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CITIZENSHIP AND LITERACY WORK:

Thoughts Without A Conclusion

Richard Ohmann

Democracy can't work unless citizens are literate and informed: that's the starting point of one familiar justification for universal schooling. College faculties and administrations may articulate it in ideological moments or see it as too obvious to need articulation. Naturally, compositionists have taken encouragement from, and sought support by affiliating with, this amiably righteous principle.

A closely allied rationale for university education is that by building, preserving, and transmitting the national culture, it fortifies the nation itself. (Bill Readings elaborated this link in *The University in Ruins*.) Compositionists don't press this claim for their work so often as perhaps they did when usage and correctness were coin of their professional realm.¹ But it is implicit in their offer to help immigrants and children of the working class enter a national conversation by first mastering conventions of academic discourse.

In my view, both these ideas are decent and serviceable, in comparison to others we might recall (the university's task is to perfect the gentleman) and especially to others we hear now (education's task is to foster economic growth and American competitiveness). Still, the telos of democratic citizenship and that of national culture are themselves laced with contradiction and ideological trouble. In particular, for my purpose here—which is to wonder about the prospects now for democratic work in composition—both rationales allow inequality to flourish, and to seem natural and inevitable.

Cultural studies after Raymond Williams has probably made it impossible, any longer, to think of culture as a realm cleansed of power, or as homogeneous throughout a nation. If universities fostered nationhood, they did so by valuing the culture of some over that of others, by recovering (actually creating) selective traditions, by giving people unequal access to respectable culture, by helping some turn culture into cultural capital, by letting their children draw on that capital to extend privilege generationally, and so on. Not to say that culture is another name for snobbery or national culture, or just a ruling class trick, only that the university can't stand apart from the class system of its society. The point is perhaps even more obvious for literacy, which, in spite of many compositionists' egalitarian hopes, is a birthright to some, a meritocratic attainment for others, a low-grade marketable skill for many, and a "remedial" insult to still others.

The trouble with citizenship is perhaps deeper—and more vexing, because citizenship is a relation of basic equality: you and I, however unlike in birth or circumstance, have theoretically the same rights and obligations before the law and the same weight in governance. Of course this has a hollow ring in the era of hundred-million-dollar campaign war chests, bought pardons, and Supreme Court sleight-of-hand. But

there's reason to doubt that the ideal of equal citizenship could ever be realized in a society like ours, even if an army of John McCains were to banish such abuses.

T. H. Marshall posed the fundamental question fifty years ago: is citizenship—a relation of basic equality—compatible with capitalist class structure? Or, to point up the contradiction: since capitalism was the condition of possibility for both citizenship and class inequality, "How is it that these two opposing principles could grow and flourish side by side in the same soil?"² Marshall answered by showing that in fact capitalist inequality was *consequent upon* the principle of equal civil rights, which in turn was necessary to the free play of capitalist economic activities. Each man (later, person) had to have the right to enter contracts, pursue gain, seek advancement, and in general act as a free individual in the market. Free labor and free capital needed a relation like citizenship as their legal basis. So in effect, citizenship *was* the "soil" in which capitalist inequality flourished. Marshall particularly emphasized a universal right to education as critical for full citizenship: "The status acquired by education is carried out into the world bearing the stamp of legitimacy, because it has been conferred by an institution designed to give the citizen his just rights," and in this way, "citizenship operates as an instrument of social stratification" (110). In other words, equal opportunity and universal access to education are compatible with great inequality, and, because they make it seem the result of unequal merit and effort, they also make it seem both inevitable and just.

