

Cultural Studies, Composition, and Pedagogy

Mark Mullen  
*George Washington University*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>

 Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), and the [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#)

Dedicated to the dissemination of scholarly and professional information, **Purdue University Press** selects, develops, and distributes quality resources in several key subject areas for which its parent university is famous, including business, technology, health, veterinary medicine, and other selected disciplines in the humanities and sciences.

*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: [<clcweb@purdue.edu>](mailto:clcweb@purdue.edu)

---

### Recommended Citation

Mullen, Mark. "Cultural Studies, Composition, and Pedagogy." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 7.3 (2005): [<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1269>](http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1269)

This text has been double-blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact [epubs@purdue.edu](mailto:epubs@purdue.edu) for additional information.

This is an Open Access journal. This means that it uses a funding model that does not charge readers or their institutions for access. Readers may freely read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of articles. This journal is covered under the [CC BY-NC-ND license](#).

*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." In addition to the publication of articles, the journal publishes review articles of scholarly books and publishes research material in its *Library Series*. Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <[clcweb@purdue.edu](mailto:clcweb@purdue.edu)>

---

**CLCWeb Volume 7 Issue 3 (September 2005) Article 3**  
**Mark Mullen, "Cultural Studies, Composition, and Pedagogy"**  
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol7/iss3/3>>

---

**Contents of CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 7.3(2005)**  
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol7/iss3/>>

---

**Abstract:** In his paper, "Cultural Studies, Composition, and Pedagogy," Mark Mullen argues that while much cultural studies work makes claims for the transformative powers of a radical educational agenda, such work is often, surprisingly, deeply resistant to a complex discussion of pedagogy. The response to Mary Louise Pratt's theory of the "contact zone" offers a useful case study in this regard, and indicates the way in which feelgood narratives of student and teacher empowerment are only made possible by a refusal to analyze the classroom as a workplace. Reliance upon depictions of the classroom as essentially an empty space playing host to ideological battles imported from elsewhere obscures the complicity of teachers in the brute fact of the classroom as a mechanism for surplus extraction and conversion. The fear of pedagogy then, of a pedagogy that locates us fully as teaching subjects in a specific workplace at a particular historical juncture, is the fear of facing up to the profound irrelevance and inconsequentiality of the "political interventions" of the classroom, or, worse, the way in which critical, scholarly, and artistic and activist challenges to hegemony are continually called into question or, perhaps, undermined by an ongoing participation in everyday workplaces of humanities instruction.

**Mark MULLEN**

### **Cultural Studies, Composition, and Pedagogy**

An early version of this paper was presented as part of a panel titled "Wars of Position: The Contribution of Composition Pedagogy to Cultural Studies" at the second annual *Cultural Studies Association (US)* conference. The impetus for the panel grew out of the attendance of several of its members at the inaugural *CSA: Cultural Studies Association* conference in Pittsburgh in 2003. Stimulated and engaged by the first conference as we were, we could not help noticing the marked lack of any meaningful discussion of pedagogy. While inaugural conferences often have their own specific agendas, it was nevertheless striking how often conversations about the impact of current political and cultural controversies upon education concentrated upon the role of faculty as citizens, researchers, critics, and public intellectuals -- but ignored their status as teachers. Amidst the heady mix created by the colliding rhetorics of new collaborations and a renewed sense of cultural crisis there seemed to be a deep sense of complacency when it came to the question of how those larger rhetorics would play out in the classroom. My colleagues and I noticed, rather, a bland confidence that, when it came to the space of the classroom, politics would just get done. Somehow. In that inaugural year our panel focused on questions concerning the intersection of politics and pedagogy, based on our shared experience as faculty members in a writing program strongly influenced by various currents in cultural studies. Scheduled in the very first session, we presented to an audience of the kind that is often described euphemistically as "small but enthusiastic" while the majority of conference attendees were checking in downstairs or still in transit. In 2004, based on our prior experience, we thought we would stake a stronger claim to the legitimacy of our presence at a cultural studies conference with the Gramscian reference in our title. Unfortunately, we made the strategic error of also including the word pedagogy (and out of all the many panels and presentations in the conference program this year our panel title was the only explicit mention of pedagogy). Not surprisingly, we were honored with the task of closing the conference, presenting as one of the "afterthought" sessions, taking place the morning following the official farewell banquet. The one person who attended was, however, very enthusiastic.

