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Making Work Visible

David Seitz

**RECONSIDERING WORKING-CLASS STUDENTS'
INSTRUMENTALIST MOTIVES**

When I asked Mike to describe an educated person to me, he initially spoke of people who tried to impress each other with their talk of politics, mocking their language and tone of voice. I asked him if this meant he didn't want to be educated in that sense. He replied, "I think you can learn something and still be yourself . . . I mean sure the A looks good, and is going to get you somewhere, but if you get there, and you have no friends, what's the point in your being there? You can have all the money in the world, but if everybody hates you because you're a cocksucker, what can you do about that?" Clearly, Mike implicitly associated acting educated with seeking individual prestige at the expense of working-class solidarity. Several studies of working-class young adults reveal the same loyalties (see, for example, Eckert; Steinitz and Solomon). Mike was a research participant in my ethnography of a first-year research writing class on "Women in the Third World" taught by Rashmi Varma at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) in 1995.¹ He was from a South Side Irish working-class background, born into a family of cops (as he put it). Mike's concern for maintaining solidarity with his home culture may have contributed to his discomfort with other students' discussions of the readings in Rashmi's class. Outside of the class, he commented to Rashmi and me that students were being too critical of everything. Although he did not see himself as wholeheartedly supporting the system, as Rashmi put it, he felt the need to take the middle ground in class discussions of postcolonialist issues. In a midsemester conference

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with Rashmi, he commented that he didn't like reading negative things all the time—that he felt he had been provided for in life, so he was less prone to make judgments.

With me he referred to a heated debate in class over the corporate exploitation of international labor. “Sure, there is a level of exploitation, but without the job, these people would probably starve. You’ve got to see the good and the bad. Sometimes people don’t want to hear that there are good points to things. They just want to hear that they are being exploited.” Mike’s language here may smack of the free-market ideology that underlies instrumental rationality in America today. An instrumentalist view as described by Kurt Spellmeyer, Douglas Foley, and others perceives knowledge primarily as a means to an end, rather than a questioning and consequent reconsidering of those ends. Yet from Mike’s view, there may also be other motivations for his language. First, to be overly critical is to seek prestige and status in this institutional situation, which goes against his ethics of solidarity. And second, to reject the value of hard work, perhaps even exploitative labor, is to reject working-class values historically rooted in material necessity.

I offer this brief portrait of Mike to suggest that students’ motives for instrumental approaches to their education, and particularly those motives of students from working-class backgrounds, are often more complex than our field has so far acknowledged. For Mike and other students from similar backgrounds, I found they may take this approach to distance themselves from the social capital of mainstream education and its forms of institutional identity, even while they work for the economic capital they hope will come with a college degree.

Both Jeff Smith and Russel Durst have argued persuasively why we must respect students’ instrumentalist motives if we hope to gain their trust in the writing classroom. Durst’s ethnography of a first-year writing class at the University of Cincinnati demonstrates well how critical-writing teachers stand to lose persuasive authority with students if their agenda ignores students’ motives for attending college. For these reasons, Durst advocates a pedagogy of “reflective instrumentalism” that works with most students’ pragmatic motives for attending college, but seeks to cultivate critical analysis within a framework of students’ examining school and career issues through textual and field research. But both Durst and Smith attribute the majority of students’ motives to conservative middle-class values, not the complex concerns of identity, social capital, and acculturation I found in Mike’s and other UIC students’ perspectives. The local situations of these students suggest that we cannot assume what these students’ motives for instrumentalist behaviors might be. For instance, some might emphasize the role of their families in shaping work values; others might emphasize peers and neighborhood influences; while others might point to tensions of work and values of success or freedom. If we make these a priori assumptions about students’ instrumentalist motives, we miss the opportu-

nity for the students and ourselves to examine and perhaps learn from these complex social situations.

