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PREVIEW

**EXCAVATING PERCEPTUAL LANDSCAPES:  
RE-IMAGINING COMMUNITY INQUIRY IN THE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM**

by

**Kevin E. Ball**

**A DISSERTATION**

**Presented to the Faculty of**

**The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska**

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**Major: English**

**Under the Supervision of Professors Joy S. Ritchie and Amy Goodburn**

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PREVIEW

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DISSERTATION TITLE

Excavating Perceptual Landscapes: Re-Imagining Community Inquiry

in the Composition Classroom

BY

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**EXCAVATING PERCEPTUAL LANDSCAPES:  
RE-IMAGINING COMMUNITY INQUIRY IN THE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM**

**Kevin E. Ball, Ph.D.  
University of Nebraska, 2000**

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**This dissertation argues that community inquiry offers a refined way of conceptualizing critical pedagogies within composition studies. Community inquiry, or close investigation and reflection on one's immediate context, analyzes the local alongside cultural studies as the intellectual work of the classroom, adding a local dimension to broader social critiques. In its "excavation" of local contexts, community inquiry counters the ways in which local and regional knowledge is erased and/or elided by current theoretical constructions of critical pedagogy that focus solely on national or broader cultural critiques.**

**My study examines three pedagogical sites in which community inquiry pedagogies have been applied—the Nebraska Writing Project Rural Institute at Henderson, two fifth grade classes at a culturally diverse public elementary school in Lincoln, and my own first-year composition classrooms at the University of Nebraska—in order to problematize current pedagogies that seek to make meaningful connections between the dichotomized "public" and "private" contexts of classrooms and communities. Drawing on my experiences as teacher, writer, and participant-observer within these sites, I explore the challenges for classroom theory and pedagogy in the exploration of local culture as well as the dangers of inquiry approaches that exoticize difference. At the heart of this study is the central question of what counts as knowledge in our culture.**

This project has implications for writing teachers integrating ethnographic or service-learning components into their courses. It also contributes to theoretical conceptions of writing classrooms by offering alternatives to conventional, standard curricula emphasizing content coverage and information dissemination and retrieval over acts of composing knowledge. Reconceptualizing critical pedagogy to include community inquiry engages issues of identity, diversity, and locality in relation to knowledge by making writing—and learning—meaningful to students on a local level. While it provides a much-needed local dimension to writing theory and pedagogies, this study also illuminates the crucial tensions between public education and higher education, and between schools and communities, that determine the kinds and sources of knowledge valued by American culture.

PREVIEW

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## Introduction

“We are discovering that the locality is the only universal. Even the suns and stars have their own times as well as their own places.”

–John Dewey, “Americanism and Idealism,” p. 687

Since Aristotle, one of the primary objectives of rhetorical education has been teaching the citizenry the knowledge, skills, and culture they need to engage in more highly literate, self-determined lives. With his goal of fostering a critically literate, politicized citizenry, Paulo Freire’s literacy programs with Brazilian peasants represents one of the most recent manifestations of literacy’s democratic ideal. Using pictures to challenge students to think critically about their lives, Freire’s “culture circles” evolved into literacy classes using carefully chosen words that represented the emotionally and socially problematic issues in participants’ lives. With its ultimate goal of *conscientization*, the awakening of critical awareness, Freire’s literacy programs enabled citizens to name their culture and lived realities in order to take control of their lives. Recognizing that students’ critical thinking stems from perceiving the socioeconomic, political, cultural, and historical contexts of their own lives, American educators have sought to apply the ideal of Freire’s *conscientization* to their own teaching. Applying and incorporating the Freirean ideals into the American educational system, however, has remained a persistent challenge because of a variety of cultural and pedagogical factors. Within the past decade, many radical educators such as Henry Giroux have grown especially frustrated with and critical of public education in the United States as a “reproductive” rather than democratic sphere. Giroux writes:

Despite their differences, both radicals and conservatives alike have abandoned the Deweyian vision of public schools as democratic spheres, as

places where the skills of democracy can be practised [sic], debated, and analyzed. Similarly, both share a disturbing indifference to the ways in which students mediate and express their sense of place, time, and history and their contradictory, uncertain, and incomplete interactions with each other and with the dynamics of schooling” (*Pedagogy* 119-120).