There is no way for composition, nor for education in general, to escape this logic. To explicate the point, consider primary and secondary schooling, which, unlike attendance at college, is in the U.S. not only a universal right but a legal requirement: access is universal. Yet even across the public schools, inequality is in Jonathan Kozol's word "savage." Attempts to level it out have always failed, and the currently popular strategies will surely also fail. About vouchers, and the privatization that would accompany them, I need not comment to likely readers of this essay. Charter schools financed in the most common way take funds from the budgets of the regular schools that feed them, almost certainly making those schools worse, so that however bright and free the charter schools may be, the system as a whole remains as unequal as before, or more so. A third strategy—mandated statewide curricula with high-stakes testing—is spreading across the country, with its advocates stating always their intention of offering tough love to the weakest schools—that is state help with professional development for teachers and tutorial work for failing students, but no diplomas for students who nonetheless fail the tests, and various penalties for teachers and schools that don't make the grade. In Massachusetts, where I live, the first cohort of students to take the tests for real will do so in spring of 2001, and if their scores match those that their predecessors achieved in practice runs, a large majority of poor kids, those with special needs, those for whom English is not the first language, and those in vocational schools, will fail. The sorting by class, race, and (dis)ability that went on subtly before will now proceed with stark clarity, as every student is measured on the same scale and either given or denied a diploma. This will amount to an ideological simplification, too, in that each eighteen-year-old's trajectory into college, career, dead-end job, or prison will now be explainable by reference to his or her numerically expressed merit. Unless, of course, as seems possible, the parents and students and teachers of Massachusetts rise up to defeat this unpleasant outcome.

The fourth strategy, just now gaining momentum, is to legislate or sue for much more equality³ in public school funding, which has from the beginning depended on local property taxes, and thus been a fluid transmitter of social class across generations. This kind of redistribution will disrupt privilege far more in most states than it has so far done in Vermont, so it seems unlikely to take place nationwide unless driven by a twenty-first century equivalent of *Brown v. Board of Education*. Even if it did—and I certainly favor it wherever possible—I suppose that Scarsdale and Oak Park and Beverly Hills would have little difficulty finding ways to preserve the advantage their children have over kids from Harlem and the Chicago projects and South Central L.A. Universal and equal schooling will be a central policy of any truly democratic society, but the sad truth is that there can be no equal schooling in an unequal society. (Nor, I think, can such schooling be the vanguard of egalitarian change—but that's another story.)

If this holds for K-12, it holds more evidently for higher education, where universal access has never been more than a distant hope, and where, should we somehow achieve it, access would be to Princeton and then Wall Street for some, and, for the rest, to the same array of less favored colleges and life trajectories that are available now. So the university cannot even with good will and heroic efforts foster citizenship in the basic sense, as a relation of equality. Nor can literacy instruction.

What a good college education can and does achieve in the arena of citizenship is nearly the opposite: it helps some students refine and develop their literacy into a vehicle of self-advancement, and maybe control over others. I don't refer to the economic advantage it will give them, though it will do that; I have in mind the leverage in public affairs. Citizens have obligations as well as rights, but the obligations are pretty slim in this country—paying taxes, obeying laws, providing census information and the like. No law requires them to exercise the franchise, and most do not. Beyond that minimal and (for each individual person) inconsequential act, citizens as a whole must serve in elective office, take turns on the PTO or zoning board, and so on. The tasks are required, but only a relative few citizens volunteer to do them. In addition, activists organize civic projects not mandated by any law: agitate to close down the nuclear power plant, set up a clinic for old people, get obscene books out of the library, establish favorable terms for businesses considering a move into the area, fight to keep them out (e.g., Wal-Mart), found a right wing think tank or a ballet company, organize a TA union or an NRA chapter. Such work gives the society its texture and shapes its future. Well before the days of "bowling alone," most people declined to join in; those who do expand their citizenship in such ways help set the terms of social life for the rest. It is obvious that advanced literacy gives activists an edge in assuming such leadership, and also, more tautologically, that those destined by birthright to be leaders will be offered advanced literacy along the way.

Now, that's no reason to deplore expanded citizenship (we couldn't do without it) or to give up on the project of offering it to working class students. It is a reason, however, to dismiss claims that university education in general and composition in particular improve citizenship flat out, if that means putting all citizens on a more equal footing and helping them work well together. No, what American universities have done for a hundred years is prepare some youth to take up places in the professional-managerial class and, if they wish, exercise robust citizenship too—while preparing others for more technical work and narrower citizenship. Liberal and progressive composition instructors have worked within these limits of possibility, with more or less effectiveness depending on who their students were and what political winds were blowing in and outside of the university.