The result of the vagaries of scheduling a large conference? Possibly. Nevertheless, I think there is something instructive in the way in which for two years running the only panel that announced explicitly a concern with pedagogy was shunted to the margins of a cultural studies event. I hasten to add that I am not attributing malicious intent here. I think the organizers recognize legitimately that questions of pedagogy have a limited appeal to a cultural studies audience. Certainly, we knew after glancing at the program that even on that last morning we would not be able to attract any kind of audience, because we were competing with panels devoted to the things that cultural studies scholars manifestly do like to talk about: popular music, the media, subcultures, celebrity, identity, the obviously political. This raises the question then: why is it that cultural studies as a field, which in its scholarly work places so much emphasis upon the potential of education to transform culture, should be more interested in talking about horror films and Jennifer Lopez than classroom praxis? Indeed, this attitude toward pedagogy is not simply a product of the inherently competitive conferencing environment but is embedded in the thought of some of those theorists whose work has been, and continues to be, central to the development of a number of cultural studies projects. As an initial example, I will cite the work of a theorist whose work I admire and whose ability to draw connections between a wide variety of cultural phenomena has helped shape my own understanding of the possibilities of cultural studies projects. Lisa Duggan's *The Twilight of Democracy* stands as a powerful critique of the way in which a move away from identity politics on the part of the cultural and political left has played into the hands of neoliberal strategies that seek to replace a notion of the downward redistribution of social and economic justice with a watered down simulation, where words like "equality," "justice," and "diversity" function in the same way as any other designer brand. In response, Duggan argues that, "What the progressive-left must understand is this: Neoliberalism ... organizes material and political life in terms of race, gender, and sexuality as well as economic class and nationality, or ethnicity and religion.

But the categories through which Liberalism (and thus also neoliberalism) classifies human activity and relationship actively obscures the connections among these organizing terms" (3).

In Duggan's response to leftist critiques of identity politics in the last part of her book, however, a disturbing note appears. She criticizes Wendy Brown, for example, for the way in which she "produces an opposition that is clearly hierarchical, positions herself unwaveringly on the high end, and adopts a one-sided pedagogical mode laced with a tone of admonishment, and even sometimes contempt" (79). It would be easy to read this piece generously and assume that Duggan is criticizing only a particular kind of pedagogical approach. However Duggan goes on to criticize the way in which Brown's "reductive condensation enables the pedagogical mode" (80), adding that "This pedagogical mode infuses much leftist and feminist academic writing about political activism" going on to cite Mary Poovey who "in pedagogical mode advises that activists turn to a language emphasizing women's reproductive health," with Duggan finally arguing that "this common pedagogical mode seems counterproductive for political engagement" (81). By way of contrast, she lauds the work of Nancy Fraser, who "never explicitly produces a hierarchy or adopts a pedagogical mode" (82); a little later she criticizes Paul Gilroy by noting that despite mounting a strong critique of liberal humanism, "his text does adopt a pedagogical tone" (84). And so on. A less-than-generous reading of Duggan here would, I think, dwell on the way in which, in the instructional occasion represented by her own writing, she too "produces an opposition that is clearly hierarchical, positions herself unwaveringly on the high end, and adopts a one-sided pedagogical mode laced with a tone of admonishment, and even sometimes contempt" (79). This is, after all, the text in which she responds to a citation from Brown with "Um, excuse me?" (80). However, as my friends and colleagues would no doubt tell you, I would be the last person to mount anything other than a hypocritical complaint concerning the strategic deployment of a fusion of sarcasm and righteous anger. So let me instead focus on the rather interesting way, in the examples I have cited, that what is no doubt intended to be a critique of a particular kind of pedagogical method, attitude and set of assumptions nevertheless slips over into an indictment of any kind of pedagogical stance. More troubling to me, given the larger frame of reference for Duggan's argument, it is clear that for her the term "pedagogy" comes to represent complicity with the disciplining, controlling aspects of the neoliberal agenda. In part, this resistance to a "pedagogical mode" is a legitimate reaction to an educational agenda in the US that, in its increasing insistence upon measurement, "outcomes," and "no child left behind," is ever more relentlessly assimilative and managerial. However the resistance to pedagogy is also an easy way of perpetuating one of the core elements of the cultural studies project: a determined avoidance of the problematic position of a politically committed pedagogy given the compromised status of faculty within a larger system of measurement and containment.

