this contradiction. As they visited varying towns in the United States, they saw one similarity in each—an overabundance of surplus labor, i.e., unemployed workers. Furthermore, no government structures existed to keep track of this growing unemployment (Bernstein Lean 59). Mill workers were among the most underpaid workers in the United States. Mill workers competed with each other, creating a large labor excess that the industries thrived upon during the 1920s:

The South’s greatest asset in its bid for industrialization was its workers, for their services were in enormous supply and could be bought at pitifully cheap rates.

They came almost exclusively from two sources: the poor white tenants and the mountain people, both predominantly Anglo-Saxon and long settled in the area as subsistence farmers... The tenants and the mountaineers shared a common derivation from a poverty-stricken agriculture. (4)

The millworkers were represented in the student population at the Brookwood Labor College. Despite the great inequities workers faced, they were largely silent about the inequities. Several theories have been suggested for this silence. Bernstein argues that:

There were two principal reasons for this silence. The first, doubtless the more important, was that the material well-being of the employed sector of the labor force was improving. (65)

However, the greater barriers were the weak unions workers relied upon to voice their needs and the rampant nonunion mentality that many businessmen and the government held to.

A pervasive wariness of unions and worker action pervaded capitalist and industrialist thinking in the 1920s. The union had become one of the few organizations that acted as a voice for the working people (though, we will see that the major union, the American Federation of Labor, was reluctant to do so). Thus, in order to keep workers quiet and maintain the wage system, most businesses promoted an anti-union message. Many businesses designed advertising campaigns where closed shops were described as anti-American and open shops were described as patriotic (Bernstein Lean 147). The reasoning used for this anti-union mentality was as follows:

Allegedly, the “open shop” was one “with equal opportunity for all and special privileges for none,” where nonunion and union man alike received nondiscriminatory treatment...In fact, open shops were normally closed nonunion shops, where a trade-union member who wore his affiliation honestly was either denied employment or fired. (147-8)

Even the major news outlets were highly critical of unions and often criticized them in the news stories (83). With the force of this supposed patriotism behind the antiunion shop and the false profession that open shops were better because they were “equal with opportunity”, businesses soon closed in on unions in order to destroy them. Not only were the businesses against unions but the government, and therefore the law, seemed to be against unions. Businesses found a

sympathetic ear in the courts where most decisions were made in their favor. The judges who sat on the Supreme Court were notorious for interpreting law in favor of business interests. Chief Justice William H. Taft, who became Chief Justice on June 30, 1921, had a negative perception of unions in general. When Chief Justice Taft read that “federal troops had killed thirty Pullman strikers, he wrote cheerfully, ‘Everybody hopes that it is true’” (190). Needless to say, with a Supreme Court consisting of justices like Taft, unions were able to leverage little power through strikes and picketing.

Business began to use an arsenal of weapons that proved generally useful in shutting down unions. The first and most simple method was to fire any known or suspected members of a strike in their factories and mills. If this didn’t work, the union also hired spies to weed out the union leaders (Bernstein Lean 149). Other techniques used were to try to replace the worker union with a company union (156). Blatant violence also seemed to do the trick. Bernstein recounts numerous stories of workers being threatened, kidnapped, or even killed by vigilante mobs of “upstanding businessmen” (17).

In smaller communities, the mill and factory owners often used another tactic: Control of workers through the guise of paternalism. Mill and factory owners in remote communities often owned everything within the town (Bernstein Lean 7-8). In order to prevent worker unrest, they would also implement welfare programs. Through such programs, mills supported the public schools and encouraged subjects like home economics in order to combat disease and diet problems among mill workers (8). The mill owners controlled every facet of worker life. Thus, through brutality, paternalism and a pro-business government, businesses managed to exert a great degree of control over the lives of American Workers. The American Federation of Labor (AFL) didn’t help in this matter, either.



Despite the trying times for labor unions during the 1920s, labor education made remarkable strides in the decade. According to Jonathan Bloom, “a nationwide workers’ education movement flourished in the United States” (71). Michael Denning writes,

There were two main types of labor school that came to serve as an infrastructure for the Popular Front social movement: the urban night schools sponsored by central labor councils and the Communist Party; and the residential labor colleges and summer schools, which trained activists. (69)

The importance of these schools in the lives of the worker students could not be overemphasized:

“I knew nothin,”...Cleophas Williams recalled. “Once you went to the California Labor School and were among other workers, hearing different talk, different rhetoric, you began to question, you began to see. It was a conversion.” (70)

Workers beginning in the 1920s were looking for more than just a typical labor education experience. They were looking for elucidation, societal exploration. They were looking to make meaning. The group of workers who came of age during this period seemed given toward a more nontraditional outlook on labor organizing and education. One study of this time period noted, “the depression generation—the cohort between 1904 and 1923—was ‘the most working-class cohort in American history’: it had the highest number of people identifying themselves as working class” (8). In fact, this group was beginning to vote in very interesting ways beginning in the early twenties. Bernstein argues that because worker populations were growing larger, this directly led to the eventual rise of the Democratic Party in the early 1930s. Apparently, this was a group more favorable to centrist and left politics than to right wing politics (Lean 80).

Moreover, this group largely came from parents who had immigrated to the United States or children of farmers who had migrated to the city. One person wrote, “The loyalties of

Appomattox and the Homestead Act were details in history books'; nor did they owe allegiance to the individualistic tradition of the farm and the small town" (qtd in Bernstein Lean 76). Old ways of thinking and believing for this group were negated. They wanted to look at labor and politics in new ways.

Altenbaugh describes the historical circumstances that led to the development of labor colleges in the United States. Developed first in Europe, such colleges and similar endeavors arose out of Working Class self-agency (3). Altenbaugh describes the functions of these schools:

[T]he labor colleges served liberating rather than adjustive outcomes, addressing the cognitive domain of human agency. They upheld working-class culture and provided adult worker-students with the knowledge and skills necessary to serve the labor movement. The schools...relied heavily on progressive, democratic pedagogy. (4)

The Working Class people were instigated to enact such schools by a belief that education was political (3). The intentions of the workers were to educate organic intellectuals, intellectuals from the ranks of the Working Class (8), and to work against public education, which was oftentimes indoctrinating and anti-labor (5). Michael Denning describes the first union education program:

The ILGWU had created the first full-scale union educational program in 1915; its unity Center, founded in 1917, offered gyms, dancing, sports, lectures, and music for urban workers, and its Unity House was a summer vacation camp in the Poconos. By 1934, the ILGWU had established a Cultural and Recreational Division, which sponsored mandolin orchestras, theater groups, choruses, and sports teams. (68)

Based on this description, the schools did more than provide rote education. They provided a sense of community and emphasized the individual worker's role in public life.

Altenbaugh discusses consent under the phrase "bourgeois hegemony" or Middle Class and Upper Class power or control over the masses. Bourgeois hegemony functions by trying to control either through the masses consenting or agreeing to control due to false identification with the Bourgeois (or the middle and Upper Classes; 4). Or consent is gained from the masses through "state coercion", which "legally" ensures the discipline of those groups which do not "consent" (5). During the 1920s, both forms of control were used to ensure that the Working Class masses were pacified. Company unions drew upon consent while strikebreaking and private police used coercion (Bernstein Lean 149). With both forms of hegemony operating somewhat successfully, it is not surprising that labor unions and organized labor in general struggled to stay alive during the 1920s.

Brookwood Labor College would soon prove to be an exemplary model of labor colleges and labor education. Founded in 1921 in Katonah, New York, the college was originally the idea of William and Helen Fincke, pacifists who originally started a school for Working Class children. After establishing a secondary school, the Finckes decided to donate this school and land to the labor education effort (Bloom 72). Having an interest in labor movements, the couple saw themselves as teachers who would train students to become worker leaders. To begin this transformation, they held a conference with prominent labor leaders and leftist leaders, like John Dewey, present to determine the specifics of the school. The participants of this conference decided that a college for workers was needed because all in attendance truly believed a worker's revolution was important, that education would herald the revolution and encourage civil rather

than violent disobedience, that workers should be the ones behind the new social revolution, and that the local area, New York, simply needed a worker's education program (Altenbaugh 70-71).

### **A.J. Muste**

Brookwood acquired its first director through the same pacifist channels as it had the school buildings. A.J. Muste was born to Adriana Jonker and Martin Muste in a Dutch province of New Zealand. Between the two parents, they had no more than a fourth grade education and both came from "poor and large families" (Robinson 3). In 1891, his family immigrated to the United States where they eventually settled in Grand Rapids, Wisconsin, which had a large Dutch population (4). Muste would come to represent a contradiction in terms. On one hand, he went from a "conservative and politically quiescent community to a career in the forefront of every major social movement of his time" (6). The religion practiced in his community was very strict and conservative but he would prove to be a radical non-traditionalist who sometimes devotedly aligned himself with pacifism (3) and who wholeheartedly supported workers. An ordained minister (13), A.J. Muste quickly turned from religious to social gospel programs after he earned his ordination (14). During this era, social gospel saw poverty and inequalities as reflections upon a society's lack of morality and advocates of social gospel worked to develop remedies for current social problems like labor practices, economic justice, and other issues (Altenbaugh 73). Eventually, Muste was asked to resign from his church when his beliefs and practices grew too radical for his first congregation. He then worked as a liberal Quaker minister until his activities became too radical for this congregation, too (74).

After his second resignation, Muste fully entered labor activities by becoming the executive head of the Lawrence Textile Mill strikes (Robinson 28). The Lawrence, Massachusetts area had a long and violent history of labor strikes:

In January 1919, “rumors began to fly,” Muste recorded, of an impending textile strike in the mills of Lawrence, Massachusetts. Lawrence in the 1910s was inhabited by approximately 86,000 people; 60,000 worked for the woolen company, half of them, mostly foreign-borne, in the “grim mills.” Since the earliest days of this settlement, investigators had repeatedly found laboring and housing conditions deplorable. But, while strikes protesting these conditions had occurred in 1882, 1894, 1902, and 1912, unified protest was always difficult to consolidate. (27)

When the 1912 strike was called, wages had been severely diminished. During that period, the radical Industrial Workers of the World stepped in to help lead the strike. Though the group put up a good fight, the end results were not very favorable. By 1919, the grievance had changed only slightly: “In the first weeks of 1919, a small AFL affiliate, the United Textile Workers, with about 200 members, called for a forty-eight hour work week, as opposed to fifty-four.” The Lawrence employers suggested they would do so but at “six hours less pay”. Surprisingly enough, the small American Federation of Labor affiliate union agreed to it. But they did so without the consent of a large body of their fellow workers:

But tens of thousands of workers felt otherwise...A further salary decrease seemed intolerable, especially when it was known that the mill owners were offering an extra dividend of ten dollars per share to stockholders.

This was the final straw for workers. On Feb 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1919, several thousand workers walked out; “[T]wo months later, approximately 15,000 remained on strike.” The AFL, more pro-business than pro-worker, denounced the walkout in winter as a “revolutionary movement”. At this point, A.J. Muste had become very interested in the events in Lawrence, Massachusetts. He traveled

there to act as an observer of the strike committee meetings (27). He also wanted to “see...what conditions were like in the mill town.” The poverty of the workers appalled him and he knew that he would stay to assist the workers. Along with two other men, Cedric Long and Harold Rotzel, he helped provide positive publicity for the strikers (28). Muste also assisted in helping workers from differing ethnic backgrounds unite together to try and make the strike work. At the time of the strike,

At least twenty-five different nationalities worked at Lawrence. Such ethnic variety made union organizing difficult. Compounding the task...was the gap that developed between generations of foreign workers. (27)

Muste had “a talent for being able to weld dissimilar factions into at least temporary unity...” (29). Though the strike was able to win a few concessions, it was not successful overall (30).

While working with labor unions like those at Lawrenceville, Muste had begun to demonstrate an interest in worker education, establishing himself as an ideal director. William Fincke soon asked Muste to take on the role of Director at the Brookwood Labor College, which he gladly accepted (Altenbaugh 75). After Muste’s experience assisting the strikers at the Lawrence strikes and his exposure to the educational and cultural activities offered, Muste was intrigued by the employment offer to direct a small labor college (Robinson 31).

### **Brookwood Curriculum and Students**

The Brookwood curriculum of the time responded to those social issues faced by worker students. One such issue, mechanization, became the subject matter for a course unit taught by Elizabeth England. This course will be examined in the third chapter. One of the reasons for this high level of unemployment was mechanization, which became a popular way to reduce the costs of labor and the number of workers needed (Bernstein Lean 51). Bernstein writes: “A

paradox of the American economy in the twenties was that its glittering technical achievement gave birth to a dismal social failure” (60). In 1929, mechanization was one of the number one reasons for unemployment. Mechanization also caused problems in that as production became mechanized, the content of jobs changed drastically (61-2). Bernstein writes,

A workman taking a job in the twenties had little way of knowing whether his skills would improve or decline; he could be reasonably certain, however, that a machine would soon change the content of his job. (62)

One of the groups hardest hit by mechanization was farmers. Because they found it difficult to compete with the plows and tractors, they began to move to towns and cities. By moving to the cities, they hoped to improve their lives, which would almost assuredly occur by moving to cities where wages were higher than the income many would earn through farming. The reason for the loss of income through farming could also be blamed on mechanization and the combustion engine. Overproduction resulted from these forces and agricultural prices fell. Bernstein writes,

This was the era in which the internal combustion engine revolutionized American agriculture by displacing the horse, the mule, and, most important, the farmer, his wife, and his children. (48)

Yet the unemployment of the farmer along with increased production due to mechanization became a boon to the businessman. The farmers’ move into the cities led to an excess of surplus labor. The businessmen could then leverage lower wages due to an excess labor population (49).

Such topics like mechanization were the focus of courses at Brookwood.

Students from various racial, economic and geographical backgrounds populated Brookwood’s sessions and they all had one common purpose for attending the college.

Robinson writes, “Students were drawn to the college primarily by their desire to improve their

effectiveness as labor organizers....” In order to insure that students came from various backgrounds and that they possessed the desire to become better organizers, Brookwood put structures in place which were largely successful:

The students who matriculated in 1921 numbered roughly twenty and ranged in age from the late teens to the early forties. The sexes were fairly represented. A quota system of selection insured that culturally and occupationally the student body would present a variegated picture, though “throughout the 1920s...the vast majority of Brookwood students were trade unionists and they particularly came from the needle trades and coal-miners’ unions.” Within half a decade enrollment doubled, taking in about fourteen “nationalities,” under which heading Negro students were listed beside Scots, Norwegians, and Hungarians. The school received official endorsement from thirteen national and international unions. (33)

By selecting such a diverse student body, Brookwood hoped to bring workers from disparate backgrounds together to aid those groups in making connections (Altenbaugh 138). Students, faculty and staff “automatically became a member of the Cooperative, which had executive power” over the school. Because of this, faculty had the power to “[determine] educational policy and [hire] teachers.” In other words, the faculty had a degree of autonomy over the curriculum they taught and whom they taught with to an exceptional degree. The students, too, enjoyed the benefits of being powerful forces within the school. They had the power to select their own officers to the school council, they advised on curriculum and educational policy, and they oversaw student affairs issues (157). In short, they were allowed an active and useful role in the governing of their own educational institution. Yet this autonomy on the parts of both students and faculty had its expenses. Both students and faculty were expected to work on the



Brookwood campus—whether as cooks, general laborers or gardeners (158). Such work could have led to even further connection to the school in that students had a part not only in the intellectual experiences they enjoyed but also in their physical surroundings. And working at the school helped to make tuition and maintenance of the college affordable for all involved.

In his autobiography Labor Radical: From the Wobblies to CIO, Len DeCaux writes of the experiences he had attending Brookwood in the 1920s as a student. His background is a unique one. He came from an Upper Class family in England but he soon developed an interest in the Working Class. He immigrated to the United States and attempted to

join the working class in a country where class struggle was more brazenly brutal than in England or New Zealand. To enter it by way of prisonlike warehouses and plants, past overflowing slums, through dust and dirt...wasn't that a fitting baptism for my life?" (30)

His experiences at Brookwood were largely positive and his favorite stories seem to be of the fellow students he met while there. He notes that at the time he attended the school,

This was the heyday of the needle trades as unions of social significance. Clothing was the city's largest industry. It had grossly sweated swarms of immigrants from eastern Europe. When these began to organize and strike, they showed a fighting spirit hard to match. Their leaders—largely Jewish—included refugees from czarist tyranny who had learned about organization in a revolutionary socialist movement. (32)

He expressed a great amount of respect for the needle trade union members and marveled over the attitudes of the young women who belonged to those unions:

The women students—from the fewer unions that then had many women—also ranged from right to left. Those from little organized industries were more hopefully than actually unionists. YWCA-ish, they wanted to do right but were little versed in the union struggle, still less in labor politics. The young women from the needle trades more than made up. Unionism was their daily life, their bread and butter, their inspiration, their struggle center. Most were steeped in both radical and union politics. (105)

He goes on to say,

Here, I marveled, were young women who could stand up to any man in labor or political argument. They had spunk—had shown it on picket lines and in organizing nonunion shops. Practical and down-to-earth, they had wide horizons. They read books—social science as well as poetry and novels. Politically active, they were inspired by humanistic aims and a world-ranging revolutionary philosophy. (106)

Having come from the type of upbringing where he had little conversation with women and perhaps outdated notions as to how they should behave, he was undoubtedly impressed by their self-confidence and fighting spirit as union activists.

DeCaux met several other memorable students while at Brookwood. The overall trend within that student body seemed to be that they came from a variety of political, ethnic, and trade backgrounds. On the one hand, there was Joe who was a cooper from a craft union: “Like it [his craft union], he clung to pride of craft, and stubbornly took the conservative side in labor arguments.” He represented the American Federation of Labor position where craft unionist perspectives were pervasive and few unskilled worker voices could be heard (100). Then, there

were the three communists that DeCaux often interacted with. DeCaux's overall outlook on the workers was that many of them leaned left:

A number of Brookwood students leaned to this body of beliefs and were politely classified as of "the left". In their turn, they called those aiding their current campaigns "progressive"; and those opposing, "rightwing" or "reactionary." The "right" or more conservative were less finicky about definition. They called all who criticized them from the left—particularly in union elections—"lousy communists" or "communist stooges." (103)

He saw this varied student population as a positive experience and seemed to enjoy learning about the perspectives of students who differed in belief from him. Many of them seemed to feel the same way.

The faculty that taught at Brookwood was equally remarkable. For example, David Saposs taught labor history, Arthur W. Calhoun taught sociology, and Sarah Cleghorn, a poet, taught English for a few months before being replaced by Josephine Colby and Helen Norton. The curriculum these teachers put into practice is largely regarded as ground breaking:

The college curriculum, Muste explained, was designed on the assumption that while in regular schools, students "did not know anything but knew how to say it," at Brookwood they "knew a great deal but did not know how to say it."

Students entered the classrooms with the knowledge that their experience as workers mattered in the subjects taught. The faculty established other positive directions in the curriculum of Brookwood:

Classroom work ranged from highly sophisticated sharing of insights into the psychology, sociology, and politics of labor organizing, to rudimentary exercises

in speaking and writing. For a number of students English had to be taught as a foreign language. Teaching methods were traditional or innovative, according to the subject matter...Josephine Colby, who was said to have “had something approaching genius in teaching...English to workers,” employed dramatics...Under the supervision of another English teacher, Helen Norton, students began publishing the *Brookwood Review* in the spring of 1923. The product of this “exercise in labor journalism” soon became “the official organ of Brookwood Labor College.” (Robinson 35)

The school also didn't offer diplomas and it didn't provide grades. Muste's reason for this was straightforward: “It was the intention to leave students ‘in a situation where the only way in which their schooling...would tell would be in the actual work they did in unions’.” The focus became “practical knowledge and activism.” To help workers in accomplishing those goals, “labor educators stressed the importance of helping workers identify their place in the general scheme of things” (36).

From the outset, students were asked to create materials that would prove directly useful in organizing workers in the field. Plays helped workers share culture and perspectives and they also invited positive publicity on the worker's plight. The labor newsletter helped workers remain apprised of what was happening in their unions and their local government. Brookwood also sought out speakers for the college. Many of those speakers were leftists. But the school always stood by its tenet that it should remain nonpartisan:

All of Brookwood's offerings, its director repeatedly insisted, were meant to stimulate free and open discussion. College policy maintained that no point of

view should be suppressed but that opinions based on prejudice would not be tolerated. (Robinson 35)

Its major curricular flaw seemed to be that it was a bit too focused on practicality and direct results. As mentioned previously, the poet Sarah Cleghorn taught at Brookwood for a few months before deciding to leave. Robinson writes, “Her students... ‘were what I [Cleghorn] called Labor Puritans. They wanted literary feeling and personal expression, not for life in general but for the labor movement alone’” (qtd 35-36). This is an interesting statement in that for many of the students the labor movement was their life because work was their life.

### **Trouble at Brookwood Labor College**

The unions of the United States were largely considered the voice of the workers in the 1920s by both workers and unions. Unfortunately, the union that held the most power and capability to effect change, the American Federation of Labor, took a disastrously conservative turn during this period. American Federation of Labor wished only to organize skilled workers and largely ignored the unskilled workers in the industrial factories. The AFL officially stopped supporting industrial workers in the 1920s. As a result,

Craft organizations, with their conservative outlook on both internal and general matters, came to dominate both the Executive Council and the convention’s of the AFL, with an inevitable impact upon policy. (Bernstein Lean 86)

The most powerful union simply had no interest in being the voice for the population of workers who direly needed to be heard—the unskilled. Instead, the AFL decided that it wanted to be a more respected institution and it began to endorse pro-business policies. It repositioned itself as and made consideration of the employer central to, its philosophy. It also firmly supported

capitalism and the status quo (97). In short, it tried to run itself more like a business and it bowed to the desires of those businesses.

The American Federation of Labor established itself as a nonpartisan conservative union from its birth. The first president, Samuel Gompers, operated the union as a “non partisan” organization with a strong strain of nativism. From the beginning, the AFL rejected the more radical worker philosophies such as socialism and communism (Boyle 2-3). By the 1920s, its stance had grown increasingly more business friendly to the point that many opponents, including some radicals in Brookwood, termed it a “business union.” According to Clayton Sinai:

Business unionism implied a small elite body of workers organized to pursue private monetary goals. It shunned solidarity with other workers and class consciousness...Labor was a commodity and craft unions attempted to monopolize that commodity in order to bid up its price, as would any other business enterprise. (76)

In short, the AFL clearly established itself as the voice of skilled conservative workers who supported the capitalist system and bargained with the business community for wage gains. This stance was antithetical to the social justice focus of the Brookwood Labor College.

Many organizers for the American Federation of Labor struggled to help many workers agitate for better working conditions during the 1920s. One organizer, Hoffman, was faced with a situation much like that of many other ground level organizers in the AFL. He could neither aid the workers in running a strike nor could he keep a strike from occurring. Though he was an organizer for the AFL, it provided no assistance. Instead, he had to rely on outside institutions for help like the Brookwood Labor College (Bernstein Lean 30). Workers, though they may

have had an organizer or two, were required to stand on their own two feet in order to strike for better conditions. Many strikes, consequently, resulted in failure due to the lack of needed funds and expertise. Brookwood often tried to provide such much needed resources.

Some would say that this conservative tendency of the American Federation of Labor was largely because of the conservative turn of the 1920s. However, the AFL continued to follow the track it laid into the 1930s. When Roosevelt was attempting to create federal aid systems that could meet the needs of the vast amounts of the unemployed, the AFL seemed to disagree with him at every turn. In 1932, union leaders actually opposed unemployment benefits (Bernstein Lean 351). Perhaps more surprisingly, it even fought a bill designed to assist workers by enforcing fair labor laws. Named the Fair Labor Standards Law, this bill called for a Labor Standards Board that would have investigated unfair labor practices. The AFL's argument against it was, "The Federation did not want another government 'board' messing around in labor matters" (Bernstein Caring 140). But, by the time 1932 rolled around, the massing forces of the Working Class were beginning to gather speed. They would come to use their own voice and many would leave AFL to join the more supportive CIO [Congress of Industrial Organization]. Perhaps this was due to the numerous labor colleges which sprung up during the 1920s period and which took on a more radical edge than the AFL in order to meet the needs of the large mass of unskilled workers.

By the end of the 1920's, Brookwood experienced numerous sources of difficulty on all sides. It had made an enemy out of the American Federation of Labor. In the beginning, the relationship with the AFL was positive—so positive, in fact, that the unions and Brookwood Labor College came together to form the Workers Education Bureau, a clearinghouse for workers' education from several labor education endeavors during the era. At this time, the AFL

had become the most powerful union. Yet, as mentioned previously, the AFL was staunchly conservative and “Talk of radical alterations in that system found no place in its platform and programs.” The relationship between Brookwood and AFL soon became strained:

The militant ideals of labor education defined by Muste...were anathema to the hierarchy of the labor federation. A move by labor chieftains to wrest control of workers’ education from the radicals was soon under way. (Robinson 36)

Though Muste may have seemed moderate in public, privately, he had an agenda that greatly conflicted with that of the AFL. Through several varying actions, Muste and Brookwood managed to separate themselves from the AFL. One of the ways in which they did so was through their labor meetings:

Beginning about 1924, invitations were issued periodically, asking various segments of the labor movement to gather on the hill above Katonah and thresh out their feelings about union organizing.

Minority groups were often the focus of invitation as Brookwood wanted to clearly discuss those issues faced by African-American and female workers in unions. The AFL, however, excluded women and African Americans from most unions whereas the Brookwood Labor College struggled for their inclusion (36-37). Muste also held commemorative assemblies for men like Samuel Gompers and Arthur Gleason. During Gleason’s commemoration, Muste remarked, “a memorial scholarship fund was being established in Gleason’s name and added that the same sort of memorial should have been set up for Gompers, rather than the statue which union officials were reportedly planning to erect.” Gompers had been the idolized conservative president of the AFL for a long time. Brookwood also commemorated the socialist Eugene Debs:



His demise stirred little grief in the top leadership ranks of the AFL, where his criticisms had been directed for years. But at Brookwood, Muste presided over a deeply moving commemoration. He stressed the fallen leader's radicalism and called for the labor movement to emulate it.

The AFL took offense at the comments made at Gleason's commemoration and objected to a commemoration for Debs. But perhaps the final straw for the AFL was when Muste later accused it of murdering Sacco and Vanzetti, two trade unionists executed for murder (37).

The union made a concerted effort to wrangle in and control labor education—in particular, that of Brookwood, which was considered radical. In turn, Brookwood made accusations that often referred to the union as only being interested in bourgeois society. This only further irritated the powerful national labor union (Altenbaugh 180). Furthermore, the American Federation of Labor had good reason for fearing the growth, power, and ideology of the labor school:

[T]he apparent threat of Brookwood producing students who maintained a critical view of AFL policies, practices, and leadership represented the essence of...[the] stinging attacks on the college. Indeed, an enlarged and increasingly popular Brookwood would have created further headaches for Federation officials. Not only would it have provided a broad forum for analyzing and criticizing AFL policies, it would produce more labor leaders and activists who opposed Federation leadership. (188)

In the fall of 1928, the AFL began discussing whether or not to continue supporting the Brookwood labor College and several teachers at Brookwood, like Arthur Calhoun who had a Marxist background, were investigated. Robinson writes:

By mid-summer the AFL was ready with an announcement that an investigating committee...had looked into conditions at Brookwood and found them tainted with communism and atheism, and with infidelity to the American Federation of Labor...[T]he AFL executive committee recommended that all its unions to withdraw financial support from the college and cease sending students. (38)

Half of the board members in the Workers Education Bureau left in protest when some called for further support of Brookwood and the AFL continued to vote on dissolution of “Brookwood’s membership in the Bureau.” Even though many unions had left, Brookwood continued on and several other unions attempted to gather support for Brookwood (39). Brookwood may have fared well but Arthur Calhoun did not. He was “dismissed by unanimous vote...on the grounds that college aims were incompatible with his contention ‘that Brookwood should adopt a policy of communism and that those who take a contrary position are betrayers of labor’.” It seems they were affected by the AFL’s accusations of radicalism in some ways. Brookwood obviously walked a very fine line between competing ideologies but it had very good reason for disagreeing with the business unionism of the AFL:

First, Brookwood’s desire for a new social order and an aggressive cadre sharply contrasted with the status quo—the business unionism of the Federation leadership...Second, Federation officials appeared intent on obliterating workers’ schools that offered any criticism of their leadership. Third, Green [President of the AFL] and the Executive Council revealed their preference for a controlled version of workers’ education, under the direct auspices of either a union or a university.... (Altenbaugh 202)

At first, this attempt to silence the college was not effective. Despite all of the conflicts and the AFL's condemnation, Brookwood was also "by 1928... one of the most outstanding institutions among some forty workers' education enterprises..." (179). It would manage to survive a few more years without the sponsorship of the AFL.

