“Put up or shut up” seems a fair, if abrupt, rendering of Peter Elbow’s point in “The Pedagogy of the Bamboozled,” which first appeared as an article in Soundings nearly 30 years ago and was subsequently included in Embracing Contraries in 1986. Elbow’s blunt challenge to teachers enamored of Paulo Freire’s arguments for critical pedagogy was essentially this: either they should “really” practice what Freire recommends in Pedagogy of the Oppressed, or they should stop talking as though they practiced it and stop “bamboozling” both themselves and their students. Real practice, Elbow insists, entails faithful adherence to four principles abstracted from Freire’s text: (1) the teacher must work as a “collaborating ally” of students, not as their “supervisor”; (2) the subject of study must be students’ own lives, their perceptions of their experience, rendered as problems for critical reflection; (3) the goal of instruction must be to change, not just the individual student, but the world itself, “objective, external reality”; and (4) the teaching and learning processes must be primarily “rational and cognitive” rather than “affective” (“Bamboozled” 87–88). However plausible a Freirean pedagogy might be among Brazilian peasants, or even among Jonathan Kozol’s adult learners in the church basements of inner-city Boston, Elbow argues that critical teaching is unrealistic for ordinary American schools, which are not “cruel or oppressive” and which already encourage “thinking, problem-posing, doubting, rationality, critical thinking, and genuine discussion” (92). Specifically, critical teaching is unrealistic for teachers like himself, “hired by an educational institution to teach mostly non-adult, middle-class students” (87). Perhaps anticipating a flood of tiresome leftist prose when Freire’s arguments hit the academic scene in the early 1970s or perhaps simply concerned about the potential for fakery in classrooms, which have enough fakery already, Elbow essentially dares teachers to enact Freire for real, while forcefully expressing a view that they can’t or won’t—and maybe shouldn’t. Given the rhetorical complexities of such a position, it is not clear whether or when his tongue is in his cheek.
A new millennium has since dawned, under the same sun, of course, that illuminated the old one, and some predictable turns of history have followed the migration of Freire’s arguments from Third World literacy projects to the alien setting of U.S. education. One such turn has been a robust academic publication industry grown up around the concept of critical pedagogy, an industry never more than contingently related to the actual classroom fortunes of Freirean or other “radical” teaching practices. How cynically one views the proliferation of scholarship in the absence of pragmatic follow-through depends on how one understands the relationship between theorizing and the supposedly grittier business of doing the world’s work. A second predictable turn is, let’s face it, the substantial failure to actualize Freire’s “principles,” certainly as Elbow articulates them, in the uncongenial culture of American schools. The institutional realities that, for Elbow, make critical pedagogy impractical remain solidly in place. Teachers work mostly as “supervisors,” authorities, grade-givers, not as “collaborating allies,” no matter how circled the desks or how animated the class discussion. The object of study remains a state-sponsored curriculum, getting more prescriptive every year, and not the concrete experience of students. Teachers continue, like most folks, to measure out their lives in coffee spoons, unmotivated by revolutionary pretensions or at least sensible enough not to confront institutional power if that’s what “changing the world” would require. Classroom practices are as rational, cognitive, and unaffectionate as anyone could possibly devise, but they remain dedicated to the problem-solving ideal of an advanced technological society well satisfied with its collective ethos and material prosperity (however unequally distributed), not to the problem-posing ideal of a society conscious of its status as a perpetual work in progress. Elbow’s pragmatic doubts about the adaptability of Freirean practice turn out to have been prescient, even if unremarkably so. Arguably too, his in-your-face challenge to teachers has laid bare anew the academy’s capacity for self-bamboozlement, since scholars interested in pedagogy continue to speak energetically about something that is not actually happening. If Elbow’s intent, thirty years ago, was to expose phony textual radicalism and ersatz political engagement, then the passage of time appears to have validated his skepticism.

