

RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

What Does Neoliberalism Have to Do with Teaching Research Writing?

by David B. Downing



I. When Research and Writing Confront the Disappearance of History

Ask any progressive educator the question posed by my title, and you won't have to wait long for an answer: everything. From the size of the class, to the quality of the computer lab, to the costs of textbooks, to the demographics and the class schedules of the students, to the workload and the compensation of faculty assigned to teach them—it is just so easy to name a few of the obvious material factors signaling the neoliberal economy's effect on how we teach required service classes like research writing (or any course, for that matter). By and large, we share basic understandings about that history, so I am not going to rehearse it here.

Rather, in this essay I focus on how I have experimented with bringing some version of relevant history into a general humanities required course called Research Writing. The problem I address is that most educators still struggle with the disappearance of history from the disciplinary agenda scripted into a class like research writing. Service writing courses occupy an especially difficult position when the consumerist powers that be wrap such courses into the anti-historical formalism of decontextualized skills that can supposedly be swallowed quickly if not painlessly. Not one research writing handbook on the market today even begins to address the significance of the transformations of the global political economy and the neoliberal production of knowledge as having much of anything to do with their basic research and writing tasks. How can a teacher frame this complex history (all in one *writing* [not history] class?) in such a way as to combat the historical amnesia, while making such history vital, understandable, and engaging to first year undergraduates? That is the task of my class and this essay.

Of course, what is possible in any given class is determined by context: the relations between the local and the global meet wherever we happen to be. For this reason, in the next section I will sketch the local colors of my own institutional circumstances, before describing some of the strategies I have experimented with in my own research writing classes.

II. A Little Local Context: Public Education in a Private Economy

Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP), where I have taught for twenty years now, is a mid-sized, public university. All faculty in the state system of 14 universities work under a collective bargaining agreement reached between the union (the Association of Pennsylvania State College and University Faculty [APSCUF]) and management (the state). This is not a minor point since the entire system is an anomaly with respect to American higher education: we have roughly 25% of our faculty on temporary contracts in contrast to the national average which is getting close to the inverse (about 75% contingent labor). This means that all faculty in the English

department end up teaching the basic humanities distribution requirements for composition, research writing, and humanities literature. These factors explain why, even though I am now one of the most senior members in the department, I regularly teach research writing. These working conditions become an issue in the course itself: IUP's faculty union has successfully on this score resisted the pressures of neoliberal privatization that seek flexibility, contingency, and cheap teaching all around (Bousquet). Regardless of how students feel about me, it is important that they have a sense of collective bargaining's ability to protect some dimensions of the public commons from direct capital control.

At the same time, students at IUP can hardly avoid the remarkable ironies in their own educational circumstances. For instance, students can readily see that there are some dimensions of their education over which the union has absolutely no control. Indeed, management has cleverly found many ways to work privatization into the public university, so it is an easy initial research question to ask students where they see examples of such privatization on campus. It is a long list, similar to the franchising and branding going on all over U.S. campuses: they can only buy Pepsi, not Coke; Chick-Fil-A, not McDonalds; Spring Reflections bottled water, not Dasani, etc. But the biggest irony is right before their eyes every time they walk out of a campus building: the enormous dormitory expansion project at IUP. This they cannot miss.

Some of the readers of this essay might not have missed it either. One of the front page stories in the April 11, 2008 issue of the *Chronicle of Higher Education* is titled "Swanky Suites, More Students?" and it describes IUP's building bonanza as, perhaps, the largest dormitory expansion project in the history of higher education in America. The article included several color photos of the luxury suites together with an explanation of the administration's goal to "reinvent its living-and-learning program" (Supiano A1). Many people are very proud of this project, but (and you would not know this from reading the *CHE* article), many people, mostly faculty, like myself, also have strong objections to the idea of re-enforcing class differences among students on the basis of the progressively more costly fees for the new dorms.

Funding for this massive 270 million dollar building project comes from the IUP Foundation, in other words, from private sources, donations, etc. The Foundation hires private developing corporations to do the building on state-owned land leased on long-term contracts to the corporations. The point is, as the administration points out, this building project budget has nothing to do with academic funding for the institution because those revenues come from state taxes and student tuition. In contrast, the corporations building the dorms even handle all business arrangements, including the room payments which are made directly to the private enterprises, not to the university or the state.