Muste attempted to curb any criticism and antagonism against Brookwood because of the American Federation of Labor turn of events by continuing to endorse and run a nonpartisan school. However, this, too, only irritated those who disagreed with the school. Those who felt it was too radical became irritated when it would not follow their conservative suggestions. And those who were radical became irritated when it wouldn't follow their radical agendas. In short, Brookwood was in a lose-lose situation (Altenbaugh 180). Moreover, internal disruptions also proved to be extremely trying as groups within the school also vied for the role of dominant ideology in the educational institution (204-205).

By the tenth birthday of the Brookwood Labor College, Muste's feelings towards pacifism and non-partisanship had changed. He had grown more militant and began to reverse some of his original policy positions:

The idealism and comradeship which had inspired Muste to enter the labor movement in 1919 had become scarce by 1931. His opportunity to help fashion "workers' control" from within the labor establishment was gone for good, if indeed it had ever existed. (Robinson 41)

Muste felt that in order to accomplish his agenda, Brookwood should join forces with an organization who shared his ideals. He and other organizations came together to form a Conference for Progressive Labor Action (CPLA; 42).

The CPLA under Muste's leadership led many strikes and continued to criticize the American Federation of Labor (Robinson 44). Muste had transitioned from "a pacifist [who] conducted the Lawrence strike according to principles of nonviolence...By the late twenties, however, Muste had ...adopted a stance of qualified defense of labor violence." His militancy alarmed Brookwood, as did his support of CPLA. Brookwood took steps to reaffirm their nonpartisanship. In turn, he suggested that

Brookwood be transformed into a training base for "CPLA fighters." He suggested that the Katonah plant be shut down, resident classes cease, and college headquarters be relocated in Newark. The Brookwood staff would devote most of its time to the Conference activities and members of the school faculty would be expected to join the CPLA. It was at least implied that they would hold no other political memberships, "without asking Muste's permission." (45)

This was the final straw for the Brookwood board of directors. The event marked the end of Muste's career at Brookwood. In addition, Brookwood faculty were angered by statements made by the CPLA who questioned their reluctance to follow Muste's orders. Muste later added insult to injury by insisting that those teachers who didn't support the CPLA should be fired:

The directors requested that Muste resign his executive position in the CPLA and turn his full time back to Brookwood. Muste instead resigned from the college and with his followers—including nineteen students—prepared to leave. (46)

After Muste's departure in 1931, enrollment began to decline. By mid 1935, Brookwood struggled to keep the school open. Ironically, the New Deal's assistance with labor unions actually diverted funds originally intended for institutions such as Brookwood when the unions stepped up membership drives. This increased union drive also led to many excellent teachers

and students returning to union work in order to assist in the new organizing efforts. Finally, the internal fights and external fights over Brookwood's policy proved to be too much for the institution (Altenbaugh 229). The school closed in 1936 due to lack of funds, internal conflicts, and lack of attention due to union organizing campaigns. In a way, it worked itself out of a job.

According to Michael Denning, the Great Depression led to a reorganization between classes, which he refers to as a "historical bloc." At this point, many workers had also been educated through many worker education programs like that of the Brookwood Labor College. The Working Class, in short, recognized their similar situations and formed an alliance along with some left members of the Middle Class in order to fight for better conditions for themselves. Parrish, too, wrote

The Great Depression, i[t] seems, drove some Americans apart and simultaneously brought others together in a common cause. It stirred conflict as well as cooperation; rage and resignation; selfishness and altruism....

Some even saw the depression as beneficial because of the ties it created between people, classes, and organizations (408).

During the period of time that Brookwood began to decline, the Working Class was making great inroads. They were beginning to develop a "popular front." Michael Denning describes the Popular Front as:

[t]he attempt to unite these millions of industrial workers with the "middle classes" ...in powerful urban alliances, building what one historian has called "an all-embracing Popular Front civic culture." Under the sign of the "people," this Popular Front public culture sought to forge ethnic and racial alliances, mediating

between Anglo American culture, the culture of the ethnic workers, and African American culture, in part by reclaiming the figure of “America” itself.... (9)

This Popular Front mixed culture, entertainment, and blue and white collar workers together into a solid wall of supporters much like labor education programs initiated in the early 1920s.

Because the Popular Front became this solid wall, it began to wage real power in the political and social landscape. Denning describes mechanisms of this power through the term hegemony:

...a moment of hegemony is when a historical bloc (in the sense of a particular alliance of class fractions and social forces) is able to lead a society for a period of time, winning consent through a form of representation, and thereby establishing a historical bloc (in the sense of a social formation). ..The New Deal was such a historical bloc, at once a particular alliance of political actors and the ruling force in the society. (6)

The historic bloc, in this sense, was made up of the Popular Front, consisting of militant workers and intellectuals, Roosevelt’s administration, and numerous other key players who were sympathetic to the worker situation. This historic bloc may not have existed without the union training provided by labor education institutions like the Brookwood Labor College.

The Popular Front used three key elements to maintain its structure and support: “working-class education, recreation, and entertainment [usually] built by the Communist Party, the new industrial unions, and the fraternal benefit lodges...” (Denning 67). It also brought self-respect back to the worker through positive and realistic portrayal of worker lives:

In this world, the proletarian artists found an enthusiastic and sympathetic audience, one for whom their works and performances became emblems of

solidarity and self-affirmation...the proletarian avante-garde became its [the Popular Front's] troubadours. (67)

Both the subject and the audience were oftentimes workers—or those sympathetic to them. Institutions like Brookwood laid the way for such worker entertainment by providing courses in playwriting and news writing.

Brookwood, its short period of time became a haven for workers who attended the school. DeCaux describes the significance of the school during the 1920s:

Spiritually, Brookwood was a labor movement in microcosm—without bureaucrats or racketeers—with emphasis on youth, aspiration, ideals...The teachers were experts, contributing the extra effort and devotion of persons addicted more to causes than careers. Most students returned to their industries and unions—as they were supposed to do—better equipped to handle day-to-day union problems and to assume leadership, as many of them did. (96)

The school also had a spiritually renewing effect on the workers who visited. Most of the workers had come from grimy, crowded industries and cities or they worked in deplorable conditions but, while at Brookwood:

To the miner, Brookwood was green, clean, all above ground—no coaldust, no cricks in the back. To the machinist, Brookwood was greaseless days far from the grinding roar of metal against metal. To makers of suits, dresses, hats, Brookwood was fairytale country to which they were wand-wafted from the square, treeless hills, the trash-strewn cement valleys of Manhattan or Chicago. To those who had known poverty, Brookwood offered ease, security, the fresh-air pleasures of the well-to-do. (95)

In short, Brookwood was a workers' paradise and it touched the lives of many.

### **Conclusion**

The decade of conservatism during the 1920s buttressed against the decade of radical workers in the 1930s, on first glance, makes no sense. Few workers in the 1920s seemed to have any spirit and businesses were seldom challenged for their poor labor practices. Workers also suffered from the American Federation of Labor's probusiness attitude. The only direct links between workers of the 20s and the more radical 30s seemed to be the following:

- Younger generations were not as satisfied with the AFL and conservative political thought.
- Brookwood Labor College and other labor education institutions were teaching students how to analyze social structures, organize workers, and act as leaders.

Because of this, I argue that schools like Brookwood rose to meet the needs of workers. In the process, Brookwood respected the experience that workers brought with them and Brookwood focused on teaching them how to make concrete impacts in their labor union and their society.

I do not want to argue that schools like Brookwood solely and directly led to the success of workers in the 1930s. There were several other mitigating factors that also played into this, namely the grinding poverty of the Great Depression and an indifferent and impotent Hoover administration. However, I do want to argue that Brookwood and schools like it certainly helped in training militant workers who could channel the anger of others in the 1930s. In short, the circumstances leading up to the Great Depression and radical workers were a confluence of forces, one of those forces being Brookwood Labor College.



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## **CHAPTER 3:**

### **LESSONS FROM BROOKWOOD**

Readers, unfortunately, do not have the benefit of getting first hand insight from actual teachers at the Brookwood Labor College under study here. Instead, we must focus on what is left of the teaching and learning experiences at such institutions. In the case of Elizabeth England we are left with only a handout. Helen Norton left little more: a description of her Labor Journalism course and several handouts. Colby, too, left several handouts. Thus, such materials are the focus of the following descriptions of classes and pedagogies at the Brookwood Labor College.

#### **Elizabeth England and Drama by Doing**

Brookwood Labor College offered several courses related to Composition and Literature. One such course was Labor Drama. According to Richard J. Altenbaugh, Brookwood and other Labor Colleges began offering courses in drama due to the influence of Agitprop theater (198). Agitprop theater became popular due to the poverty experienced in the Great Depression, which led to efforts to inform people about the struggles of the Working Class<sup>1</sup>. Due to Agitprop's growing popularity, numerous groups opened theater companies in order to depict such Working Class struggles. Agitprop, the most common type of play performed in or for the labor movement (according to Altenbaugh, it was not the most fascinating type of play) was used to unite workers. Essentially, such plays were capable of being moved easily from location to location. In short, Agitprop was radical theater that put on shorter plays and designed production

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<sup>1</sup> As in the previous chapter, I use the terminology "Working Class" instead of "Working Class/Poverty Class" because this was the accepted terminology during the period under examination.

for easy mobility. The themes were almost always “political satires” and they focused on the troubles of the Working Class. They were, in short, a form of propaganda designed to unite the Working Class (197).

Performance of the Agitprop play is novel. Characterization is not as important as symbolism. Actors representing the masses speak and move together on the stage. This group movement is not surprising because expressionistic theater was a significant influence on this genre. Another not so surprising fact about Agitprop is that it came from the Soviet Union. After gaining influence there, it spread to Germany where it became popular among workers. Part of the reason for the success of Agitprop is that it was often written and produced by workers instead of writers or intellectuals of the left, which seems to have made an impact. Labor colleges, realizing the organizational potential of Labor Drama for unions, offered similar (though not Agitprop) Labor Drama courses at their schools (Altenbaugh 198).

At first, labor colleges like Brookwood drew upon Labor Drama as a means for entertaining students. But when the colleges realized the organizing capabilities of such plays, they began making more concerted efforts to incorporate the reading and acting of Labor Drama into their regular coursework and they began offering a Labor Drama course that focused more on plays with political rather than simply entertaining themes (Altenbaugh 200). As they did so, Brookwood began to teach the discourse of such playwriting by both focusing on the traditional elements while also promoting a more radical playwriting discourse from a worker’s perspective. The Labor Drama course became increasingly more popular and the themes offered grew more sophisticated as they “encompassed Working Class struggle, unionization, sexism, social class solidarity, racism, and working conditions, among others” (200-01).

One of those instructors teaching the more politically relevant Labor Drama course was Elizabeth England, who taught at Brookwood Labor College in 1935 and 1936. To provide a framework of her course, she described the subject matter as covering ancient theater and modern culture. Students would study the “relation of people to theater [and] contemporary economic forces determining modern theatre...with stress on trade union dramatics.” Students also analyzed plays written on drama and wrote papers on plays. The final assignment was to present plays at various locations to large audiences of workers (Brookwood 6-12). Her course focused on three different plays, one of which was Henrik Ibsen’s The Doll’s House. A description of the handout on Ibsen, the playwriting instructions that England provided to students, and an analysis of the pedagogy that she incorporated will help reveal the structures of her educational approach.

England attempted to balance her introduction into the two communities of playwriting discourse, Labor Drama and traditional theater, by both focusing on traditional and nontraditional elements. Her focus on the traditional elements can be seen in two areas: the literary criticism employed, and the structure of the play and other literary forms. In teaching the form of plays, she is most explicit. Drawing upon traditional play resources, she focuses on such subjects as how to write dialogue and develop characters. She also writes about the differences between short stories, novels, and drama. Point of view is discussed along with timing and play structure like the climax and denouement. The greatest focus is on one act play structures. England also instructs students on methods to use in order to read and analyze plays. At times, she seems to focus on less traditional analysis techniques, but she also instructs the students on the more traditional aspects. To illustrate, she focuses heavily on form analysis. In one area of her handout, she asks students to answer such questions as what characteristics define something

as drama She also instructs students on themes to look for in plays. For example, she describes Ibsen’s work as focusing on “denial of love” as “the only tragedy”. Plays were analyzed and critiqued according to the formal stylistic parts they did not include. In each of the above named subjects, it is clear that she was introducing her students to the world of theater by first explaining how this world works—how its plays are written and what that world considers to be acceptable writing techniques. She invited them into the discourse community of theater (Williams 14-9).

Yet, even as England introduced her students to the dominant discourse expectations of playwriting, she invited the students to play near those boundaries. She accomplished this largely by pulling in elements used in Agitprop theater such as a focus on Working Class life. In one section, she encourages students to write about a strike scene between workers and the militia hired to suppress them:

This is easy to illustrate. I might write a thrilling account of a picket line. I might tell you in moving details how the tired and determined workers, starved, dauntless, plodded night and day before the factory. I might describe the militia watchful, strained, loaded with all the cruel paraphenalia [sic] of their bloody duty. I might repeat in my story the things the strikers say to each other and to the militia, and the answers. And the whole might be a swell story.

She suggests that students take scenarios like this scene further and put the militia and workers in conflict with each other but adds that this is not an invitation to depict violence. Play writing techniques are encouraged that speak to Working Class preferences like the need for one act plays in order to perform for various worker audiences, certain taboo themes like sappy endings, and focusing on the Working Class as a group instead of individual heroes. She also chooses

plays with a Working Class or radical focus for student analysis such as Henrik Ibsen's The Doll's House, which is about a woman's desire to free herself from her husband's patriarchal grasp (Williams 14-9). As a result, it is clear that she respects the need to first learn the rules of the discourse community but she is not afraid to let students bend or break those rules in order to accomplish their number one goal: building worker solidarity through plays.

### **England's Traditional/Nontraditional Pedagogy**

To some degree, Elizabeth England was both a prisoner to traditional pedagogy and a rebel against it in her focus on instructing students in both the traditional discourse of the theater community and the labor drama discourse. Certainly, though, she was not afraid of crossing disciplinary boundaries. As evidenced in her handout on drama, she mixed the study of drama as literature with that of drama as creative writing and drama as production. Perhaps because she assumed correctly that her students would have little experience in any of the three disciplines, she needed to incorporate all aspects that involve a play's interpretation or reading. She needed to invite students into the discourse community. By incorporating elements of both communities, though, she was successful as a teacher because each introduced the students to a new perspective when reading, writing, or performing a play. Critical thinking and reading were deeply emphasized as students switched lenses or disciplines throughout the process of learning about drama and how to produce it and those subjects conveyed the importance of entrance into the dominant discourse community.

England incorporated critical thinking in other ways, too. When teaching analysis of a play, she incorporated an interesting theory for analyzing it as written literature. While professors in traditional colleges were headed down the path of New Criticism in this time period, her analysis seemed more heavily geared toward what literature professors today would

term New Historicism and Critical Theory. To illustrate, she criticizes plays based on love and relationships that were written in the 1800s. By drawing upon psychology and historical information about treatment of women during the 1800s, this focus on history does not mean, though, that she did not ask students to take part in close reading. Questions posed to students at the end of her handout seemed geared more toward the close reading of New Criticism when she asked students to discuss the organization, form, wording, and characterization in plays, rather than asking students to make sense of the historical time period and plays that were written during those periods. Once again, here she seemed to be both instructing students about the boundaries of literary analysis while also inviting them to cross those boundaries. England seemed to use a historical and critical theory in the actual written description of the play that she provided to students in order to help them make sense of a particular play. Such moments can be seen when she described traditional plays written during Ibsen's time and when she drew upon Ibsen's background to flesh out his experiences with the Working Class and how that may have affected the meaning of his play, A Doll's House (Williams 14-90).

On one hand, England's theoretical examination of Ibsen's life and play were probably very helpful to students in making sense of both and in connecting with the play on a personal level. On the other hand, it could be argued that she relied heavily on her personal reading of Ibsen and failed to provide an opportunity for students to theorize about and analyze Ibsen's work themselves. But there are several ways to make sense of England's overt theorizing. Based on the handout, what is known is that England assigned more than one play to be read. Other plays assigned were The Long Voyage Home by Eugene O'Neill and "The Weavers" by Gerhardt Hauptmann. So, one could reason that England first demonstrated how to read

critically and analyze literature by using Ibsen as an example (Williams 14-9). For the other plays, she may have asked students to provide their interpretations.

Professors and instructors have much knowledge in critiquing and defending literary canons. Yet Elizabeth England and others were frenzily trying to build a canon—the canon of Working Class literature and drama. Moreover, they first needed to be able to make generalizations, inferences, and descriptions on Working Class texts. Perhaps such a fact can also explain England's overt analysis of Ibsen. In her reading of Ibsen, she was likely trying to make explicit common themes and motifs in order to assist herself and students in creating a genre or description of Labor Drama. As a consequence, her overt political and social reading would make sense in this light, too.

Furthermore, her belief in the need for students to be invited into traditional discourse communities in order to gain power and challenge those communities spoke to more than just this need to build a canon. She clearly wanted to empower students by asking them to contribute to this canon and she also wanted to accomplish the goal of performing a service to the larger labor community.

Respect for students is also quite explicit in England's textual style and in the way she references certain sources and expects certain materials from students. A mentor of mine suggests that every teacher should assume complexity in regards to the students they teach. I have always read this statement to mean that teachers should assume that their students are sharply intelligent human beings who bring their own life experiences to every class. Elizabeth England, in her academic style of writing and in her somewhat complex sources, did not seem to assume that her group of worker students would be unable to understand the complexity of



certain works and statements. In fact, she seemed to assume the exact opposite. And her respect for such students is demonstrated by doing so.

Though historians and scholars will always have the benefit of hindsight, one aspect of England's pedagogy can be questioned due to its almost antithetical nature in regards to workers' movements. She seemed to buy into the intense individualism propagated in the early twentieth century. This can be seen in her almost continual reiteration of the value of the individual in Ibsen's work and her lack of criticism in Ibsen's focus on grand individualism. However, in one sense, she tries to make sense of this individualism when exploring Ibsen's theme of "denial of love". She interprets "love" to be "love of man for his own kind, for society, a mystical, compassionate gentleness for humanity" and denial of it to be binding one man's hands by constraining his individuality—his only way to help his fellow man. Due to the reliance of the workers' movement on community betterment, England may have felt quite conflicted in regards to Ibsen's focus on individualism while she worked at the very communal Brookwood Labor College. Thus, her ambiguity on this matter makes perfect sense (Williams 14-9).

Brookwood Labor College was sometimes criticized for being too academic. When looking at England's handout, such accusations at first seem well-founded. Her description of Ibsen verged too closely on the banking concept in that it seemed filled with lecture and her opinion rather than asking students to read the text in their own way. Moreover, her sources on drama form seemed extremely commonplace and traditional. The form she suggested is not very different from what I was taught in a creative writing class ten years ago. The elements do not seem that different. However, England does make a few pedagogical moves that teachers of Working Class students should note. When starting from the beginning (from the moment of learning about drama), England was not afraid to cross disciplinary boundaries and she also

demonstrated a great degree of respect for her students. Moreover, she believed in the power of entrance into traditional discourse communities. Because of this, she provided a general overview of drama that was comfortably comprehensible. She simply incorporated good writing instruction by providing students with examples of plays and by asking students to write plays that would actually be produced for the stage. There is no better way to learn than by doing and this is exactly what she incorporated but she also asked students to challenge the dominant discourse through their focus on workers. For these reasons, her example may prove useful for teachers of any writing or reading class consisting of Working Class students.

### **Josephine Colby and the Catch-All English Course**

Josephine Colby left a larger sampling of her teaching experiences at the Brookwood Labor College than most instructors at Brookwood. She was assigned the task of teaching the “English” course that covered topics from parliamentary law to public speaking. Like Elizabeth England, our access in this dissertation is limited to the handouts and readings that Colby produced and assigned on such subjects. Each year at Brookwood, two terms of English were offered and the courses met five times a week (Brookwood 6-7). As before, I will describe the educational structure of each subject that England taught in order to analyze her teaching pedagogy.

Among those varied subjects taught by Colby, “Report Making”, “Development of a Subject”, “Vocabulary Study”, “Resolutions”, and “Detechicalized Grammar” were some of the subjects for which she wrote handouts. Each handout left clues as to the values Colby brought to the English classroom along with the pedagogical techniques she incorporated given the subject matter. What was revealed was largely a portrait of unsurprising complexity.

To help students in "Vocabulary Study", Josephine Colby assigned an essay written by Aldous Huxley. Entitled "The Outlook for American Culture: Some Reflections in a Machine Age," Huxley's work possessed an overt political and ideological position. The students were asked to take this essay and "make a study of the vocabulary." What a study may have looked like is unclear. But the type of vocabulary to be studied was very revealing (Ellickson 2-13).

To further contextualize the vocabulary study assigned by Colby, it helps to understand just what Aldous Huxley argued in this essay. He began by arguing that the future of the world is dependent on the future of the United States because it has become the leader in material and economic development. He further suggested that problems in the United States can forecast problems the world will experience. In essence, what happens in the present could negatively affect the future or benefit the future. Huxley undertook an evaluation of such good and bad benefits in the rest of the essay (Ellickson 2-13).

According to Huxley, machinery (i.e., technology) brought much to man and it made possible even more. For example, it provided leisure and the possibility to provide improved "culture." Huxley found it very doubtful that machinery was headed down this path to improved culture, though. According to him, many genetically inferior people avoid "high culture" at all costs. Likewise, mass production led to conformity of ideas, low culture, and shoddily produced materials (Ellickson 2-13).

Because of machinery's drawbacks, Aldous Huxley believed that the United States should become a "material democracy" instead of a political democracy. Moreover, he advocated a Eugenics policy (i.e., controlled parenting rights) to weed out those animalistic humans who do not desire "high culture." He envisioned a future where a small core of men with superior intellects and an appreciation of "high culture" would lead the country. Furthermore, under this

core of intellectuals, each person would be guaranteed a certain standard of living and an education for which they were suited. In short, Aldous Huxley desired an intellectual aristocracy (Ellickson 2-13).

Several key words could be examined from this reading excerpt. I have italicized those words in my analysis for this paragraph. Huxley was an obvious supporter of *Eugenics* and he promoted an aristocratically governed United States. Moreover he used such phrases as *archaic absurdity* and words like *civilized*, *civilization*, and *culture*. In other words, Huxley touched upon numerous words that students probably heard in the Labor Movement as leftists attempted to make sense of *the machine age*, *capitalism*, *aristocracy*, and the overall cultural situation. His text seems as if it would be extremely offensive to the strongly independent labor college student who would seem predisposed to believe in the most democratic model of government available, whether they believed it could occur only under capitalism, socialism, communism, anarchism, or some other type. He also discussed such topics as *mechanization* and *democracy* (Ellickson 2-13). If an instructor were to build a vocabulary study around this selection, the focus would obviously quickly turn from simple word definitions to an attempt to interrogate such words and their impact on student lives.

What we find in Huxley's essay is not the simple and inane vocabulary building activities that many of us have encountered where we are asked to look up the definition for words that are arbitrarily pulled from the dictionary such as "emollient" or "fluvial". The study of vocabulary didn't ask that students respond to words randomly chosen. Instead, much like Paulo Freire's teaching, key words that had a direct impact on the lives of students were focused on. Eugenics was still a common subject with uncomfortable arguments on the worth of each individual. As worker students who may have unfairly been described by people like Huxley as animalistic

humans, they very much had a stake in the world represented in this word. Likewise, the “machine age” probably struck a chord with students who may have been or knew of someone who lost her job to a machine. We can see through the subject matter and vocabulary chosen that Critical Literacy was encouraged to the degree that Colby wanted students to know and understand those words and issues that directly impacted their lives. The vocabulary being taught was relevant and integral in order to comprehend and make sense of issues that affected the Labor Movement (Ellickson 2-13).

The handout provided by Josephine Colby, entitled “Detechicalized Grammar”, was very much a traditional handout. The form of this document is akin to that of most grammar textbooks from 1900s to the present time. Colby often first provides explanations and charts and then follows up such explanations and charts with an activity in which students use that information to conjugate the correct verb, punctuate a sentence, choose the correct pronoun and so on and so forth (Brookwood 2-7).

The intriguing part of the grammar handout has more to do with its intended audience and the subjects covered in the examples and assignments given. Many of the examples provided in the handout are focused around work and strikes. For example, when showing students the different verb conjugations for the infinitive, “to break”, Colby uses sentences related to strikes and to socialists like Beatrice and Sidney Webb (a couple who aided in the development of England’s labor party.) Another interesting example recounts a strike in Pennsylvania:

When Pennsylvania state troopers, *hurling* tear-gas bombs and *swinging* bloody maces against human flesh and bone, rode into a crowd of 1,500 striking miners

and their wives and children at a Sacco-Vanzetti protest meeting in an orchard near Cheswick, Pennsylvania, on August 22, over 200 persons were injured.

In this focus on a particular subject matter, namely workers and strikes, Colby tries to instill critical consciousness, appeal to her worker students, and teach them the grammatical skills that they will need in order to have a voice in dominant society. Colby also walks the fine line between teaching to a group of longtime native speakers and to a group of recent immigrants to the United States (Brookwood 2-7).

The resolution and the labor convention were the backbone of the Labor Movement in the early twentieth century. One cannot read about labor history during that era without being assailed by references to numerous conferences and conventions. To truly express the significance of such conventions, Colby explains:

At every labor convention the world is made over. The wrongs of the downtrodden are righted. Inequalities are ironed out. The machine is cleaned up. ALL THIS ON PAPER. If organized labor accomplished what it “RESOLVED” to accomplish at labor conventions this world couldn’t be recognized.

At such labor conventions, important decisions were made regarding labor in United States. Moreover, leaders took action resolutions at conventions. But in order to sway and influence members of the union at conferences, local union leaders and convention delegates or attendees needed to learn how to write and present such resolutions effectively. During labor convention proceedings, rules of parliamentary law were followed closely in order to ensure orderly progression in the convention. When resolutions were presented, they were usually first provided on paper and then read aloud during the convention proceedings. In this way, conventions provided an excellent opportunity to bring about real change in one’s union. Labor

colleges took very seriously the task of teaching their students, future leaders of labor unions how to effect change by composing resolutions and by presenting them at conferences (Starr 25-8).

A handout provided by Colby deals with those integral resolutions. In the handout, Colby writes that a resolution operates to turn ideas into actions at trade union conventions. Moreover, the resolution provides a voice for the membership of unions, it educates members, and it is a means to reaching the public through the press. Because of this, composing effective resolutions is essential to effecting change in a trade union. Even unpopular resolutions can be made more popular through maintaining publicity on the resolution and continually introducing it at union conferences. But Colby states that publicity alone isn't reason enough to write and present a resolution. Colby incorporated assignments that called for comparing and contrasting resolutions, composing different types of resolutions and revising, or rather, editing resolutions so that their overall effect proved more powerful. For example, one activity assigned by Colby is to write a resolution from memory. She also asks students to compare the shape of one resolution to their own written resolution, to compare their resolutions to resolutions printed out from a convention, and to rewrite a resolution in order to better explain a problem (Starr 25-8).