THE WORK MEMOIR PROJECT: THEORETICAL RATIONALE

Nonetheless, when these same students discussed their views of work and education with me, they would often use language that writing teachers would dismiss as clichés, conventional sayings such as “Hard work will always pay off in the end.” Too often critical-writing teachers have tended to write off their students’ use of these maxims and narrative tropes of success as unworthy assimilation to dominant cultural values. As Dawn Skorczewski recently reminded us, when teachers encounter a cliché about work and education, such as “No one is going to give it to you on a silver platter,” in a student’s writing, they habitually challenge the statement’s validity with their own clichéd responses in their margin questions. Typically teachers ask questions intended to push the student to reexamine the appropriate reading from their course, or a contradiction in the student’s own paper, that complicates the ideology in the use of the offending statement. Most of the time when I ask questions like these in students’ texts, I realize later that my implicit motive was not to learn from others (in a way that would then help me intervene more effectively in their learning), but to instruct them in what I already believe I know.

Moreover, my ethnographic research at UIC had shown me that when teachers implicitly dismiss the local social meanings underlying students’ commonplace statements, they often are not given internally persuasive authority by the student writer. The student participants in my research had repeatedly taught me that they could articulate complex understandings of their cultural and material situations embedded in their conventional views about work. Through their articulation of lived experiences, these students would persuasively argue for the validity of these common sayings to help them make meaning in their lives in individualized ways that should not be dismissed as commonplace. So when I began teaching at Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio, a school with many students from working-class backgrounds, I designed the work memoir project to aid these students’ articulation of this complexity and validity. In the second half of this article I examine how and why themes of developmental control tend to emerge in these work memoir writings and what they suggest about persuasive critical learning, particularly with working-class students.

This stance toward student writing and internally persuasive critical learning follows Thomas Newkirk’s discussions of personal writing and the tradition of American pragmatic philosophers such as William James and John Dewey. Like the sophists and postmodernists, the pragmatists did not believe there were foundational truths outside the contingencies of language and changing situations. But unlike the

absolute skepticism of these other antifoundationalist perspectives, pragmatism values experience as the arbiter of belief. As Newkirk explains, James would judge the validity of a belief by its consequences—its utility in an individual’s or a community’s life. Yet the appraisal of a belief can only begin with the willingness to engage in the act of believing. Newkirk offers the example of jumping a ditch: “Suppose I need to jump a big ditch and my ability to do this is in doubt—yet I believe that I can; that belief is a crucial component of the experiment I am attempting. Without it, I cannot make a true test of my ability; or as James ([1896], 1948) writes, “The desire for a certain form of truth here brings about the special truth’s existence” (qtd. in Newkirk 45).

From Newkirk’s pragmatist perspective, my work memoir project urged students to ask: “How do we construct our own narrative in a way that empowers, inspires, and sustains us?” (68). Newkirk charges that cultural studies approaches to composition show “no ethnographic interest in the moral utility of these [students’] commonplaces” (91). Although Newkirk’s polemic doesn’t account for the whole ethnographic side of cultural studies that does value people’s “vernacular theories” of cultural power (see McLaughlin), he has a point here. Similarly, he rightly contends, “It is paradoxical, if not hypocritical, for compositionists to argue for the centrality of ‘class’ in our understanding of students, and at the same time advocate a form of skepticism that is antipathetic to the sources of moral and spiritual power in many working-class communities” (101). With the work memoir project, I sought to invest my and the students’ ethnographic interest in the moral utility of their pragmatic beliefs toward their lives at work.

My ethnographic research had also convinced me that students were more likely to value critical positions in writing through an inductive approach. For students from working-class backgrounds in particular, the material situations of their family’s and community’s lives lead them to value critical knowledge as something embodied and gained through lived experience more than through abstract thought. In contrast, as Bruce McComiskey also contends, when students follow a deductive approach in critical writing, they apply a critical theory to their experiences or another text, generally reproducing the blueprint put before them. Therefore, I have come to believe that most students are more likely to be persuaded there can be value in critical writing for examining their everyday lives if they reflect upon and analyze their social circumstances on their own without a full-blown theoretical model for them to trace over. The work memoir project I describe below follows from this larger teaching philosophy of inductive theorizing. This pedagogy also suggests that teachers should think about critical writing as a process one comes to understand through the continual development of the social self, a perspective that I address further in my conclusion.