Giroux points to current calls by conservatives, who have argued that schools need to reform their curricula in order to serve the corporate interests of the dominant society more faithfully, as evidence of the ways schools often serve as reproductive public spheres for legitimatizing the dominant culture. Despite educators’ best intentions for *conscientization*, curricula often fall prey to the values, social practices, and skills of the dominant social order. As Giroux indicates, Freire’s vision, just like John Dewey’s vision, has yet to produce a truly critical pedagogy that faithfully and consistently engages the citizenry at a local and individual level in North American public education.<sup>1</sup>

As a field, composition studies shares a similar commitment to teaching the transformative power of literacy for self-discovery and social change, and thus it is a frequent site of conversations about critical pedagogy. Despite its transformative vision and numerous discipline-wide conversations, composition has yet to find an ideal solution that makes writing in the classroom and writing in the community mutually informing. My study offers one model for making community investigation the focus and subject of the intellectual work of the classroom, fulfilling the dual aims of writing instruction: fostering the student’s growth as a self-conscious, reflective person and as an engaged, productive citizen. I argue that inquiry and investigation into community foregrounds locality,

providing a way to excavate individual identity while simultaneously developing an awareness of the ideological terrain surrounding and influencing that subjective and socially produced identity. Drawing upon the work of critical educators and theorists, rural writers, and students' experiences, this study illustrates the need for a theory of writing instruction founded upon investigation of local and individual communities.

### Writing Community

No one ever told me I could write about community. I grew up and spent eighteen years in a small, rural town in mid-Missouri before enrolling in a state university where I, like most students, expected my classes to teach me to think critically about the world. At the time, it never struck me as odd that I studied for four years at that state university without ever really considering the implications of what it meant to come from that semi-rural background in a small town in central Missouri or how that experience shaped my identity. On the first day of class, I always introduced myself and named my hometown. After the first day of the semester, however, that sense of place never again became the subject of serious conversation, study, or interrogation as part of the intellectual work of the classroom. Beyond asserting the name of my hometown, I ignored that community and sense of place within my university education. If I asserted anything, it was the irrelevance of my past experience; I assumed I “knew” that community, and I expected to turn my critical gaze outward. Like many students, I assumed that an “education” meant only interrogating national issues and contexts, an assumption fostered by my K-12 experience. And when I graduated after four years of such study, I graduated without any real insight into the community in which I had lived previously for eighteen years.

Undoubtedly one of the most frequently cited sources in American education, John Dewey has informed much of the continuing curriculum reform in composition studies based on his theories of progressive pedagogy. In his championing of the Great Community of American society, Dewey envisioned an early version of Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy founded on the locality of the learner's environment. From its outset, service learning has relied on philosophy of John Dewey as a grounding theory. Indeed, John Saltmarsh notes Dewey's numerous contributions to the pedagogy of community service learning, one of composition's most recent manifestations of critical pedagogy.<sup>2</sup> Saltmarsh notes the parallels between community service-learning and Dewey's philosophy in five areas: linking education to experience, democratic community, social service, reflective inquiry, and education for social transformation. Even though Dewey never specifically addresses "community service learning" as a term signifying a particular conceptual framework of education, Saltmarsh argues that Dewey's educational philosophy provides the basis for a pedagogy connecting practice and theory, what Dewey called linking "action and doing on the one hand, and knowledge and understanding on the other" (*Later* 107). For Dewey, democracy was not an alternative to other principles of associated life, it was the idea of community itself (*Public* 148). As a result, Dewey devoted a great deal of attention to reflection as a model of inquiry. This reflection is central to experiential learning and is a crucial connection between service activity and the learning associated with it. Saltmarsh concludes: "Together, these contributions form the basis of a cultural and political critique and reconceptualized pedagogy aimed at the development of democratic values and critical citizenship" (13). These same emphases

underlie Freire's work, particularly in his conception of praxis, dialogic education, a liberationist educational paradigm, and a redefined role of teaching.