Colby introduces students to the discourse rules to be followed at labor conventions, like the various types of resolutions from action resolutions to publicity resolutions. She provides the expected structures for each type and key transitions that should be used. In addition, she addresses the changing rules of the discourse community by explaining that resolutions were becoming modernized. The ornate language typically used in resolutions, such as "whereas", was growing unpopular (Starr 25-8).

Akin to the resolution in importance was the report. Such reports were presented at conferences and, like the resolutions, were sometimes read aloud and passed out to union conference attendees. Overall, the report was essential to the investigation of any problems or issues in the labor union or American society. Colby covered several central issues in writing convention reports such as the various types or styles and issues of audience awareness. It was crucial that such reports be accessible to both students and union members. The report provided as an example by Colby discussed the situation of educational activity in the New York American Federation of Labor. This report was possibly intended for actual presentation at the New York AFL convention (Brookwood 3-20).

Colby felt that it was imperative to teach the report form because students reached two audiences through this form—labor leaders and the public. Assignments required for the report were to use topics such as child labor, the five-hour work day, the need for organization of workers, benefits from organizing, and any topic that would otherwise assist the Labor Movement. Students also composed outlines from presidential reports used at union conventions and wrote their own basic presidential report outlines. At stake were the types of information included in reports and how that information affected the report readability. The students were finally instructed to compose an improved proceedings report for a labor convention (Brookwood 3-20).

Colby once again returns to introducing the students to the labor union organization and structures that they belong to in writing convention reports. Under resolutions, she taught them how to call for action and offer solutions. Under the report, she taught them how to raise issues and problems in the labor union convention setting. Through introducing students to such



discourse conventions, she attempted to give them a voice in the larger structures and institutions that affected their lives.

### **Analysis of Colby's Pedagogy**

The pedagogy depicted in Josephine Colby's handouts was similar, in some ways, to that of Elizabeth England's. The very nature of the English course required that Colby take an interdisciplinary approach akin to England's. Moreover, Colby, too, wasn't afraid to address contentious political issues in her classroom. By doing this, she also encouraged students to enter the dominant discourse community. Colby's assignments called for a distinct purpose. To further explain, Colby's genres would call for writing or speaking that would take place in real world environments instead of being disembodied essays composed just for a teacher's eyes.

The English course at the Brookwood Labor College called for more than just writing and reading instruction. Students at Brookwood were trained to become future labor leaders. Thus, they would need to be familiar with some types of writing, along with certain public speaking practices, and parliamentary procedures (rules of discourse employed at labor union meetings). To have taught just the ability to write coherent and organized writing would not have helped such students in labor unions where union leaders were demanding more advanced skills that could be used in the Labor Movement.

Because the students would enter into a very distinct environment and discourse community after they graduated from Brookwood, Colby incorporated writing assignments that would prove very practical in the Labor Movement and in labor unions. The two instances of such a focus can be seen in her description on reports and resolutions. These genres were extremely important in the effective organization and regulation of labor union activities. Most importantly, knowledge of these genres would prove useful to the students when they were

trying to make their voices heard in their own unions. Hence, the students were writing for very concrete purposes in genres that would produce concrete results. The students had a clear understanding as to whom their audience would be—peers, other labor union members and leaders. Such an understanding of the audience probably helped in recognizing both the value of the course in their everyday lives and improving any writing assignments based on the needs of known audiences. Unfortunately, what is not known, though, is whether Colby required the students to compose resolutions or reports that they would actually introduce at the labor unions.

Colby did not teach resolutions and reports as if their forms were set and to be placed on pedestals. Though Colby supported the status quo organization of resolutions, she encouraged students to critique any and all genres that she introduced. She invited students to test the boundaries of this dominant discourse community by inviting them to ask if the forms really reached the intended audiences. All of this can be seen in her assignments, which typically asked students to address the overall effectiveness of the organization of a resolution or report and the effects of genres.

As mentioned above, Colby also taught students very specific and helpful writing genres. When teaching each genre, though she may have been doing so subconsciously, she incorporated a focus on rhetorical awareness. In the case of both the resolution and the report, she asked students to consider questions such as who, what, when, where, and how, questions that often addressed rhetorical issues such as audience purpose, organization, and more. Thus, the students were taught to see the genres as texts produced in social environments and for social purposes.

Much like Elizabeth England, Josephine Colby was not afraid to incorporate a pro-labor ideology into her classroom. Such an ideology can be seen in the grammar handbook that Colby provided and in the reading assignments that she passed out. Both, in one way or another,

focused on a pressing problem for workers in the United States—the benefits and drawbacks of technological progress. By doing this, she took a pedagogical step toward Critical Literacy by focusing on words and subjects that asked students to consider the social system they operated within. Moreover, she incorporated authors who were clearly at odds with each other on the issue of technology but who often conflicted with each other in regards to social improvement. In short, though Colby obviously supported her worker students, she also incorporated contradicting opinions in order to flesh out the spectrum of ideas on technology and progress.

Her ideological opinion did more than just align Colby with her students. She also used this ideology to draw upon the experiences of her students. Many of her students were already members of unions. Her use of examples of unions in the grammar handbook, her use of union resolution examples in the handout on resolutions, and her use of a union report on education when discussing report-making provided the students with real and familiar examples to draw from in order to make sense of the subject. She drew upon familiar life experiences. This alone probably greatly assisted her in teaching students such varied subject matter in one English course.

### **Helen G. Norton's Labor Journalism Course**

Some may ask why I have chosen to discuss the Labor Journalism class at Brookwood. They may argue that Journalism and English are separate departments. This is definitely true today. But English and Journalism cover similar subjects and often require similar abilities when it comes to reading and writing. More importantly, though we separate the departments now, Labor Journalism was often introduced in the introductory English course at Brookwood. Since Brookwood instructors saw no need for clear separation, this dissertation shall follow suit.

The Labor Journalism course offered by Norton was described by her as “the first” and that “most of the other labor colleges...have since instituted such courses [and] have borrowed my syllabus.” The course was long overdue and, as in many cases, Brookwood led the way (Brookwood 44-12).

During the late 1920s and 1930s, as labor newspapers became more prevalent, a need for people skilled in Labor Journalism was felt by many organizations in the Labor Movement. Helen Norton worked to remedy such a need by offering an intensive Labor Journalism course at Brookwood. The course covered several topics in journalism, including humor in the press and how to publish small “shop papers”. The core goal behind all Labor Journalism was to provide Labor Movement propaganda (Brookwood 44-12)

One handout composed by Helen Norton (later revised by Lawrence Rogin for instructional purposes in 1935 and 1936), provides foundational knowledge in Labor Journalism. For example, the handout begins by defining the word “journalism” and explaining its Latin roots. More interestingly, the handout contextualizes the need for a Labor Journalism course of study. The best reason is that newspapers and journals of the time were dominated by capitalist interests. The second reason was that workers had special need of journalists who could represent their voice in newspapers or journals (Brookwood 4-11).

Other foundational information provided was the scope of Labor Journalism. Norton and Rogin described the audience of Labor Journalism as labor leaders, workers, and the general public. When writing stories, students were encouraged to focus on the hazards of those unsafe work conditions and how poor situations at work often carried themselves home to create poor living conditions (Brookwood 4-11).

“Strike Stories” were especially encouraged. At the time, Norton wrote that most people only found out there was a strike when some sort of violent action took place—usually between police officers and strikers. She called such violent incidents “when heads are smashed on the picket line.” Norton pushed the emotional appeal. She told writers to depict the children standing at the soup line, and the workers’ lives. However, she warned writers not to demean workers by depicting them as dirty. She wanted workers to simply come across as poor but honest. Those who were interested in becoming labor journalists weren’t the only ones who attended her course (Starr 4-11). She directed a particular segment of her handout on strike stories to students who planned to become labor leaders. Labor leaders would often be interviewed by reporters for general newspapers so they needed to be prepared for the questions they would be asked (Brookwood 4-11).

The first assignment Norton passed out in conjunction with the strike stories and the fire and accident story was to take three paragraphs of general information on a strike and turn it into two strike stories for the New York Times. Students were to write one story on the strike before violence had taken place and one story on the strike after violence had occurred. One can see that she wanted to study the ways in which students were able to pull on the emotional heart strings. The second assignment was to write a 750-word strike story and to concertedly appeal to the “human interest” aspects of the story (Starr 4-11).

Rhetorical awareness was enforced when Norton encouraged students to always think of the intended audience when feature writing. She wrote that students keep such an audience in the back of their mind, along with the audience’s “surroundings, their education, their income, their ambitions, their amusements, their prejudices....” In short, Norton wanted her students to know their audience inside and out (Brookwood 4-12).

When discussing ways to begin writing, Norton covered typical approaches to prewriting. The method of prewriting she most encouraged was outlining. When organizing feature writing, the system should be like a series of logical steps, she wrote (Brookwood 4-12). Both Colby and England also encouraged organization in which content should be organized as a series of steps in order to reach the intended conclusion.

One of those publications that fall under the genre of Labor Journalism was known as the shop paper. Each section of a factory or shop could develop its own small newsletter—or rather—shop paper. Norton wrote:

Such “shop papers” serve to combat the company loyalty engendered by employers’ magazines, to voice workers’ grievances and make them a basis for group action, to link up workers in different shops, and to educate them as to the aims and activities of the labor organization. Shop papers are particularly useful where unionization must be carried on secretly or where an organization is trying to get a foothold in unorganized plants.

Because the nature of such shop papers was to bring together workers, Norton warned against creating glossy or fancy shop papers. She suggested that students produce “crude”, mimeographed papers because such papers looked like and often were produced by “real” workers. Another way to encourage camaraderie with workers was to write “us workers” instead of “the workers” (Brookwood 4-12).

Shop papers acted as propaganda in order to focus on issues that affected workers like wages, bosses, hours, poor working conditions, bureaucracy, and more. After all, this is what worried workers. She warned, though, when writing about issues that irked workers, not to write

about single individuals. She, instead, said that workers should write about “the machine”. The individual was but a mere “cog” in that “machine” (Brookwood 4-12).

Because a shop paper served as a means to organize workers and because many companies were adamantly anti-union, Norton also discussed ways to publish and distribute papers so that employers wouldn’t find out about the publication. She discussed areas to leave papers like particular corners or neighborhoods and systems for handing out papers so that workers would be able to acquire and read such papers without losing their jobs (Brookwood 4-12).

The Labor Journalism course expected students to write articles. Norton wrote of the abundance of speakers who visited Brookwood. She assigned students to “report their talks for the Brookwood Review.” She also put together groups of three students every four weeks. Those three students produced a weekly newspaper in that four-week time period (Brookwood 44-12). One such weekly paper, entitled Problems of the Working Class, featured articles on fascism in the United States, the American Youth Congress (an organization that aimed to fight “war and fascism”), and covered speeches given at the school by prominent labor leaders. One particularly interesting article featured one student’s trip from Illinois to Katonah, New York. The entire trip was made by hitchhiking and taking various forms of inexpensive transportation. The student described the experience as “attending my first legitimate theatre on the street of streets....” (Brookwood 11-19). Another weekly paper, entitled the Brookwood Reporter, reported on labor congress conventions, the activities of alumni, a failed effort to organize hodcarriers in Louisiana, and the current conditions in Europe from the perspective of a former native who had returned home for a few weeks (Brookwood 14-16). The essays written by

students were decent and very much seemed to follow the guidelines for effective newspaper writing as established by Helen Norton.

### **Helen Norton's Pedagogy**

Much like her peers, Helen Norton did not shy away from her ideological position. Moreover, recognizing that her students shared similar ideological positions, she incorporated and justified her Labor Journalism course based upon those positions. Take into account Norton's approach to Labor Journalism. The whole purpose of Labor Journalism, from her perspective, was to promote the Labor Movement. In this way, every article that she assigned was geared toward convincing audiences to listen to the labor perspective. In this way, we may argue that her course had a service-learning component. By writing for the labor movement, they were providing a service to their community and critically interacting with that community.

Furthermore, her course introduced elements of rhetorical analysis. She incorporated a style of teaching that was geared toward writing for a purpose. For example, she instructed students, when writing editorials, not to write simply for those who agreed with them. The whole intent of an editorial was to win the favor of those who disagreed with the idea of the editorial. Consequently, editorials were written for the concrete action of influencing or persuading a given audience. Moreover, articles were written to gain support for some event or to cause readers to question certain people or actions. Writing was not intended to be inert words resting on a page. Writing, in Norton's pedagogy, made things happen.

Norton also encouraged an action orientation in writing by setting up situations in which students would actually be required to develop articles and even entire newspapers. Such actions must have provided the students with invaluable experience in organizing and planning a small newspaper from the ground up. Moreover, the articles actually written by the students were



generally sound and they covered interesting topics that were of interest to the Labor Movement. By requiring writing for a purpose and by incorporating an actual outlet for that purpose, Norton allowed her students to experience first hand what could and couldn't be accomplished with writing. They were given a look at the entire spectrum of the writing process. Moreover, they knew that their voices would be heard by their peers. They knew that when they wrote, there was something at stake and that real audiences would be reading.

Writing for a purpose also meant being rhetorically aware of what went into a publication and an article. At all times, Norton stressed audience awareness. She encouraged students to know their audiences inside and out, to know their likes and dislikes and by doing so, she helped her students develop the ability to make such audiences listen to the labor perspective. She also prepared her students for the real world by requiring the students to get to know certain publications before writing for them. She knew, as mentioned before, that news media was extremely supportive of capitalism at the time. Thus, she encouraged students to question the biases in a newspaper and to prepare themselves for overcoming or avoiding such biases when writing (Brookwood 4-12). In short, she asked students survey the rhetorical situation. By doing so, she taught the students both critical thinking and reading and she inevitably helped them become better writers.

## **Conclusion**

The English course offerings at Brookwood Labor College may, on first pass, seem rather traditional in their focus. As I mentioned previously, England's labor course went to great lengths to cover traditional writing techniques as did Colby and Norton. Yet, for their time and even for our time, the English courses seem radical in their own way.

James Berlin has written a history of the major schools of rhetoric at the turn of the century to 1975. Those schools of rhetoric from 1920 to 1940 speak most descriptively to the pedagogy used during Brookwood's period. Berlin writes, "The varieties of writing instruction in use during these years corresponded in a curious way to developments in the economy" (58). The three schools of thought are current-traditional, expressivistic, and social-epistemic rhetoric. Current traditional rhetoric could be described as the typical English course where students write multiple themes which are graded largely on surface features. Berlin describes one such course:

The content of the Syracuse courses was representative of an emerging pattern. English A was a course in writing about literature; it required fifteen weekly themes of two pages and a long review of a novel. English B was a course in expository writing that included a weekly out-of-class theme, a weekly in-class theme, and a research paper of two thousand words on a subject selected from an approved list. (66)

This type of rhetoric course focuses mainly on thesis statements, grammar, and organization and ignores the social influences on people and writing. The expressionistic rhetoric of the times, focused on individual artistic expression:

For expressionistic rhetoric... writing—all writing—is art. This means that writing can be learned but not taught. The work of the teacher is to provide an environment in which students can learn what cannot be directly imparted in instruction. That which the writer is trying to express—the content of knowledge—is the product of a private and personal vision that cannot be expressed in normal, everyday language. (74)

This rhetoric focused on the individual's self-expression often at the expense of the group.

Social epistemic rhetoric brought writing back to a focus on society. Berlin describes the advent of this form:

After the economic collapse of 1929, the social reformism that had been the main concern of progressives before the war again became dominant. Many educators now saw writing as a social act with public consequences, and new instructional approaches were introduced compatible with this view. (60)

He goes on to describe the structure and importance of this type of rhetoric:

Here was an attempt to prepare students for a comprehensive response to varied rhetorical situations, involving a consideration of the writer's and audience's roles and the definition of issues and exigencies. This rhetoric appeared most fully articulated at the end of the thirties....(81-82)

Despite the fact that social-epistemic rhetoric was not fully articulated until the thirties, beginnings of this rhetoric can be seen in the coursework at Brookwood Labor College through its focus on society above the individual. Brookwood, however, incorporated each of the rhetorics aforementioned. Current-traditional rhetoric was represented in the focus on organization and style in writing while expressionistic rhetoric could be seen in inviting students to write their own plays. Most of all, as previously mentioned, the English courses focused on the social function of writing by asking them to write for purposes directly related to their lives and for real audiences.

The courses at Brookwood also speak to common types of English pedagogy today. Not only did they promote Critical Literacy but they also introduced students to powerful discourse

communities. Brian Jackson, focusing on rhetoric as public activism, speaks to the importance of focusing on multiple discourse communities:

[I]t [rhetoric education] must attend to endowing students with a capacity to speak and write in multiple situations and learn to “risk the unpredictable outcomes of public expression,” rather than deposit in their minds the content of a discipline. (184)

The instructors of Brookwood believed that they were doing more than just instructing their students in the various disciplines. They were asking their students to respond to the various communities within a discourse and they were asking them to speak to a public of peers. Jackson’s statement refers to the importance of this. It seems that by focusing so much on the community, Brookwood instructors were demonstrating an understanding of the need for their workers to identify with each other as a group—to build worker solidarity. John Dewey writes of the importance of community building:

There is more than a verbal tie between the words, common, community, and communication. Men live in a community in virtue of the things which they have in common; and communication is the way in which they come to possess things in common. What they must have in common in order to form a community or society are aims, beliefs, aspirations, knowledge—a common understanding—like-mindedness as the sociologists say. (4)

The Brookwood English courses performed this crucial role of community building by asking students to communicate their concerns as a community through plays, convention resolutions, and newspapers. The beginnings of Critical Literacy could also be seen in the grammatical and

vocabulary lessons that asked students to engage words and sentences that reflected upon larger social issues like eugenics and strikes.

Such learning based in the community can also be seen in the one act plays that students performed and in the newspapers that they published. In each situation, though students were producing texts for a discourse community, they were producing them for a concrete purpose outside of the classroom. Patricia Bizzell speaks to the need for this:

Producing text within a discourse community, then, cannot take place unless the writer can define her goals in terms of the community's interpretive conventions.

Writing is always already writing for some purpose that can only be understood in its community context. (Bizzell 89)

In short, this was the liberating pedagogy taught at the Brookwood Labor College. In chapter six, we will look at ways to apply what we have learned from Brookwood in our own courses.

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**CHAPTER 4:**  
**LABOR, RACE, AND EDUCATION: A CONTEXTUAL HISTORY OF HIGHLANDER**  
**FOLK SCHOOL**

Born in the mountains of Tennessee, Myles Horton grew up among the impoverished Appalachian residents whom he would later serve. His parents were educators who taught in rural public schools until Tennessee passed a law requiring teachers to possess a minimum high school diploma. Because of their careers and belief in the power of education, they encouraged Myles to attend college (Glen 10). As Horton grew, he often questioned the living conditions of his fellow residents. Yet, he was at a loss for what he could do to help improve conditions. He was unclear as to what direction he should take in life.

Facing inertia, Horton decided to heed his parents' advice. He attended Cumberland University where he worked on a degree in literature, though he was not enthralled by the subject (Horton, Kohl & Kohl 13). Literature seemed to be merely something to do until he found his calling. In short, he wasn't content with the college environment. Because of this apathy, none of the courses Horton took seemed to relate to Horton's life and what he experienced growing up in rural Appalachia. In part, Horton resisted because, as Frank Adams writes, "like others before him, and after, Horton was being educated away from his culture and led to underestimate his heritage" (6). Though Horton was not entirely pleased by his educational experience, he finished his course of studies at Cumberland and reached a decision on his future. He decided that he would devote his life to helping the people of Appalachia, though he still didn't know how. Perhaps, he thought, attending Union Theological Seminary in New York City might lead to an awareness of how to help his people (Horton, Kohl & Kohl 32).

During summers, when Horton was not attending Cumberland University, he worked for the YMCA in Tennessee. One summer, he was assigned the task of setting up Sunday schools in rural areas. Once he had established the small Sunday schools and he located teachers for them, he quickly grew tired of the work, and felt that it was not challenging. He turned toward the problems experienced by people in the area who struggled to survive and so he embarked upon his first adult education endeavor. In a town called Ozone, he sent letters home with the Sunday School students. The letter asked the children's parents to attend a sort of town meeting to discuss "some issues." Horton did not, in any way, mention the true purpose of the meeting, which was to find solutions to common problems. When the townspeople showed up for the meeting, he attempted to establish a conversation with them about the problems they faced in the community. Thinking that he may have solutions to their problems, they readily spoke up. Quickly they realized that he did not have answers, which made for a rough beginning. But they also learned just as quickly that, where Horton did not have solutions, others at the meeting did. After the rough beginning, the meeting quickly became a success. Residents of the town asked Horton to continue facilitating such meetings on a regular basis. Though the meetings and his work as a Sunday School organizer only continued for a short while, he learned quite a bit from this experience. The most important lesson learned was that people could be taught how to help themselves and that they wanted to do so in order to be self-determining. He also learned that a teacher's role should be that of the facilitator—not the problem solver. Finally, he learned that people work best when they discuss problems as a group (Adams 3-4), instead of being handed answers by presumptuous authority figures.

While at the New York Seminary, Horton was introduced to many new ideas and people who would help shape his path. They would clarify some of his most basic and profound



misgivings about social justice in the United States. In particular, he met Reinhold Niebuhr who introduced him a socialistic approach to Christian theology (Glen 14-15). While being raised in Tennessee, Horton had been taught to help his fellow man and to treat the poor with respect (Horton, Kohl & Kohl 2-3). When he went to New York and met Niebuhr, individuals around him articulated his beliefs and he became inspired by socialism and had a central interest in the Working Class<sup>2</sup> (Glen 14-15). This is not to say, however, that Horton ever truly considered himself a socialist.

Lester Ward, a sociologist who studied poverty, also had a large impact on Horton's approach to education. Ward, much like John Dewey, argued that "education is action" and that only action would lead to improvements in society (Adams 17). As Frank Adams writes, this reinforced what Horton would learn. Moreover, Ward helped Horton determine that poor people deserved, wanted, and could obtain an education. In fact, Ward's thesis was "that poor adults need only the opportunity to learn in order to do so" (17-18). Horton took such a statement and made it the cornerstone of his educational philosophy. In the future, he would strive to educate workers through encouraging them to actively participate in strikes and other social issues.

In New York, Horton began the process of confronting some of his racial prejudices. More African Americans lived in New York City than Horton knew in Tennessee. Due to this exposure, he was bothered that he did not know any African-Americans as authentic and individualized human beings. However, he felt that he began to overcome this uncomfortable prejudice while at Cumberland University when he began reading the poetry of African Americans. Many of the themes covered in the poetry were themes he related to such as poverty

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<sup>2</sup> As in the previous chapter, I use the terminology "Working Class" instead of "Working Class/Poverty Class" because this was the accepted terminology during the period under examination.

and hardship. Poets like Langston Hughes and the African Americans he would later meet in New York helped Horton begin his first hesitant steps toward a philosophy of racial equality that would culminate in his backing of the Citizenship Schools (Adams 16).

Ralph Tefferteller, a former classmate at the New York Seminary and later an extension director at the Highlander Folk School, discussed the significance of the New York Seminary. He wrote of the impact Reinhold Niebuhr had on the students in his class and his lectures on Christian ethics (Wigginton 103). Like Horton, he wrote of the affirmation he found in New York for his culture and way of life. Tefferteller, too, had grown up in the Appalachian Mountains. While at the Seminary, when he was asked about the culture in the Appalachian area and he shared what he knew, he was baffled to find so many people at the seminary fascinated by what he had to say (110). Moreover, he, like Horton, was beginning to question the role the church played in easing the effects of the Great Depression for those groups in need. He states:

I felt more and more that people like Jim [Dombrowski] and Myles and John Thompson and Franz Daniel and the others who were pitching in together into the outer parts of the labor movement [were coming closer to really helping those in need than the churches][sic]. (112)

All of the men named in the quote would later prove instrumental in Highlander Folk School's establishment.

Horton left the Union Theological Seminary with no regrets, having spent a year of study there. He never wanted nor intended to earn a degree or title while at the seminary. He merely wanted to learn. And he felt he could learn more by going to Chicago and spending a year in a Master's degree sociology program (Horton, Kohl & Kohl 46). While in Chicago, he met Jane Addams, who taught him about "democratic decision-making." In a conversation with Horton,

she stated that in order to truly make a democratic choice, one must allow everyone to have an equal voice in the decision-making process and in the vote. People should, while making such a decision, come together in a group and weigh the pros and cons of a situation. In this scenario, once a decision had been discussed, everyone voted. To make decisions otherwise, according to Addams, was not authentically democratic (Adams 18). Horton carried this message first to the Highlander Folk School and later to Citizenship Schools where decisions weren't made hierarchically, but collaboratively.

At the end of this journey, Horton had reached a decision about how he could help his people while visiting Ozone, attending the Seminary, and visiting Chicago. He would establish a nontraditional educational institution. While in Chicago, Horton stumbled upon one of his most formative experiences as an educator. He heard about the folk schools of Denmark and he had the opportunity to speak to someone familiar with those schools (Glen 16-17). In addition, he also visited Hull House where he met and spoke with Jane Addams. When Horton heard of the Denmark folk schools, he thought they might be a good educational model for his endeavor to build a nontraditional educational program. He just wasn't sure how. He made plans to visit Denmark.

### **The Denmark Folk High Schools**

One of the original founders of the folk schools in Denmark was a man known as Bishop Grundtvig who designed his educational philosophy around what he termed the "Living Word." This philosophy centered on his concept of:

[A] School for Life [that would] replace lifeless academic schooling. He believed the experience of the students could be awakened by a search for their roots in

Danish history and Norse mythology. The people would find their identity not within themselves but in relationship with others. (Horton, Kohl, and Kohl 51-2)

When Horton and others later established the Highlander Folk School, they incorporated several parts of this philosophy, including programs that reaffirmed pride in the Appalachian and working class cultures. Highlander also strongly encouraged a sense of community so that students realized the importance of grassroots collaborative action (57).

The Denmark experience also taught Horton several other things. He knew, first of all, that labor would be the central factor in the school and that he would focus directly on those students who worked in factories and industry (Horton, Kohl & Kohl 53-54). Moreover, he wanted to assist workers from the Appalachian Mountains. At the outset, he wanted African Americans to be represented in the experience. Furthermore, he wanted to create a learning environment where peers learned from each other, lived together, took courses on nonvocational subjects, and where the school was not regulated by the state (52). Horton hoped that by encouraging peers to work together, the education they experienced would spread and thereby have a large-scale effect. People, in his belief, were meant to learn together and grow together through common experience and common goals. Horton's theory was that, "Out of their experiential learning through living, working, and studying together could come an understanding of how to take their place intelligently in the changing world" (qtd in 54). He realized that, in order to help the poor of Appalachia, he must

Get behind the common judgments of the poor, help them learn to act and speak for themselves, help them gain control over decisions affecting their daily lives.

The answers to the problems of the poor, in Ozone and elsewhere, must emerge from the poor themselves, he concluded. The sooner the poor were trusted to

develop and express their own ideas—their own creative ideas—the sooner America would begin to achieve the kind of social structure that could end poverty and racial prejudice, set aside exploitation and the reasons for war.

(Adams 24)

As Horton continued his visit with the Denmark Folk Schools, such a focus on the common people was reinforced. He noticed that the leaders of the schools were bent on changing oppressive conditions in their society, that the discourse used at the schools was radical in nature, and that education based on social betterment instead of politics was better than that based on simple memorization—such memorization of facts being much like schools of his time (23).

Horton took other aspects and implemented them at the Highlander Folk School (HFS).

Highlander Folk School strictly avoided grading and assessment. For example, it did not award diplomas or degrees. HFS also incorporated student culture in school courses, and it incorporated students into the life and organization of the Folk School (20-21). One of the more literal aspects that HFS implemented was asking students to work communally with teachers in order to maintain the buildings and provide food for the school's community. In short, the Denmark Folk Schools had a strong and beneficial impact on the formation and direction of HFS.

### **Founding Highlander**

Myles Horton may be seen as the original founder of the Highlander Folk School in that he conceived of the original idea of the school. As described previously, the development of this idea came from two primary experiences: the first was his experience in Ozone and the other was Horton's visit to the Folk High Schools in Denmark. However, Myles Horton was not the only person interested in setting up a folk school.