On the face of it you would not think that there was any shortage of politically-engaged pedagogy in US college classrooms. Certainly the "politicized classroom" in general and "cultural studies" in particular continue to be sufficiently healthy bugbears for neoliberal college administrators and their counterparts in the media. Meanwhile for some teachers the composition classroom in particular -- as a privileged site of textual interpretation, transfer, and production -- has already achieved the Nirvana of sustained critical engagement. In a recent *College English* article Shannon O'Dair asserts that the teaching of critical literacy already constitutes the "Standard Model" of composition pedagogy (593). As self-described literature scholars we might possibly forgive O'Dair such a stunningly misinformed appraisal of the field, but this bland assumption of the easy possibility of a politically effective classroom is interesting. In O'Dair's argument this is particularly evident given that the focus of her article is on the problems faced by working-class students entering the academy. Her analysis of trends in education is accurate in many respects. She notes, for example, that expanding access to college has done little to ameliorate the fact that it is still basically a mechanism for reproducing class structures; now an affluent student is even more likely than a non-affluent one to earn a bachelor's degree than was the case in the past (600). But her argument is that when it comes to working class students we should either cheerfully help them become middle class, or help them see that college is not for them; our teaching practice, on the other hand, amounts to little more than simply trying to value more visibly the elements of work-

ing class culture. It is difficult to see what is activist or counter-hegemonic about this stance, although it is easy to see the superficial deployment of a rhetoric of tolerance and diversity of which Duggan is justly critical. Yet I think it is worth looking at what would enable O'Dair to believe that a set of such facile and accommodationist solutions do count as a politically engaged pedagogy. Formulating the question this way I think leads us to see that those who profess cultural studies (or the related notion of critical literacy, in O'Dair's formulation) are linked by the common belief that the classroom can in and of itself be a space of politicized, transformative pedagogy. In this common belief, however, "pedagogy" usually describes only what material is covered in the classroom, sometimes what we say (and permit our students to say) in the classroom, and, occasionally, the different practices in our classroom—but rarely the brute fact of the classroom itself as an institutional and social space.

In terms of seeing the classroom as a political space, probably no single concept has been so important for cultural studies and at the same time so systematically abused as Mary Louise Pratt's notion of the "contact zone." This concept has been particularly influential in the fields of composition and rhetoric, mainly owing to Pratt's own savvy readings of a variety of "marginal" writings and the cultural rhetorics in which they are embedded, but has also been influential in other disciplines. Most people have encountered Pratt's work through her essay "The Arts of the Contact Zone" first delivered at the MLA: Modern Language Association of America's *Responsibilities for Literacy* conference in September of 1990 and published in *Profession 91* and then reprinted, along with a series of responses to her work in 2002 in the collection *Professing in the Contact Zone: Bringing Theory and Practice Together*. Now, I am a cynical and suspicious fellow at heart and when something catches on like wildfire, I want to know why there was all that dry tinder piled up in the first place. And it is clear to me that Pratt's work has been so influential because, based on a reading of the "contact zone" idea that is actually a misreading of Pratt (it does not seem evident that too many people have worked through the more complex version of Pratt's contact zone argument in her book *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*), the notion of teaching in the contact zone allows most faculty to go on functionally doing what they have always been doing, albeit now with the added glamour of being "political." Invocations of the contact zone tend to produce heroic narratives of classroom transformation, where students encounter texts that offend their privileged sensibilities and are magically transformed into critically engaged savvy cultural negotiators. A signal example of this genre is Richard Miller's well-known "Fault Lines in the Contact Zone" where a student overcomes their (his/her?) disgust for Anzaldua's "Entering the Serpent" and realizes that "Not only must I lessen my own barriers of understanding, but I must be able to comprehend and understand the argument of the other" (143). Not surprisingly, such narratives often end up privileging the role of the teacher, even if it is often privileging a nominal deauthorization of the teacher. Thus Miller closes the essay by noting that "In the uncharted realms of teaching and studying in the contact zone, the teacher's traditional claim to authority is thus constantly undermined and reconfigured, which, in turn, enables the real work of learning how to negotiate and to place oneself in dialogue with different ways of knowing to commence" (145).