Still, it has always seemed to us that skewering radical chic was something of a side issue in “Pedagogy of the Bamboozled,” certainly in the context of Embracing Contraries, where Elbow’s larger purpose is to query the sufficiency of any teaching practice and “embrace” the competing values that different practices represent. His pursuit of this end makes it reasonable to situate critical pedagogy within a constellation of such values, but we are struck by the pointed critique of Freirean pretensions in an argument ostensibly seeking to balance
opposites. Elbow wishes, after all, to hold “critical teachers” to a remarkably stern standard if they are to avoid bamboozlement—higher, for example, than any standard he invokes for prospective followers of Socrates, who is named as the “locus classicus” of an alternative to Freirean pedagogy and whose method he labels the “emulation or participation model of teaching” or, still more congenially, the “falling-in-love model” (96). However appealing the recollected image of Socrates’s riverside dalliance with Phaedrus, we can’t quite forget the philosophic-gadfly intensity, the hemlock-drinking incorruptibility of Socrates’s practice, or ignore the likelihood that (pseudo-)Socratic teaching might have its own potential to bamboozle—let’s say by claiming that it seeks the truth relentlessly wherever truth may lie when it is “really” just posing a series of canned, self-answering questions, predetermined to support a teacher’s biases. Since Elbow (fortunately!) does not commit would-be Socratics to an all-or-nothing discipleship, his insistence on such a commitment from would-be Freireans, which then makes the prediction of failure a self-fulfilling prophecy, seems unsporting at the least. “It is not feasible,” Elbow insists, “for most institutional teachers to follow the model laid down by Freire”; therefore, we should “examine scrupulously the nature of our teaching” and “if it doesn’t fit all four principles we can stop pretending, through words or implications, that we are engaged in an education to help people be free” (94). But surely no model or theory, not Socrates’s, not even Elbow’s, could survive such a test. That is, even “embracing contraries” is a philosophical ideal different in kind from the casual eclecticism of classroom life. It entails an artful negotiation of alternative possibilities—“doubting” and “believing,” for example—in an integrated educational practice (see “Embracing Contraries in the Teaching Process,” 142–59). Teachers will fail in the application because theories are simpler than life, propositions that neither fully comprehend the world nor adequately plot a course through it. Ironically, given Elbow’s intent, the tactical flaw in representing Freirean theory as mere bamboozlement unless applied with requisite faithfulness is that such a move also eliminates the theory as a meaningful “contrary” to embrace. The logic of the argument from strict practicality is that Freire must be abandoned if teachers are to avoid deception, not that his practice is always modified in the context of other values.

As teachers who have appreciated Peter Elbow’s hard-nosed assaults on bamboozlement in education, we want to accept his challenge, still echoing across the rising sea of scholarship, to articulate the possibility of an American critical pedagogy. We’re hardly the first to attempt an adaptation of Freire’s now familiar assumptions, but other theoretical justifications have steered clear of Elbow’s inconveniently explicit terms. It’s important to begin, however, just where Elbow chooses not to begin, by recalling that critical pedagogy
is an idea, not just a method—or better, a “practice,” not an algorithm. For Freire, “practice” entails a dialectical relationship between action and reflection, each informing, each modifying, the other—an idea in action. Elbow is content to measure Freire’s idea by doubting its practicality; we prefer to establish the value of the idea as stimulus for addressing the difficulty of implementation. Critical pedagogy is an idea that strives to reconceive the aims and responsibilities, no less than the “methods,” of education. Broadly speaking, the “idea” is to incorporate traditional areas of knowledge, including language arts, within a framework of cultural critique in order to promote, through “dialogue,” a community of “knowing subjects,” as Freire calls them, who apply what they know to the practical challenges of social change. The teacher regards the analysis and transformation of existing social relations as the central activity of democratic culture and views critical reflectiveness, therefore, as the most important competence of an educated citizenry. Over thirty years, of course, the idea of critical pedagogy has grown beyond Freire’s formulations, incorporating materialist, feminist, postmodern, and other conceptual perspectives. Discordant voices have joined in lively conflict, from Dewey to the Frankfurt Marxists, from liberation theology to the Birmingham school of cultural criticism. The work of Ira Shor contrasts with that of bell hooks, Henry Giroux’s with that of Michael Apple, Jennifer Gore’s with that of Donald Morton. But although the voices are (dis)arrayed across what Gore has called “fragmented discourses” (6), we agree with her that they share, amidst differences, a certain “commonality of claims” (7–9). The importance of critical pedagogy as an idea, and arguably the point of convergence among competing theoretical vantage points, lies neither in explicit designs for cultural change (a utopian perspective often critiqued in the literature) nor in specific methodological recommendations, but in its posing of problems that are not formulated in traditional American educational philosophies: its critique of social life, its imagining of social change, its distinctive situating of education within culture, and—if we may turn Elbow’s argument around—its sustained investigation of the various forces, forms, and techniques of bamboozlement, in education and elsewhere. Far from causing or encouraging bamboozlement, as Elbow fears it does, the art of posing critical problems, we would argue, enables the very dialogical encounters that can identify deception, misrepresentation, trickery, or mystification and open them to inspection. Critical pedagogy is, in short, the antidote to bamboozlement.