When Horton returned to Tennessee and began investigating potential locations for a folk school, he heard of Don West, who was also interested in establishing a folk school like those in Denmark. The two soon met and decided to work together to establish a school based on the Denmark model (Glen 25-26). They began contacting people who might be interested in teaching at the school.

The next step was meeting with the future teachers in order to determine the hierarchical structure of the group. Many people wanted Jim Dombrowski to head the school. Dombrowski previously planned out the charter and assisted in constructing a governing board for the school (Horton, Kohl & Kohl 65). Because of his initiative, he seemed like a logical selection. However, he did not believe in hierarchical organizations and he declined the nomination. The group, nevertheless, decided that at the very least they needed an executive secretary, which Dombrowski was elected to, and an educational director of the school, which Horton was elected to. The school, as a result of the meeting, finally had a plan and a group to fulfill that plan. In the beginning, to further benefit from each other's expertise, the faculty rotated all courses so that everyone could get experience in teaching certain subjects (Horton, Kohl & Kohl 65). This meeting demonstrated that, from the very beginning, the school was dedicated to a more radically egalitarian model of education.

Highlander started out as a community education center focused on the training of labor leaders. The school intended to help farmers make the difficult transition from farm work to industry work (Highlander 84-7) because the South had become a major center for manufacturing and industry beginning in the mid twenties (Bernstein 4). The school was designed much like the Brookwood Labor College. Founded in 1932, one of the aims of HFS was "to assist in bringing about the economic and political democracy that is the heritage of the

finest American tradition.” The other aim was, of course, to train community leaders. Both aims were later carried into HFS civil rights work (Highlander 84-7).

In the beginning, Highlander Folk School offered a resident term. It worked in the community of Wilder, Tennessee, and it donated its time to strikes. The terms were held in the summer and spring, were six weeks long, and hoped to host students from unions in the South. The qualifications to be admitted were “the ability to read and write and devotion to the labor movement. No student is accepted without the recommendation of his or her union.” HFS carried this selectivity into its civil rights work. It would only hire certain teachers dedicated to the Civil Rights Movement and voter registration when hiring Citizenship School teachers. HFS also largely invited candidates based on a system of networking where it asked participants of past workshops to invite potential community leaders to future workshops (Highlander 84-7).

During the first semester of operation in 1931 (Langston 151), Highlander Folk School had no formal courses planned and no real plans for courses until a farmer’s wife stopped by to discuss the problems she was having with one of her children. This led to the very first course at Highlander—a course on psychology. The next class was a course on cultural geography (Horton, Kohl & Kohl 66). After a visit to a strike, the school then offered a class in economics. In total, “During that first winter [Highlander] held four evening classes weekly, with an average attendance of twenty men and women ranging in age from eighteen to eighty” (68). In essence, the first semester of courses offered at Highlander was dedicated to a local community and to community improvement—not so much labor unions. And students usually determined the course topics.

To recruit students for the school, May Justice states that she and Myles Horton visited several towns in the area and approached people in the street asking them if they wanted to

attend a Folk School. These grassroots recruitment efforts eventually paid off (Wigginton 78). As the school grew in popularity, a more concrete focus on labor organizing soon emerged, and the school transitioned into residential programs, usually geared toward union members and leadership training. They expanded their course offerings to include labor journalism, public speaking, economics, psychology, and lectures on Russia (Highlander 1-3). During this period, students were chosen to attend Highlander by area unions and some college graduates were allowed to attend (Adams 40). By the end of the 1930s, Highlander was an established and respected labor institution—at least among labor unions.

As Highlander tried to establish itself as an educational institution in the Grundy County, Tennessee area, it attempted several projects. One of those projects that would have proved useful under different circumstances was a canning cooperative, among other cooperative efforts. By and large, such cooperatives could not be established due to the degree of poverty experienced by residents in the area. It was hard to pool resources into a cooperative when there were few resources to pool (Adams 8). Highlander also organized social activities such as dances and discussions (Glen 66). By actively integrating itself into the community through such dances and community betterment programs, the school began to endear itself to the community residents.

May Justus writes of the first years of Highlander and how it gained a foothold in Grundy County, the location of Monteagle Tennessee, and the original site of Highlander Folk School. She described this county as “one of the poorest counties around.” Yet, a history of union organizing existed. During the Depression, Justus stated that “there was really a lot of hardship there, a lot of hunger, and a lot of just plain poverty, and there weren’t any unions around that area then” (Wigginton 78). Surprisingly, despite some efforts to oust Highlander Folk School by



Middle Class leaders in Grundy County, the Highlander Folk School made connections with some people in the community such as the Tracy City Newspaper. May Justice remarked, “[W]e had a considerable amount of good friends there among just the plain ordinary poor people who didn’t have much power” (78-9). The school began to establish itself as a voice of the working people in the area.

Grundy County had a history of class exploitation. The county was named after one of the instigators of the War of 1812, a criminal lawyer of questionable integrity, Felix Grundy. When coal was discovered, the county experienced growth. The mountain and land where the coal was located were quickly sold to the Sewanee Mining Company. The mining business grew very quickly from the early to late 1800s. The area soon entered into manufacturing iron and into the railroad business. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, use of convict labor increased at coal mines throughout the South, leading to growing anger among disempowered workers. Yet political figures did not do workers any favors. US Steel took over the Tennessee Coal, Iron, and Railway Company, previously the Sewanee Mining Company, in 1907 (with the supposed assistance of Theodore Roosevelt, John D. Rockefeller, and J.P. Morgan; Highlander Reel 19).

Mine work was dangerous in the Grundy County area regardless of whether the worker was convict or free laborer. The miners worked long hours for low pay and they were often manipulated and cheated out of wages by their employers. Moreover, many of the mining companies resorted to questionable practices in order to reduce the wages of miners. For example, in 1892, one company began cutting regular wage laborers’ time in half and instead worked the convict laborers full time. The miners eventually reacted by going to the stockades of the coal mine companies (where the prisoners were housed) and releasing the prisoners. Then they placed the convicts on a train to Nashville. The miners told papers that they were fighting

for existence, but they were inevitably attacked in the conservative press as anarchists and communists. Though the miners also attempted to organize via the Knights of Labor and the United Mine Workers, they never won the battle for union representation and were forced to find work elsewhere. Several more strikes and acts of violence were committed on both sides by the unions and companies throughout the era. After this violent period, the area did not see any more significant union activity until 1933, about the time HFS entered onto the scene (Highlander Reel 19).

In part of a speech from the Metropolitan Youth Conference of 1935, an unknown speaker described the overall condition of the mine workers and other laborers in the Grundy County area. The speaker stated

Many of you have heard them paint a picture of how their people [sharecroppers] have lived for generations in a condition of virtual peonage that in many respects is worse than chattel slavery...living in shacks that are not fit for a self-respecting dog, eating only cornbread, sowbelly, and molasses, and clothed in rags...this picture is typical of over fifty percent of the population of the South which makes a living picking cotton--while furnishing the clothes of a nation, they themselves must clothe their bodies in rags...these poor souls have [lately] been evicted, driven from the land by the hundreds of thousands.... (Highlander Reel 23)

Mentioned in this passage is not only the abject poverty of this group but also one of the conditions that Highlander wished to remedy during this time—that of the textile manufacturers and farmers exploiting the cheap labor.

Harmony between and among faculty and students was one of Highlander's highest priorities. To reach this goal, Highlander, like Brookwood, established "a council of workers"

comprised of students who helped govern school decision-making (Paulston 223). The relationship among faculty encountered some difficulty when Don West and Myles Horton quickly began to disagree with each other's theoretical and social perspectives. Horton felt that West did not focus enough on the details of the school and that his philosophy was too individualistic while West felt that Horton wanted to exert too much control over the school. West decided to leave Highlander Folk School because he believed that Highlander wasn't making enough progress and because of the strong personality differences between the two men (Glen 33). Interestingly enough, such differences boiled down to social and political strains often in conflict in movements of the left. One emphasized the person over the group, the other the group over the person. In Horton's opinion, group needs would always be more important than individual needs.

The Highlander Folk School jumped into the labor movement in its first few years and would remain involved with labor unions for the next twenty years. The school became involved in its first strike through an "extension program" that assisted unions in the Grundy County area. In this program, students were provided with the opportunity to take part in actual organizing and strike efforts. They often conducted fundraising activities in order to assist strikers and they provided recreation and education for strikers, all of which were sorely needed. An unknown author describes the conditions of a mining community assisted by Highlander's strike extension work:

Deep in the mountains of the Southern Appalachian highlands in the northeastern part of Tenn [sic] and not far from the H.F. S. is a little mining town of Wilder... It is just like hundreds of other mining towns...it is a hideous picture [sic] company owned shacks, mud streets, drab little company owned church, and

school, and company store, its multitude of half starved children with tooth-pick legs.... (Highlander Reel 23)

This strike, much like other strikes during this era, ended in failure largely because the new union leader of Wilder, Tennessee was blatantly murdered by employees of the mine company. Throughout most strikes, the school was routinely threatened with vigilante action. During the Wilder strike, it was twice threatened with bombings (Langston 147). Despite this early setback in union organizing, for quite a while, Highlander had a very strong extension program and even opened another program farther away from Highlander (Adams 40).

In the early 1930s, the South's labor movement was virtually nonexistent largely because the south was very racist and very anti-labor. In fact, during this period "African-American and Labor Leaders were targeted as offenders against Southern White purity" (Langston 147). Highlander's role in the southern movement was limited to Grundy County, which lessened its impact on the labor movement. And the activities of the instructors, labeled radical, did little to help the school's reputation. From HFS beginnings, it practiced an openly integrated policy, which angered many Southern White supremacists in the Tennessee area (151). However, by 1937, Highlander began to establish itself as a voice in the southern labor movement (Glen 55). As HFS made a name for itself, a conservative backlash took place after Highlander made a somewhat successful attempt to unify southern labor organizations. After this effort, in which the resulting Southern Conference for Human Welfare was formed, the school was attacked by conservative newspapers, which often fabricated information that the school was a Communist stronghold (Glenn 51). Soon an organization known as the Grundy County Crusaders began to do the same (78). With the help of Jim Dombrowski, HFS revealed itself to be a strong public relations force by willingly opening its doors to investigators and he largely proved any

accusations false. The school willingly met with accusers to discuss differences (Glen 76). However, some radicals who supported the school began to criticize it for its neutral political position.

During Highlander's time in Grundy County, several battles were waged against the school by the Grundy County Crusaders, a group that consisted of businessmen and other Middle Class people in the area. In a ten year span, from 1932 to 1941, the school was barred from using public school buildings in Grundy County, it was prevented from meeting several times by police and legionnaires (another significant group involved with the Grundy County Crusaders), was often accused of immorality, socialism, and drunkenness, was accused of scaring away business, was investigated by the Dies committee, and was accused of training students who later tried to dynamite a work camp near Unionville, Tennessee (Highlander Reel 2). Because of such accusations and actions, Highlander struggled to maintain a nonpartisan political position and it continuously fended off attacks.

In 1940, Highlander took a more assertive stand on racism. They informed the unions that they would no longer provide residential programs for those unions who discriminated against African Americans. The school also reinforced their previous statement on student selection which was "that any student with the ability to write who came with a recommendation from his or her local would be enrolled, regardless of race or sex" (Adams 100). Many unions soon turned down efforts to visit HFS for officer training. By 1944, the United Auto Workers was the first union to break down and agree to an integrated workshop at HFS (Langston 152). This move greatly contrasted with the laws set forth in Tennessee that declared situations where African Americans and Whites lived and ate together to be illegal.

During World War II, the residence sessions grew less important in comparison to extension work. In 1937, Highlander Folk School sessions halted so that faculty could aid the CIO (Congress of Industrial Organizations) in a large union organizing drive in textile mills throughout the South. In the CIO workshops, HFS continued to offer courses like labor history, parliamentary procedures, and union solidarity (Langston 148). The school also worked to do its part for the war effort. Bill Elkuss directed the defense program developed by HFS. Under this role, he covered wartime labor legislation and produced a biweekly bulletin for union servicemen. And, by doing so, his program and other programs like it “did encourage the exchange of information among unions, helped educate union members on the labor issues created by the war, and boosted the prestige of the school” (Glen 106). As always, HFS also took great steps during this era to maintain its nonpartisan stance while continuing to try to meet the needs of unions (Glen 105).

Though strikes during this era were often failures for unions or, at best, stalemates, Highlander made much progress in training leaders for the labor movement after 1941 (Langston 140). Previous students commented on their work with unions while at Highlander. For example, many spoke of individual efforts to integrate unions after their Highlander experience. One person wrote of the progress his plant had made:

Colored employees in our plant have received a larger increase and more back pay than any other group. This has been done in order to close the differential in rates. We hope to eliminate this completely but it is a long, slow (but sure) program. The colored employees serve on our committees and also meet with us in our meetings. Their complaints have priority over others because they are a minority group.

Another student wrote,

As a member fo [sic] the UAW local in Memphis, I insisted on Negroes being on all committees and on shop committees, executive board, etc...The race problem cannot be solved by backing away from it, but by following a straight course and sticking to it.

One wrote of organizing Black Workers in Danville, Virginia and of how much the organizer enjoyed the experience due to the strength and militancy of Black labor leaders and workers. Such experiences testify to Highlander's early and concerted attempts to improve race relations, their influence on students who continued such attempts, and the situation of African Americans in unions (Highlander Reel 1).

The years between 1942 and 1947 were tumultuous for many reasons and tense conditions as a result of integration and accusations of Communism resulted in an on/off relationship with the Congress of Industrial Organization. Through Highlander's assistance with the CIO in southern organizing labor drives, a firm relationship was originally established. However, by 1947, the specter of Communism caused a rift between the two groups. To avert accusations of Communism, HFS publicly reaffirmed that it was a nonpartisan independent institution. Despite this proclamation, its role in assisting the CIO became extremely marginalized. In 1949, the CIO officially cut ties with HFS (Langston 148).

One of the most disheartening events to happen to the school was the loss of the Secretary, Jim Dombrowski. He resigned in 1942 in order to assist in the Southern Conference for Human Welfare. As mentioned previously, he was often the organizing and pacifying force behind HFS. He had proven to be exceedingly useful to the school in the past when conflicts arose between the school and outsiders such as the Grundy County Crusaders. When this

peacemaker left, HFS was left to ward off attacks on its own (Glen 108). Moreover, the 1942 residence term proved to be disappointing to HFS faculty. Part of the problem was that the school began to allow college students to attend with worker-students. The college students “dominated class discussions” and offered their worker peers few avenues for expressing their unique opinions. After this experience, Highlander pointedly separated college students from workers and worked to ensure that “college students would be educated from the workers’ perspective.”

From 1944-to 1953, Highlander Folk School continued to organize workers and it continued to push for integration among Black and White workers. It also took part in a farmer’s union organization drive. Increasingly, Southerners began to equate Communism with racial integration. After the CIO took HFS off its list of approved schools, the Farmer’s Unions’ attempts to control the educational program resulted in a split between the union and Highlander, not to mention an end to most HFS labor organizing and education. By the late 1940s, Highlander’s role as a labor education institution was drawing to a close (Glen 139).

Highlander faculty and Horton grew disenchanted with labor organization efforts, which were often frustrated by poor Black/White relations. Frank Adams states,

Horton’s dreams for militant unionism in the south were shattered by several factors. The idea of a working class never really developed as a concept...in the United States, and workers seldom saw themselves as part of a struggle to build a better society. Those parts of the Protestant ethic enshrining individualism and self-advancement as good in the eyes of the Lord were undermining factors, too. If white workers could move from job to job seeking better pay, greater security, and shorter working hours, they undermined the idea that strong unions were the



means through which to accomplish individual aims. Ultimately, however, the decisive barrier to unionism in the South was racism, raw and naked. (106)

Moreover, Horton questioned whether or not the school had actually helped any African Americans. When both African Americans and Whites attended workshops together, the Whites would “dominat[e] black participants.” Horton realized that “individualism was a privilege for whites” (108-9). He believed that enough White supporters of anti-racism would cause racism to dissipate but he realized that African Americans, as individuals in White situations, often felt obliged to become White. Horton realized that a plan was needed in order to assist African Americans in working as a community. Faced with growing worker disinterest in labor unions, HFS decided to radically reassess the direction of the program and turn toward the challenge of the racial climate in the south.

### **Highlander Folk School’s Role in the Civil Rights Movement**

The radical roots of Septima Clark were long established before she was introduced to the Highlander Folk School and later hired by HFS. Throughout her life, she tried to combat racism and classism in any way that she could. She was born to a former slave, Peter Poinsette, and a free woman brought up in Haiti, Victoria Warren Anderson Poinsette, on May 3, 1898. Victoria Poinsette often told her daughter “I never gave a white woman a drink of water” (McFadden 85). Clark carried the independence of her mother with her into her civil rights work as she attempted to improve the conditions of African Americans in her community. In the 12th grade, Clark passed a teaching test (86). Her first teaching position was on John’s Island where she witnessed the plight of the Sea Island residents. Clark, with one other teacher was assigned to teach 132 Sea Island children. She was paid \$35 dollars a month as principal of the school. Her assistant was paid \$25 dollars a month. Across the street, a White teacher taught three students for \$85

dollars a month. Clark's students, especially the older children, were often pulled out of school during harvests so that they could work. Because of this, when Clark began working with Esau Jenkins to establish a literacy school for Sea Island residents, she was well aware of the causes of illiteracy in the region (Wigginton 16). Clark taught at the school for three years. While there, she advocated for equal teacher salaries (McFadden 86). This experience of teaching at the Sea Islands led her on a personal crusade to change such situations. Her life was marked by an engagement in civil rights and social justice projects in her local communities.

After teaching on John's Island, Clark taught at the Avery Normal Institute in Charleston, South Carolina. While there, she attended NAACP meetings where she helped the organization work on overturning a rule that did not allow Black teachers to teach and work in Charleston public schools (McFadden 86). Clark soon married and gave birth to a son. Her husband unfortunately died in 1925 of kidney problems. In 1929, Clark moved to Columbus, South Carolina where she received her bachelor's degree at Benedict College and her master's degree at the Hampton Institute. Because Clark was not financially secure, she left her son with her parents in 1935. As McFadden hypothesizes, her separation from her child and the death of her husband may have allowed her the "freedom necessary for social and political action" (87).

While in Columbus, South Carolina, Clark was introduced to new social situations. In this city, Whites and Blacks, and the rich and poor interacted with each other more frequently. Such an experience raised Clark's awareness (McFadden 88). Clark also worked for Wil Lou Gray, an adult educator, while she was in Columbus. Gray managed the South Carolina Adult Education program where Black soldiers were taught literacy skills. At the time, 50% of Black soldiers in South Carolina were illiterate. Clark's experience in Gray's program later became a part of the foundation for the Citizenship Schools. In 1947, Clark moved back to Charleston

where she began teaching in the public schools. She soon attended the local NAACP. Later on, a law was passed making it illegal for her to be a member of the group while teaching. She was fired when the school board found out she was a member (89).

Clark first became acquainted with the Highlander Folk School in 1954 after Anna Kelly, a member of Mrs. Clark's YWCA, told her of a visit she made to Highlander in 1953. While there, Kelly received free room and board and the meetings and living spaces were integrated. She encouraged Clark to experience it herself. Clark visited the school after the Brown vs. Board of Education ruling had been made. She was amazed to discover that everything Ms. Kelly said was true. Her first significant interaction with Horton and the Highlander Folk School took place when she asked him for assistance in setting up a teacher's credit union in Charleston, South Carolina. The teachers were later successful in establishing the credit union thanks to the work of Clark and Horton. Because of the help Clark received from HFS, she began making a concerted effort to recruit more African Americans to the Folk School. She took three groups to Highlander in the summer of 1954. Most of the people in those groups couldn't believe the stories of racial integration until they actually experienced it. Clark felt that such racial integration relieved many African Americans and helped them to come to trust some Whites (Wigginton 239-240). Eventually, after Clark was fired from the Charleston public school system for being a member of the National Association of Colored People (NAACP), Horton asked Clark to become a full-time workshop director for Highlander Folk School, which she accepted.

In 1955, Clark invited both Bernice Robinson, future teacher of the Citizenship Schools, and Esau Jenkins, future cofounder of the Citizenship Schools, to their first Highlander workshop. Clark even offered to cover Robinson's expenses in order to convince her to attend.

At the workshop, Esau Jenkins told Myles Horton of his attempts to assist African Americans in the area in registering to vote. Soon Horton, Clark (who had been added to the HFS staff by this time) and Jenkins began to collaborate on developing ways to establish a literacy class (Horton, Kohl and Kohl 99-100).

The first activity to combat racism that HFS took part in was the effort to desegregate public schools. In 1955, a workshop was held on public school desegregation. Fifty teachers, union members, college students, and civic leaders gathered together to develop plans for a smooth school integration plan. Because the Brown vs. Board of Education ruling put the onus on the local schools for integration, Highlander wanted to host this workshop in order to assist schools in desegregating. Rosa Parks attended the workshop and expressed doubt that many in the area would help with the movement to integrate. However, much ground was made between Whites and Blacks during this workshop. Glen writes,

Septima Clark later suggested that prior to this session most black students had hesitated to speak before whites, fearing that news about what they said at Highlander would at the least cost them their jobs back home. They remained cautious. But perhaps because of the size of the student body, the large percentage of black participants, a more experienced HFS staff, and the context in which they met at the school, black students showed a greater willingness to speak openly to the rest of the workshop group.

The result of the workshop was an organizing pamphlet entitled A Guide to Community Action for Public School Desegregation. It consisted of a series of recommendations for citizens' groups that wanted to assist in the effort to desegregate schools (161).

At the public school desegregation workshop, Rosa Parks may have encountered inspiration for her infamous bus ride. Describing the Highlander experience to a friend, she stated, “That was the first time in my life I had lived in an atmosphere of complete equality with the members of the other race” (qtd in Glen 162). After the workshop she returned home with a new vision. But Septima Clark hypothesized that as Parks experienced the recurring discrimination in her home environment and reflected on her freedom at Highlander, she grew increasingly dissatisfied with the status quo. In addition, as a secretary for the NAACP in her hometown, Parks was aware that many civil rights activists in her hometown were desperately seeking a young woman of moral character who could successfully test bus segregation. After her experience with the workshop on integration, she decided not to move to the back of the bus. Gradually, the efforts of HFS and other strong civil rights groups like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee grew into a total attempt to desegregate public places and services through bus boycotts, sit-ins and more (Wigginton 240-41).

Rosa Parks’ refusal to move, as history shows, touched off a larger bus boycott effort. Due to this increasing focus on integration, in general—not just school integration—Highlander decided to host a workshop on integration in general. Once again, several individuals met in order to develop a pamphlet on promoting integration. One hundred and ten college students and sixty visitors attended the workshop. Half of the attendees were African American. At this HFS workshop, the first mention of voter registration efforts was made (Glen 164). This focus on voter registration eventually led to a Citizenship School, one of the main focuses of this text.

The first Citizenship Schools were held on the Sea Islands of South Carolina. The Sea Islands are a “chain of coastal islands that extend from North Carolina to Florida” (Oldendorf 169). The population of the Sea Islands consisted of slave descendants who raised cotton and

practiced “truck farming.” Most of these people owned land and spoke Gullah—a hybrid language made up of English and African words. Yet their isolation led to “poor education, poor health care, and little economic opportunity” not to mention political disenfranchisement (170). Oldendorf recounts the situation for most Sea Islanders at the time Clark and Robinson began offering citizenship classes:

Sea Islanders suffered from discrimination, lack of education, few jobs, and insufficient health care. Black schools were old, crowded, and drafty in the winter. The teachers had few supplies and attendance was sporadic because of the growing season. Venereal disease was epidemic...And, of course, everything was segregated.... (170-171)

At the time, Clark and Robinson began working with this group of people, “there were few Black registered voters on the Sea Islands because there were few literate adult Blacks. On John’s Island about ten percent of the Black residents were registered to vote, and about the same number were literate” (170-71).

Previous groups attempted to start adult education courses on John’s Island. Illiteracy was a sore spot for many African Americans. And to admit to illiteracy in front of often times condescending educated Whites or Middle Class African Americans was a bitter pill to swallow. Moreover, literacy materials usually consisted of children’s books—an extremely uncomfortable and ego chaffing reading material for any adult. As Oldendorf writes, “Words such as *tomato*, *cotton*, *register*, and *imprisonment* were more relevant to their lives than *cat*, *dog*, *Dick* and *Jane*” (Oldendorf 172).

The 1957 workshops grew increasingly larger and more numerous. The staff members soon realized “that they needed to work harder to bring whites together with blacks and to

maintain contact with them after they left the school. The residence program also needed to focus more sharply on specific community issues rather than broad topics” (Glen 168). In 1959, Esau Jenkins assisted by supplying a potential community issue that needed attention—helping Sea Island residents acquire literacy and register to vote. That same year, Highlander held a workshop to review and construct a Citizenship School (171). One of the first things they learned, largely from Septima Clark and Esau Jenkins, was that Charleston and the Sea Islands were some of the most segregated and racist areas in the United States. Septima Clark reflected upon the Charleston, South Carolina, prejudices that she encountered while growing up: “[T]here were so many different rules you adhered to. You hid so many things. Handicapped children were hidden. Girls who had babies were tabooed” (Wigginton 19). The Sea Islands were almost totally cut off from Charleston. Clark further noted that

[T]here wasn't even a bridge over to the island from Charleston until about 1945, so those people just stayed right there in their little shells, isolated, accepting whatever was there. And they really suffered.... The people were virtual slaves. They had no choice but to work in the fields for the white people. That's one of the reasons we had so many babies to die. A mother was only allowed to stay two or three days in the house after giving birth, and then she had to be back in the fields. (15)

Not only was the environment highly restrictive, but also the culture was largely hidden and almost impermeable to the outsider.

When Bernice Robinson first began teaching such students at the Citizenship School, she didn't quite know how to go about it. On the first night, Robinson walked in with a stack of materials borrowed from elementary school teachers. But as she looked at the adults, she

realized that she didn't have adult materials. She asked them what they wanted to read. They offered several practical and relevant texts like newspapers and the Bible. She learned to incorporate those texts and problems offered by her students and by doing so met the actual needs and wants of her students (Wigginton 251). At first, Robinson and Clark hesitated in allowing any White visitors --including Horton--to observe the Citizenship School classes because Clark felt that "the pupils might be frightened away by a white man being there" and for good reason. Few of the Sea Island residents had met a White person who could be trusted and they were fearful of White backlash if Whites learned that they were trying to register to vote. When Clark came upon a Black man reading to a group of Black people on the Sea Islands, she knew they had overcome their fear of being found out (244). By the end of the first Citizenship School term, all fourteen of Robinson's students had registered to vote. The school took off after that (253).

The situation at the Citizenship School was not only sensitive to Black/White relations but also Black/Middle Class Black Relations. One of the reasons why Bernice Robinson was chosen as the first Citizenship School teacher is because she didn't have many of the pretensions of Middle Class and educated African Americans nor did she fear too much white reprisal as a business woman who earned most of her money from the African American community(Wigginton 245). Besides, many Middle Class Black educators had already failed in their attempts to teach literacy classes. Septima Clark has reflected on reasons for those failures:

I don't know whether they [middle class blacks] were afraid to try to teach others, or if they had some highfalutin idea that poor people were so far beneath them that they wouldn't fool with them. Many middle-class blacks were extremely hostile and prejudiced one to the other...And so going to Highlander with them,



we had a hard time. We got them to see what conditions they were living under, but we couldn't get them to do any of the work....(Wigginton 241)

Some Middle Class Blacks, at that time, often proved as obstructive and inactive as some Whites.