Why am I saying these abstract and gloomy things? I have meant to ground the question of citizenship and composition in terms and ideas that applied to the university system at least until recently. Today, as the title of this colloquy indicates, and as is suggested by very much analysis and speculation, our system of higher education is changing into something different, which has called forth various attempts at naming the emergent institution. The "managed university" is a helpful one, and others, such as the "corporate university" and "*Campus Inc.*" (Geoffrey White's title) identify something that most observers from left to right and from *The Chronicle of Higher Education* to *Business Week* agree is happening. How does it change the conditions of post-secondary work in literacy? How does it bear on the question of citizenship?

Bill Readings' much-discussed book, *The University in Ruins*, has pointed some toward a direct enough answer. In the current issue of *College English*, I come across this, by Daniel Green: "the role established for the modern university over the past 200 years, to mold educated citizens who will take productive places in the nation-state, is no longer tenable," because—and he goes on to quote Readings—the university "is becoming a different kind of institution, one that is no longer linked to the destiny of the nation-state by virtue of its role as producer, protector, and inculcator of an idea of national culture."⁴ The university is becoming a transnational corporation, he says, and although I suppose you could argue that it now prepares the young for global citizenship, this doesn't help much and doesn't at all capture

Readings' point. In my view, the concept of privatization gives us more analytic leverage than that of globalization in trying to grasp what is happening in post-secondary education.

To be sure, U. S. universities are selling their degrees and their knowledge "products" on a world market—attracting many thousands of international students, starting up branches abroad, and using the internet to carry learning across global distances. Also, corporations shop worldwide for educated labor, and hence indirectly for education itself: if one of them sets up a facility in India to take advantage of engineers who earn a small fraction of what their American counterparts do, that company is also in effect buying specialized education that is cheap by comparison to engineering degrees in the U.S. But then, capital has always sought cheap (and docile) labor in poor countries or colonies, just as it has sought or created markets abroad for its products. The international mobility of capital in recent decades is real and important; but to repeat, I think the idea of privatization works better to underline the gradual subsumption of higher education within markets and market-like processes, and thus explain lots of changes in our lives.

Those that involve academic labor are all too familiar. Part-timers doubling from 1970 to the 1990s as a percentage of the workforce; full-time, tenure track hires amounting to only about one-third of all hires, last decade; the consolidation of a two-tier labor market with the upper tier shrinking; the "oversupply" of credentialed workers and the disappearance of many from university work: such painful changes are the givens of this symposium, and need not be enumerated further. I want simply to mention two contexts for them. First, similar changes have taken place throughout the economy since 1970, in the era of agile competition and flexible accumulation. The old, Fordist, core labor force of unionized, job-secure, well-paid, benefited workers has everywhere fallen on hard times, and a host of new and old arrangements now become dominant: outsourcing, subcontracting, job-sharing, temp work, part-time work, sweatshops, maquiladoras, prison labor, and so on. Second, the conditions of academic (and other mental) labor increasingly approximate those of industrial labor, especially for professionals in the lower tier. And of course that has happened precisely because the academic profession is no longer functioning in the way successful professions do. It has failed to limit entry, regulate careers, restrict the practice of teaching to fully credentialed members and selected apprentices, control the definition and assessment of its work, and secure the high pay and prestige that people in strong professions enjoy.

But *are* there any strong professions these days, as medicine and law were strong a few decades ago? I cannot argue the point here, but believe there's a good case that the forces of agile capitalism are undermining most or all of the professions. As capital seeks to bring all areas of human activity into the market, it has increasingly commodified "information," including the kinds that we proudly but perhaps quaintly call "knowledge," and that professions have amassed as cultural capital, to ground their practices and justify their exclusiveness. This point may seem remote from what's happened to English studies and literacy work, compared, say, to the commodification of medical services by HMOs. But if you think about the various learning companies offering literary culture for sale; about provision of literacy skills on the Net; about the fights over who owns and can profit from courseware; or about Rudolph Giuliani's threat to eliminate "remedial" work from the City University and subcontract it to private companies; it will be evident that nothing intrinsic to the subject matter of our own profession will protect it from commercial exploitation, any more than the knowledge and skills of weavers protected their trade against the capitalists of Manchester.