Now there is no rule that says the Foundation could not invest directly in academic projects, but the separation of public and private realms explains why the administration can raise class sizes, authorize faculty hiring

freezes, and ask all college divisions to tighten their budgets because of fiscal crisis. The public/private split is immediately evident to students in my research writing class because the humanities building itself is deteriorating rapidly, with peeling paint, cracked walls in places, and no carpeting except in a few rooms. In other words the public spaces for education for all students in the humanities is deteriorating while for those students who can afford it (the luxury dorm suites cost between a third more than and twice as much as regular dorm rates), there are some pretty fancy private places to enjoy good living (and, I suppose, good learning) on campus.

Not to be too jaded, but these local public/private splits really help my students to understand what privatization in the neoliberal economy is all about. One instance really stands out: following our in-class discussion of these campus circumstances, one student, who was trying to access the IUP budget, got frustrated because she could only get very general accounting figures without any details. She then accessed the State legislature, and ended up locating the specific statute that says all public institutions in Pennsylvania must make budget allocations publicly available. Everyone felt something was wrong here, but a week later, after a few students had interviewed local administrators, we had our answer. We could not access any form of a detailed budget because it was kept confidential, and the administration gets around the law by making the general budget figures available. The effort it would take any individual or group to protest these circumstances is so great that the administration feels safe in playing by their narrow (mis)interpretation of the law. In this case, the entire class got a good lesson in the way that public regulations can be evaded by private interests.

III. Negotiating Power and Framing History for Research Writers

The critical pedagogy movement launched by Paolo Freire has led the way in teaching us how to negotiate the asymmetrical relations of power in the classroom. Through the writing of the syllabus, we are in some pretty fundamental ways the authors of the narratives embedded in our syllabi. Self-consciously presenting these perspectives over which we are invariably viewed as author/authority when we seek dialogic engagement and critical consciousness can easily end up in a zero-sum game played out between the emancipatory intentions and the institutional authority of the teacher. Indeed, the historical frame comes from me, and that asymmetrical power relationship can be negotiated, but it cannot be idealized out of existence.

Nevertheless, the appearance of a strong political agenda on my part versus the more apolitical agenda of formalist skills is itself ahistorical. In other words, the vocational skills model is itself an enormously powerful ideological project authorized and supported by a long history of institutional formations and only appears neutral to the extent that it has been naturalized as the way things are in the field. Abuses of teacher authority, therefore,

come not from the content of the agenda per se (since both ahistorical formalism and social activism can be bludgeoned into students), but rather from the specific protocols and behaviors of the instructor regarding how he/she negotiates the institutional power he/she has been granted.

My claim, which the students get to test out, as I put it to them, is that the historical flames we explore deeply impact their own lives.

One way to theorize the negotiation of classroom authority is to conceive of both teachers and students as what I call "resource translators." By this term I mean to indicate that the teacher's credible (as opposed to the more obvious institutional) authority comes, first, from his/her access and understanding of available resources, and, second, from his/her ability to translate some of those complex resources from diverse sources and disciplines into accessible concepts, rhetorics, and frames. Teachers and students must translate knowledge resources from one context into another. Indeed, students are also resource translators since they bring to the class various kinds of knowledges such as their home discourses, their skills at interacting on YouTube and Facebook, their areas of special interest, which they often have to translate for their classmates into accessible terms, explanations, or narratives. Moreover, the nature of a research writing class often positions students themselves in the role of experts in relation not just to the other students in class, but also to me. Their own research projects often lead them into disciplines other than English, and that very limitation with respect to my own disciplinary subject position can be highlighted as an opportunity for students to take responsibility as resource translators in communicating knowledge of their specialized topics to their peers and their instructor. Resource translator might seem to echo the kind of objectified skill required by the standardized rationales, and such echoing is intentional on my part, if only to indicate that teachers as well as students confront the commodification of their own skills. Except for one key difference: those skills are not disinterested, but interested in a particular project, social justice, which is the ideological rationale for the course itself. I explicitly state this rationale in the syllabus, so I will quote directly from myself here:

The basic premises for this class are large, important assumptions about the nature of knowledge, education, society, and democracy. They are these: that the hope for social justice is at the root of any basis for a worthwhile human life; that learning, socializing, research, understanding, awe, imagination, and inspiration should be directed at expanding human freedom; that research and writing are not just technical, vocational skills to improve (although they certainly involve such skills) but are directly

related to the larger social hope for a better world for all peoples on this earth.