As the Civil Rights Movement gained momentum, Highlander aided it in trying to smooth the integration process in public schools. They taught different forms of protest and they assisted young people in constructing organizations. They also assisted the young African Americans and Whites in determining what the role of Whites would be in the movement. Meanwhile, the Citizenship Schools continued to thrive. Between December of 1958 and February of 1959, four new Citizenship Schools were opened in the Sea Islands. The students fell between the ages of 15 to 76. Of those who attended those four schools, 66 of them later successfully registered to vote (Oldendorf 173-4). In fact, the schools multiplied so quickly that Robinson soon became a supervisor for the schools, instead of the teacher (173). Between 1959 and 1960, five new schools opened and 182 students attended. In fact, on Edisto Island alone, student enrollment jumped from 40 in 1958 to 200 students in 1960. By 1963, after the SCLC had acquired the program, there were 750 teachers and 50,000 new voters as a result of the schools (174). The Citizenship Schools were a resounding success.

Clark hypothesizes that the success of the Citizenship Schools led to the death of the Highlander Folk School. She stated

We saw it coming. We had already been designated a communist outfit. Because blacks and whites were able to live together and to work together at Highlander...And since we were working in violation of the segregation laws of Tennessee, Myles knew that eventually they would close down the school.

Horton, foreseeing the problem, set about trying to locate another organization that could maintain the Citizenship School program. He eventually contacted Martin Luther King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which later adopted the program (Wigginton 245).

Clark was often critical of the place women were given in the history of the Civil Rights Movement. She believed that they were never given the respect that many of them deserved. In fact, Ralph Abernathy complained when Clark was given a seat on the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's (SCLC) board not because of whom she was but because she was a woman (McFadden 93). Yet she believed that the Civil Rights Movement in general, and the Citizenship Schools in particular, "helped women realize their worth in society...Clark contended that women who participated in Citizenship education became aroused citizens and assumed positive roles in the quest for civil as well as women's rights" (94).

Though Clark's Citizenship Schools were a success, Highlander Folk School was forced to look for another home after the Tennessee Legislature began investigating it for a long list of reasons--none of them really very legitimate. The investigation had begun when Highlander held a conference and invited Martin Luther King to attend. A photographer was planted at the conference by the state and conservative media. While there, the photographer continually inserted Abner Berry, a freelance writer for The Daily Worker (a communist paper) into every shot. The photographs were published in newspapers throughout the south. Soon, accusations of communism surrounded both King and Highlander Folk School (Langston 158). Tennessee government leaders first attempted to shut the school down by using outdated segregation laws. This attempt failed. Soon after, HFS was raided on July 31st and several people, including Septima Clark, were arrested for public drunkenness and resisting arrest. Much of the evidence against the school, at the time, was fabricated (160). In the end, the state of Tennessee managed

to close Highlander on a technicality. The school had been offering cold beer to students now and then in exchange for a few cents to keep the cooler stocked. The state successfully argued that this activity should be construed as selling liquor without a license. The school was officially closed in 1961 (Langston 162).

Surprisingly enough, it was neither the Communist indictments nor the accusations of being immoral that brought down the Highlander Folk School. It was the folk school's poor bookkeeping, failure to apply for another charter, and failure to follow exact rules regarding liquor and non-profit organization laws that closed the school (Glen 239). In 1959, while conducting a workshop with participants from Charleston, the Sea Islands, and eastern Tennessee, local law enforcement raided the school while the attendees sang "We Will Overcome" (Glen 231-232). Though the folk school shut down, a similar program near Knoxville, Tennessee was established with Horton as the President of its committee. They named it the Highlander Research and Education Center. Highlander continued on under a new name (Glen 247).

Acquiring the Citizenship School was not an easy task for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. And convincing the SCLC to take the school was hardly a breeze for Highlander. Yet, SCLC took a positive step toward taking on the program when they hired Ella Baker as a temporary director in 1957 (Branch Parting 230). King worried about a female managing an organization that consisted mostly of conservative preachers. But when Baker visited Highlander, she was the one who saw the potential of the program that would later play a key role in the SCLC's, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee's (SNCC), Congress of Racial Equality's (CORE), and National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's (NAACP) attempts to bring racial justice to the southern United States. Baker had some doubts

that SCLC preachers would be willing to acquire HFS's program. She felt that they would avoid the program because "Literacy schools involved tedious work, outside the daily interest or control of the clergy. Also, being openly predicated upon widespread Negro ignorance, they presented image problems to leaders still struggling to build public recognition of a 'New Negro' of proper manners." When Baker discussed the program with the SCLC preachers in 1958, she did not play up the program she was personally excited about because she knew that the SCLC preachers would resist (264).

At the time the previous Highlander closed and the new Highlander opened, it had 20,000 students in extension schools. 350 teachers taught at Citizenship Schools. The Citizenship Schools had grown so numerous that Highlander could no longer handle the project (Langston 162). Septima Clark, as director of the Citizenship School program, moved with it to the SCLC. Eventually, Robinson moved too. In the end, the Citizenship Schools had taught somewhere around 140,000 students how to read, write, and vote (163).

### **SNCC's Involvement**

In the fall of 1958, James Bevel, future leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, was convinced by John Lewis to attend a Highlander Workshop on nonviolence. Bevel's attitude toward both education and social justice was generally apathetic. He was more interested in having fun than using nonviolence to combat racism. Branch writes, "Of the Highlander speakers, it was Myles Horton who first cracked Bevel's sense of mastery. [Horton] made [students] doubt who they were, what they were saying." In other words, he caused Bevel to question his complacency. Bevel later walked out on the Highlander workshop when another speaker "berated the students for cowardice" (Parting 263). The experience for him was, in essence, intense.

John Lewis, another future Civil Rights leader, was also influenced by the HFS. He attended Septima Clark's workshops: "In a compressed week's workshop, Clark promised to turn sharecroppers and other unschooled Negroes into potential voters, armed with basic literacy and a grasp of democratic rights" (Branch 263). He found this promising concept of great value to the SNCC.

Clark became a venerated figure in the Civil Rights Movement, according to Taylor Branch: "Clark was a saint even to many of the learned critics who predicted she would fail...As always, she worked both sides of the gaping class divide without letting the friction ruin her spirits" (Parting 264). Branch describes her further: "There was an invisible edge to her. Still touchy about being the daughter of a slave, she was quick to notice what she called pridefulness among her own people...." She even criticized Martin Luther King's mother for not inviting her into the King drawing room and she criticized preachers for not respecting women's roles in the movement. In fact, Clark once reprimanded Andrew Young, leader of the Voter Registration project for the SCLC, for trying to eat in front of hungry Citizenship School students (576). Trying to help Young understand the psychological barriers that adult students at voter registration schools faced, Clark told him "[Citizenship School Students] would never dream of attending church at [a prestigious institution like] Ebenezer, let alone Young's elite congregation, because the worshippers there dressed up too much and were too refined for them, and if the recruits could not feel comfortable doing such simple things, how could they feel worthy to vote against the wishes of the white man?" (576-77). His meal in front of the obvious hunger of the students was a message of his superiority, whether intended to be or not. At one point, as "mother conscience" of the SCLC, Clark even called out Ralph Abernathy, King's right hand man, for behavior unbecoming a man of his position. While staying at a hotel, Abernathy had

jealously complained “that his hotel room was not appointed as finely as King’s” and he complained about room service. The story is that, “Septima Clark followed Abernathy to his room to tell him bluntly that he was a spoiled man, full of unseemly spite, and while she was at it, she also reproached him for his habit of being deliberately late to church services in order to flaunt his mastery over the common people of the congregation” (899). In short, she spoke plainly and truthfully.

A convergence of forces began in late 1960. As Horton struggled to keep Highlander open after Clark’s workshop was raided, (Branch Parting 289-90), Bob Moses was proposing his own voter registration project with the help of Amzie Moore. Moore suggested that SNCC students go to Mississippi for voter registration projects (330). When Amzie Moore formally proposed the voter registration project to SNCC, “He received only polite interest, however, as the abstract idea of lonely registration work was lost in the excitement over mass demonstrations” (345). Jane Stembridge, working as a secretary for the SCLC, also told Ella Baker and Bayard Rustin about Moses and Moore’s ideas for a voter registration project. Meanwhile, Horton invited the SCLC to “take over endowment” for the Citizenship Schools (381). At this point, King and the SCLC began to see the potentials in a voter registration project:

King and [Wyatt T.] Walker were drawn to the vision of a multifaceted attack on segregation in a targeted town--with Clark training the registration workers and teachers, SNCC students sitting in, King preaching, and Walker coordinating the attack. [As a result] Complex arrangements were begun to transfer Septima Clark’s citizenship school to the SCLC, and the two major proposals were filed for voter registration money. (382)

John Doar, an attorney, also began voter registration investigations for the United States Justice Department. Previous attempts to register African Americans in the south proved difficult: “For instance, some of the officials charged with refusing to register Negroes to vote simply resigned their offices, whereupon their lawyers moved to vacate the Justice Department suites...” (332). The FBI was also slow in responding to voter registration obstructions largely due to J. Edgar Hoover’s lack of cooperation and that of other agents (333). Doar, because of such obstructionist tactics, began to personally investigate registration cases (335).

The Kennedy administration played no small role in this sudden shift toward voter registration. While the Freedom Rides were taking place, the Kennedy Justice Department developed their own plan to promote civil rights: “The idea was to keep appointing Negroes to jobs and to register enough Negroes to render Southern officeholders more sympathetic to their legislative proposals” (Branch Parting 382). This sudden shift partly came about because of a major voting victory in Fayette County, Tennessee where African American votes made the county Republican for the first time since Reconstruction (382). Doar’s reports on voting repression had also led to the reemphasis on voter registration (387). However, it is questionable whether the Kennedy administration suggested such a refocusing in order to authentically benefit the Civil Rights Movement or if they did so to divert attention away from the Freedom Rides. Robert Kennedy, in fact, formally encouraged the Freedom Ride Coordinating Committee to focus on registering voters. Harris Wofford gave them pointed choices: “They could be persecuted or protected. To those who expressed interest in voter registration went phone numbers for Burke Marshall or John Doar, along with assurances that they could call the Justice Department collect any time they got in trouble down South” (480). Because of this ultimatum, civil rights groups met at the end of July in order to combine forces and allocate parts of states

for voter registration efforts. The Voter Education Project had officially begun (482). However, when SNCC introduced the Voter Registration Project to their members, they protested. They “objected that there was nothing Gandhian about voter registration, which they saw as conventional, political, and very probably a tool of the Kennedy Administration” (485). At the same time, “Voter registration advocates replied that they were ready to undertake the drudgery of registration work, intimating that the Freedom Riders had been seduced by the allure of martyrdom.” This may have led to the big confrontation at Highlander Folk School in the early Fall of 1961 (486). Branch reports that:

At Highlander, three days of rancorous debate produced nothing more than a deadlock among the state delegations within SNCC. Charles McDew announced dramatically that he was going to break the tie by casting the chairman’s vote in favor of the voter registration plan. Several direct-action advocates stalked out in anger.

Ella Baker, by then mentor to the members of the SNCC, suggested that the group develop two programs—“one for direct action, the other for voter registration” in an attempt to heal the rift in the student organization. Only a few people refused to accept this proposal and left SNCC (487).

During this period of growing the voter registration project, new requirements were implemented by Clark’s program for Freedom (a.k.a. Citizenship) School teachers. They were now required to be twenty-one years of age, from the community that they planned to teach in, and they were required to have a high school diploma. Four sessions were held in February through June of 1961 and a total of 88 teachers were trained to teach basic literacy skills and social studies to adults (Langston 157). Yet Clark often complained about a lack of dedication to



voter registration. She once remarked to Martin Luther King that young people wanted “glamour” and “drama” instead of focusing on maintaining the literacy program (McFadden 94).

Bob Moses was already beginning his registration campaign in Mississippi when the SCLC acquired the Citizenship Schools. Registering African Americans to vote in Mississippi was tough. In the beginning:

Moses counted it as an initial victory if he could get someone ...even to imagine being inside the registrar’s office in the county courthouse.

Behind that psychological barrier lay fears of being branded a renegade plus piercing doubts of literacy, self-worth, and entitlement. (Branch Parting 492-93)

On August 15<sup>th</sup>, Moses finally convinced three people to register to vote and the registrar allowed them to do so. However, all three knew that their registration application would not be accepted. Immediately after leaving the registrar’s office, Moses was arrested (494). Through his arrest, Moses managed to break down some of the resistance towards the voter registration project within the SNCC: “Moses’ arrest had blurred the sharp distinctions drawn at Highlander between ‘safe’ voter registration and ‘dramatic’ nonviolent demonstrations” (496) This distinction was further erased when Moses took two would-be voters to register to vote on the 29<sup>th</sup> of August. He was assaulted by three White men (497). Though he was assaulted, he continued on with the two registrants to the registrar’s office. The registrar, rather than allowing the bleeding Moses and two men to enter, closed the office (498).

Throughout 1961, several people were assaulted and some murdered in connection with voter registration. Finally, in 1962, voter registration made some progress when the SCLC finally received grants for the Voter Registration Project (Branch Parting 573). The SCLC

named Andrew Young as the new director of the Voter Registration Program, which had incorporated Clark's Citizenship Schools. Clark began training students at a Dorchester missionary school. Each week:

[S]he took in adult students in by the busload...and used the practical methods she had been developing for more than forty years. In math...she taught her pupils how to figure out seed and fertilizer allotments. In literacy classes, she worked upward from street signs and newspapers to the portions of the state constitutions required for voter registration. (576)

Remarking upon her pedagogy, Branch wrote "Although her pedagogy commanded the attention of professionals...her gift lay in recognizing natural leaders among the poorly educated... and imparting to them her unshakable confidence and respect." King presented his Voter Registration project in February 2, 1962 at a meeting of SCLC affiliates. Clark and Young would work on the voter registration project, James Lawson would teach nonviolence, and "King would speak on tour ...to solicit new volunteers. Then [Jack] O'Dell and Young would send selected volunteers to Dorchester for citizenship training with Septima Clark. The most gifted trainees would take her methods back to their home areas as teachers" (577).

Around the Mississippi Delta, Moses continued to work on his voter registration project. He managed to set up six voter registration schools. The area was described as "plantation country, where most of the potential Negro voters lived on scattered farms amid unspeakable poverty and illiteracy, in a state of semifeudal dependence on the white planters." Moses took workers to Highlander in June in order to train them for nonviolent registration work. Jack O'Dell, at the time, also passed out pamphlets entitled "Why Vote?" and "Crusade for the South: Vote" along with other materials like workshop handbooks. Meanwhile, James and Diane Nash

Bevel, seasoned leaders in the SNCC, were invited to join Moses and assist him in the registration project (Branch Parting 634).

By 1963, the registration workers of the Mississippi Delta had formed a movement that President Kennedy began to take notice of (Branch Parting 711). The work, as always, was not easy. Arsonists had burned down four African American businesses in Greenwood, Mississippi. One building targeted by the arsonists was used for voter registration. When Sam Block was arrested for suggesting that the arsonists were trying to prevent African American voter registration, 100 African Americans showed up for his court trial. The judge during the trial told Block to choose (715). If he stopped his registration work, he would not be punished. If he continued, he would be sentenced to six months in jail. Block chose prison. This decision caused a massive stir among African American people in the area. Branch writes that “Events and emotions had rolled over each other and swelled, with the result that Moses counted more than fifty of Greenwood’s poorest Negroes lined up outside the registrar’s office,” shortly after Block was sentenced. Moses counted 150 African Americans lined up by the end of the day. The registrar, of course, used delay tactics so that only a few managed to apply for registration (716) and their applications were invariably later rejected. One week later, Moses and Jimmy Travis were almost murdered. Due to the rising violence and the growing movement, “The SNCC staff voted to converge on Greenwood so as to prove that terror could not dislodge the registration project.” At the same time Bernice Robinson arrived to teach the voter registration courses in Greenwood (717).

The Kennedy Justice Department began putting pressure on Mississippi citizens yet they continued to resist because they realized that African Americans in the area could greatly affect voting outcomes if allowed to vote (Branch Parting 718). After a man was killed on his way

home, the registration movement began an impromptu march on City Hall in an attempt to register. During the march, Moses was attacked by police dogs unleashed upon the marchers yet SNCC persisted (719). Fifteen more workers were added to the voter registration project in the Mississippi delta. The project now covered six counties. Members from the project came from the SCLC, the SNCC, and the NAACP. However, the focus was on survival in 1963. The Mississippi Legislature stepped up efforts to prevent African American voter registration by adding a new requirement: “Ever sensitive to political danger, the Mississippi legislature added a requirement that names of new voter applicants be published in the newspapers for two weeks prior to acceptance.” Other laws provided that the “moral character” of applicants could be questioned. Branch wrote, “Facing these laws, plus the shootings and padlocked churches, no Mississippi Negro could hope to slip quietly in or out of the courthouse.” The intimidation and repression experienced by African Americans became too much to bear (712). Groups came together to work out a plan that would try to break the back of the entrenched groups who would deny African Americans the right to vote.

### **Looking Back**

After the SCLC took over the Citizenship Schools, the work of Septima Clark, Bernice Robinson, Esau Jenkins, and Myles Horton continued to bring about good. The desire to vote spread throughout the south and those in positions of power were recognizing the potential power of the vote. However, the Citizenship Schools were only a small part of the fire that would become Freedom Summer. As has been recounted previously, at the time that the SCLC considered acquiring the Citizenship Schools, two states away in Mississippi, Amzie Moore of the NAACP and Bob Moses were beginning their own voter registration project that would largely be controlled by SNCC and COFO (the Council of Federated Organizations that

consisted of all of the major civil rights organizations; Branch Pillar 193). SNCC leaders arrived in a hostile Mississippi Delta where they struggled to register African Americans who were prevented from voting due to extreme segregationist practices such as only allowing one day a month for voter registration; threatening, beating, firing, and evicting would be voters; and intentionally slowing down voter registration processes (329). By and large, this group in the Mississippi Delta lit a great fire.

With assistance from Clark and her cadre of Freedom School teachers, COFO launched the infamous Freedom Summer which had as its goals to educate and register thousands of African Americans and to found a Mississippi democratic party that would dislodge the entrenched segregationist democratic party (Branch Pillar 438).

The Freedom Summer, by and large, proved to be more of a moral victory, though it did influence creation and passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 that abolished unfair registration tests and taxes and made registering to vote as simple as filling out a small form (Branch Pillar 605-606). The actual Freedom Summer taught many but registered few (454). In addition, the original Mississippi Democratic Party remained entrenched, though the would-be Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party did manage to seat two of its delegates (469). In the end (if there was an ending) a victory was not necessarily had but there was a glimmer of hope and a legacy of a thoroughly prepared and self-determining African American populace in the South built upon a legacy of labor organization. And the good works of individuals did not end after that trying summer.

After the Voter Registration Act passed, Clark continued her work for social justice. She was elected to the Charleston School Board in 1975. In 1976, the Governor of South Carolina, recognizing the positive change that she had helped bring to South Carolina, publicly apologized

to Septima Clark for being fired in 1956 because she was a member of the NAACP. Moreover, he paid her the entire back pension that she had not received in the intervening years (Langston 163).

HFS reopened immediately after it was closed in 1961. It continues as a site of social justice work today. After 1961, Highlander helped train students for the sit in movement and it assisted in training workers for Freedom Summer 1964. In 1967, it helped train people for the Poor People's March in 1967, a march held in collaboration with King and the SCLC. Before Martin Luther King passed away, he had wanted to begin a poor people's coalition between races. Though King did not live to see this idea through, HFS continues working toward such a coalition today (Langston 165).

### **Application**

On many levels, the Citizenship Schools and the early Highlander Folk School speak to many issues in teaching working class students today. Most importantly, the power that the unempowered can wield when working together can have a profound educative effect. For example, both Bob Moses and Martin Luther King recognized the power that African Americans might possess if they were not only registered to vote but also taught literacy skills and knowledge of the political processes that affect voters.

Highlander, too, learned this lesson on power in numbers while organizing strikes and cooperatives. Throughout Horton's experience at the Citizenship Schools, he had several more important insights into the education of working class populations. The most important lesson learned by Horton was that educators should "learn from the people; start their education where they are." Horton remarked upon how difficult it was for most of the teachers at Highlander to adapt to the educational needs of their populations when they first began. Sometimes the

educational background of the teachers ensured that their goal would be to simply educate students—not learn from them or allow them to decide upon their own educational objectives. In short, this was the experience behind the phrase “start their education where they are.” Thus, “education, then, had to develop naturally from the people themselves, from the ways they could and would learn” (Adams 206). Such an education required that Highlander come to know intimately the experiences of the working poor on a daily basis. In the case of Citizenship School students, Oldendorf writes, sometimes “Many of the students had acquired ‘learned helplessness.’ They believed that it was better for whites to make the big decisions about politics and that blacks had no need to vote.” The teachers were aware of this and tailored their instruction toward empowerment.

Through his experiences, Horton developed a definition of empowerment and a process by which to empower students. The first goal was to convince one student “that they can shape their political and economic reality.” Students needed to be shown that “an individual can ‘spark an action’ that can lead to a larger movement” (Oldendorf 176). The next step was to explore problems that students faced in their own communities (177). This was known as teaching them “critical awareness, developing skepticism” (176). Bernice Robinson taught this by teaching skepticism of local newspapers and media (177).

The third step to empowerment was action. Though Esau Jenkins was never a Citizenship School student, he did come to represent this pedagogy of empowerment. As a result of this pedagogy, Jenkins took action in his community and helped in several beneficial projects. In his own community, he not only “helped establish adult education, [he also helped establish] a kindergarten, a credit union, a nursing home, the Sea Island Comprehensive Health Center, and a low income housing project” (Oldendorf 177-178).

The students of the Citizenship Schools also embodied the pedagogy of empowerment. Wadmalow students later went on to form a “Board of Concerned Members of Wadmalow Island,” one woman was elected to the school board, and another elected precinct leader. Finally, “50% of the class on Wadmalow finished high school” (Oldendorf 179). Horton’s pedagogy of empowerment worked when refined and implemented by Clark and Robinson. Frank Adams writes of the goals Highlander has accomplished based on this focus: “Poor people have been encouraged to find beauty and pride in their own ways, to speak their own language without humiliation, and to recognize their own power....” (207). One of the most significant realizations that Horton made was that the needs of such working and poverty class populations and minority groups were immediate and pressing. They could not be asked to wait for later changes. They needed immediate change (46).

Moreover, as Highlander acquired the necessary experience to successfully provide educational programs for disadvantaged groups, Highlander also refined its philosophy of education. Some have criticized the education provided by Highlander because Highlander, like the folk schools of Denmark, didn’t grade or evaluate its students or participants. Instead, Highlander felt that assessment would come in the everyday world as students applied principles they learned while at Highlander. Another principle that Highlander developed was that “People learn about unity by acting in unison. They learn about democracy by acting democratically” (Adams 207). Thus, Highlander operated by incorporating a communal problem solving approach (208). The focus in workshops was upon what groups could do together in order to address problems—not what one person did alone. Highlander also believed that the school should provide only a means to solving a group’s problem. Their role, in that case, was not to solve that problem for the group (209). All of these principles led to Highlander’s overall



goal—to help our society realize a “fully free democracy” instead of “a limited democracy and authoritarianism” (205). Another facet of the school that deserves recognition is the integration of racial identity into the schoolwork. Without this, the Citizenship Schools would have been impotent. The course work would have lacked significance for the students. The finesse and wisdom of Clark and Robinson in incorporating this should be commended

As has been discussed, much is to be gained by studying the history of such institutions as HFS and the Citizenship Schools. For example, instructors of working class students should recognize the need for a pedagogy that stresses empowerment and self-determination. We should try to incorporate more collaborative activities that will aid diverse working class students in learning how to work together across cultural divides. In short, we should make our mantra collaboration and self-determination. Later in this dissertation, I will discuss how to incorporate such goals in the English classroom.

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**CHAPTER 5:**  
**GRASSROOTS READING AND WRITING FOR MORE ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP: THE**  
**HIGHLANDER FOLK SCHOOL AND SOUTHERN CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP**  
**CONFERENCE CITIZENSHIP SCHOOLS**

From 1932 until 1965 the Highlander Folk School engaged in three different types of education. In 1932, Highlander opened as a school offering a residential term of education where courses were more closely oriented to that of an academic institution offering courses like drama and economics (Highlander 84-7). Around 1944, Highlander transitioned out of an academic phase and into a trade union leadership training phase. The courses during this period were geared toward specific trade union needs while occasionally focusing on a few more social issues in the United States (Glen 105). The next phase, beginning around 1954, focused on educating local leaders for work in a budding Civil Rights movement. During this period of time, Highlander established and trained African American teachers for classes on literacy and citizenship. Of interest to this chapter is the Citizenship Schools literacy program (154). The primary resources drawn for this section are audiotapes and archival materials like workshop descriptions, letters, and reports. The Citizenship School program should offer a distinct contrast to the academic orientation of the Brookwood Labor College English courses.

Four individuals affected the overall makeup and direction of the Citizenship School Program as it existed under the Highlander Folk School. Those individuals were Septima Clark, Bernice Robinson, Esau Jenkins, and Myles Horton. Bernice Robinson taught the first Citizenship School class at St. John's Island. Robinson was a high school graduate of South

Carolina. She had degrees in cosmetology, typing, and real estate but no real formal teacher's training. Before becoming a full time staff member at HFS, she had worked at the IRS, worked as an inventory clerk in Philadelphia, and, at the time she began teaching, she owned a beauty shop. She was a chairwoman of the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) and she was the secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (Highlander 24-13). Thus, she possessed several qualities that would assist her in becoming a very successful teacher and future director of the Citizenship School Program at HFS. She had an education—but not a formal education—and she was an active member of the community in which she lived. Those elements made her a trustworthy figure for the Citizenship School students.

Septima Clark would become the first Director of the Citizenship School Program. She began working for the Highlander Folk School in 1954 after she was fired from the Charleston School District (where she was a language arts teacher) for being a member of the NAACP (Highlander 8-9). She received her bachelor's degree from Benedict College and her masters in arts from the Hampton Institute. Moreover, she earned those degrees while teaching, demonstrated her respect for learning and her personal initiative. Like Robinson, she was very active in the community. She was the first vice president of the NAACP in Charleston and she belonged to numerous civic organizations. Her previous experience teaching children on John's Island from 1916-1918 and her experience teaching adult literacy classes in John's Island from 1929-1930 made her an invaluable source for the Citizenship School program (Highlander 3-8).

In a booklet Clark wrote entitled "Champions of Democracy", her reasons for directing the Citizenship School Programs were alluded to. The booklet begins with a photo of three African American boys on the front cover. The language inside is very simple, leaving the

impression that perhaps it was intended as reading material for children and adults trying to learn how to read. In the booklet, Clark makes a profound statement. She writes, "I have spent all my life teaching citizenship to children who really aren't citizens" (Highlander 84-6).

Obviously, the environment for African Americans during this period of time was less than favorable. In a letter to potential donors for the Highlander Folk School, Septima Clark discussed the racial problems of the south. She described the South in two ways: as "the soul-sick South of the Ku Klux Klan" and "the South of Martin Luther King" (Highlander 8-9). This "soul-sick South" can be found in several areas of the archives on Highlander. For example, a "Civil Rights Form" published in 1959 collected information on Black people who were denied the right to register to vote. On the form, an individual who was denied the right to vote was asked to report on the time and date of the incident in which they were denied the right and they were asked to note if a White person was allowed to register without being asked to take a literacy test or without providing proof of home ownership, apparently two different means by which a person could register to vote in a particular state (Highlander Reel 34). Also archived was a "Teacher Application" for the Ellore School District in South Carolina for 1956-57. Ellore was composed mostly of African Americans who worked for the nearby town of Orangeburg, South Carolina. This teacher application was very politically motivated. It asked for typical application information such as college education and schools attended. But it also asked for religious membership information, whether or not the teacher was a member of the NAACP, and whether or not this person supported school integration. The specific question was phrased as follows: "Do you feel that an integrated school system would better fit the Colored race for their life's work?" Thus, several structures were put into place by White citizens to

affect the public school education of African American youth and to prevent African Americans from using their voting rights (Highlander Reel 34).