THE WORK MEMOIR PROJECT: A SITUATED PROCESS APPROACH

We begin the work memoir project with a series of prewriting prompts that I would describe as a situated process approach. The prompts are meant to elicit writers' multiple orientations toward cultural values of work through reflection on situated moments of their continually evolving work identity and persuasive influences on work issues in their lives. By encouraging a broad range of concerns or topics within this generative theme, I try to tap into the students' individual motives for analyzing whatever associations they have with values of work from their pasts. My hope is that in the process they will critically consider the narrative they want to invent for future selves based on those past experiences, images, and influences.

Nancy Mack asserts that in memoir, "the past, present, and future selves can enter into a complex dialogue [. . .]. Through representation, language gives us the ability to change experience, to rewrite the experience as we decide for it to be. Even memoir involves writing for change, to change the meaningfulness of a past experience." Yet Mack also recognizes that our use of language in memoir "comes charged with the motives of others," sometimes demanding a struggle between conflicting social roles and identities. My prewriting prompts are intended to call forth writers' perceptions of their past, present, and future selves as imagined through the people, places, objects, and institutions that have influenced their present, or changing, work values.² Below I summarize the nature and purpose of each of these writing prompts. These prompts are what I give to the students while I also orally relate some of my own and previous students' specific examples:

Role Models. Consider those who have been good and bad role models for teaching you about the world of work and possible careers. Thinking about parents, grandparents, neighbors, or even models in the media, whose attitudes about work and discipline (or lack of it) have been influential on how you acted in different jobs and how you want to see yourself in the future world of work?

Places of Work. Make a list of jobs you have had, whether or not for pay. Which jobs would you want to revisit, which avoid like the plague? From your list, choose one or more to write what you can recall about: (a) personal relationships with co-workers, bosses, and customers, and (b) details of place that stand out in your memory.

Objects. List ten or more objects from your memory that relate to the subject of work. They can be someone's tool for work or objects that identify a kind of work, such as a metal lunchbox or a briefcase, or they might be objects of others that you associated with the kind of work you want to do, such as a computer or a particular car. For each object, list what associations you have with it. Were there any rules (spoken or unspoken) associated with it? What role did they play in how you saw yourself then, and what you imagined for yourself in the future?

Career Aspirations. List careers you are considering. Briefly describe what qualities you would be looking for in a job that you choose to do. For each one, try to list some

specific memories that might have inspired these aspirations. You can also try listing your ideas of dream jobs—where did they come from? Or if you associate working with drudgery, make notes about moments when you were enthusiastic and energized in a “work activity” that was not for money.

School as Work. Many students tend to treat their participation in school as a job or as preparation for a future job or work life. With a partner, list ways school experiences are and aren't like a job, considering not just classes but social life as well. Now, by yourself choose a specific positive and negative experience from the list and describe the experience to show positive and negative sides of school and work.

Over the course of several class periods, everyone writes lists, notes, and associations from the prompts, each time discussing with a partner the possible topics that emerge from the notes. From these notes, they choose two experiences, or a connected series of events, to expand on for a freewrite that they share in groups to help them choose and develop their ideas for the first draft of their work memoir. In the process, they have generated a storehouse of memories associated with their present work values that they can draw on for later drafts to enrich and possibly complicate their interpretation of the memoir's main story.

In keeping with my developmentally oriented, situated process approach to the writing course, the assignment for the first draft calls for an emphasis on self as more than one voice, and the revision requires a situation of self in a social context. For the first draft, students concentrate on the self in terms of action and reflection, which requires them to consider their sense of self as a tension between the character participating in the story and an observer reflecting on that participation. Through our readings of published and student memoir essays, we discuss how the memoir genre requires conflict, complication, and/or growth of self, but not moralizing (admittedly rhetorical moves that help constitute middle-class social distinction, as Newkirk thoroughly demonstrates). The students' goal is to use their stories to analyze their views of the working world in their lives so far. The revision assignment then extends this sense of self in two ways. First, students compare the work values associated with their memoir drafts to assigned readings that categorize examples of work types and values. Second, students also craft scenes of their experiences in their memoirs to explore the implications of the social contexts that helped shape their current perspectives (for more detail on the pedagogy of students crafting scenes to develop a dialogic view of social contexts within their writing, see Seitz, *Who Can Afford Critical Consciousness?*). To foster these complex aims of narrative and analysis, I involve the class in a recursive three-part revision process that overlaps over the course of the project. The class reads and discusses models for their work memoirs; they examine theoretical articles on work types and values; and they develop scenes in their memoirs that dramatize the issues in their represented experiences.