To take another example, in "Reconstitution and Race in the Contact Zone" Robert Murray provides a trenchant analysis of the mechanisms of students' resistance when confronted with evidence about racial discrimination that challenges their own worldview. This, Murray argues, is an example of the way in which "a person in the dominant ruling position, or one who subscribes to the ideas of that position, is able to cast his or her rhetoric in ways that exploit the necessary indeterminacy of the contact zone in order to serve the ruling interests by simultaneously pretending to serve (or at least share) the interests of the subordinated group" (149). Murray's argument is thus a refreshing change from the conversion narratives so beloved of those writing within the contact zone genre. At the same time, Murray is working with a version of the notion of a contact zone that substantially re-writes Pratt's original argument. "In its pedagogical context," he argues, "Mary Louise Pratt's anthropological notion of a "contact zone" is essentially a theory of representation that allows writers and their teachers to recognize how a piece of writing manifests itself in layers of meaning. Each layer is analogous to a "voice," each of which is invented, learned, or parodistic" (147). In the most frequently quoted passage from Pratt's essay she defines contact

zones as "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today" (4). Most interpretations of Pratt's argument at this point leap straight to the "culture clash" aspect, and ignore the fact that Pratt's argument is fundamentally about space, its definitions and redefinitions. That is why, for example, the larger project from which Pratt's essay is drawn focuses on travel writing and scientific investigations of bodies (of flesh, but also of water, of land). Notice, however, that Murray converts the argument about space into one about voice, and that this conversion makes Pratt's notion perfectly adapted to the existing theoretical and instructional contexts in writing and literature classrooms. It is not that history, voice, culture, politics, and so on, are not extremely important categories of analysis for Pratt: they clearly are. But the primary locus where individuals encounter these force lines are specific spaces, social spaces, workplaces. The central illustrative text in "Arts of the Contact Zone," that of Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala, is connected intimately with the likelihood that Guaman Poma worked in some capacity as a bureaucratic functionary, possibly a scribe, in the Spanish colonial administration. That administrative workspace, about which we know so very little, constitutes the space in which he encounters and inhabits the disciplining colonial rhetoric, its force both articulated and preserved; it also furnishes the material means to parse and interpret that rhetoric and, more importantly, to formulate a response; presumably it also affords him the conduit by which to transmit his text back to Old Europe. Naturally, the contact zone is a much larger construct, a cluster of symbolic and material spaces that Guaman Poma inhabited. But these spaces are all shot through with the logic of the place in which the scribe worked, a site that gave him the potential to construct the contact zone as a writing space, to imagine a response, then to execute it.

It is precisely this notion of the specificity of a social space that is a workplace, first and foremost, that drops out of the conversation concerning politics in the classroom. On the face of it this will seem odd, especially since the term "contact zone" itself would seem to open up the notion of an encounter space, and especially because so many descriptions of the radical, critical, counter-hegemonic writing course spend so much of their time talking about what happens in the space of single classes or the larger space of entire programs. It's true, of course, that some of the programs presenting themselves as examples of critical pedagogy have little interest in the way in which their material base may connect with their theoretical superstructure. This permits, for example, Mary Juzwick, in a deeply troubling article, to claim that her writing program is influenced by "a neo-Marxist socio-critical approach to texts and writing that continues to be prevalent in composition studies, critical pedagogy, literary studies, and literacy education" (48), while at the same time describing a program in which instructors all teach from a central syllabus, have one entire unit of the course formulated in advance and required of everyone, and where an instructor does not have her contract renewed because she resists this kind of curriculum. Precisely because her discussion of "pedagogy" doesn't include a discussion of the program as a work space, she is cheerfully oblivious to the split between theory and practice, design and execution that is so evident in her description. In those programs that are interested in practice, however, we see that attention to the space of the classroom is continually deflected into a discussion of other kinds of social spaces. As a result, the classroom space becomes emptied of all its own content and practice and becomes a blank zone where discourses and practices brought in from outside (by students, the teacher, university administrators, corporations, etc.) meet and interact. One form that this takes is to focus on the politics of the product rather than the process or the conditions that helped to produce the product. Miller's essay, for example, takes as its subject a well-known and very controversial piece of writing from the early 1990s, where a student wrote an essay about assaulting a homeless man during a drunken trip to San Francisco, an essay that, fictitious or not, may also have been an attempt to "bash" his openly gay instructor. Miller's aims in the essay are laudable: he challenges those who would simply have called in the police, and provides a lucid justification for an instructional response that many saw as problematic in its refusal to engage the horror of the essay, but which resulted in the instructor preserving a working relationship with the student which promoted sufficient mutual respect that the student wanted to work with him again