The critical first step in establishing a Citizenship School was visiting the community the school would operate in. Septima Clark visited several Sea Island communities in the beginning of the Citizenship School program and compiled a report of the gains and setbacks those communities experienced as they struggled for their civil rights which describes her process of getting to know the community was an important step in establishing a Citizenship School. In this report, a transcript is provided of the conversations that took place between Septima Clark and other leaders of the different islands as Septima Clark visited them. While there, Clark visited St. Helena's Island, John's Island, Hilton Head, and others. During her visit to St. Helena's Island, she noted that only 300 whites lived there, compared to 3000 African Americans and that everyone on the island owned land. The situation in several other islands was similar. Clark first talked to one Mr. Washington and Mr. Arthur Brown. They informed her that after the Reconstruction, a group of northern white women came to the island and started what was later known as the Penn School. The Penn School provided a number of opportunities for the African Americans of the island and those opportunities made a difference for that island community. However, the island's population started to decline by the time Clark visited. The leaders she interviewed blamed the dropping population on racial injustices. Mr. Brown stated, "Injustices have caused the young people to drift away. They leave as soon as they finish high school. Many go to college but find work elsewhere." When the Penn school operated, it managed to send several African American youths to colleges in the area. The school even worked to provide employment for graduates. Despite this, African Americans in the area could not vote in the election until 1945 and no one tried to establish a registration program. When

Clark visited the island, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People was trying to establish a voter registration campaign in the area. After the Penn School closed, the state began to take over, though not efficiently or fairly. Current problems faced by the people of St. Helena's were the need to provide clubs and recreation for youth in order to keep them in St. Helena. The Penn School provided a higher standard of living than they currently enjoyed. The report pointed to some of the inadequacies in previous schooling efforts. Institutions, like the Penn School, had the best interest of the local people at heart but it is questionable whether or not the school taught the autonomy the people of the island needed in order to manage their own affairs. This is exactly what the Citizenship Program was trying to do—to help people solve their own problems by teaching literacy, citizenship, and leadership (Highlander Reel 34). Clark's approach here is interesting from a service-learning standpoint. Before initiating a program, she went to the community and worked to establish a relationship with them first. She engaged in dialogue with them in order to ascertain their history and current needs. Only after assessing this community did she make arrangements to establish a school.

Clark also worked from her own experience in setting up Citizenship Schools. She had previous experience with philanthropic groups that offered literacy classes to Sea Island residents. In an interview transcript, Clark recalls teaching literacy classes under the guidance of Wil Lou Gray, a leader in the field of adult literacy and adult education while at the Booker T. Washington High School in Columbia, South Carolina. At the time, Wil Lou Gray provided a booklet on facts about South Carolina that Clark described as “a lot of little things about South Carolina.” Gray didn't have much success in this literacy program. Horton stated, “Miss Wil Lou Gray, though, had been beaten down so often, that she just thought it was impossible to carry on literacy programs, especially among the island Negroes in South Carolina.” Gray was



seen as the authority on adult education in the South Carolina area. In fact, she was told of HFS' plan to provide Citizenship Schools but she said she did not think it would work due to her own frustrated attempts (Highlander Reel 34). It would be interesting to compare Gray's courses to the Citizenship School structure and one wonders what effect the little booklet about South Carolina had on the construction of the Citizenship School handbook.

After Clark had established the Citizenship School Program on some of the Sea Islands, Myles Horton recounted a discussion he had with a retired teacher from the Sea Islands. This teacher also expressed disbelief that HFS managed to teach people in the Sea Islands to read and write. As a teacher who previously worked with Wil Lou Gray, she went to one of the adult schools to see for herself. Horton, after recounting the experience with the doubtful teacher, then talked about what HFS did that may have made the difference between Gray's attempts and their attempts. He noted:

[W]e [the Citizenship Schools] treat these people as adults and give them very challenging responsibilities. We say, "It is your responsibility to be a citizen, in the fullest sense of the word, even though you don't read or write, even though you're a Negro on an isolated island, you have, as a human being and a citizen of the United States, this responsibility."

He also noted that Citizenship School teachers stressed to the students that they must find some way to become active citizens and that HFS would help them in doing so. He stated, "First thing you have to do to vote is to learn to read the state constitution. So you learn to read to vote so you can assume your responsibilities as a citizen." The second difference that he noted was that their program used locals who were involved in the community to teach the classes. This helped

in getting students to trust in and take part in the literacy and citizenship endeavor (Highlander Reel 34).

Clark's philosophy on adult education is depicted in an essay she wrote entitled *Workers Wanted!! Space Needed!! For Continuing Education*. In the essay, she talks of how adult education is becoming increasingly more important as knowledge continues to grow at exponential rates. She writes,

For meeting challenges posed by our explosive growth of knowledge, for coping with increasing complexities in our society and for adjusting to changing needs of each individual, continuing education as never before has become a vital force in the lives of every one of us.

She then discusses adults in Citizenship Schools who struggle to get an education and acquire the right to vote and she notes that most of these people were educated before 1950. Also reflected upon is the changing socioeconomic environment. For example, she witnessed cotton fields in Mississippi turning into dairy farms and how those who were once crop farm hands needed training to become members of "a productive private economy." In short, the current landscape for African Americans resulted in adult education becoming increasingly in demand. She notes, though, that adult education is most important at the community level and writes, "This means newer knowledge of state legislation, local rules and regulations, state appropriations, and local allocations." A big role is given to action-research in adult education. She argues that such research can help in furthering goals: "We must take a look at where we are and where we want to be. We need to get so excited about our programs that we even participate ourselves." As an example, she describes one teacher of a Citizenship School who passed out a questionnaire presumably to measure needs and successes among students as evidence of action research. The

goals a group came up with in John's Island based on action research are also described in order to depict the benefits of action research. She stresses that knowledge has a very short shelf life. Then, she states, "Modern society does not live by asking, 'Is everybody happy?', but rather, 'Is everybody learning?'" (Highlander Reel 34) Here we can see several tenets of her educational philosophy. We see that she believes education is the gateway towards civic engagement. It is also the method by which African Americans will meet the changing technological situation. Finally, a key aspect of her pedagogy is action research, which translates into activities performed in class with a direct bearing on the needs of the community at large.

The students who attended the Citizenship Schools were a very diverse group with regards to age. The Highlander Folk School compiled a table reporting on the number of students in Citizenship Schools, their ages, and how many of them registered. Most students were from 40 to 50 years old although the range was as young as 15 and as old as 76. The table represents four schools in the Sea Island area. By 1959, Highlander Folk School had registered around 90 people. With Highlander's help, each community also established a civics group that held meetings once a month (Highlander Reel 34). A handout described the ideal Citizenship School students as those "who have not had an opportunity to learn what is required of first-class citizens. Adults who are not registered and those who are registered but are not properly exercising their rights" (13-33).

In the beginning, very strict qualifications were set forth in order to teach a Citizenship School class. Septima Clark described the ideal teacher or supervisor for this adult learning program as "a housewife, a beautician, a seamstress, a businessman or woman, with high school education or less formal training can be used" or, as Clark put it, "a degree-mind but not necessarily a person with a degree" (Highlander 9-12). Clark and Horton were very emphatic

that they did not want trained teachers teaching the Citizenship School classes. They wanted regular people taken directly from the surrounding community. Whites were strictly forbidden from teaching and visiting Citizenship School classes (Wigginton 241-244). The decision was made, in a Highlander staff meeting, that

Highlander will not in any way bring in any whitepeople [sic] until specifically invited by Newman and the other leaders there to do a specific job...In working with Highlander, they do not have to open themselves up to people who just want to see Negroes or who just want to get in on something “interesting” without really being qualified to make a significant contribution. (Highlander 3-1)

By 1960, the selection criteria for potential teachers had been greatly refined. People with professions as businessmen or women, ministers, teachers, beauticians and college students were acceptable. Teachers were to be at least 21 years old or above with a high school or college education, possess the “ability to read well aloud”, and have the “ability to write legibly on the blackboard.” Potential teachers were also required to know the specifics of voting and register to vote in the location they were teaching classes. By the time the SCLC acquired the program, the requirement for teachers slightly altered. The teachers were required to be “already active in their own communities and in a position to put what they have learned into practice immediately on their return.” The SCLC, in short, wanted community members who were ready to participate (Reel 34).

While describing the Citizenship School’s educational programs, I will be looking at two different facets or structures involved in this program. The first facet is the actual Citizenship School program that worked to prepare African American citizens to vote. Also of relevance to us in this study is the facet that involved the training of teachers for those Citizenship Schools.

Such facets will be discussed in two different sections in order to aid in comprehension: The first section is on the Citizenship Schools, the second on the reading materials, and the third on teacher training.

### **Citizenship School Classes**

The Citizenship Schools, as mentioned before, did not teach reading and writing as an end goal. They trained students to become citizens. The Highlander Folk School described the intent of the program in the following way:

The purpose of the Citizenship School is to teach adults, first, the rights and responsibilities of first class citizenship...Second, to teach adults to use their voting power effectively for realizing the opportunities of citizenship...Third, to teach adults to work together for community improvement.

To summarize, the structure of the curriculum, Highlander Folk School argued that the curriculum should be based upon the needs and wants of students and should be designed around their social and geographical location, termed as “on a level at which we find the students.” For example, topics or activities discussed in such a course focused on information on local, state, and national government and office responsibilities in certain areas. Other ways that the school encouraged citizenship was by teaching students how to acquire information on candidates, the potential of the vote, and “techniques of community development” (Highlander Reel 34). In a letter to a reverend, Myles Horton explained what a citizen was according to the Highlander Folk School and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. He described a first class citizen as one who:

1. [Has] The ability to read and write
2. [Has an] Understanding of the responsibilities of voting

3. Tak[es] part in community affairs which include health, recreation, housing and improved home-life
  4. [Has an] Understanding of tax-supported resources, such as public health facilities, etc.
  5. [Has an] Elementary knowledge of local, state, and federal government
  6. [Has] Some understanding of politics and how it works
  7. [Has] Knowledge of the Constitution of the United States and how it works
- (13-33)

Thus, the intention of the program was to improve the lives of students and to realize a true democracy through intense civic engagement.

In one archival audio tape of a Citizenship School class, a young female instructor encouraged democratic thinking and critical reflection. She first asked the students to address the question, “What is a citizen?” One student stated that a citizen is one who can help him or herself. The student’s response led to a discussion on the worth of the individual in the matter of voting. The students and teacher concluded that each individual has a role to play and that because African Americans are American citizens they had a right and a role to play as a voting citizen (Highlander Tape UC 515A/53, 8/10/61). Here we see dialogue occur where critical concepts such as citizenship, democracy and racial injustice are engaged.

Other aspects of democratic education can be found in tapes of the Citizenship School course. In one tape, a teacher discusses questions that appear on literacy tests. She asks the students “What is a republican form of government?” Other questions they covered were “What are the names of the government branches? In what state senatorial district do you live? What is the name of the county you live in?” Such questions were important mostly for the literacy test

but also provided students with a structure to understand how their government worked (Highlander, Tape UC 515A/53, 8/10/61).

In another tape recording, a sense of how the students were treated and their relationship to the teacher can be ascertained. The class began with a ten-minute devotion after which students were placed into groups of beginners and advanced. Upon placing students into such groups, the woman teaching explained that each person had his or her own worth regardless of the group they were placed in. She wanted to make sure that the students were comfortable with her decision to assign them to groups and that they knew it was no reflection on their worth as humans. Apparently, her treatment encouraged the students to be more vocal about their unhappiness with the curriculum being taught that day. When trying to teach the alphabet and how to write it, a student interrupted to argue that their letters were okay—that they wanted to know how to read. She then attempted to explain to the students why she had chosen the focus for the class. She stressed that each person has their own way of writing letters. She then stated that the class needed to learn how to write such letters “correctly.” What is interesting about this tape is that in the class, the students questioned the focus on the alphabet because many could recite the alphabet and write at least some letters. What was at issue, it seems, was correct spelling that would probably have led to a functional literacy. The teacher first had to make an argument to the students about why they would need this. In some states, when registering to vote, it was also extremely important that the African Americans registering be able to spell correctly and write clearly. Many White registrars would look for opportunities to deny African Americans the right to vote (Highlander Tape UC 515A/53, 8/10/61). The important element of this tape recording is that she had established, through emphasizing mutual respect and worth, a classroom that was willing to both challenge and engage her.

Through such tape recordings of the school, it is clear that the Citizenship Schools focused upon a pedagogy that would lead to active citizenship. The key goal, of course, was to pass the literacy test. However, through the process, the students learned the ins and outs of the system that governed them and they learned how to function within that system. Moreover, a major component of the pedagogy was demonstrating a profound respect for the student and her potential as an active citizen. These were two major components of the Citizenship School educational method.

### **Reading Materials**

As revealing as the actual pedagogical practices in the Citizenship Schools were the reading materials chosen for the students. Such reading materials—especially “My Reading Booklet”—proved to be the backbone for the Citizenship School program. “My Reading Booklet”, a course reader and syllabus of sorts, was compiled, edited, and written by Septima Clark and Bernice Robinson. It includes a brief history of the Highlander Folk School, an “Official Statement of Policy” from HFS, a map or geography of South Carolina and a map of the Sea Islands locations in South Carolina. The booklet also describes South Carolina election laws, the predominant political parties in the United States, and it provides information on taxes, social security, and health services. Moreover, the booklet describes how to write and address officials, how to fill out mail order blanks, and how to fill out money orders (Highlander Reel 34). It addressed the major day-to-day issues that affected the African American citizen.

The booklet describes the original intentions of the HFS school as combating problems in the South related to the depression. HFS wanted to help people learn “how to survive in the face of farm blight and unemployment.” The purpose of HFS was,



to discuss common problems, improve organizational setups, and to train southern rural and industrial leaders for participation in a democratic society. A basic tenet has been to combat intolerance and to promote better understanding between rural and urban people and between members of all races, creeds, and complexions.

This section seemed geared toward encouraging students to trust in this institution that suddenly decided to provide opportunities for literacy to the students. The “Official Statement of Policy” for Highlander also seemed geared toward instilling trust in the organization especially in the first sentence, which stated, “We reaffirm our faith in democracy as a goal that will bring dignity and freedom to all.” The Highlander Folk School defined democracy as:

Democracy to us means that membership in the human family entitles all to freedom of thought and religion, to equal rights to a livelihood, education and health; to equal opportunity to participate in the cultural life of the community and to equal access to public services.

Another oft-stressed purpose was “[T]o assist in creating leadership for democracy.” The official purpose noted that they determined which services to offer students in workshops based on what students and their communities needed. The official policy in the booklet seemed to be a way to convey to students the purpose or objectives of the Citizenship Schools, which were designed to not only provide literacy but also to help instill a sense of citizenship in students and to train students to become local leaders (Highlander Reel 34).

In the section describing the United States, which is accompanied by a map, Clark and Robinson state:

We are a part of that great nation. We are all Americans...We love this great land. It has given us our living for many years. It holds opportunities for our

children and grand children. Day by day we silently pour the concrete of love into the furious violent ocean of hate. Some day that concrete will build a foundation that will support a bridge to span the channel and open lines of communication to all peoples. Our hearts are filled with that spirit of brotherhood and our hands move forward defying all acts of violence.

This almost prayer-like section may seem overly nationalistic to some. However, when one considers the fact that African Americans were seldom made to feel like they were citizens of the United States, it makes sense that Clark and Robinson would want to instill a sense of patriotism in a group of students who seldom felt patriotic. By doing so, Clark and Robinson were trying to instill a sense of citizenship and to provide the students with the desire to vote (Highlander Reel 34).

The Citizenship Booklet also provides descriptions of some of the basic symbols of American politics and culture. Clark and Robinson write, “The Supreme Court building and its justices are the symbol of law. The White House is the symbol of the free representative government.” They continue, “The American way is law and justice. Yes, we love this great land—America!” It is strange that, though this law betrayed African Americans, Clark and Robinson write these words. To convince people to vote, though, African Americans must have needed some coaxing and reassurance that this law had admirable intentions if voters worked to ensure that the law would work to promote those intentions (Highlander Reel 34).

Another section of the Citizenship Booklet reproduces specific registration information on “South Carolina Election Laws”, from 1958-1968. The language describing those laws was extremely convoluted, which proved useful in demonstrating what African American citizenship students were up against. The reproduction states:

Registration that is good and valid in the year 1957 shall be good and valid until May 1, 1958, and thereafter registration that is good and valid in the year immediately preceding any year of general registration shall continue to be good and valid only during the first four months of general registration.

Such were the documents that African Americans and other Americans were up against as they attempted to vote. Even the most advanced student would have difficulty understanding such a text. After this law description is a copy of a registration certificate. The person is supposed to provide her birthdate, race, sex, hair, eyes, weight, and height. The registration certificate also asks for specifics as to the registrant's address, his or her town, and the voting location. Three members of the Board of Registration were required to sign the certificate in order to make it valid, which seems excessive. In a registration application, it asks the person to state, "I am not an idiot, or insane, a pauper supported at public expense or confined to any public prison." It also asks if a person has been convicted of certain crimes, one of them being miscegenation—relationships between Whites and African Americans, and fornication—or premarital sex. The level of interference into the registrant's personal life was intimidating. The documents in this section of the Citizenship School booklet provided a comprehensive background on the types of language that voters would need to be familiar with in order to vote. The registration was not as easy for African Americans as registration is today. Citizens are not required to get three signatures, take literacy tests, or own property. The attempt to register at this time was truly a difficult endeavor (Highlander Reel 34).

Comprehension of constitutional amendments was also taught. In the handout on amendments, the writer provides copies of, and discusses the relevance of, particular constitutional amendments. Those amendments discussed are the 1<sup>st</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, and 15<sup>th</sup> amendment.

To provide an example of this analysis, the writer argues that the 14<sup>th</sup> amendment was significant because it gave the Supreme Court some leverage over the states in regards to civil rights in its “due process” clause. The amendment was established to provide citizenship to African Americans by defining citizenship. The writer provides a history of the amendment, noting that the Supreme Court began to avoid confrontation with southern states over this law in the late 1800s when it ruled that segregation was constitutional. The writers argue that only in the 1930s did the shift in the situation change. They feel that the most momentous decision was reached in 1954 in *Brown vs. Board of Education* (Highlander Reel 34). Here the students are provided with knowledge of the law in order to describe its effects on their own lives.

The final notes in the Citizenship Booklet state,

Your interest in voting shows your interest in the type of government you want...The right to vote is your birthright—Stand up and be counted as a Citizen...If you are not qualified to vote you are not considered as a citizen in your community...The right to vote is a priceless possession, take advantage of it...Unborn generations will be asame [sic] of you for not exercising your right to vote.

Conveyed in this section is the importance in voting and citizenship. A sense of urgency and obligation was conveyed in order to encourage and, in a way, make African Americans feel obligated to vote (Highlander Reel 34).

### **Training for Future Teachers**

As mentioned previously, training courses for school instructors were also provided. A general training session for student teachers under the Southern Christian Leadership Conference usually included a one-week workshop. Teachers would live with civil rights leaders in the area

where the workshops were being conducted and they would also attend and sometimes teach resident Citizenship School students (Highlander 1-7). During the workshops, a supervisor teaches a group of students. At one point, the future teachers present will then take over the classes for five hours. Teachers would come from as far away as eighty miles ( Highlander UC 515A/51, August 9, 1961).

The teacher training programs, especially after the SCLC acquired the Citizenship Schools, were interesting in that, in order to assist teachers in how to teach the classes, the teachers were lead through a Citizenship School class. Audiotapes of these training sessions exist. I will provide a summary of some of these classes in order to illustrate how they were taught.

In the first training tape to be discussed, a facilitator (meeting leader) begins by asking if a person should get a job or steal. She then asks, based on the response to the previous question, if it is wrong to demonstrate. Students (future teachers) respond that it is good to demonstrate. She asks why and they respond by saying that everyone who is a citizen has the right to march. They believe that because they were denied a constitutional right, this denial gave them the right to march. The class then discusses how the Constitution gives people the right to petition the government and that marching is a form of petition. In the next segment of the course, the teacher explains that future citizenship school teachers need to explain their student's role by first defining citizenship. The instructor takes the class through a discussion on the subject. In order to then transition into the Constitution, the facilitator poses the question, "Why does the United States Constitution override the state constitution?" The instructor takes the students through a dialogical discussion on the subject before she covers ways to incorporate the alphabet into learning about words. The teacher suggests that student teachers focus on "A" for

amendment. Then student teachers can use this to discuss “affidavit.” For “B,” the teachers can cover “ballot” and “bill of rights.” The facilitator then discusses the 14<sup>th</sup> amendment and asks why this amendment is important. In this tape we get a clearer picture of two aspects of the Citizenship School program: We get an idea of how the Citizenship School classes are structured. Several different topics are covered. In addition, we get an idea of the level of student involvement in the course. Students are encouraged to provide feedback and to converse with each other in such courses. Dialogue is expected and encouraged (Highlander Tape UC 515A/58, Part 8).

A workshop program and description by Benjamin Mack provides insight into the method in which the Citizenship Schools were taught under the SCLC. Very little, it would seem, has changed. He discusses what people need to become first class citizens. Some of the topics covered are voter requirements, filling in registration blanks, the poll tax, when polls are opened or registration offices are opened and where to register. He also discusses the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> constitutional amendments, how to read, and how to write names or fill out applications, checks and more. Later, Mr. Mack discusses teaching two groups of students at different skill levels to read and write. Mr. Mack also discusses Election Day topics like assigning poll watchers, looking up poll tax records, reading and marking other ballots and other important topics when helping African Americans vote. Other topics discussed are social work and the social worker, nonviolence, and other civil rights topics (24-13).

Also taught is how to assess students for the Citizenship School. The instructor on this tape, Septima Clark, states that the future teacher should assess students who have been recruited by asking the students if they will write their names. If a person can't write his or her name, then the teacher will know what the student's level of reading and writing is. The teacher, Clark adds,

should then place students into groups of beginning and advanced students. She states that teachers should explain to students what the SCLC is because this is the organization that funds the classes. Then, she discusses how the specific needs of students would affect what those students are taught. If Clark were teaching a Citizenship School class, she would ask the students what they want to learn and work around that. Of interest could be what teachers have read on their own time. This could then be integrated into the classes. Of interest here is the focus on the students' needs. Classes are designed around an assessment of those needs and various levels of experience are factored into the instructional approach required (Highlander UC 515A/58, Parts 3 & 4).

On one tape, Clark writes about the types of things that teachers will discuss, read and write in citizenship school classes such as newspapers, manuals, and the Constitution. She discusses how one class taught women to can tomatoes. Then Clark discusses the difficulties in identifying people who are illiterate. She states that many people who are embarrassed due to their inability to read or write will ask others to read or write for them by saying that they aren't wearing their glasses or using some other excuse. She emphasizes how important it is to be aware of this embarrassment. A good place to announce a citizenship school would be a church because it would be a way to invite students to the course without embarrassing them. The fragile psyche of the Citizenship School student is always respectfully observed (UC515A/58 Highlander Research and Education Center no date Parts 9 & 10 Citizens Workshop Septima Clark).

An idea of how vocabulary is taught can also be found in the tapes. In one tape, an instructor has passed out a pamphlet. She asks student teachers to identify a letter on the page. Someone suggests the letter "p" in the word "program". She then begins asking the teachers

“What is a program?” One person says that it is an outline that everyone follows. Then she asks, “Who can be in a program? Use a program? Can teenagers use it?” The future teachers refine their answer and state that a program is a plan of action. They state that school children already have a program—an educational program. The future teachers then begin to discuss potential ways to help students understand words like “program.” Techniques mentioned are to explain different kinds of programs instead of providing a general definition, to teach by using different kinds of experiences, to allow students to argue with each other over what a program is and to break each word into syllables (Highlander Tape UC515A/58, Part 1).

On another tape, the group begins reading the booklet, the “ABCs of citizenship.” The teacher points out a word on the front cover of the booklet: “idiot.” The teacher trainers then go about discussing what an “idiot” is in regards to voting. They state that an “idiot” is one who doesn’t vote. The teacher then discusses a phrase also used on the cover-- “Political machine.” She asks them what this phrase means and if only politicians are a part of the machine. The students state that politicians are not the only people who can be part of a political machine. They argue that the Chief of Police can be a part of a political machine. Then, they argue that anyone can set up a political machine and “call the shots from the sideline.” At this point, the White Citizens’ Council’s use of political machines is discussed. The future teachers argue that, with enough Black votes, they can destroy the White Citizen’s Council’s political machinery. The teacher stresses that, when teaching Citizenship Schools, and covering this booklet, the teacher should spend plenty of time on the front cover of this booklet. Other potential influences on the political machine are discussed such as the Ku Klux Klan, the Chamber of Commerce, unions, and other groups. The teacher argues that people, when they do not vote, are tools of oppressive pressure groups because politics control lives. She encourages the teachers to



research and help students research the political leaders or candidates (Highlander UC 515A/58, Part 1).

One tape recorded class demonstrates the critical media literacy that was encouraged in the Citizenship Schools. A female instructor discusses newspapers for future Citizenship School teachers. She discusses different types of news like the Associated Press and the United Press International. She argues that AP stories are more reliable than many local papers because local papers will sometimes misquote and incorporate obvious bias. To demonstrate the discrepancies between AP, UPI and local news stories, she gives students an article on civil rights. She asks them to look at the article and asks them if it could be helpful for a Citizenship School class. She asks about the author's bias and how it is indicated. Her point in doing so is that when teaching students to read a newspaper they should teach them to understand it—not just read it. She suggests that teachers and students read editorial pages to determine a newspaper's bias and asks how articles might interest people. By doing so, she encourages teachers to discuss the meaning and relevance of a text. (Highlander Tape 515A/57, Part 1).

The student teacher tapes prove even more illuminating than the actual student courses. Through the tapes, a clearer picture of the subject matter taught can be ascertained as well as some of the techniques used to instruct students on that subject matter. Dialogue and conversation are encouraged and critical concepts such as citizenship and democracy are engaged. Students are taught to become active citizens who critically engage in the world around them.

### **Student Success**

There are several anecdotes and statistics in Highlander archival materials that indicate that the Citizenship School program proved to be a success. During 1957, workshop participants

training to teach Citizenship School classes gave Highlander high marks in individual evaluations based on the fact that the school was integrated, that the school aimed to help people solve their own problems and that the atmosphere was “informal” (Highlander 1-6). Students of the Citizenship Schools also highly praised the program. One student wrote to Myles Horton, “We learned much of what Democracy means that we did not know before.” Another student, writing to Bernice Robinson, stated,

I want to thank you very much for helping me with my lesson because the highlander school mean so much to me and I learn so much by going two it learn me how to read and pronounce my spelling and how to crochet tell I can make any thing I want and most of all it learn me how to read and I get my Registration Certificate now I can vote and it mean so much to me.

Finally, one student wrote to Septima Clark,

I just want to say how much I enjoy the adult school. I have learn a little of every thing in the line of reading and writeing math. and fract. And more about civic organizations. And fine fellowship with one another. And our teacher was kind and faithful to us. (Reel 34)

Several statistical and quantitative gains were measured to assess the success of the citizenship school program. A reporter wrote:

Conditions have been improved on the islands; roads have been paved and a new high school serves the needs of the islanders. Negroes have run for city and county offices and have made a good showing, and along with the desegregation of many public facilities has come encouraging progress in curbing discriminatory hiring practices...a voter registration office and a savings and loan association

have been set up, and a housing project for low income families is underway.

(Highlander 1-7)

In short, many of the students and student teachers enjoyed the experience of attending Highlander and many of them also fulfilled Highlander's goal of developing community leaders and citizens civically active in their communities.

Esau Jenkins, the original developer of the Citizenship School idea, was touched and changed by the Highlander Folk School and its programs. Myles Horton, in an interview, explained the problems that Esau Jenkins experienced before he took part in Highlander's workshops. One of his largest problems was that he tried to do everything for the people instead of providing the means for them to solve their own difficulties. Esau Jenkins also only looked out for obvious leaders. He did not look for the more hidden local leaders in an area until he went to Highlander. He did not realize that he had to look past "recognized leaders". Horton stated, "you have to have people who are neighbors to influence people" when working with local communities. In addition, according to Septima Clark, Esau Jenkins did not involve the whole community. He only involved those people who shared his class and social status. After Highlander, he included everyone and he became an esteemed leader in his community (Highlander Reel 34).