THE EMERGING THEME OF TAKING CONTROL

As I look over students' work memoirs from the last three years of teaching this course, I now see how many of them deal with issues of control: over their past and future work identities, over tensions between work and family life, over constraints of social class and gender. Often these issues over various kinds of control converge into one another. Janet Bean also points to this theme of control in her students' stories of work. Following Newkirk's pragmatist view of students' writing, she asserts that "by casting themselves in the role of hero in a narrative of meritocracy, they affirm their ability to control their lives" (103). Bean recognizes what students gain from this rhetorical move, but she also shows how some student writers' emotion over their working-class parents' bodily pains as sacrifice for their children's education disrupts and critiques the main narrative of the student narrator's eventual success. "In the dominant cultural narrative of success," Bean writes, "parental silence and sacrifice are ethical choices designed to promote the welfare of their children." In the narratives Bean examines, these writers speak their parents' pain, making it salient and present, to honor their parents and critique the system of middle-class achievement that they must still take part in despite emotions of anger, loss, and nostalgia. Students in my classes have often enacted a similar double move in their work memoirs, developing a narrative of self-control while simultaneously detailing the material realities that complicate their stories.

Not surprisingly, a good number of students in my course choose to examine their control over tensions between work and family life, often reassessing their past histories of complicated family life through the lenses of their own work situations. For instance, Audrey's essay, "I Work Hard for My Money, So Hard for It, Honey," opens with Audrey and her father packing clothes, but she is leaving on a trip to Florida and her father is moving out of the family home for good. The core of Audrey's essay chronicles her experiences working a summer in the GM plant where her father climbed from factory worker to GM executive of labor relations now working outside Ohio, and where her brother Roy also works summers to earn money for dental school. Audrey has to negotiate a difficult role as "Rocky Johnson's little girl" when she encounters some workers who aren't fond of her father because he sided with management. Through a series of scenes, Audrey demonstrates how the oppressive work atmosphere wears her down and tears at her sense of self-identity. Ultimately the monotony forces her to reconsider her father's and her family's situation.

I always wondered why my father never expressed any feelings and how he was able to cope and be so strong with all that was happening. I then came to a conclusion. I was going through a lot of new changes in my life just like my father was five years earlier [. . .]. I learned from my father and Roy and oddly enough from the assembly line workers, that you just have to learn to deal with the cards that you are dealt.

On the surface, Audrey's use of this popular maxim sounds like the kind of cliché of accommodation to the status quo that critical teachers tend to abhor. Yet the details of her scenes and the analysis of worker relations in the factory in the body of her essay help articulate the complicated social functions of this statement embedded in her efforts to gain control over these issues of family and work.

Melissa's essay, "From the Ashes," also opens with family members moving, this time the mother and children leaving while the father is away on business. To Melissa, her future work means self-sufficiency and control over her life and family, the kind of control she admired in her mother's ability to keep her family together. Melissa's fashioning of a future working self is intricately tied to her desire for a stable family life, unlike the broken promises of her father, which she dramatizes in several short scenes. Building upon this theme of control, Melissa also depicts herself as a girl watching her mother at work:

I wanted to fill out paperwork, go to meetings, and have my own desk where *I* was in charge. Every move she made and everything she said was given my full attention. She seemed to know it all. Seldom did things go wrong, and if they did my mom had the answer. She was in control, unlike the life that I had been so accustomed to at home. That type of control and unhesitating security is the life I now strive for.

I admire how Melissa's choice of language in this passage moves from the girl's young, inexperienced understanding of power for a woman, measuring her mother's control by the outward signs of her mother's work identity, to the more considered resolve of her young adult self that now measures control by the possibility of "unhesitating security."