the following semester. What is only vaguely hinted at in Miller's article, however, is that a large part of the reason why the student's writing took the form that it did may have had less to do with the student's character or their status as a particular ideological subject than with the larger ideological matrix of practices shaping the classroom. For example, the essay was prompted by a really, really stupid assignment, drawn from the *Bedford Guide*: "Station yourself in a nearby place where you can mingle with a group of people gathered for some reason or occasion. Observe the group's behavior and in a short paper report on it. Then offer some insight" (qtd. in Miller 132). And nowhere in Miller's article does he discuss the way in which the writing may have been prompted by a set of deeply embedded teaching practices: why was the *Bedford Guide* being used at all? Why was it being used in the way it was? Why was there no process or consultation built into the assignment (given that the essay seems to have completely blindsided the instructor)?

For other teachers, the radical nature of their pedagogy resides solely in developing new kinds of class content and a different focus for the class assignments. Paul Jude Beauvais, for example, in "First Contact: Composition Students' Close Encounters with College Culture" looks to extend Pratt's ideas about the contact zone in ways that promise to focus on the forces exerted by the institution on students' lives. What does the course actually ask students to do, however? It asks them to produce three essays that, while having a different thematic focus are, in terms of the task being required of students, highly traditional (23-33). Students are thereby encouraged to engage with numerous facets of the social space of the university that constitute their larger contact zone -- but at the cost of obscuring the construction of their primary contact space, the writing classroom itself, the history and assumptions behind the nature (as opposed to the mere content) of the task they are being required to perform, and the reasons why they are in a writing class at all. Still less are these questions, embedded in the practices of the individual classroom space, asked when the subject is complete disciplinary reconfiguration. This is true even in Patricia Bizzell's thought-provoking "Multiculturalism, Contact Zones, and the Organization of English Studies." While the essay now is a somewhat depressing reminder of the way in which the word "multiculturalism" was, ten years ago, a term full of hope, and where the idea of "multicultural democracy" made sense (before it became possible to employ the derisory term "multiculti" to identify the glossy marketing of a superficial diversity) it still offers a sharp and (although depressingly, still deeply relevant) critique of the traditional organization of English studies into literatures and periods, which allows in some new voices only to the extent that they can be configured within the already known, and consigns some others (like composition) to the permanent margins. Yet Bizzell's proposal that we "organize English studies not in terms of literary or chronological periods, nor essentialized racial or gender categories, but rather in terms of historically defined contact zones, moments when different groups within society contend for the power to interpret what is going on" (53) amounts to little more than a shuffling of the deck chairs because her argument takes no account of the actual deep strata of work practices underlying the superficial greenery of labels and organizations. A more recent version of this argument is Karen Fitts and William Lalicker's "Invisible Hands: A Manifesto to Resolve Institutional and Curricular Hierarchies in English Studies." It is, on the one hand, a very clear statement of the marginalization of composition and the prejudices on the part of literature faculty that both give rise to that marginalization and arise from it. The problem with the piece is that it imagines that the central problem can be addressed through (yet another) curricular reform initiative, that what is really holding "us" back are habits of mind. However the real problem is the whole notion of what a hierarchy is and what it does. In large measure something like a curriculum, while it may have a limited constitutive and policing function, is more of a symptom, a superstructural reflection of underlying structures. And these structures are manifested in habits of body not just of mind, and in the ways in which bodies are organized toward specific forms of productivity: who gets phones and who doesn't, who gets their own office and who doesn't, who gets job security and research funding and who does not. Given all of the material factors contributing to this inequality, proposing a new kind of course structure is not going to get the job done.

Finally, the "empty classroom" is used to provide a rationale even for student resistance. Thus Murray maintains that "Student resistance is an unavoidable characteristic of the contact zone of