### **Problems Encountered**

Everything was not all perfect at Highlander Folk School. A rift developed during the Civil Rights Movement between the young and the old, between those who were for passive resistance and those who were beginning to question such practices. This rift began to manifest itself during the SCLC years of the Citizenship School Program. For example, one person using the initials R.P. described an extremely conflicted teacher-training workshop. This person

speaks of a large group of youth who attended the workshop with a few adults. The youth were veterans of the Albany Civil Rights movement and the Saint Augustine Civil Rights Movement. Unfortunately, the writer believes the students attended the workshop, not quite knowing what the workshop entailed. The speakers selected seemed to be above the heads of these students. Moreover, the students spoke very little and expressed some anger and frustration toward the “adults.” For example, they would not help with chores around the homes they stayed in, they would not consider any discussion or ideas presented by a white person, and they would not seriously consider much put forth by the older adults because, as R.P. writes, they were “considered suspect, senile, or brain-washed.” However, the older adults also demonstrated inability to listen and consider the issues put forth by the youth. After this experience, the writer suggested that the staff at HFS should make a point to become closely connected to participants and to reconsider group make-ups by examining age groups. A previous one-week workshop had been a success. However, during this workshop, the youths were not in the minority— they also had not taken part in the Civil Rights Movement as of yet (Highlander Reel 34)

During another workshop, Septima Clark described the problem solving process. The steps involved first proving that there was a problem and then conveying that problem to the community. A young man interrupted to argue that African Americans already knew about the problems in the communities and that identification and dissemination are redundant steps. He seemed to think that, once again, African Americans experienced the brunt of making changes. They were expected to do all the footwork and that Clark and others like her were putting the onus on African Americans again. The situation here seems to be very akin to the youth versus elderly problem that so interrupted the previous Citizenship School teacher-training workshop (Highlander Tape UC 515A/58, Parts 11 & 12).

During one internship training program, some of the young attendees threatened to leave mid-workshop. Many of the young men chafed over the authority some people tried to establish over them when it came to moving about in the community. Browne points out, though, that a majority of the problems were generational in that “Communities where progress towards the stated ends is slow or where no progress has been made are particularly subject to these divisive tendencies.” At one point in the workshop, some future teachers planned on leaving the internship mid-progress because they felt that “nothing important was happening.” It is arguable that such students were members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, a group that became somewhat impatient with SCLC’s lack of progress reluctance toward teaching literacy for voter registration (Highlander Reel 34).

### **Greater Themes, Greater Results**

The Citizenship School Program adamantly did not work to teach only reading and writing. Everyone involved in the program aspired to larger goals. They wanted an informed citizenry, African Americans who could critically think for themselves and who could critique unfair power structures that worked against them. Susan Kates writes,

Clearly, in the context of the Citizenship Schools, literacy operates as a badge of citizenship and much more: the acquisition of literacy comes with a particular responsibility—service to others who do not possess the ability to read or write. The reading exercises in the literacy packet stress the theme of service to others. From the pervasive slogan of the Citizenship Schools, “Each Man Get a Man,” to the service-oriented themes of the reading exercises, the literacy materials never deviate far from a message that comes round again and again: Gain literacy to pass the test and vote, then find someone else and teach him or her to read. (491)

To accomplish this goal, the program used several instructional methods, some more beneficial than others. Those facets of the program that seemed most successful were the program's methods for teaching reading and writing, methods for selecting instructors, topics discussed, and the overall goal to train students to become informed citizens.

The uniqueness of the teacher selection process could be seen in the Citizenship School Program's criteria in selecting teachers. Those involved in the program selected teachers based upon the comfort they would provide to the students and their student centeredness. This comfort primarily derived from a shared class and race. For example, Bernice Robinson, though probably more well off than most of her students, was chosen because she was a familiar and comforting face. In addition, she was very student-centered:

Robinson stressed that the life experiences of the adult students were essential components of the community-oriented goals of the Citizenship School. She reminded students that they had raised children and run farms: by emphasizing their expertise in other arenas, Robinson helped to build students' sense that literacy and community activism were two challenges that they could meet successfully. (Kates 489)

Both Robinson and Clark demonstrated a focus on the student through their development of subject matter, which they also encouraged in student teachers:

I found that you don't tell people what to do. You let them tell you what they want done and then you have to have in your mind certain things that you feel they need to do. And so you get their thoughts and wind your thoughts around them [...]but if you have a cut-and-dry program for them, you'll lose out every time. (489)

Both were also very careful in the way that they assessed the communities and students. Paulo Freire has argued for the importance of doing just that in order to create a beneficial relationship with the communities and thus the student:

Meanwhile, the investigators begin their own visits to the area, never forcing themselves, but acting as sympathetic observers with an attitude of *understanding* towards what they see. While it is normal for investigators to come to the area with values which influence their perceptions, this does not mean that they may transform the thematic investigation into a means of imposing these values.

(Freire 110-111)

Teachers like Robinson and Clark were strong teachers because they were aware of their students' lived experiences because they, too, had lived those experiences. It should be noted that Citizenship School teachers did not receive wages for their work. They received only stipends to cover expenses incurred like gas to and from the schools and teaching materials.

The method in teaching literacy was also somewhat novel and definitely beneficial. Kates writes that, "The Citizenship School Workbook adopted a consistent ideological theme that emphasized literacy for voting, for citizenship, and for social transformation" (Kates 482). In teaching the alphabet and in discussing what certain words meant, the teachers seemed to only cover words that mattered to and affected their students. To draw upon a previous example, one teacher taught the letter "r" in conjunction with the word "registration." By doing so, the teacher did not just treat the students as elementary school students by using words like "cat" and "ball." Kates further reflects:

While Clark and Robinson certainly employ many rote or mechanical means of teaching and learning, these cannot be viewed in isolation from the message embedded in these materials.

Almost no reading exercise, vocabulary word, or question about the reading is neutral or arbitrary in its placement in the workbook; reminders about the relationship between literacy and the power to change unjust situations resonate repeatedly throughout the text (Kates 497).

The teacher demonstrated a belief in their maturity and intelligence. Moreover, the focus was on words that affected the students' goals and lives. Students, in this case, needed to register. Thus, "registration" would be a natural choice to focus on. When explaining words (i.e., discussing vocabulary) the teachers also taught a literacy that seemed more critical than functional. Once again, in a previous example, one training workshop discussed ways to define words for students. The future teachers were taught to cover varying definitions of words and to locate words in certain contexts. The students weren't asked to spell for correctness or memorize a definition. They were asked to view words as complex and socially situated terms (Highlander Tape UC 515A/57, Part 1). The students in the Citizenship School Program, in short, were taught an empowering rather than functional literacy.

The topics and reading material proved empowering. Many of the topics brought to the students' attention several rights and services available to them such as health care for women and children and social security benefits (Highlander Reel 34). Also discussed were news items that could affect students like the Vietnam situation and the bill preventing employment discrimination. Most importantly, students were taught to look out for biases in newspapers and they were directed to sources that would more honestly report on racial issues (Tape 515A/57, Part 1). Thus, students were taught to read critically--not merely for word meaning but overall comprehension.

Finally, the goals of the Citizenship Schools were admirable. The schools did not merely teach just for the ability to read. The schools taught students to think critically. They taught



what was at stake—the rights of citizens. The Citizenship Schools taught for the benefit of an entire society by trying to educate for a true democracy, instead of teaching simply to cover material relevant to a certain academic subject. At the Citizenship Schools, there were no walls preventing teachers from engaging social issues as there often are today. Citizenship Schools redefined the meaning of "literacy."

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**CHAPTER 6:**  
**APPLICATIONS: WHAT WE CAN LEARN**

Henry Giroux writes,

Educational institutions and the processes in which they engage are not innocent. Simply stated, schools are not neutral institutions designed for providing students with work skills or with the privileged tools of culture. Instead, they are deeply implicated in forms of inclusion and exclusion that produce particular moral truths and values. In effect, they both produce and legitimate cultural differences as part of their broader project of constructing particular knowledge/power relations and producing specific notions of citizenship. (373)

The purpose of this chapter is to interrogate such claims to innocence by proposing a nonneutral pedagogy. Through Critical Literacy, service learning, and awareness of academic discourse communities, teachers are encouraged to establish classroom structures that no longer consider their students to be subjects divorced and unaffected by the outside world. As instructors, I would argue that we have a moral obligation to do anything but present education and the world around us as politically neutral. To do so would be to play a direct role in the oppression that Working Class/Poverty Class students experience on a daily basis.

Encouraging such nonneutral education, I would argue, is beneficial for society as a whole, regardless of whether those in positions of power would agree. This type of education willfully addresses social issues that have proven divisive or non-egalitarian. When we ignore the political construction of education, we do a great disservice to the democracy that our country aspires to. Dewey writes:

The fact is that the opposition of high worth of personality to social efficiency is a product of a feudally organized society with its rigid division of inferior and superior. The latter are supposed to have time and opportunity to develop themselves as human beings; the former are confined to providing external products...But if democracy has a moral and ideal meaning, it is that a social return be demanded from all and that opportunity for development of distinctive capacities be afforded to all. The separation of the two aims in education is fatal to democracy; the adoption of the narrower meaning of efficiency deprives it of its essential justification. (121-122)

In short, a concept of education and learning as outside of politics simply supports those societal structures that reproduce inequity. I argue, instead, for a pedagogy for Working Class/Poverty Class students that is very much politically and socially constructed. I develop such a pedagogy by reflecting upon the successes of Brookwood Labor College and Highlander Folk School who successfully managed to construct English classrooms that were critically engaging. They helped train groups of students who would become actively involved citizens who were willing and able to speak on behalf of their communities. They managed to acquire a voice that the dominant society began to respect and observe. I hope that the pedagogy I am about to advocate for may do the same for WC/PC students today.

### **Working Class Baggage**

Before I begin to explore a pedagogy that would empower Working Class/Poverty Class students today, it is crucial that we first explore the difficulties many college students from WC/PC backgrounds encounter when they enter the community of higher education. This community is not designed for easy admittance. In fact, many would argue that it serves a major

gate keeping function whereby it attempts to keep the “rabble-rousers” out of the “higher echelons of society.” Thus, higher education begins to have a deep and uncomfortable impact on the psyches of many students whether those students are extremely gifted or just average.

Working Class/Poverty Class students today are, in general, afraid, ashamed, or simply unable to identify as WC/PC. Some would call this inability false consciousness. But such a label would be simplistic. Some WC/PC individuals do identify with the Upper Classes. However, others know that they are less well-to-do than most and that an invisible force works to keep them in their place. Many blame themselves and the system and they try to hide their backgrounds because being seen as WC/PC is not acceptable or lucrative. Thus, such people remain hidden. To be hidden is to be cut off from peers and denied a community. Because of this, WC/PC students should be helped to recognize and appreciate the classes they come from while at the same time critiquing and questioning the problems in their own and other classes (LeCourt 30-31).

Such identity conflicts are especially troublesome in the college environment. LeCourt describes the identity conflicts that Working Class/Poverty Class students experience when they attempt to enter the academic realm. Too often, they are made to feel like they must choose between the academic world and their home culture (30-31). Instead, she suggests that WC/PC students should be encouraged to see that the cultures and discourses can exist together within the student. She believes that the discourses of the two communities depend upon the existence of the other in order to define each (32). Thus, the two cultural discourses are not exclusive or binary discourses. She views identity as an ever-changing self-image that will eventually combine both discourses and cultures (33) in the WC/PC students, if teachers refuse to set up the two cultures/discourses as either/or identities (34). She suggests that teachers:

need a perspective on class that recognizes that it is always under construction, always being negotiated, and always felt and enacted in relation to other classes, discourses, and power structures...[S]eeing class as “something to be done” asks us to look more closely at how all aspects of pedagogy imply particular *social relations*. (45)

We should assume then, that the student experiences brought to our class are complex. But they bring with them a type of fear or apprehension in regards to the experience of higher education, which we must be aware of.

The struggles of the Working Class/Poverty Class do not halt before the halls of academia. If a student with roots in the WC/PC has the good luck (sprinkled with very hard work) to make it into a college or university, he or she soon struggles against the most daunting adversary yet: Alienation. Law describes this feeling of alienation when she depicts a conversation she had with her mother on attending graduate school. She writes:

When I mentioned to my mother that I was leaving my teaching job...at a...university in a small town in Missouri to pursue a Ph.D. in literature in Minnesota, she said to me, “Education destroys something.” (1)

Upon hearing this, Law realized that being a WC/PC person in higher education could place one on a tight rope where they attempt to balance competing identities. While attempting to balance competing identities, it is not uncommon to be incapable of identifying with either the home or academic community. Law goes on to write:

I have suffered a loss my present context doesn't even recognize as a loss; my education *has* destroyed something even while it has been re-creating me in its own image. The pride I feel in my academic and professional achievements,

generously applauded by the institutions of higher education...[who] believe that I am their success story, is always tempered by the guilt I feel in having chosen a life path that has made me virtually unrecognizable to my kin. (1-2)

She did not fit in completely at home but she didn't do so in school either. She was adrift between two worlds. Most universities and public colleges are not overwhelmed by hordes of WC/PC students attending their university. The chances of an encounter between two WC/PC students are somewhat unusual. Add to this the conflicting cultures and values of WC/PC students in comparison to Middle Class students, and one may begin to realize what a lonely existence it is for most WC/PC students in public and private universities and colleges. The situation improves somewhat if WC/PC students attend community colleges and junior/technical colleges. The WC/PC population is larger so there is some opportunity for identification and relationships. However, the coursework oftentimes continues to conflict with or otherwise alienate WC/PC students from themselves, peers, family, and cultures.

In addition to feelings of loneliness, many Working Class/Poverty Class students also feel a certain guilt or fraudulence about their success in higher education. Borkowski describes it:

One such conflict is categorized...as the "impostor-phenomenon," the sense that working class academics, like those *Saturday Night Live* characters from "Wayne's World," are "not worthy!" of being in higher education. In other words, when it comes to genuine intellectual timber, many working-class academics believe they just don't cut it. And it's only a matter of time before the authentic scholars figure it out. (96).

The degree to which such students may feel estranged from higher education may be seen in this inscription. After all, many of the WC/PC are the first to go to college in their family. When they do so, it is almost instinctual that they question their place in such a world. This world has, admittedly, worked to keep them out of higher education for a long time. Of course they would feel somewhat like imposters who had managed to sneak in through the back door of higher education.

As Borkowski implicitly argues in his exploration on themes of the gifted Working Class/Poverty Class students, we must not construct all of our students as genius students. Many of our WC/PC students may consider themselves average and they may have no great love for the books which may have rescued many genius working class teachers and students before them (95). Thus, we would approach this group with a respect for their continued connection to their WC/PC lives and we should work to teach literature, writing, and rhetoric as subjects that may be balanced with a student's culture, instead of replacements for it.

Because of the fear many Working Class/Poverty Class people experience in higher education, it is no surprise that such students react to their environment by becoming silent in the classroom. Ira Shor writes:

Working people know that they will betray their inferior class-background by simply speaking. Why should they open themselves to judgment in front of a college-educated, articulate teacher? They are verbally intimidated in the presence of the elite, but in private, in their own idiom, they invent marvelous stories and satires. They cannot talk freely while a superior is present, which is why such a dramatic silence begins when the teacher enters the classroom. (74)



WC/PC students have very good reasons for distrusting the structures of education and for practicing protective silence in the classroom. It is our job as instructors to encourage students to view our classrooms as safe spaces that respect their language and culture.

Moreover, Working Class/Poverty Class students enter into college with a mindset and educational knowledge different from that of middle class students. They respect but question authority, they are wary of social institutions, they question the value of work that doesn't produce material results, and they feel equal to middle and Upper Class people but are skeptical of other working class individuals from different cultures, religions, etc. Finally, they believe that the end is more important than the means (Greenwald and Grant 29-30).

Working Class/Poverty Class students do not receive the same grooming received by Middle Class students: Greenwald and Grant write:

In today's economy, working-class parents and guardians recognize the importance of college—even if they do not quite understand it. And although college is encouraged, the world of college is not. This means that working-class students lack basic knowledge of curriculum and career choices. (34)

It should, of course, be no surprise that because of this lack of experience, students do not fare as well due to a difference in abilities. Patricia Bizzell describes those Middle Class abilities that most WC/PC students enter into the classroom lacking:

...students from different social classes come to school with different abilities to deal with academic discourse: middle-class students are better suited by their socialization in language use to deal with academic discourse's relative formality and abstraction than working-class students are. This unequal removal from

academic language is, of course, exacerbated for students whose home language does not resemble the so-called Standard English.... (107)

WC/PC students begin farther away from the starting line than their Middle Class peers.

Instructors should keep this in mind as they design pedagogies to meet the needs of WC/PC students.

Sherry Linkon discusses the need for working class appreciation and analysis in the classroom in order to overcome the psychological effects of discrimination and oppression. In order to substantiate this need, Linkon discusses the background of Working Class/Poverty Class students. She reflects that most self identify as Middle Class and thus, have very little class-consciousness. Moreover, she admits that WC/PC:

[Students] are often uninterested in what they find here, and though they are generally cheerful and willing, and I have been impressed with how hard they work, many value the diploma more than any of the actual content of their education. (2)

Understandably, for many WC/PC students, the importance of education lies in its ability to help them improve their economic situation through employability. Thus, they focus somewhat too heavily on getting the degree instead of the process of learning. The instructor should attempt to redirect students in their focus by examining what is at stake in the learning process and how it can do more than just add a zero to the paycheck. Finally, she explains that in order to educate WC/PC students, teachers should try to understand their WC/PC identities, try to understand that such identities are further complicated by geography, race and other cultural identifications, incorporate more personal narrative options, and draw upon Paulo Freire's pedagogical tenets. Such tenets are that education should be transformative, that the classroom should focus on

students' culture and interest, and that words and actions should be intertwined. To do so, she feels, would "expand our institutions' recognition of diversity" (3). Though Linkon admits that WC/PC students may be very different, some key circumstances unite the group. She writes,

Yet, even with all these differences, the basic circumstances of the working class—the lack of power, the economic vulnerability, the level of education—form the groundwork for some basic attitudes and experiences that strongly influence our working class-students. (Linkon 5)

Brookwood and Highlander expertly dealt with the racial, gendered, and economic identities of their students. Thus, they offer worthy examples of how racism and class identity can be approached in the classroom.

Both Brookwood and Highlander aimed at improving their student's pride in self by encouraging pride in their social class, and, in the case of Highlander, pride in their race. Brookwood encouraged pride in class and background by allowing students to relate their experiences to the general public via newspaper stories, short plays, and other written venues. Newspaper articles in student papers recounted tales of students' struggles to reach the Brookwood campus and plays recounted immigrant workers' experiences with brutal bosses and racist neighbors. As a result, those students usually left Brookwood feeling pride in their background and hope for the future.

Highlander, too, encouraged pride in identity by teaching Working Class African Americans of their historic struggle and admirable perseverance. They helped build belief in self by guiding African Americans in making a difference in their own lives. By doing so, African Americans developed pride in self and background that increased social involvement. Such an approach would have been ineffective had Highlander Folk School totally divorced the students'

African-American identity from their Working Class identity. By approaching race as primary and Working Class as secondary, the school managed to address both facets of their students' identities.

Brookwood Labor College's drama course helped students accept their backgrounds and envision an authentic working class history and culture by asking students to read plays by and about the Working Class/Poverty Class and to write and perform plays about their WC/PC experiences. The Citizenship Schools, likewise, also encouraged an awareness of the students' culture and history by using the African American historical struggle for equality as a way to teach reading and writing.

Ira Shor laments in his book, Critical Literacy, "Worker-students cannot count on the solidarity of their own class-peers, whose loyalty is badly divided by their own self-doubts and by their need to enforce rules made by superiors who can fire them" (Shor 80). I agree that this is a problem and I illustrate how this is a problem by describing my own upbringing.

When I grew up, my neighbors and I lived in the same HUD housing, in the same location of town. We attended the same schools and took the same buses. We were the children of the working and the poor. Yet we seldom realized that we had so much in common, though most of us knew that we were not like the other children we attended school with. Our appearances and races often spoke this difference. We wore old clothes and old shoes. Our hair was often unkempt—the hallmark of parents overwhelmed by economic difficulties and troublesome time constraints. Our "free lunch" status was stamped on our hands before lunch and we carried this symbol throughout the rest of the school day. We were labeled and our destinations decided.

Our parents carried the weight of this economic status with them, too. While my parents believed that they could be economically and socially mobile, they struggled to make ends meet. Other families in our HUD housing community also believed and struggled. And though we lived next to each other and ate similar foods, shopped at the same stores, played the same games, we still looked at each other with wariness. Ours was a multi-racial community with Blacks, Whites, Native Americans, and Mexican Americans living next to each other. We did not know we were connected because dominant social groups had taught us to blame ourselves and our neighbors for our conditions. Blacks blamed Whites, “Mexicans”, and “Indians”. Mexican Americans blamed Whites, Blacks, and “Indians”. And Native Americans followed the same path. We couldn’t see the forest for the trees.

When I look back on this experience growing up, I feel lucky to have lived near such resilient and different individuals. Yet, I realize how much we, as a community, missed out on by not recognizing and appreciating our shared life experiences. I wish we could have moved past the racism by engaging our various identities in order to forge partnerships. After all, though we were all WC/PC, many of my neighbors more closely aligned themselves with their racial identity rather than their economic identity because this identity is felt to have more of an impact on their lives. Perhaps if we had engaged our differences and learned to forge partnerships, then the journey through WC/PC life would not have been so lonely and mentally and physically repressive.

Though such an environment may seem insurmountable and an English instructor’s abilities to improve it nearly nonexistent, instructors can do something to assist the Working Class/Poverty Class lot in life by encouraging solidarity and community in their own WC/PC

classrooms. Labor colleges and Folk Schools like Brookwood and Highlander provide helpful insights into the ways in which such strong communities are fostered in a writing classroom.

### **Community Learning**

The keystone to a good Working Class/Poverty Class pedagogy is a focus on Community Learning. Community Learning is not to be confused with Service Learning. Service Learning has its merits. Yet there are significant differences between the two. Service learning has typically implied Middle Class students in public and private universities volunteering or “sacrificing” time for the benefit of others from lower classes. The experience I propose involves WC/PC students going into their own communities and communities like their own. In the process, they use knowledge, tools, and experience gained in their English classroom in order to work on problems that affect their own and similar communities. I term this activity Community Learning because the students get not only English experience, but they personally reap the benefit of their own problem solving efforts and such a learning activity will help their communities bond.

If established correctly, Community Learning could help instructors meet every goal described in this chapter. It could encourage student and community solidarity by asking students to work with each other in order to serve their communities. Ellen Cushman writes,

Emancipatory teaching can only go so far in instantiating activist research, though, because teachers often apply liberating teaching only in the classroom, and they are hard pressed to create solidarity and dialogue within the institutionalized social structure of American schools. In order to adapt Freire’s pedagogy to the United States, we must also practice it outside the academy, where we can often more easily create solidarity. (333)

It could introduce students to various discourse communities by asking them to write for the various stakeholder audiences involved in the issues they are exploring. And it could encourage Critical Literacy through calling on the students to engage in problem-posing in order to develop solutions for problems in their communities. In short, it becomes the element that ties everything together. It calls on the Working Class/Poverty Class student to become an active and engaged member of an empowered community. Such a community will accomplish that which the working class most needs: It will help them develop a voice of power.

Instructors should go beyond recognizing their students' socioeconomic backgrounds to become involved activists in their students' communities. Such instructors are referred to as public intellectuals. Ellen Cushman critiques the current definitions of public intellectuals, arguing that such definitions ignore the potentials of the public intellectual in the local community. Too often, she argues, "'public' only applies to the middle and Upper Class and academics often limit themselves to the university" (328). Cushman believes that many in the university are beginning to call for more involvement in the problems, politics and experiences of the communities that surround the university. Her definition of public intellectuals are those who "combine their research, teaching, and service efforts in order to address social issues important to community members in under-served neighborhoods." It is not enough to simply make academic language more approachable to the general public in order to become a "public intellectual." Academics must also work in and with local communities (329) and not always as teacher-benefactors. The way in which she feels we can begin to positively change the role of public intellectuals in the classroom is through "service learning and activist research" (330).

A move to become an activist scholar would help instructors further get to know and help their students and their community to thrive. Both the Brookwood Labor College and Citizenship

School instructors were active in their communities. Brookwood instructors assisted in labor strikes and spoke out on injustices. Such teachers went beyond the classroom by encouraging and helping students and community members form civic groups to lobby for changes in their communities. This, by no means, implies that instructors should try to lead or control the actions of the community. The goal should always be self-determination and instructors promising to address a community's problems for them would not necessarily help that community.

Instructors should simply, as activists, aid, be present, and speak up for Working Class/Poverty Class communities.

### **Creating the Ideal Classroom Environment**

When creating the ideal classroom environment for Working Class/Poverty Class students, it is important to learn from the classroom environments that were generated at Highlander Folk School and Brookwood Labor College. An important goal of both schools was to unify the classroom by encouraging solidarity. This is no less important today. bell hooks writes,

But excitement about ideas was not sufficient to create an exciting learning process. As a classroom community, our capacity to generate excitement is deeply affected by our interest in one another, in hearing one another's voices, in recognizing one another's presence...[A]ny radical pedagogy must insist that everyone's presence is acknowledged. (8)

Student engagement is necessary, then, for both solidarity and overall learning success. After all, as John Dewey writes,

Employers do not advertise for workmen who are not interested in what they are doing. If one were engaging a lawyer or a doctor, it would never occur to one to



reason that the person engaged would stick to his work more conscientiously if it was so uncongenial to him that he did it merely from a sense of obligation.

Interest measures—or rather is—the depth of the grip which the foreseen end has upon one in moving one to act for its realization. (130)

The student must be involved both mentally and physically. Freire also supports this necessary engagement for empowered learning when he writes,

The more active an attitude men and women take in regard to the exploration of their thematics, the more they deepen their critical awareness of reality and...take possession of that reality. (106)

Thus, the more engaged students are in the critical classroom, the more capable we are of truly engaging with the world around us, leading to an ability to stand up for our own and our communities' interests.

One way to encourage this solidarity is through embracing dialogue and discussion in the classroom. Ira Shor writes, “Dialogue is a democratic model of social relations, used to problematize the undemocratic quality of social life” (95). Dialogue, however, cannot be nonconfrontive. Successful dialogue is brought about by teachers (or “co-ordinators” according to Freire” ) who “not only listen to the individuals but must challenge them, posing as problems both the codified existential situation and their own answers” (Freire 117-118). Dialogue, then, is important in promoting a more ideal and democratic form of life. The Citizenship Schools demonstrated just how this could be accomplished. They encouraged active student engagement with concepts and terms that students struggled with in their lives. The end result of each debate usually resulted in some level of class consensus or agreement on the issues being discussed. By doing this, the class managed to bond with each other and engage in a democratic process.

Other ways of engaging students in the classroom are by questioning the baggage that students bring with them to the course. That baggage most notably discussed in Composition and Rhetoric is the reluctance to engage in debate or arguments (especially problematic with Working Class/Poverty Class). Patricia Bizzell writes,

I contend that they most often see "ideas" presented in the mass media in just this aphoristic, "self-evident" way: a way that assumes that rational debate cannot resolve controversial problems, so that all that remains of importance is to identify what side one is on, to solidify the personal image or ethos one has found to be most acceptable to the peer audience with which one is most concerned. (34-35)

It is important to question such attitudes, as they would impinge upon the teacher's and students' abilities to create a democratic classroom. Dialogue here would once again prove useful in that it would require students to question such assumptions.