This basic rationale may sound grandiose, but I always try to make the motive for social justice not philosophically difficult (which it is) and tied to sophisticated notions of recognition and redistribution, but based on a simple, practical question: what's fair here? And the good thing is that most students can easily subscribe to these general principles.

My key notion of historical frames is a direct consequence of translating by way of simplification the complexity of the historical archive available. I organize the course around two overlapping historical frames. My claim, which the students get to test out, as I put it to them, is that the historical frames we explore deeply impact their own lives, and that some knowledge of these frames is a necessary way of interacting with the complex world of consumer culture that they inhabit. The first frame is more conceptual (capitalism vs. socialism), the other more chronological (regulated, New Deal, social-welfare state capitalism followed by deregulated, free-market, neoliberal capitalism).

In the first instance, at the conceptual level, we work to develop a shared, basic understanding of the two modern historical movements of capitalism and socialism, and the history of tensions between them. Most students have a general, ideologically charged view of how capitalism works, and how whatever counts as socialism does not work, but beyond that, they have often not received very much direct attention in their education to these fundamental historical movements. For this reason, the textbooks assigned for the course I consider to be essentially resource translations: they provide articulate overviews and simplifications of complex historical changes.

Fortunately, we now have available such resource translations: the small books by James Fulcher on *Capitalism* and by Michael Newman on *Socialism*. Now these books draw on immense historical archives and translate that material into concise narratives accessible to many readers, but this audience still does not in most instances include second-year college students. So my job is to simplify and reduce even further, which means that I prepare a few handouts to frame the differences as different views of human freedom and justice regarding the production of goods and services by any given society. Privatization of the means of production will make much more sense once we have some contrastive views of public ownership, control, and regulation of the way wealth gets produced and distributed. The key concept I focus on here is surplus value, so we go over the way any production process adds value to the raw materials, and that added or surplus value gets distributed in three main ways: to replenish raw materials, to the workers/employees, and to the employer/management/shareholders. The key question is: how does private management (capitalism) or the collective work force (socialism) produce, appropriate, and distribute the surplus value, in short, the profit? And do they do it fairly? It does not take long for everyone to see

examples of the mal-distribution of surplus value made visible in the massive wealth inequalities, class differences, and the exploitation of workers both in the United States and globally. Indeed, we only spend about 3 weeks laying out these main concepts, after which we turn to the overview of the last 60 years of global history.

The main historical frame for the course I actually take from David Harvey's *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. His historical overview divides the last sixty years into two phases: 1) embedded liberalism (1935-1970s), and 2) neoliberalism (1970s—). The turning point for Harvey is the years 1978-80 when Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Deng Xiaoping took control of China, and Ronald Reagan became President of the United States. In my experience, these dates have proven to be convenient and understandable. Nevertheless, the first time I used this book, I presumed (and I was correct) that it would be very difficult for students, so, again, I negotiated these difficulties by assigning only strategic chapters and using several key handouts that simplified the two-part historical frame.

One handout, called "The Basic Historical Frame," is particularly key to the whole class, and I hand it out when we begin reading Harvey. It lists at the top some of the key events of the turning point years, before dividing the page in half, listing contrasting features of each phase on the left and right columns. On the left, embedded liberalism is represented by key characteristics of the regulated, New Deal, Keynesian version of capitalism, and, on the right, neoliberalism is represented by the deregulated, Friedmanian version of free-market capitalism. In short, the contrast is between the social welfare state and the privatized neoliberal market economy

On the handout itself, crucial to these contrasting lists are some easy to comprehend statistics regarding the most massive construction of wealth inequality in modern history: the contrasts in the two periods between CEO/average worker salaries; the proportion of wealth ownership as a percentage of assets and income; the decline in real wages; the destruction of organized labor; the decline in public funding for education; the shift from a 75%-25% ratio of tenure-track faculty to the current 25%-75% ratio; the decline from 1970s highest levels of progressive taxation at 70% to current levels of 33%. The schematic presentation of this data tends to be quite dramatic for many students, who have never been taught any of this material in 12-14 years of their formal education. That these changes have been a direct result of specific policy decisions rather than merely the uncontrollable "nature" of the market is the lesson at hand. To even begin to imagine that socialism names a tradition of trying to think of alternatives to these grossly unjust forms of the appropriation and distribution of surplus value is a first step in beginning to understand how knowledge produced under capitalism always happens in some relation to the surplus.