the multicultural classroom" (162). Once again the "content" of this encounter is all imported from outside, and the only function of the teaching space is as a blank canvas upon which "resistance" can manifest itself. Contrary to Murray, it is perfectly clear to me why we encounter resistant students and why they are in no sense confined merely to the "multicultural" classroom. As de Certeau points out, any workplace is rife with innumerable strategies of resistance to the enforced conformity of a bodily and intellectual discipline. These kinds of actions are what de Certeau identifies as tactics, "a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus" (37). A tactic, Michel de Certeau argues, "must vigilantly make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers. It poaches in them. It creates surprises in them. It can be where it is least expected. It is a guileful ruse" (37). Despite his acknowledgement that the victories achieved by tactics are necessarily partial -- "What it wins it cannot keep" (37) -- de Certeau, and many of those who have adapted his work, are still prone to romanticize tactics as an inherently oppositional strategy of successful resistance to the imposition of authority. The theorization of tactics certainly helps to explain why students often act against what the system (and what the students themselves) would often define as being in the individual student's best interests. However the tactical approach in all its occasional partiality is in no sense confined to strategies of subversion. Thus while it is clear why teachers encounter "resistance" it is equally obvious why we encounter all kinds of "unsatisfactory" student behavior: outright resistance, the suspiciously willing conversion, the artfully simulative conversion we will never spot as a fake, the thoughtlessly genuine conversion. Once we understand the classroom as a workplace and students as workers in the truest sense, we have to acknowledge that most students are good at doing their job: they have been practicing for it most of their lives. They know, even if subconsciously, what are the metrics in such an institutional site and know also that while they may be manifested through writing, they are primarily attitudinal and behavioral. And precisely because they are attitudinal, and manifested largely through writing that takes place in a relatively discreet location with a very short acquaintance on the part of the designated administrative authority (and bureaucratic functionaries whose surveillance powers are exceptionally limited, especially in contrast with authorities such as the financial aid office, or student records, for example), such behavior can easily be simulated.

There is much discussion concerning the activities that take place in the classroom, but I argue that it is precisely the degree to which these activities are not discussed as forms of labor that allows their advocates to construct them as realizations of, or templates for, political transformation. To counter this we would have to begin asking some hard questions about our classes. For starters: Why are you (the teacher) there in the classroom at that particular moment in your life and in your institution's history? Why are you there at that time of day and not another, in the kind of room you are in? Why, more importantly are your students there? Are they required to be there? If not, how constrained is their freedom of choice? Why is it that you are teaching whatever it is you are teaching within a specific departmental or programmatic structure? But these are just for starters and are only the means to get us to the more important issues. How do the activities that you assign in your classroom facilitate the production and extraction of surplus value from the work of your students to your benefit? How do the activities in your class facilitate the production and extraction of surplus value from both you and your students to the benefit of the institution? The fact that these questions sound completely alien when applied to a discussion of classroom politics again indicates the degree to which the classroom is not understood even by the most well-theorized neo-Marxists (except in abstract terms or as an afterthought) as an economic unit: a revenue-generating, surplus extracting, value-processing unit. Indeed, this level of interrogation of the classroom workspace is often precluded by the resistance of many cultural studies scholars to the notion that education involves teaching "marketable skills." In his appeal for a more nuanced understanding of "tradition" in relation to the teaching of writing, Bruce Horner notes: "Viewing writing skills in the abstract, and sensitive to the commodification of writing skills for their economic exchange value in the labor market, some promote teaching writing as 'art' or 'process' rather than marketable skills to de-emphasize its use value ... But this de-emphasis of the use value of writing through its effective aestheticization simply substitutes for the economic



capitalization of writing skills the production of cultural capital and its exchange value, and so is no less complicit in the commodification of writing: in place of writing 'skills,' we have the production of works of 'art,' say, or, more recently, the production of politically leftist attitudes. The difference between the two positions, to the extent that there is one, resides in the kind of capital recognized" (373). Horner's observations are part of a more general concern that "In its attempts to establish itself as a professional academic discipline, Composition has distanced itself from what is often identified as its "traditional" concerns with the immediate demands of teaching" (366). This is true of cultural studies also, I would suggest, and even more so at the point where cultural studies and rhetoric and composition intersect. However, the larger problem I have been describing is that it is not simply that writing teachers influenced by cultural studies are inattentive to teaching, but that teaching is not conceived of as particular kinds of labor taking place in a particular kind of workplace. Thus when cultural studies scholars propose a new disciplinary alignment, or an innovative curriculum structure, or introduce previously marginalized texts, or develop compelling and counter-hegemonic writing assignments, all those activities somehow take place as a series of practices outside any economic implication and devoid of any materiality.