Whether the emergent profession of rhetoric and composition is turned back by commodification remains to be seen, but there is no doubt that the corporate university is a less and less friendly home for it, as well as for the older professionalized disciplines. To be a little more precise: by "corporate university" I mean an institution that acts like a profit-making business rather than a public or philanthropic trust. Thus, we hear of universities applying productivity and performance measures to teaching (Illinois); of plans to put departments in competition with one another for resources (Florida); of cutting faculty costs not only by replacing full-timers with part-timers and temps and by subcontracting for everything from food services

to the total management of physical plant, but also by substituting various schemes of computerized instruction; and so on.

Marketing the educational product becomes a far more self-conscious activity than it used to be: universities try to identify their niches, turn their names into brands, develop "signatures" and slogans. (The college where I used to teach paid consultants to invent a killer slogan for us; they came up with "the alternative ivy," which students soon laughed out of court.) Less ethereally, all but the fancier colleges do what community colleges have long done: tailor course offerings to the immediate career needs of students entering or returning to the job market—frankly imagining students as customers, not as citizens or as future leaders or as novices in a common culture. Universities also look around for other customers, in some cases selling their students *to* those customers, through large, long-term, exclusive contracts with such as Coke and Pepsi. Administrators scan the university for whatever resources they can take to market: research, patents, courseware, faculty reputations. They seek to "partner" with corporations in developing these products. Or they seek venture capital to help launch businesses that the university will partly own. Or they use their own venture capital to set up "incubators" for small, often local businesses, some of which will hit it big and bring fame or fortune to the university along the way.⁵

In the old days, administrators made pitches to trustees, regents, or legislators, seeking a mix of income sources (tax moneys, tuition, yield from the endowment), and staged their mainly traditional activities within the limits so established. In boom times such as the two postwar decades, they added new programs and expanded campuses. In lean times they trimmed costs. Now, like agile corporations, universities look to develop new products, enter new markets, preserve flexibility in labor and plant, and in general direct their efforts where they can generate income in excess of costs. They are not profit-making institutions as a whole, but they seek profit-like gains in whatever part of the operation they may be generated.

The causes of this shift are complex and not really to the point of this essay. They include a decisive reduction in direct state funding of public universities—from roughly half of their total budgets in the early 1970s to less than a third now, and quite a bit less than that (20-25%) at major research campuses like Berkeley and UCLA. That reduction followed in part on the "fiscal crisis of the State" around 1970, the accountability movement that sprang up at the same moment, and the conservative reaction to social rebellions and educational reforms of the 1960s (e.g., the "exposure" by right wing culture warriors of academic lunacy and betrayal made it politically acceptable to defund higher education). As government support declined, competition from non-traditional universities and programs greatly increased. Proprietary institutions grew apace. Most famous is the University of Phoenix, with its hundred-plus "campuses," nearly 100,000 students, no library, and no full-time faculty. But many others are making money in the same way, by providing skills, learning, and credentials for people looking to advance in their jobs or find better ones. Finally, corporate universities abound. General Electric started the first one in 1955, and there are now 1800 of them providing just-in-time training to their own employees. These and other incursions by for-profit companies have forced universities to think of themselves, too, as players in a vast *market* for post-secondary education. That is the most telling expression of privatization.

Along with this refiguring of education as a commodity, an ideology of education valued for the economic benefits it brings has become salient. When the senior George Bush took office in 1988, staking out his claim to be the "education president," he gave exactly four reasons in support of his showcase proposal, the Educational Excellence Act of 1989: "I believe," he said, "that greater educational achievement promotes sustained economic growth, enhances the Nation's competitive position in world markets, increases productivity, and leads to higher incomes for everyone." Most of the provisions in that act bore on K-12 education, but government increasingly demands that higher education, as well, repay expenditures on it within the same economic calculus. Critical intelligence? Historical consciousness? Appreciation of beauty? Spiritual growth? Ethical refinement? However loudly the Right may cheer when a Lynne Cheney or William Bennett or E.D. Hirsch or Allan Bloom condemns the politically correct as barbarians and calls for reestablishment of the Great Books, when it comes to federal support for

education, market rationales take precedence. Students seem to have got the message: 75% now cite being "well-off financially" as an essential goal in their educations, compared to 41% thirty years ago; back then, 82% listed development of a sound "philosophy of life" among their main goals, twice as many as do today.