Of course, my historical agenda is a bit overwhelming to contemplate for a research writing class. But I have also found that most students adjust to this difference, and the appreciation of those who respond to the challenge has far

outweighed the resistance. In each class, however, I have organized our interactions so as to anticipate and accommodate both resistance and appreciation. For that reason, I have devised a series of integrated reading/writing/discussion exercises to mitigate my authority, but also to engage a whole set of recognizable skills required by the catalog course description. The exercises are progressively designed so as to move from basic individual reading/writing strategies, to note taking, to more complex, and often more collaborative tasks such as clarification of terminology, consulting and comparing alternative kinds of sources, drafting, and developing a paper or web site. Most of this work appears online, since we use a WebCT blog that provides for threaded discussions. Students are also asked to view all their writing during the first half as part of their construction of a "Neoliberal Portfolio" which by mid-term consists of their own selections of (and justifications for) their most significant online, in-class, and out-of-class writing. The main tasks are as follows:

WebCT Responses: Students are asked to write and post daily responses to each assigned reading. Some of the assignments include videos, so that, for example, when we read Harvey's chapter on Deng's efforts to restructure the Chinese economy, we also view David Redmon's provocative documentary, *Mardi Gras: Made in China*, which poignantly shifts between jubilant celebrations of Mardi Gras in downtown New Orleans with the raucous rituals of throwing beads and baring breasts; and the bead factories in China where the average workers are 14-18 year old girls making \$1.60/hour. The text/video relationship is crucial to translating the resources into understandable terms and experiences. These daily responses have proven crucial to everything we do. Some students respond positively with enthusiasm; others, with worry that the reading is going right over their heads; and sometimes there is outright disagreement when, for example, they take a hard-line position that socialism is just an ideal that will never work. But sometimes there are epiphanies of sorts, which every teacher looks for, as when one student remarked that: "The Mardi Gras movie blew my mind. Everything we've been talking about just fell into place."

Key Quotes: For every assigned chapter or essay, three students have the task for that day of highlighting what they feel are the important passages. They are asked to do this by dividing the reading into three sections, with each student responsible for typing up one page of "key quotes" for their section. The group then assembles their three pages into one file, also mounted on WebCT. Students must also boldface any new terms or terms they might not understand. To some extent they take on the role of resource translators for that day's reading since they are representing (translating into a digested form) a simplified version of the text to make it more accessible to their classmates.

Definitions: In this assignment, also done in small groups, students each take 3-5 terms to define from the boldfaced items highlighted in the previous day's key quotes. Since it becomes pretty clear that there may be two or more separate (and often competing) meanings,

they should try to clarify those differences when they arise. This task helps the class to progressively develop a working vocabulary. And I provide a model for how this is done at the beginning of the semester by defining the four terms I want to emphasize: surplus value, privatization, deregulation, and free market fundamentalism. With respect to my choice of key terms, I agree with Richard Ohmann that "the concept of privatization gives us more analytic leverage than that of globalization in trying to grasp what is happening in post-secondary education" (par.13). Again, students are functioning exactly as resource translators: making definitions clear and accessible to the immediate audience of the students in class.

Culture Wars synopsis: Students are asked to explore various news and commentary sources representing two opposing sides in the debates that have shaped contemporary U.S. social and political life with respect to the rise of neoliberalism. The opposing sides represent, generally speaking, the political left and the political right. Their specific task is to choose one issue and read two sources about it, one from each side, and then write a synopsis of each article, and a brief comparison of their similarities and differences. I supply a list of suggested alternative journal and web sites from both sides, although students are free to select their own sources as well. A good example of how such resources translate into classroom practices happened when one student decided to search "Noam Chomsky" on YouTube, and found there, among other things, an interview with rapper Zach de la Rocha, the first half of which we showed to the whole class on the overhead. This provoked a discussion of Chomsky, de la Rocha, (and his first group, Rage Against the Machine), and The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), one of the key topics of their conversation. Fortuitously, we had also just been reading David Harvey's description of NAFTA, so suddenly we had an amazing set of links between their time spent on YouTube, alternative media figures like de la Rocha, and neoliberalism.

[When discussing student proposals], students hear from other classmates that everything has a history, and once we get that far, it invariably leads back to the social, political, and economic dimensions of the frame we have outlined.