The theoretical effort to pose problems is not a retreat into empty intellectualism, an escape from practicality; it is the starting point for practice—reflection and action—since cultural critique is what reveals both the need and the opportunity for transformation. This critique may focus on forms of injustice—racial,
class, or gender bias, corporate greed amidst worker layoffs, unfair housing prac-
tices. It may focus on relations between educational and other social realities—
literacy levels in the inner city, unequal subsidies for urban and suburban
schools, the relationship between income and academic success. Or it may inter-
rogate realities within schools—the exploitation of teachers, the power arrange-
ments in classrooms, the workings of the hidden curriculum. Always, the
critique presumes that the issues explored have relevance for pedagogy and
belong with the disciplined knowledges that teachers and learners should wish to
acquire. Some theorists, Ira Shor notably (*Empowering Education, Critical
Teaching and Everyday Life*), have accepted the added challenge of a practi-
tioner’s viewpoint, even suggesting the work of Monday morning; but when they
do, they remember Freire’s advice to Donaldo Macedo in *Literacy: Reading the
Word and the World*: “I refuse to give so-called how-to recipes. . . . Educators
must investigate . . . conditions in their own contexts. . . . In essence, educators
must work hard so that learners assume the role of knowing subjects and can live
this experience as subjects. Educators and learners do not have to do the exact
same things I did in order to experience being a subject. That is because the cul-
tural, historical, social, economic, and political differences [will] play a role in the
definition of the tense relationship between the educator and the learner” (134).
In general, when critical teachers move their theorizing to the classroom, turn
reflection into action, they import the motivating concern for a just society, con-
cretize it for students through investigations of cultural conditions, reconceive
their disciplinary materials in critical terms, and “work hard,” as Freire puts it, to
create opportunities for students to “experience being a subject.” But the nature
of those opportunities, the nature of the “experience” itself, grows out of the real-
ities and possibilities of a distinct educational setting.

For Freire, human beings as “knowing subjects” accept responsibility to
learn, not merely be taught, and to act, not merely be acted upon. Through
education, they improve their power to “perceive critically the way they exist in
the world . . . ; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality
in process, in transformation” (*Pedagogy* 56). Education in and for critical con-
sciousness does not transform the world (except insofar as it may change the
school); rather, it works to develop the habits of mind that make transforma-
tion possible. It assists the emergence of the knowing subject, for whom aware-
ness of the imperative of transformation derives from prior understanding of
conditions that jeopardize the continuing possibility of democratic culture.
Accordingly, the principal focus of educational work is reflection, a politically,
no less than intellectually, disciplined will to inquire rather than to take the
world on its own, apparently self-evident terms. Freire describes the habitual
stance of the “knowing subject” in *The Politics of Education*: “whether it be a
raindrop (a raindrop that was about to fall but froze, giving birth to a beautiful icicle), be it a bird that sings, a bus that runs, a violent person on the street, be it a sentence in the newspaper, a political speech, a lover’s rejection, be it anything, we must adopt a critical view, that of the person who questions, who doubts, who investigates, and who wants to illuminate the very life we live” (198). Freire’s concern is, in a manner of speaking, very like Elbow’s, but more encompassing: his concern is a world in which a lack of reflectiveness, an uncritical assent to cultural “common sense,” and a docile immersion in history work for the most part inconspicuously, and therefore effectively, to maintain existing social arrangements. His concern, more pointedly, is a world awash in bamboozlement, where unequal privilege and opportunity are rationalized or mystified by the manipulations of political parties, corporations, mass media, and even state-sponsored education, while the critical faculties of the citizenry grow flaccid from underuse.