While their cultures were quite different, both Freire and Dewey had similar transformative goals in mind for their cultural and political critiques. In fact, the roots of Freire's educational philosophy can in part be traced to Dewey. Moacir Gadotti notes that Freire wrote his thesis to become Professor of History and the Philosophy of Education based upon Dewey's *Democracy and Education*, published in Brazil in 1936. As just one example of Dewey's influence on Freire, consider the parallel notions of reflective teaching in both men's work. Freire writes, "[T]hrough dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-students with students-teachers" (*Pedagogy* 61). Dewey imagines a similar dynamic: "...the alternative to furnishing ready-made subject matter and listening to the accuracy with which it is reproduced, is not quiescence, but participation, sharing, in an activity. In such shared activity the teacher is a learner, and the learner is, without knowing it, a teacher" (*Democracy* 167). Current trends within composition reveal these same pedagogical foundations of experiential learning and dialogic relationships as well as the critical, active engagement required by both students and teachers. Service-learning programs and ethnographic research and writing projects reflect just a few of the ways in which composition has incorporated both men's philosophies into the curriculum.

Given Dewey's pervasive influence on American education and critical pedagogy's accepted place within mainstream composition scholarship, it seems ironic that compositionists persist in overlooking one of the most fundamental principles of both

theorists' student-centered pedagogies: the role of locality in learning. That the cultural critiques students are asked to consider in many composition classrooms take place on a national or global scale (using anthologies and readers published for a national audience, for example) with popular culture defined broadly in terms of "mass society" is indicative of the way local and regional knowledge and literacies are often erased or elided by current theoretical constructions of critical pedagogy. Recent studies of textbooks and the ideologies upon which they are based, for example, have addressed the normalizing and anti-progressive force that textbooks play in composition pedagogy (Welch; Gale and Gale; Jamieson). As a result of these kinds of forces, students' experiences are frequently neglected, silenced, or negated within curricula intended to foster their voice and perspective.

As Gregory Jay and Gerald Graff point out in their critique of critical pedagogy, new studies in gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality are some of the most revitalizing developments to have taken place in education as a result of critical pedagogy. These studies have opened up questions about politics, power, and representation that educational institutions have too long suppressed. Jay and Graff caution, however, that translating those questions into pedagogical practices and programs should denote "a set of problems to be explored and debated, not a new truth which teachers and students must uncritically accept" (202). One mistranslation of critical pedagogy occurs when teachers assume that the questions and answers relating to issues of politics, power, and representation are universal for every educational setting (and that they as teachers know both the questions and the answers). Multicultural anthologies such as *American Voices*

or *American Cultures* cannot speak to the diversity of individual experiences each student brings to the classroom. Even though Dewey reminded us from the outset that “the country is a spread of localities, while the nation is something that exists in Washington and other seats of government” (685), teachers often implement versions of critical pedagogies based on universal or nationwide assumptions that ignore the contexts of individual localities (such as using an anthologized essay about race to reflect upon racial tensions in every community). The student from a rural Nebraska community, a block of Newark, New Jersey, or a suburb of St. Louis comes from a unique locality, shaped by and confined within a particular geographical and perceptual landscape that fosters a unique way of knowing and making meaning in the world. A critical pedagogy should begin by opening up questions of politics, power, and representation within those localities.

Within the past ten years, American compositionists have attempted to conceptualize critical pedagogy in a number of ways, struggling to appreciate locality fully as a source of knowledge. Some of the more prominent composition scholars who could be seen as “American Freireistas,” as Victor Villanueva terms them, are Ira Shor, Patricia Bizzell, Villanueva, and bell hooks. Ira Shor’s “liberatory pedagogy,” for example, represents some of the most visible and consistent attempts to employ Freirean theory in postsecondary composition courses. In *When Students Have Power: Negotiating Authority in a Critical Pedagogy*, Shor describes his efforts to enact a context-based and student-centered pedagogy at the College of Staten Island (CSI) in New York, rooting the curriculum in subject matter familiar to his working-class students. Shor’s focus on

locality incorporates social criticism with the imagination of social change, encouraging students to question the cultural assumptions of society and to imagine alternatives to the status quo. In one assignment, for instance, Shor asks students to imagine changes in their education at CSI and in their lives in New York. These “generative themes” of College and City are then the starting agendas for the writing, reading, and discussions in the course.