Finally, we create an engaged classroom by honoring the communities and cultures that students bring with them. This will help provide what Jay Robinson terms a "civil literacy":

Civil literacy "relies on politeness...but is never merely that...it asks us to be sensitive to the voices that develop when we ask students to bring their experiences and pasts into the school environment, but it asks us also to be seriously responsive, to engage students in true conversations in order to help those voices grow stronger. (Schaafsma and Fleischer xxvi)

Such civil literacy will, through respect, develop what Robinson terms "a habitable space." The idea of "a habitable space" is defined by Schaafsma and Fleischer as "a common place, a safe place, where conversation can begin and where meanings might be negotiated to create

communities in which literacy might flourish” (xx), a space, of course, that applies both to the community and classroom space, depending upon the context. A habitable space also requires a “common language”, a way of speaking constructed and shared in the community that surrounds it. The authors are quick to warn, though, that such a common language must not be placed by the teacher upon the group. It must be co-constructed to avoid authoritarianism (xxii). The authors note that their own intentions in literacy and Robinson’s intentions in literacy are much like those of Dewey. They wanted to help realize a “true democracy” (xxiii). Robinson is also said to have argued that curricula isn’t as important as the relationship and method of communication created between teacher and students (xxiv). In other words, no matter how good a teacher may be, if she refuses to connect to the student on the human level, i.e., as equals, and if she refuses to communicate meaningfully (or if the student refuses to do either of these things), then her attempts at educating that student will be futile.

A successful classroom for Working Class/Poverty Class students, then, relies on two key features: an atmosphere of mutual respect and an instructor who engages students through dialogue. Without such dialogue, the course would not come close to approximating the democratic structures that existed within Brookwood Labor College and the Highlander Folk School. Both engaged their students by demonstrating this profound respect and encouraging their participation in a democratic society.

### **Questioning False Consciousness**

False consciousness is enemy number one in classes where Critical Literacy is taught. It becomes the primary goal of such courses. False consciousness is a sometimes willful ignorance about mass culture and the way it works—especially the way it works for or against some

members of society. In order to accomplish true liberation, many scholars argue that it is crucial to first overcome such false consciousness:

Mass culture is inside each mind no less than each person is inside mass culture. Critical education is a long process of desocialization, as each feature of dominated thought is expelled from consciousness. Programmatically, where mass schooling stresses vocationalism, liberatory culture promotes critical liberal arts, the integration of mental with manual arts, and the serious exploration of science and sentience in learning...In response to acceleration, the critical class develops modes for deliberate scrutiny. Experiments are needed with techniques for slowing down perception, through meditation, careful observation, and successively deeper phases of inquiry into a single issue. (Shor 82)

In order to encourage thought processes that break down false consciousness, teachers must directly engage those ways in which false consciousness are promulgated. For example, one Citizenship School teacher encouraged her students to question the bias in newspapers that they read every day. Those biases were having a negative impact on students by encouraging an invalid perception of the world and weakening their resolve in civil rights issues. Today, professors like Borkowski fight false promises by

[...]situating students in a social and political context rather than presenting it exaltedly as an autonomous process that separates the good, the bad, and the ugly, or as a boot-strap offering that will save some and damn others. Instead, I want my students to be reflective, to think about who they are, what they do, and what decisions they make, believing in the importance of those things in the construction of self and society. (115)

He presents every situation, problem, or issue as socially situated. By doing so, he divorces students from a false consciousness, which separates the students from being actual agents in the world around them.

Professors who practice Critical Literacy primarily destroy false consciousness through a problem solving pedagogy where they focus on central issues in the students' lives and ask students to study and develop potential solutions to those problems. Freire writes that such problem posing education is beneficial for students because:

[s]tudents as they are increasingly posed with problems relating to themselves in the world and with the world, will feel increasingly challenged and obliged to respond to that challenge. Because they apprehend the challenge as interrelated to other problems within a total context, not as a theoretical question, the resulting comprehension tends to be increasingly critical and thus constantly less alienated.

(81)

They will be drawn to action or what Freire terms as praxis: "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (51). In order to encourage this type of action, Dewey states that,

Setting up conditions which stimulate certain visible and tangible ways of acting is the first step. Making the individual a sharer or partner in the associated activity so that he feels its success as his success, its failure as his failure, is the completing step. (14)

Students become willing participants in action when they feel that they have a vested interest in that activity. This is accomplished by posing problems with real ramifications to students.

Such a problem posing activity may help students recognize that language as a form of power—more importantly that language as power—is couched in action or usage. This belief can

Community learning can also be integrated into the literature classroom. For example, an instructor might discuss the topic of “setting” or “place” by pulling from numerous authors who come from Working Class/Poverty Class backgrounds. Perhaps the following short stories could be the focus of such a subject:

Sherman Alexie—“The only Traffic Signal on the Reservation Doesn’t Flash Red Anymore.”

Dorothy Allison—An excerpt from Bastard Out of Carolina

Rudolfo Anaya—An excerpt from Bless Me, Ultima

James Baldwin—“Sonny’s Blues”

While examining those texts for setting, social analysis may also be brought into the readings. In short, questions about the social arguments being made by the authors could be examined in regards to the ways they effectively convey such arguments through setting and place. The next step in this type of course would be to give the students time to write short fiction, which focuses on setting or place. Each unit of the course could continually pull from such WC/PC fiction and require students to provide either a critical analysis or creative writing component. For a creative writing component, the students would be encouraged to incorporate their local community, street, grocery store, or other regularly visited area as a setting and write a story incorporating it. At the end of the course, the class might host a public reading where five class-selected student works would be read to the public along with excerpts and bits from the essays of other authors the students read during the course. By doing this, the students would be able to share their reading communally with people in their local community.

There are two elements from the nontraditional educational institutions incorporated into this course. The first is the fact that students are encouraged to compose works that incorporates

consciousness as consciousness intent upon the world. They must abandon the educational goal of deposit-making and replace it with the posing of the problems of human beings in their relations with the world. (79)

The Citizenship Schools clearly worked to obliterate false consciousness in their students. Teachers centered all of their reading materials on the necessity to pull back the veil from their students' eyes by revealing the degree to which and the ways by which their students were oppressed. By doing so, they allowed their students methods by which they could begin to work against those structures that would oppress them.

Language becomes a political and social force under the instruction of Critical Literacy teachers. Berlin writes that in Critical Literacy:

Language is a social construction that shapes the subject as much as the subject shapes it. Since language is a product of social relations, it is inevitably involved in power and politics. Language thus constitutes an arena in which ideological battles are constantly fought. The different language practices of social groups are inscribed with ideological interpretations of experience that reinforce versions of what really exists, what is really good, and what is politically possible. The discourse of each and every social group tacitly instructs its members in who they are and how they fit into this larger scheme, as well as providing an interpretation of the scheme itself. (258)

The hidden rules and norms behind language use are revealed in Critical Literacy. Language comes to be seen as a way to both empower oneself and as a way to oppress others. Language, then, can no longer be innocent, nor can the English instructor adopt a non-political stance when language is loaded with so much political and social meaning:

The clear oppositions between disinterested and interested, private and public, and contemplative and creative are obliterated. There are simply no disinterested uses of language, since all signifying practices, in both writing and reading, are involved in ideological predispositions. (259)

Instructors, then, may be seen as willfully reckless if they do not reveal those hidden rules and norms to those students who have a vested interest in language that could be used to dominate them.

Fleischer and Schaafsma, paying homage to literacy educator Jay L. Robinson, also provide a conception of language that helps to articulate how language comes to possess power. Robinson promotes a rhetoric known as constitutive rhetoric which is described as being crucial to effective literacy teaching and literacy acquisition. Schaafsma and Fleischer define constitutive rhetoric as: “a rhetoric in which meaning is necessarily constituted in the context of one’s interactions with others” (xviii-xix). They further add that meaning is made through language when people speak to each other in specific situations and locations. As we “use language” in locations, “we are always constituting other things as well: our own character, the character of others, the intentions we bring to the interaction, the community that surrounds us, [and] the cultural mores which help define the community.” The goal, in teaching literacy is to help students see the ways in which they create themselves in certain locations or situations through the use of language. In this meaning creation activity, the singular student does not act alone. Other parties involved in the situation or location also aid in the creation of the person and the meaning that occurs in the context.” The community, in short, plays an active role in constituting meaning and identity (xix). Thus, the way in which Robinson defined literacy and



described literacy was very dependent upon the importance of the social situations or constraints.

In fact, Robinson is reported to have said:

[Literacy is], in essence, sociocultural development, not merely cognitive development, a notion that seems to imply an isolated learner and not one who lives and learns as a social being in conversations with others. (qtd in Fleischer and Schaafsma xx)

Literacy, then, is just as much about functional ABC literacy as it is about learning how to interact in the community around oneself and as a human being within that social situation.

Moreover, this “sociocultural” literacy also entails assistance for the student in how to interact in the present AND how to interact in the future--how to create a future (xx).

Perhaps most importantly, Critical Literacy encourages Working Class/Poverty Class students to interrogate the racial tensions that haunt their everyday existence. Race must be an object of study for WC/PC students in order to weaken the racism that is prevalent in these communities. Thus, Giroux proposes that Critical Literacy also focus on difference:

In this case, literacy as an emancipatory practice requires people to read, speak, and listen in the language of difference, a language in which meaning becomes multiaccentual and dispersed, and resists permanent closure. This is a language in which one speaks *with* rather than *for* Others, and has serious implications not only for students but also for teachers, particularly around the issue of authority, pedagogy and politics. (368-69)

Race and culture become key means through which difference can be problematized and addressed in classes that encourage Critical Literacy. Speaking about race and difference is beneficial in learning environments because:

Exploring race helps students learn to think and write critically. A growing body of scholarly literature establishes a positive correlation between diversity experiences (including, among other things, courses that directly address diversity) and improved critical thinking. Indeed a recent study...at the University of Iowa found that the critical-thinking skills of white students benefited most greatly from diversity work. A fundamental aspect of critical thinking and effective writing entails recognizing...that “all reasoning is done from some point of view.” (Winans 254)

Students learn much from engaging difference in their world. By engaging difference, they break down structures of false consciousness and are required to engage in more complex views of the society around them. Other ways to encourage engagement with difference is by also focusing on the issue of globalization. A study of the world economic structure, the increasing interdependence of nations, and the existence of WC/PC in other nations in light of racial and cultural differences could add further insight into the structures that the WC/PC of the United States exist within. It would further allow WC/PC students to establish a sense of community with the world’s WC/PC.

Along with racial differences, cultural differences should also be engaged. Speaking on the benefits of pedagogies incorporating cultural studies, Lindquist writes:

Cultural studies-derived pedagogies aim to have students interrogate the material conditions of their lives, and thus to help them arrive at a fuller understanding of their own (and other’s) socioeconomic predicaments. While I see this as a worthy goal, I question the means, which seem not to put nearly enough energy into the enterprise of learning what is at stake (and in particular, what is at stake for

working-class students) in assenting to such critiques, into figuring out what resistance to cultural-studies projects might mean. (228)

However, she worries against mindless cultural celebrations as cultural studies and instead argues that cultures should also be critiqued and their roles in society studied. The culture of Working Class/Poverty Class individuals is often as racist, homophobic, and patriarchal as the Upper Classes. Mindless cultural celebrations could be avoided by focusing on those differences, which often separate various cultures from each other. Therefore, I agree with Lindquist on the issue that cultural studies in the classroom should also critique and analyze.

Critical Literacy is about engaging difficult issues that students often face in their lives. From exploring differences to fighting false consciousness, Critical Literacy asks that learners become engaged in such problems and work to develop solutions to them. Rote learning is not allowed in such classrooms. Instead, the focus is placed on learning as a way to improve one's community and society.

Both Brookwood and the Citizenship Schools practiced elements of Critical Literacy in their courses. At Brookwood, language became socially and politically situated when students were asked to explore those words and worlds that had direct impacts on their lives. The same situation existed at the Citizenship Schools where students were asked to interrogate words like "registration" and "citizen." Both schools prepared students for more than just a life of reading and writing outside their institutions. They prepared their students to become active citizens who could engage their own problems.

### **Engaging Literature**

When teaching literature as a subject, a working class pedagogy can be invoked in order to help Working Class/Poverty Class students successfully navigate the halls of academia, effect

his or her own change, and acquire writing and reading skills that will benefit the student both intellectually and in everyday life. This can be done in spite of the sometimes negative effect that the literature vs. rhetoric division has had upon our the English community. Such a division replicates class divisions in society:

The poetic/rhetoric bifurcation found in colleges...serves the interests of a privileged professional managerial class while discriminating against those who are outside of this class. It does so, furthermore, through cruelly clandestine devices, refusing the political in the service of an aesthetic experience that implicitly reinforces discriminatory economic and social divisions....More importantly, it works to exclude from...those students not socialized from birth in the ways of the aesthetic response, doing so by its influence on the materials and methods of reading and writing required for success in secondary schools, college admissions tests, and the colleges themselves... English studies has served as a powerful conservative and antidemocratic force, all the while insisting on its transcendence of the political. (Berlin 257)

The way Literature has been taught has deeply harmed students, most assuredly WC/PC students, by refusing to address the political nature of literature and language studies in general and by expecting WC/PC students to enter the classroom with knowledge of the dominant discourse and middle to Upper Class literary aesthetics. However, this may be remedied by addressing the social aspects of literature in courses where a portion of students are WC/PC. The power of language in literature should be explored. Brooks and Cayetano posit that “Students who can tell their own stories about how truth is made can negotiate (and renegotiate) their own relationships to a rapidly changing world. In this process, textual and even literary skills are

critical” (58) This literature as literacy could become integral to WC/PC instruction as a “transformative literary pedagogy”:

[A transformative literary pedagogy] claims, against widespread academic Darwinism, that community-building, not book-collecting, is literature’s best use.

It values methods over topics, critical tools over texts, literacy over literature. (59)

Furthermore, Literature as a means for teaching literacy should be instituted in such a way. It speaks to the lives of students and it questions dominant expectations about whose story deserves to be heard.

I must warn instructors, though, that literature as a subject of study brings a lot of Middle Class baggage to a Working Class/Poverty Class classroom, from the formal style of some literature to the way in which understanding literature is often described as some rubics cube puzzle of finding the “right” answer or meaning. Because of literature’s formidable reputation, it is understandable why some WC/PC students remain silent in the classroom. Brooks and Cayetano warn that silence must be carefully used in a literature class composed of WC/PC students. The teacher must become aware of reasons for silence. Is the silence present because students are trying to consider or interpret a text? Then silence should be allowed. But if students are silent due to intimidation, teachers must honestly address intimidating expectations and reassure them that the lenses they are using to read a text are valued and that, when interpreting those texts, there are no wrong interpretations (62-65).

In addition, Working Class/Poverty Class students usually encounter some difficulty in Literature classes for one basic reason. Brooks and Cayetano phrase this reality best. They write, “For working-class college students, literature means work. Paper writing is a demanding time-intensive process; poems require multiple readings; novels swallow hours already

designated for part- or full-time jobs and family responsibilities” (56). WC/PC students deal with some time constraints that Middle Class and Upper Class students generally don’t need to worry about, like finding childcare and balancing part- and full-time work schedules with similar school schedules. Asking students to forsake familial and economic obligations will result in only one negative outcome—no students in class. Therefore, instructors must carefully weigh whether or not the reading and work schedules are realistic for their WC/PC students, or even their Middle Class and Upper Class students. This is not to say that such students should do no outside work but rather that the workload should be manageable.

I suggest that literature be made more accessible to students by at first focusing on literature that speaks most to their life experiences. While teaching literature as a subject, it is important that we do not fall into the trap of promoting one type of literature as high culture and another type of literature as low culture. By choosing texts written from similar perspectives as our students, we demonstrate a respect for our students’ culture and we suggest to them that such works demand as much respect as other literary texts.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, we allow ourselves space to teach literacy and examine language as a place where battles of ideology are waged—where even literary texts are not innocent but are socially and politically constructed.

The labor drama course taught at Brookwood provided this type of literary study. Texts that spoke to the students’ lives were chosen according to their ability to speak to social and political issues in current society. Literature came to be seen as a place to actively carry on debates that mattered in the students’ lives like the place of strikes in the labor movement and a

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<sup>3</sup> For those instructors who would like resources for such texts, I suggest that they look into works authored by Renny Christopher, Sherry Linkon, and Janet Zandy. Linkon and Zandy have published edited anthologies of *Working Class/Poverty Class* literature.

woman's role as a subordinate to her husband. Literature became loaded language that presented arguments and incited readers (or in the case of plays, watchers) to action.

### **Discourse Communities**

I have mentioned before the obligations of instructors to Working Class/Poverty Class students. One of those obligations is to introduce students to various discourse communities while also remaining respectful of the students' home language and culture. After all, if we are to fulfill one goal of Critical Literacy by questioning the neutrality of language, the best way to do so is by exploring the various discourse communities that our students must operate within in order to be successful in their lives. Dewey describes the variety of worlds (i.e, discourse communities) that students interact with on a daily basis and also the obligation to invite students into exploration of those discourses:

The school has the function also of coordinating within the disposition of each individual the diverse influences of the various social environments into which he enters. One code prevails in the family; another, on the street; a third, in the workshop or store; a fourth, in the religious association. As a person passes from one of the environments to another, he is subjected to antagonistic pulls... (22)

Our position as instructors requires that we help students navigate such environments and “antagonistic pulls.”

One discourse community that is important in the success of the student in his/her college life is the academic discourse community. Working Class/Poverty Class students encounter much difficulty with this community as its rules for writing are unlike anything many of them have seen. Like academic culture, the writing activities required in university courses have proven problematic for many WC/PC students. The academic essay is essentially a form that

conveys a Middle Class system of values and reality, which explains why WC/PC students may have problems with this genre (Adler-Kassner 87).

Linda Adler-Kassner has researched the history behind the academic essay. She found that progressive education influenced the development of academic writing by calling for essays based on a students' own experiences. However, the progressive educators still imbued certain Middle Class values on the essay such as on the format and language commonly used. Those Middle Class values are precisely what WC/PC students have trouble responding to (88).

Adler-Kassner offers suggestions to help students adapt to academic writing. She suggests that educators reconsider the ways they look at academic writing. The focus of such writing should be on expressing, investigating, and understanding a subject instead of focusing on form or style. Moreover, she argues that writing activities should provide avenues for students to make connections between subject matter and their own lives and cultures (102). Finally, she asks that they reconsider the focus on academic language and allow students to use their own languages in essays (102-103).

Furthermore, it is imperative that students acquire the language of the dominant communities at large in order to be able to argue with those communities—and be heard! Higgins and Brush explore this idea in their essay about women on welfare who struggle to argue for their own interests against the public forces that would deny them a voice. Many of the same rules learned by this group of women should also be conveyed to our own students who may, at one time or another, need to argue their position against public officials. Higgins and Brush write of the ways in which people in power automatically relegate less empowered stakeholders to object positions. They write:



Social scientists, policy specialists, legislators, state bureaucrats, and political spinmeisters deliberate about welfare policy among themselves. These recognized players vie to define public problems and promote technical remedies. They have established *ethos* in the literal sense: They are recognized *characters* or actors in a larger drama. Thus, if welfare recipients hope to enter into public deliberation, they must constitute themselves as characters in political drama capable of bridging the chasms of expertise and privilege that separate them from the sites of deliberation and power. (697)

Our students must also achieve this goal by overcoming the divide between themselves and policy makers—especially if they go on to advocate for change that would affect their working class communities. Learning the discourse involved in such discourse communities provides them with the means to speak the language of the dominant discourse in order to subvert it to their ends. Higgins and Brush go on to stress this point when they write,

Subordinated narrators need to move beyond victim and hero narratives, producing effective narratives that voice subordinated perspectives while intersecting with the interests and beliefs of wider publics. The credible public narrator or protagonist must demonstrate agency, countering assumptions about her own passivity, ignorance, and impugned character. She needs to avoid casting herself or others in extreme hero or victim roles, and she must be willing to engage the substantive and moral terms of the dominant discourse without capitulating to them. (701)

The language and discourse of our students served them well while they lived within their home communities but they must add to their repertoire of discourses in order to effect change in the

larger world around them. They need experience in arguing against dominant groups in order to truly be empowered.

Yet, in our attempt to teach students about varying discourse communities, we cannot lose sight of our larger goal by speaking demeaningly of our students' discourses and language. To do so would only result in psychological damage which we have struggled so hard to repair. In other words, we must also value the discourse community of our students even as we introduce them to other discourse communities.

Brookwood Labor College seemed especially focused on this idea of introducing students to various discourse communities in order to help them effect change in the world. They covered a variety of different discourse communities that proved powerful in their students' lives such as the labor union. In the process of doing so, they also encouraged students to test the boundaries of those discourse communities. By accomplishing this, their students learned that discourse communities were structures that could be challenged in order to meet the needs of their communities.

## **Conclusion**

Our students should be encouraged to become public intellectuals as defined by Ellen Cushman. If we want to empower them to make changes, we must encourage them to continue to operate as shrewd activists in their home communities. This role makes what they do less like "service learning" and more like community learning. This, in short, is the overall goal of Working Class/Poverty Class pedagogy. In order to demonstrate the type of pedagogy I envision for WC/PC students, I have put together basic course structure examples that may serve as a jumping off point for those teachers who wish to better serve the needs of their WC/PC students.

A hypothetical Composition classroom that incorporates Community Learning would begin by first asking students to brainstorm on issues or situations occurring in their local communities that affect the students in negative ways. The students would then select a particular issue for the class to focus upon. At this point, they would be encouraged to engage issues that are truly representative of their group. One of those issues may be race and its connection to a situation that many of the students are experiencing. They should be encouraged to explore the way race affects the experiences of the students in the problems at hand. The WC/PC is not a largely white group. It is a diverse population and most of the members are people of color, which makes a focus on racial issues even more integral.

The next step would be for students to form groups and research the issue by not only looking up articles, essays, and books, but by going out into their local communities and performing field research. The students, for example, may decide to conduct a brief survey on a particular issue like transportation. This would be interspersed with writing activities where the students analyzed and made sense of the data and research they were examining. Then, the teacher could guide the students in developing ways in which they might help alleviate the problems experienced because of this local issue.

If an instructor is in a situation where Middle Class students make up a majority of the population and those students are being asked to take part in service learning for WC/PC communities, I would strongly encourage the instructor to preface that experience with a long discussion about the students' roles in the service learning activity and WC/PC and racial expectations regarding behavior and treatment. If possible, the instructor should bring in leaders from the WC/PC community so that they, too, can reiterate the need for respect and other desirable behaviors. What most people want is not so much help but to be respected.

The third phase would be to focus particularly on ways that students might be able to use their writing abilities in order to provide assistance to the community. The class may decide to write letters to members of the city council or they may decide to join forces with a community action group that is already engrossed in the situation. While this goal was being met, students would focus on contextualizing the problem on further levels by looking at how the problem affects the county, the state, the nation, and even our increasingly globalized world.

I would end such a course with a critical reflection on the efficacy of the students' actions and what they would or wouldn't have done anything differently. This type of course would incorporate many elements of the nontraditional English courses we have examined. For example, it would incorporate the focus on the lives of the WC/PC students much like the playwriting focused on the student workers at Brookwood. It also incorporates a focus on a local issue just as the Citizenship Schools focused on issues that directly impacted their students like corrupt local newspapers. The course would also offer other benefits. It would ask that students work together to make many of the course decisions such as what problem the course should focus on. It would also ask that students rely upon each other and *begin* to reach out to each other across race, class, gender, ability, or sexual preferences. This sense of community would encourage autonomy and it would help WC/PC students forge bonds. In addition, if the instructor teaches a course where WC/PC students are equal to or a smaller part of the classroom population, I suggest that the instructor put together small groups where the WC/PC students are allowed to be the majority members of those groups. Too often in largely middle-class classrooms, people of color, women, and the WC/PC are silenced by those who have power. We should allow avenues for WC/PC students to take the lead in some endeavors

Community learning can also be integrated into the literature classroom. For example, an instructor might discuss the topic of “setting” or “place” by pulling from numerous authors who come from Working Class/Poverty Class backgrounds. Perhaps the following short stories could be the focus of such a subject:

Sherman Alexie—“The only Traffic Signal on the Reservation Doesn’t Flash Red Anymore.”

Dorothy Allison—An excerpt from *Bastard Out of Carolina*

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James Baldwin—“Sonny’s Blues”

While examining those texts for setting, social analysis may also be brought into the readings. In short, questions about the social arguments being made by the authors could be examined in regards to the ways they effectively convey such arguments through setting and place. The next step in this type of course would be to give the students time to write short fiction, which focuses on setting or place. Each unit of the course could continually pull from such WC/PC fiction and require students to provide either a critical analysis or creative writing component. For a creative writing component, the students would be encouraged to incorporate their local community, street, grocery store, or other regularly visited area as a setting and write a story incorporating it. At the end of the course, the class might host a public reading where five class-selected student works would be read to the public along with excerpts and bits from the essays of other authors the students read during the course. By doing this, the students would be able to share their reading communally with people in their local community.

There are two elements from the nontraditional educational institutions incorporated into this course. The first is the fact that students are encouraged to compose works that incorporates

elements of their life experiences. The course on playwriting encouraged this by asking worker students to write plays about their strike experiences. The Citizenship Schools often incorporated ways for the students to give back to or interact with their home communities. By incorporating a community reading where students share those works that spoke to them, such community interaction is once again encouraged and essays that speak to that community's lived experience would be shared.

Other important goals to keep in mind while designing and teaching English courses for Working Class/Poverty Class students have been explored in this chapter and in the pedagogies of Brookwood Labor College and Highlander Folk School. Those goals are as follows:

- **Encourage Community:** Working Class/Poverty Class students today are not as connected as the students of Brookwood Labor College and the Citizenship Schools were. This lack of connection proves to be detrimental not only to the individual student but the overall community and the WC/PC.
- **Respect and Acknowledge Class Backgrounds:** Working Class/Poverty Class students do not usually hear positive comments about their class or communities from the Upper Classes and authority figures in higher education. This can break down student moral and sever community connections. It may also alienate the student from the teacher and the rest of the classroom. At the very minimum, teachers should demonstrate tolerance. Political correctness applies to the WC/PC, too.
- **Explore Discourse Communities:** Working Class/Poverty Class students must operate between two worlds. The home world of their discourse community and the world of the Upper Classes. They need to experience both discourses in their English education environment. The dominant discourse should not be privileged over the

other. A balance must be struck for the sake of the student trying to maintain a connection with her home culture.

- **Integrate Critical Literacy:** Working Class/Poverty Class students today will become the voices of their class in the future. They must be encouraged to critically analyze the forces of power and they need the tools necessary to critique and argue against such powers in order to assist their communities and themselves.
- **Literature Matters:** Working Class/Poverty Class students need the opportunity to encounter literature that speaks to their own life experiences. They also need to read literature that opens them up to new cultures and ways of life. Keep in mind the baggage that WC/PC students may bring about Literature to the English classroom.
- **Incorporate Democratic Structures:** Just as Brookwood and the Citizenship Schools allowed students to determine the shape and focus of their educational experiences, we must do the same. Such a practice makes the courses real and vital to the students. It also helps the students learn how to work together and it strengthens their sense of community.
- **Include Community Learning:** Above all else, allow the students to practice what they have learned in the classroom through working towards solving problems in their own communities. This practice not only helps build community bonds but it also helps Working Class/Poverty Class communities work toward solutions to those problems. The students need this kind of community interaction and their communities need this, too.

Highlander and Brookwood offered beneficial models for community learning in their pedagogies. At Highlander, community learning was accomplished every time a Citizenship

School graduate went out into the world and operated as a citizen of the United States. Brookwood encouraged students to provide service to their communities through plays, labor convention materials, and newspapers. Both schools encouraged active, engaged students who eventually went on to become active and engaged members of their communities. By doing so, they probably did more for justice in the world than many other endeavors may have done. By going out into the world and becoming active, they encouraged others to do the same. Freire writes that, "The oppressed must be their own examples in the struggle for their redemption" (Freire 51). The students of Brookwood and Highlander acted as such examples. We should encourage our students to do likewise.



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