Needless to say, although citizenship, too, gets a nod in pious moments, it has a smaller place now than before in official rationales for higher education and no place at all in the play of economic forces that are remaking the university. For students, citizenship is a recreational choice, an individual taste. For capital it is nearly irrelevant—of even less interest than other leisure activities because it cannot easily be commodified. In fact, robust citizenship is a downer for capital, a threat to its freedom of movement and its ability to mold the future society that best suits its needs. Those needs include quiet citizens and social calm, maintained by the police when necessary, not a vibrant public sphere where needs other than capital's can be asserted and dominance contested.

To return to the main question: how does literacy work fit into the configuration I have been describing? One might answer, only a bit sardonically, that it doesn't have to—that higher education as a whole has reconfigured itself on the model of literacy work, having learned from English 101 how to give the customer decent service while keeping costs down and the labor force contingent. The professionalization of comp, while installing the usual apparatus (journals, conferences, a professional society, graduate programs and degrees), bringing a great advance in theoretical sophistication, and winning job security and good compensation for advanced practitioners, has made little if any difference in who does the front line work, under what regimen, for what pay, and so on. Meanwhile English, the old professional home of literacy work, has itself fallen on hard times, along with most academic professions, losing much of its ability to maintain a market haven for its members. So the adjuncts and graduate students who teach composition exemplify well the floating, peripheral labor force of contemporary capitalism.

Nor is the service they provide the kind that can easily be packaged and sold as a job credential or career boost. It remains "basic" if not remedial, a foundation on which to build other marketable skills and capabilities. For that reason and because of the addictive arrangement whereby TAs staff first-year English, it seems likely that composition will go on being taught chiefly within the university in a kind of sweatshop operation.

To sum up, then: the idea that universal education underwrites a polity of free and equal citizens was contradictory to begin with. But an illusion can serve well as a common goal, and the dream of a mutually responsible, educated citizenry probably did help open the gates to higher education in the U.S., through the postwar period. In the present time of privatization and agile capital, the illusion shatters: education becomes a commodity among other commodities, with claims made for its contribution to the common good only on the basis of economic advantage. All that is solid melts into air, once again.

Meanwhile, the same forces of capitalist transformation and market imperialism have pressed the university to act like a business in many ways, including the casualization of its labor force. The academic profession as a whole is losing much of the ground it won a hundred years ago. Literacy workers within or outside of English departments have long been exploited and marginalized, nor has professionalization raised up most of those workers as it has their leaders. So within the average literacy classroom, a dispossessed intellectual works at survival wages transmitting skills to people hoping they can trade these for more-than-survival wages.

This picture may be skewed or defective; I hope to be challenged and corrected by readers of *Workplace*. But if the picture is even roughly accurate, what directions does it point for the progressives who, I think, make up a majority among literacy workers? Rather than bring this sketchy argument to a dubious closure, let me take advantage of our evanescent medium to put out two ideas for discussion. First, given the fading chances for strong professionalization among literacy workers, the present move to unionize and to

ally with other groups of university workers is right and necessary. Further, adjuncts and grad students should continue to lean on professional and scholarly organizations to support unions and act more like unions, though they cannot *become* effective unions. The labor-related resolutions passed by the Delegate Assembly at December's convention of the Modern Language Association show many members to be in agreement with the Graduate Student and Radical Caucuses' arguments that struggle for better working conditions is now in the interest of both our contingent and core labor forces, as well as of those professional values that are worth hanging on to. We need solidarity, in short, pointing "out" toward a late capitalist equivalent of embattled citizenship.

Second, if privatization is driving higher education into the market, to the point where even education presidents forget to include citizenship in official proclamations, deferring instead to GDP and international competitiveness, could this be a time for literacy workers to take whatever high ground is available in public relations and in fights over budget and curriculum? If the Ph.D.-holding and tenured directors of writing programs work with those in the trenches to refuse the economic justification for comp, stressing instead historical, social, and critical thinking, . . . well, what? Not the revolution, but maybe the beginning of a fight to retake the university for education. This fight and the one for decent working conditions might enforce one another. Or not—we're in tough times. I hope others in this conversation can revise or complete this line of thought better than I can.

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