Looking at the classroom as a workplace is precisely what Evan Watkins asks us to do in his much neglected 1989 text *Work Time: English Departments and the Circulation of Cultural Value*. Watkins argues that it is the relative freedom in the disposition of place and time of work on the part of faculty that has tended to remove the idea of faculty work from the realm of traditional labor critiques. However, "like a factory, an English department is a different kind of formation; it is specific to a phase of the organization of culture under capitalism. To say that work in English is location governed thus directs analysis not to a long history of 'craft skills' as it were of literary study, now 'institutionalized' in English, but rather to the formation of English as a structured workplace" (14). There is no space in this paper to do justice to Watkins' thoroughly historicized and analytically astute analysis; however, I would suggest that the fact that his analysis is virtually invisible in most discussions of the politicized classroom has everything to do with the fact that he raises some extraordinarily uncomfortable challenges to the smug sense so evident in a lot of cultural studies texts that our classrooms are loci of political change. In the discussion that followed the presentations at the "Publics and Feelings" panel at the 2004 Cultural Studies Association conference on the connection between affect and political action, Heather Love argued that many cultural studies scholars know deep down that there is really very little connection between the critical work that we do and political effectivity, that we are anxious about that, and that we compensate through a more elaborate performativity in our work (deploying ritualized gestures of hope, for example). I would add to her analysis by saying that the ritual deployment of the classroom in political discussions functions as the same kind of performativity. It is its visibility (which is, however, a function of its disciplined containment) that makes it the perfect antidote to the invisibility of the link between theory and action: "I have X political commitments and I changed my classroom to introduce Y kinds of texts and Z kinds of activities and, look, it produced demonstrable and measurable effects on my students." At the same time, it is not simply the case that this performativity manifested in making the classroom visible is a response to a feeling of anxiety; it is, rather, a set of fictions that help to obscure how deep is our complicity with a capitalist structure of value production and ideological containment. This is where I find Watkins work so useful. One thing that forms a key structural point in his analysis, is to differentiate "what circulates in English" from "what circulates from English" (21). As he goes on to argue, it's a particular kind of radical fiction (and, I would add, neoliberal *bête noire* that English is a key disseminating point for cultural value. The circulation of ideas "isn't really done after all by hiring thousands and thousands of English faculty to take small groups of students through the poems of John Donne or the novels of Ernest Hemingway [and here I would add or the novels of Salman Rushdie or the essays of "insert theorist here"], as if cultural production had remained unchanged since the eighteenth century, except that more people can read" (22). Instead, as he discusses in some detail, if we are really interested in the circulation of ideas, the world of advertising is a much more productive field of inquiry. In understanding what it is that English does do, however, Watkins' analysis requires us to make a radical shift in our definitions of labor. For one thing, he notes that even by rough esti-

mates, the most "work" being done in term of raw person hours in any department is that of students, conservatively almost four times that of faculty and staff combined (24); "To the extent that work in English is organized toward circulation in any sense, the primary process of circulation involves neither what circulates from English nor what circulates in English, but who is circulated to English" (24). The upshot of this is that English is a very weak form of ideological circulation, but a powerful form of people circulation. "For students, the texts studied in English are first of all occasions for the performance of work to be evaluated by someone else" (25).

In your English, composition, or humanities class you could be teaching anarchist philosophy, postcolonial writers, deconstructing the rhetoric of neoliberalism, burning the university president in effigy, conducting naked sun-worshipping sessions -- Watkins point is that to a large extent the university does not care as long as three conditions are met: you are occupying defined blocks of student time, you are deploying some kind of evaluation process, and a grade issues forth at the end. And of these three even the second isn't really necessary, given that if the process has any kind of ideological hegemonizing component, it is merely to accustom students to an evaluative and containing structure that establishes an increasingly arbitrary relationship between use and exchange value. This does not mean that universities, legislatures and, occasionally, the public at large do not on occasion make attempts to police the content of the classroom, but these tend to be the exception rather than the rule, and the amount of energy expended in such efforts pales against the effort expended to reform larger structures of administrative accountability and financial distribution. The least interesting aspect of the "Culture Wars" (now, mysteriously, referenced as if they identified a struggle which came into being at a specific point and is now over) was the struggle over canon formation, which was always largely smoke and mirrors. Behind such charades cultural conservatives were busy transforming the educational system in more fundamental ways: re-organizing student debt, building support for a back-to-basics, test-'em-till-they-gag movement, gutting supporting institutions such as the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Endowment for the Arts. Indeed, Watkins argues that understood in this larger structural system our classrooms occupy an extremely important role in the larger economic model. Beyond the immediate task of accustoming students to evaluative processes one thing that Watkins work points to very explicitly in his historical overview is the way in which classroom spaces as workplaces employ a particular form of action. They constitute a "holding action" in the sense both of holding a particular ideological line, but also serving, quite simply, as a place to hold student bodies as part of a flexible reserve army of labor. They act as a buffer zone that mitigates the effect of a system designed around chronic under-employment. Therefore, it is not really the case, as I asserted over-dramatically at the beginning, that cultural studies is afraid of pedagogy. It is, however, deeply afraid of a full and comprehensive definition of pedagogy that asks us to take the nature of the classroom as a workplace into account and use that awareness to foster a more realistic assessment of our claims for the political effectivity of our teaching. It is easy to see, for example, why most of the arguments concerning the classroom as a "contact zone" producing political transformation are deeply problematic. However creative the ways in which these teachers have re-shaped the activities of their classrooms, their refusal to engage with the aspect of Pratt's argument that references the social workplace means that nothing about their proposals has in any way changed the fundamental structure of their immediate environment, a structure that works effectively to counteract or disable almost all forms of direct political action in advance. The fear of pedagogy then, of a pedagogy that locates us fully as teaching subjects in a specific workplace at a particular historical juncture, is the fear of facing up to the profound irrelevance and inconsequentiality of the "political interventions" of our classrooms, or, worse, the way in which our critical, scholarly, and artistic and activist challenges to hegemony are continually called into question or, perhaps, undermined by our ongoing participation in our everyday workplaces.