Many of the Freireistas agree that critical consciousness requires a recognition of any liberatory pedagogy’s ideological agenda and a dropping of all pretense of objectivity. In *Academic Discourse and Critical Consciousness*, for instance, Patricia Bizzell calls attention to the ideological nature of the rhetoric class and argues that teachers must be aware of the ideologies that motivate teaching and research when applying Freirean principles in American contexts. Since the University is not a neutral or objective space, she argues, teachers must be conscious of the indoctrination of students into the socially oppressive terms of traditional academic discourse and “the school’s function as an agent of cultural hegemony” (“Cognition” 237). Building on this idea of cultural hegemony, Victor Villanueva’s literacy narrative *Bootstraps: From an American Academic of Color* calls attention to systemic hegemony and proposes a critical literacy that he hopes will enable social change, placing identity at the heart of the literacy struggle. Other scholars such as bell hooks imagine a revolutionary theory and pedagogy that emphasizes critical pedagogy and the centrality of language as a larger site of struggle, with opposition and conflict as productive tensions in the classroom especially relating to issues of race and gender. Their teaching fosters an “authority of experience,” a phrase used in feminist



writing and pedagogy referring to ways of knowing rooted in experience.

Another form of critical pedagogy is enacted by writing teachers such as Shor, James Berlin, Karen Fitts, Alan Frances, John Trimbur, and John Schilb who advocate cultural studies approaches for writing classes in order to interrogate the ways in which race, class, and gender intersect to construct oppressive subjectivities and identities. Stemming more from literary theory than educational theory, “cultural studies” signifies a wide range of critical practices ranging from mainstream communication and media studies to historical materialism. For Berlin, the objective of cultural studies is to “provide a comprehensive program that can critique the production and reception of discourse within the realm of power and politics” (“Composition and Cultural Studies” 130), a theory for a cultural-studies-inflected composition program that was instituted at Purdue University. A focus on popular culture is often a prominent feature of cultural studies approaches to composition, a focus that extends the notion of students’ “texts.” Cultural studies infused into composition, Trimbur argues, demands consideration not just of cultural texts, but the reader’s active engagement with them “to connect rhetoric both to sign systems and lived experience” (130). By connecting sign systems and lived experience, composition explores the linkages between writing and cultural reproduction. Schilb is just one of the composition scholars who claims that composition as an institutional formation is well suited to investigate cultural studies and postmodernism with the potential to become “a key force in the diagnosis of the contemporary world” (188). Even though the field is positioned to encourage this type of work, composition still faces numerous challenges to implementing a truly critical pedagogy. As Karen Fitts and Alan France illustrate in their

1995 anthology, *Left Margins: Cultural Studies and Composition Pedagogy*, student comments on course evaluations such as “the class spent too much time on racist issues” and “there was too much about politics and not enough about writing” indicate the ways teachers fail to make manifest for their students the linkages between writing and cultural reproduction that recent theoretical work in rhetoric and composition has exposed. *Left Margins* represents one of the most recent efforts to turn those oppositional classroom moments into fruitful ones pedagogically by focusing on and addressing the conflict and student resistance typically generated by this teaching approach. Henry Giroux, in that collection, claims that it is necessary to see pedagogy as a central aspect of cultural studies, as a way of connecting theory and practice, form and content (7). Writing assignments, he claims, should be designed to get “students to theorize their own experiences rather than articulate the meanings of other people’s theories” (11).