This theme of family security runs deep in some of my students' writing about their values of, and hopes for, working lives. Matt's essay, "Like Father, Like Son" follows a familiar but worthy path of a son who wants to work with his father, this time in the real estate market selling houses locally.³ Matt's first draft made no mention of these concerns. Instead, he had written about the day of his high school graduation, using my writing prompt about school as a job to throw together a conventional comparison-contrast paper. When I met with him to discuss the draft, I asked him what he liked about it. I was greatly relieved when he replied, "Nothing. It's all B.S." When I asked why he was in school and what he hoped to do in the future, he spoke about his admiration for his father, who had worked three jobs without a college degree before he passed the real estate exam, and his mother, who lives with multiple sclerosis. Matt and I discussed how he was different from many of his friends who wanted a college education to get far away from their parents. In his final draft, he includes a dialogue with a friend that dramatizes his difference from the common trend of more middle-class work aspirations.

"Why do you want to stay close to home and come back here to work?" Joe asked with a tone showing that he was confused with my decision.

“Well Joe, my Mom has gotten really sick lately and I want to be close if anything were to happen, plus I’ve always wanted to work with my Dad. The funny thing is, you’re always the one commenting on how loaded my parents are. Then why wouldn’t I want to make the big bucks?” I joked.

Although I know Matt wasn’t entirely kidding about his drive for the big bucks, his conscious use of the verb “joked” implies his understanding of what values of success are dominant in the larger culture compared to what situations and values ultimately motivate his efforts at work. In a sense, Matt wrote his essay to speak to his friends like Joe. Through scenes of his family’s history, his mother’s illness, and joking conversations with his dad that belie their fears of the family’s future, he wants to lead readers to identify with his choices.

In Durst’s study of University of Cincinnati students’ resistance to two critical-writing courses, he describes how most students felt their traditions of family were under attack when one course unit focused on critiques of American myths of the model family. What intrigues me about my students’ critical reflections on the intersections of family and work is how these concerns emerge largely from the students’ own motivations. Perhaps they are more willing to critically analyze these situations when the teacher and course readings do not tacitly intend to squelch the commonsense sayings that motivate and sometimes sustain their families. Indeed in Audrey’s, Melissa’s, and Matt’s memoir essays, those sayings are still there alongside dramatized scenes, descriptive narratives, and reflection that articulate the complex local meanings they attribute to those sayings.

As Bean demonstrates, students who identify with their immediate working-class family backgrounds often recognize there is much at stake in these issues of control because the family histories of physical labor and pain are immediately present before them. Like Matt’s essay, the final draft of Gwen’s essay, “Working towards My Dream” includes early on a scene of a father’s advice. Although the character of Gwen’s father speaks the familiar words, “You can do anything if you put your mind to it,” he couches this saying with warnings about how bosses “are usually going to try to make you feel as though you are being watched so that you constantly stay busy.” Gwen’s first draft narrated an incident where she badly cut her finger in a meat slicer at her deli job. In this draft, the emphasis is on the loss of bodily control. By the end of her revisions, the memoir also examined the theme of social control—of controlling her work identity and the worry about bosses’ controlling her life that she drew from her parents’ working-class experiences. Writing about the loss of bodily control helped trigger consideration of the issues of social control she saw in the physical labor of her parents, as she expands on in the revisions. Gwen writes that she knew her father worked harder in a “rundown automotive station than anyone else I knew because every night he came home his hand would be black as night, covered by grease and grime.” In comparison, she writes that her mother “had a more clean, business like job” managing a seafood grill. Nevertheless, Gwen de-

scribes her mother's job as "very stressful on her because she worked a lot of nights, had to keep control of all the waitresses, and she was always watched by the owner."

Gwen then describes the strains of her different jobs in food service, which followed in the work patterns of her mother, first working for her at the seafood grill and then at a local deli. Although both jobs were physically taxing, Gwen emphasizes her relief that in her first job she avoided a real boss by working for her mother and in the second job she mostly worked alone. She describes her father's pleasure that the second job made her feel as if she was her "own boss," but she states that he then brought her back to his working-class realities that "one day I was going to have to deal with the boss situation and that the longer I waited the harder it was going to be to adjust." She then adds, "I told him about my dream of becoming my own boss, and he replied by saying that I was going to have to work extremely hard in order to pursue that dream." Surprisingly, the essay doesn't include the anticipated scene of Gwen's oppression under a particular boss. Yet the scenes in her next deli job in another state, where she has the accident, illustrate the hard work her father foretold. Gwen is left with no easy conclusion other than a refusal to work in food service any longer, if she is to continue to work toward her dream of full control over her work identity, and a reaffirmation of her father's distrust of the bosses' class.