#### Works Cited

Beauvais, Paul Jude. "First Contact: Composition Students' Close Encounters with College Culture." *Professing in the Contact Zone: Bringing Theory and Practice Together*. Ed. Janice M. Wolff. Urbana: NCTE, 2002. 21-47.

- Bizzell, Patricia. "Multiculturalism, Contact Zones, and the Organization of English Studies." *Professing in the Contact Zone: Bringing Theory and Practice Together*. Ed. Janice M. Wolff. Urbana: NCTE, 2002. 48-57.
- Certeau, Michel de. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Trans. Steven Randall. Berkeley: U of California P, 1984.
- Duggan, Lisa. *The Twilight of Equality*. Boston: Beacon P, 2003.
- Fitts, Karen, and William Lalicker. "Invisible Hands: A Manifesto to Resolve Institutional and Curricular Hierarchy in English Studies." *College English* 66.4 (2004): 427-51.
- Horner, Bruce. "Traditions and Professionalization: Reconceiving Work in Composition." *CCC: College Composition and Communication* 51.3 (2000): 366-98.
- Juzwick, Mary. "Handling Curricular Resources: An Examination of Two Teachers' Tactical Appropriation of First-Year Composition Curricula." *Writing Program Administration: Journal of the Council of Writing Program Administrators* 27.1-2 (2003): 40-58.
- Love, Heather. Contribution to Panel "Publics and Feelings." *Cultural Studies Association (US) Conference*. Northeastern University, Boston, 2004.
- Miller, Richard E. "Fault Lines in the Contact Zone." *Professing in the Contact Zone: Bringing Theory and Practice Together*. Ed. Janice M. Wolff. Urbana: NCTE, 2002. 121-46.
- Murray, Robert D. "Reconstitution and Race in the Contact Zone." *Professing in the Contact Zone: Bringing Theory and Practice Together*. Ed. Janice M. Wolff. Urbana: NCTE, 2002. 147-65.
- O'Dair, Sharon. "Class Work: Site of Egalitarian Activism or Site of Embourgeoisement." *College English* 65.6 (2003): 593-606.
- Pratt, Mary Louise. "Arts of the Contact Zone." *Professing in the Contact Zone: Bringing Theory and Practice Together*. Ed. Janice M. Wolff. Urbana: NCTE, 2002. 1-18.
- Pratt, Mary Louise. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. London: Routledge, 1992.
- Watkins, Evan. *Work Time: English Departments and the Circulation of Cultural Value*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1989.
- Wolff, Janice M., ed. *Professing in the Contact Zone: Bringing Theory and Practice Together*. Urbana: NCTE, 2002.

Author's profile: Mark Victor Mullen teaches writing at George Washington University where he is also director of the First-Year Writing Program. His interests in scholarship include nineteenth-century American theatre, computer games, film, information technology and education, and composition and rhetoric. His recent publications in these fields include papers in *Radical Teacher* (2002), *M/C: A Journal of Media and Culture* (2003), and a paper in the collection titled *Writing the Visual: A Guide for Teachers of Composition and Communication* (2005). E-mail: <[ishmael@gwu.edu](mailto:ishmael@gwu.edu)>.