Following Giroux’s challenge, I argue that composition studies needs a redefined conception of critical pedagogy which addresses the ways in which local and regional knowledge or literacies are erased or elided by current theoretical constructions of critical pedagogy that focus solely on national or global critiques. I argue that community inquiry, or close investigation and reflection on one’s immediate context, offers a space in which to analyze the local alongside a wider cultural critique as the intellectual work of the composition classroom. By asking students to focus on a particular place at a particular moment within a unique context, I argue, community inquiry fosters exploration of self in relation to community while educating students into a broader cultural consciousness that grows out of understanding one’s own place in the culture and the web of power

relationships and language within which each individual is immersed. I argue that students' awareness of the competing definitions of themselves within their lived contexts provides the foundation for a critical pedagogy that addresses power relations extending from the local to the global. While such an awareness should inform all disciplines within the academy, composition is an especially valuable and important site for doing this type of work because of its use of literate acts to create meaning from the intersections between language, identity, and community. Marilyn Cooper articulates a common philosophical ground for writing teachers in noting that most compositionists "believe in the value of critical thinking, cognitive dissonance, and adopting different perspectives—all of which are based on the central value of coming to know through reading and writing" (55). In my classroom, community inquiry prompts students to investigate questions such as, "What does it mean to be from Nebraska?" and then further narrowing the questions according to their particular experience: What does it mean to be a punk rocker in a small rural Nebraska town? What was my sense of place as a child from suburban Omaha? How does growing up in the Sandhills of western Nebraska affect my perspectives on state and national political policies? What is it like to be a member of a minority at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln?

While I have only implemented my community inquiry approach with students at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, the pedagogy remains applicable and relevant to students in any context. Students could just as easily ask "What does it mean to be from Washington (or Texas or Maine)?" The hockey player in Minnesota, the surfer in California, the son of a Maine fisherman, or the choir member in a Southern Baptist

church would each have unique experiences within a community to explore and investigate. Ultimately, each individual's inquiry should culminate in the underlying question: How does what I am learning at this university at this particular moment in time relate to my life and my experience, and how are my perceptions affected by linguistic and ideological constructs within each respective culture? Asking this question politicizes the educational process for students, challenging them to consider the role of their generative words and themes within their university education. Within the composition classroom, students can address and investigate these questions through community inquiry, realizing the power of "coming to know" through their reading and writing while also gaining insight into the value of their local experience as a source of knowledge. In the following chapters, I describe classrooms in which community inquiry was made a focus of student writing, and I explore some of the tensions this writing posed for students and teachers.

This project occurs at the intersections between composition studies and a variety of related discourses. In particular, this study draws upon compositionists and proponents of service learning such as Anne Gere and Bruce Herzberg, community literacy advocates such as Wayne Peck, Linda Flower, and Lorraine Higgins, as well as "fieldwork" educators within literacy studies such as Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater and Bonnie Stone Sunstein who are investigating connections between public and private spheres; critical and Marxist educators such as Freire and Ira Shor; educational theorists and philosophers such as Henry Giroux, Stanley Aronowitz, and Peter McLaren; as well as the work of cultural and educational theorists like Paul Theobald and rural writers such as Wendell Berry, Paul Gruchow, and Robert Critchfield. Each of these strands contributes a

perspective that, when focused through the lens of community inquiry, ultimately forms a larger conception of the role of and possibilities for locality in the composition classroom. Together, the intersections between these various discourses imagine the potential for what composition pedagogy can and should mean to students. Beyond providing a theoretical justification of community inquiry, this study also employs ethnographic observation in and of several writing classrooms to examine concrete experiences of students carrying out community inquiry projects. It examines the lived experiences of teachers, students, and community members in their specific localities to better understand critical pedagogic principles of literacy instruction in practice.

### Communities and Perceptual Landscapes

A composition pedagogy encouraging community inquiry allows students to theorize their own experiences through investigation and writing about the communities and cultures<sup>3</sup> in which they live, avoiding some forms of traditional resistance by basing the investigation on students' environments. I propose the concept of the perceptual landscape as the best means of conceptualizing individual identity in relation to community, culture, and lived context. John Brinckerhoff Jackson, founder and editor of the journal *Landscape* and one of the foremost authorities on the study of landscapes, asserts an important truth: "we always need a word or phrase to indicate a kind of environment or setting which can give vividness to a thought or event or relationship; a background placing it in the world" (4). Jackson notes the range of definitions from the old fashioned but surprisingly persistent definition of landscape as "a portion of the earth's surface that can be comprehended at a glance" to the more contemporary definition: "a