A DEVELOPMENTAL PERSPECTIVE FOR TEACHING CRITICAL WRITING

Each of these four memoir essays demonstrates to me why teachers should think about critical writing as a process that one comes to understand in developmental stages. I use the term *developmental* in reference to Vygotsky's understanding of the continual development of the social self, not as a pejorative notion of an uneducated self, as the term is often institutionalized in developmental writing programs. Because deeply committed critical-writing teachers are often blinded by pedagogical faith, they tend to forget that anyone's understanding of culture and power comes as a developmental process contingent upon the situations he or she encounters.

Donna Qualley's reconsideration of feminism with her undergraduate students provides a compelling example of this developmental process. Qualley came to see that although most current feminist criticism challenges essentialist theories of women and men that ignore the influence of social positions such as race, class, and region, her female students interested in feminist thinking needed to begin with a more essentialist dichotomy (and perhaps not move beyond it in the course of her class or others') that emphasized the necessity of solidarity and larger group cohesion. Without the time for that political development through stages, Qualley argues, these women tended toward a more conservative, individualist brand of feminism. Like Qualley, I have come to see the political importance of writing process approaches

that recognize people's need to come to new knowledge through developmental stages of inquiry. From this view, perhaps we should recognize working-class students' various motives for instrumentalism as part of an uneven, unpredictable stage of development of a political and social self in response to their particular local contexts.

These various issues of gaining control in many of my students' work memoirs have helped make me more conscious of this developmental aspect, which is often missing from our discussions of critical-writing pedagogy. To be persuasive, education must be in synch with the developmental issues the students are facing. Finally, this necessary connection between the dynamic development of the social self and the development of critical writing means more than the usual call for relevant topics like current music and media. As Jabari Mahiri puts it,

New college students are at an age and in a situation that forces them to consider complex issues of identity and family/community connectedness, especially since they have often been distanced from their familiar support systems, and they must determine how they will represent themselves in and to a larger stranger world. (82)

The often wildly uneven transition from adolescence to young adulthood requires continual testing and reassessing of control in all realms of the social self—when should one accommodate, oppose, or resist various forms of power relations in multiple domains of one's life, and in what ways given each situation? Compared to scholars of secondary education like Mahiri, teacher-scholars of critical pedagogy at the college level have almost never explicitly addressed these developmental concerns. Yet this necessary connection between the developmental social self and critical writing follows the logic of Paulo Freire's view that effective critical teaching must make room for people's individual dreams of freedom within collective work toward social change. Thus, if handled carefully, the structures of a writing-process approach can motivate students to actively engage in interpreting, creating, and articulating knowledge in critical writing classes. And that involvement in an inductive approach to inquiry into social contexts, especially as embodied experience, is more likely to foster students' internally persuasive critical perspectives.

NOTES

1. See Seitz, *Who Can Afford Critical Consciousness?* (Hampton Press, 2004) for greater detail regarding the ethnographic study and the pedagogy I developed in response to what I learned from the research participants. This article is adapted from two chapters of the book.

2. I am indebted to my colleagues Nancy Mack and Brady Allen for writing process models I have adapted for my course. For other composition courses on work, see Zebroski, Owens, and McComiskey.

3. As I winnowed down the number of student writings from my classes that dealt in meaningful ways with this theme of gaining control, I was uncomfortable with how few of these essays were written by men. I do not mean to imply that these men have not produced thoughtful critical writing. But when

I tried categorizing some of the main themes in their essays, they seemed to focus on other themes such as discovering connections with fathers, regional values of farm work compared to people in town, finding joy and identity in aspects of their work situations, or learning about the inhumanity of many working-class jobs and sometimes the humanity of workers they would otherwise have ignored. A woman colleague suggested that most women's cultural and societal positions within family dynamics and work hierarchies may help explain why these particular developmental concerns about control emerge more explicitly in their writing. Janet Bean's essay, however, offers strong analytical readings of working-class male students' writings about their father's labors.

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