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Education is perceived to be the door and ladder to prosperity. Learning, it is believed, will open new opportunities and help one advance intellectually and socioeconomically. As writing instructors, we believe in the transformative potentials of our pedagogy. We teach students to be rhetorical authors and audiences of “texts,” believing these abilities will help them attain success in college and beyond, and since the social epistemic turn in the early ‘90s, composition courses also strive to make learners become critical “readers” of culture; we teach them to challenge hegemonic myths in order to bring about positive social change (Berlin 100-101). Cultural criticism, critical thinking, and argumentation are highly regarded in our discipline. Critiquing these valued practices as middle-class habitus, Irvin Peckham’s Going North Thinking West examines how contemporary composition pedagogy marginalizes working class students, castigating their culture and worldviews. It calls for our discipline to develop a more reflexive and inclusive pedagogy for teaching college composition.

Situating composition studies as a middle-class enterprise, the book begins by problematizing the functions of education. Chapter 1 posits that education does not merely impart knowledge, it disciplines working class students to conform to literacy standards and practices deemed acceptable/appropriate by the bourgeoisie, and it initiates them into a culture that privileges and maintains middle class epistemology and values. This presumption frames the book’s remaining arguments.

Chapter 2 provides a definition of class: “a system of social relationships within which people act toward each other as if the groups did exist … sorting on the basis of a person’s occupation, level of authority, assets, level of education, and social relationships” (26). Through this definition, chapter 3 explores the relationship between class and language, showing how linguistic codes demarcate status and identity and how first-year writing exacerbates this demarcation by norming the middle-class language. Peckham asserts that composition studies accentuates the “logic of the deficit thesis” through which working-class language is depicted as deficient because it detracts from middle-class English, the so-called “language of power” (42). This logic is then used to justify the adherence to bourgeois language and literacy practices, and instructors come to believe that although students have the right to their own language, they best learn the master’s discourse. Working-class speech becomes castigated as a result.

Chapter 4 argues that, like middle-class English, critical thinking is not class neutral. It classifies critical thinking into two strands: cognitive and social. The former focuses on reasoning, correctness, and logical validity (logos). The latter analyzes social structure and ideology. Peckham acknowl-
edges that both strands are important, but he advocates teaching them with “epistemological humility” in which students are taught to be reflexive and recognize that all perspectives are partial and situated (64). Hence, it is crucial for students to learn to think through multiple lenses and continuously question their knowledge and beliefs.

Chapter 5 critiques argumentation and shows how it conflicts with working-class learners’ background in five ways. First, academic argumentation values objectivity, by which Peckham means composing in a distanced tone with reason, rationality, and logic at the fore, and sublimating emotion and desire that might impede that tone. According to Peckham, this norm is problematic for working-class rhetors because they see emotionally distant discourse as pretentious and insincere; they prefer to “write ragged. Their words spew out, an eruption of thought and emotion…” (71). Second, effective argumentation requires writers to see issues from multiple angles, but working-class students have limited opportunities to cultivate this ability. Peckham claims that, contrary to the working-class, upper- and middle-class Americans are exposed to varied social situations and roles through their networking, employment, and travel. These exposures broaden their perspectives and allow them to see from various points of view. Hence, they have an advantage in academic argumentation over working-class writers (73). Third, dialogism is lacking among working-class members. Given their social position, Peckham believes they are not raised/trained to dialogically negotiate back-and-forth on public issues and often are silenced (73-75). Fourth, middle-class children possess greater vocabulary and syntactic skills. They enter the academy with more advanced language ability (78). Lastly, academic writing encourages readers to read against the grain, practices that Peckham purports are not encouraged in the working-class household, where children are taught to remain silent, defer to authority, and reserve their complaints (79-80, 84-85). In sum, this chapter demonstrates that academic argumentation is not disinterested; it favors bourgeois privileges, putting working-class learners at a disadvantage. Peckham is not suggesting that we cease teaching argumentation, however. Through his critiques, he is attempting to expose the biases of academic conventions so we can better understand and accommodate working-class learners and most importantly, recognize that they may have difficulties acquiring academic conventions because of habit differences—not unintelligence or sloth.

Chapter 6 critiques critical pedagogy. Peckham believes that it focuses on politics at the expense of composing. Ideology, rather than writing, becomes the main subject of the course. Further, critical pedagogues may also position themselves as the enlightened ones and students as the blinded ones, hereby producing a hierarchy that runs counter to the egalitarian aim of critical pedagogy. Moreover, the instructor’s urge to correct students’ naïve perceptions can lead to a vanguardist pedagogy that pressures students to agree with his/her worldviews. Class discussions become prescribed to assure a predictable agreement, and free, radical thinking is circumvented as a result.
Extending the critique of critical pedagogy, chapter 7 explores how cultural studies lessons can clash with working-class students’ habitus and, at times, beliefs. An analysis of a textbook and writing prompt on cultural criticism in this chapter shows that they are written in a patronizing tone that positions students as naïve subjects. Peckham also examines a sample student essay on a cultural critique assignment and found that the prompt conflicts with working-class students’ beliefs, causing one student to become ambivalent about the course’s focus and function. She ended up producing a weak essay for which she received a poor grade. The instructor thought this writer failed to demonstrate the social strand of critical thinking, when in fact, Peckham argues, she is attempting to negotiate and resist the political agenda and middle-class values upon which the course is based (133, 142). According to Peckham, what is at issue here is the clash between middle- and working-class worldviews, but the teacher’s bourgeois root and political views may have precluded her from recognizing this (142).

Citing two case studies, chapter 8 demonstrates how critical pedagogues’ political orientation may impede them from properly evaluating students’ writing. They assess the writer’s belief systems instead of his/her prose. Consequently, students may feel pressured to change their viewpoints to align with the instructor in order to please him/her and attain a good grade.

Chapter 9, the last chapter, calls for instructors to practice a reflexive pedagogy that honors and works with, instead of against, working-class students. This does not mean eliminating argumentation or critical thinking. Peckham affirms that these skills are crucial, but in teaching them, we must better understand working class writers and their backgrounds and use this knowledge to create lessons that will engage, rather than alienate, them.

In sum, Going North Thinking West urges writing instructors to be critically aware of bourgeois biases inherent in the discipline, so that we can avoid marginalizing writers who may not share that social origin. It invites us to scrutinize our instruction and field at large to create an inclusionary pedagogy for teaching writing. Its critiques of problematic critical pedagogy practices are thought-provoking and significant. They can help us avoid replicating them in our own teaching and maintain a writing-centered classroom that fosters free thinking, open debate, and multivocality, essential for intellectual growth. Altogether, the book aims to break down the steep steps that hinder working-class students from succeeding rhetorically and academically. However, it does not offer concrete pedagogical activities or strategies that might help us circumvent the pitfalls critiqued in the book. How might we foster both strands of critical thinking, maintain epistemological humility, and avoid marginalizing working-class students at the same time? As a composition instructor who works with working-class students, I would have appreciated specific exercises and assignments that would help me address this question in details. Further, while I admire the book’s aim, I would like more evidence to substantiate some of the characterizations about working-class learners (e.g. they are less likely to see multiple perspectives).
Regardless, Peckham’s book presents a compelling critique of Composition Studies. It encourages us to sustain healthy skepticism by being critical and reflexive about our own teaching and discipline, crucial practices that will help us remain effective and innovative teachers and researchers of writing in the years to come.

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**Works Cited**