composition of man-made or man-modified spaces to serve as infrastructure or background for our collective experience” (*Discovering* 3-7). Jackson’s reflections on the American landscape are particularly useful in theorizing perceptual landscapes as the spaces of students’ localities, the portion of a terrain that they might comprehend through inquiry and investigation. Maxine Greene advocates a similar attention to the “landscapes” that provide the canvas upon which personal histories and lived lives are painted: “It is, as many have found out, not only the events, the modes of action that must be recaptured; it is the landscape—perceived and felt and imagined—against which the activities have taken place” (“Multiculturalism” 14). Greene envisions this landscape of everyday life, this domain in which “we do our work, interact with others, and try to bring about the kinds of changes that will sustain our purposes,” as the paramount reality (*Landscapes* 16). Unfortunately, this reality too often remains unexplored. Greene write, “Each of us, because our biographies, our projects, and our locations differ, encounters the social reality of everyday from a somewhat distinctive perspective, a perspective of which we are far too often unaware” (2).

If, as these theorists argue, perceptual landscapes encompass all of the various communities and cultures of an individual’s life, a shared reality forming the horizons and peripheries as well as a background placing an individual in the world, then I believe students can gain a better understanding of their relation to the world and to the members of their communities by writing for, about, and within those landscapes. More specifically, I want my students to view their perceptual landscapes as physical and geographical sites (concrete, three-dimensional shared realities) that exist simultaneously as cognitive,

perceptual, and psychological spaces. Because an individual's perceptual landscape most likely comprises multiple communities or cultures that significantly influence an individual, community inquiry forces students to narrow their focus to one specific community and its "local" texts such as newspapers, diaries, the discourse of a community itself, or even physical artifacts such as billboards. Through community inquiry, students read these local texts in order to write their own local texts ranging from memoirs and essays to family histories and letters to the editor. Critically excavating the terrain of the perceptual landscape prompts students to engage discourse critically (to both interpret and invent strategic uses of text) by encouraging the use of local texts; at the same time, locating and investigating local—and thus very "real"—texts within the public sphere of the classroom emphasizes to students their role in self-discovery and their potential for social change. Like archeologists hunkering down over a dig, composition students excavate their own sites of meaning through literate practices of observation, interview, and reflection, drawing on artifacts and sources from these sites to expand their imaginative potential as well as possibilities for advocacy. It is in giving voice to community, to their identity within a perceptual landscape, that students begin to assert the significance of the locality within their education. It is unfortunate that students and teachers have not yet imagined and asserted locality's fundamental role at every educational level.

When I first began this project, I possessed a limited imagination of these landscapes. I imagined students' perceptual landscapes as the mere geographic landscapes framing students' places including the individuals inhabiting those places. These perceptual landscapes included small Nebraska towns and rural communities, larger cities

such as Lincoln and Omaha and the urban neighborhoods within them, and the suburban areas lurking between urban and rural. Attempting to narrow the perspective from a national to more local gaze, I failed to imagine a scale encompassing countless smaller localities. An over-emphasis on geography only caused my students to describe their places without considering their implications for identity. Since those initial definitions, my students have taught me to imagine more diverse conceptual areas, from locations of language communities to perceptual senses of place stemming from life in an apartment or on an acreage or the family farm, to the sense of community within a church, civic, or youth group to a sense of belonging within a band, intramural team, or Dungeons and Dragons group. The physical horizons dominating students' daily lives growing up in Nebraska also contribute to perceptual landscapes: from urban blocks in Omaha to the tall grass prairie of the Great Plains, from life in the wetlands along the Platte River to the cornfields stretching for miles along the interstate, from the noise and chatter of the city to the silences of the Sandhills. All of these spaces contribute to an individual's sense of place and self in relation to community. Understanding this enlarged perceptual landscape has enabled my students to better appreciate their local experience as a site and source of knowledge. The horizons of these perceptual spaces, like the natural and man-made structures giving shape to a distant horizon, frame a known world (and a world of knowing) as well as ways of knowing that enable individuals to make sense out of their experience. Perceptual landscapes are the realities of individual's daily lived experiences, the realms within which they live and interact on a daily basis. These are the landscapes which must form the basis and foundation of education from primary schools to post-