Mid-term Research Project: "Neoliberalism and Me": For their first full research project, I ask students to explore the ways that their personal life, career plans, and choice of major have been affected by neoliberalism. The scope of the project is a 6-8 page paper in which they get to relate my agenda to theirs, so to speak. Some students really get to open whole new ways of thinking about their future opportunities (or lack of them), and the most interesting papers are often the surprising ones. For example, one nursing student, who had previously seen

Michael Moore's film, *Sicko*, told the story of how her learning about neoliberalism gave her a much better understanding of Moore's contrast between socialized medicine in France and Great Britain, and privatized care in the United States.

IV. Freedom of Inquiry and the Hope for Social Justice

My hope is that the first half course work, aimed at articulating the historical frame of neoliberalism, will influence and, at best, infuse their second half projects over which they have entirely free range with respect to topics. My only suggestion is that they should care deeply about the issues they seek to investigate so the topics should not be frivolous, and we do indeed end up discussing some proposed topics that may at first seem trivial, say, hair coloring. But often after discussion, students hear from other classmates that everything, including hair color, has a history, and once we get that far, it invariably leads back into the social, political, and economic dimensions of the frame we have outlined in the first half. During the first 2-3 weeks of the second half of the course, students work to develop their topics, which are quite literally all over the place: from the history of high heel shoes, to the construction of the U.S./Mexican border wall, to the history of tanning salons, to No Child Left Behind, to gay marriage, to revenue sharing in Major League Baseball, to more place-based investigations of how a powerful factory affected the local economy of their hometown, and so forth. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to provide details of these investigations, let me sketch out how technical research skills function within the historical frames I have outlined.

For two weeks in the middle of the second half of the course, I turn to the typically boring if not dreaded concerns for documentation, citation, and plagiarism. I do so in relation to the course theme by asking the class to undertake a brief investigation into the history of intellectual property laws. Since their formation in late 18th century England, the intellectual property debates provide a good example of how under emerging industrial capitalism, citizens and governments were struggling over the rights of private intellectual property and the sharing of that knowledge in the public commons. Now, since students in this class have already had a good overview of the relations between private and public ownership, they are relatively well-prepared to understand the key issues. I have a few handouts highlighting these debates, as well as an overview of the historical evolution of the different major documentation styles, APA, Chicago, MLA. We even touch on the significance of the WTO's 1996 TRIPS (Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights), which extends all kinds of legal protections favoring the private corporate ownership of a huge range of intellectual property, from genetic codes to Hollywood movies. Given these historical overviews, then, the care with which students should follow the documentation styles of their chosen fields is a form of social caring. The ethics of justice is always a key issue in citation because students realize that they must borrow from the public commons

knowledge often produced by private individuals, and any form of social justice calls for considerable care in recognizing their predecessors from whom they must borrow and on whom they depend in their research translations. They can also see that there really are some grey areas regarding ownership rights of individuals to texts, musical phrases, video images, and the like. This, of course, segues well into discussions of plagiarism and the injustice of such unacknowledged appropriations. Citation, therefore, acquires a contextual sense of social and political importance, rather than coming down as a set of picky, decontextualized rules.

The goal of the final projects is to develop either a multi-media web site presentation, or a desk-top published magazine/book that they produce for a specific audience. I ask them to reflect on the imagined audience to whom they are translating the results of their research by composing a one-page audience analysis that accompanies their final projects. Again, how much they draw on our first half historical frames, and how they imagine their audience responding to those historical contexts, varies considerably, sometimes as a reflection of their resistance to the anti-capitalist considerations the course opens up. Indeed, although many students remain unremitting free-market advocates, I have yet to encounter a student in Research Writing classes who does not have hopes that social security checks will be showing up in their mailboxes in some distant future their parents have called retirement. By the end of this class, they can at least see that when Roosevelt signed the Social Security Act in 1935, this part of the New Deal was a slim slice of the socialist plan for a more equitable redistribution of wealth right in the heart of capitalist America. Even after we discuss the web site for the World Social Forum, and its links to the wide-spread alter-globalization movement, it goes without saying that students do not all become active members of the DSA (Democratic Socialists of America); understandably, since the resistance to any wholesale conversion runs pretty deep. All I can say is that so far I have negotiated the resistance, or to put a positive spin on it, the gratitude for the historical frame expressed by quite a few students in the course evaluations helps to keep me going.

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