Elbow is probably correct that the “doubting game” for Freire receives more attention than the “believing game” (see “Methodological Doubting and Believing” in Embracing Contraries 254–300), just as, arguably, there is more room for the affective in education than Freire sometimes appears to provide (we can think of more responses to a raindrop, a lover’s rejection, than critique). But Elbow has introduced the issue of bamboozlement, even if limited to the self-deceptions of certain teachers; and Elbow certainly recognizes, no less than Freire does, that belief and bamboozlement make good partners—that misrepresentation and deceit are not easily perceived from the stance of the believer, even, perhaps, the “methodologically” sophisticated one (282–84), let alone that habitually uncritical human being who is (one of Freire’s darkest words) “naive.” The naive person is one who submits to the power of cultural common sense—“my country, right or wrong,” “you can be whatever you want to be,” “one nation, under God, with liberty and justice for all”—thereby becoming easy prey for bamboozlers. What makes “common sense” so mischievous is that it evades one of those “stringent” tests for intelligent belief that Elbow cites from Wayne Booth: “you have good reason to believe that all men [sic] who understand the problem share your belief” (281). It’s the nature of “common sense” to be uncritically believed—because it has lost its visibility as an argumentative proposition—and scrupulous examination alone, Elbow’s “doubt,” can reveal its non-necessity. American life is replete with representations that should cry out for public inspection but that, instead, have successfully wrapped themselves in the mantle of common sense. People speak glibly of trickle-down economics amidst manifest, and accelerating, inequities in the distribution of wealth. Equal opportunity has become reverse discrimination; new schemes for segregated education are nostalgically presented as returns to neighborhood schooling;
civil regard for the sensitivities of historically disenfranchised groups is mere political correctness; laying off workers to increase profits is framed as corporate responsibility to stockholders; welfare is a free lunch for shirkers; the bombing of civilians in war is collateral damage; incinerating wrongdoers in electrified chairs is getting tough on crime. Are these representations necessarily bamboozlements? Let’s just say they are splendid candidates for critical inspection and reasonable examples of the type of unexamined assertion that might have preoccupied Freire had his work been here and now. Cultural common sense is not always bamboozlement because it is not always deceptive; but it encourages the possibility of bamboozlement because its formulations present themselves as self-evident and therefore beyond debate.

Critical pedagogy investigates common sense, seeks in effect to “doubt” it, in order to root out the bamboozlements that jeopardize free and fair communal life. The effort does not presume some transcendent vantage point from which deceit or mystification is clearly visible (after all, if bamboozlements were self-evident, they would not be effective). It presumes instead the efficacy of public dialogue in which engaged participants evaluate, judge, and challenge public representations, analyzing their claims, testing their integrity, weighing their sufficiency. The trouble with common sense is not that it is false but that it is, by definition, unreflective. The trouble with bamboozlement, meanwhile, is that it is corrupt, a form of representation in which the complexity of experience is wrongly simplified, whether through naivete, conceptual laziness, or malice, in order to control or close off deliberation. If the representations above—“trickle-down” economics, “collateral” damage, “neighborhood” schools, and the rest—were to deserve the label of bamboozlement, the reason would not be the argumentative stands they signify on complex issues (relying on investment to prime the economic pump, tolerating casualties in order to win a war, using the social network of a neighborhood to support a school). The truth of such issues is not so readily discerned nor does it attach to liberal positions more reliably than to conservative ones. Rather, the reason would be that they willfully simplify, distort, or mystify in a bid to manipulate the public mind. It might be found, for instance, that the warm and fuzzy concept of “neighborhood” has been allowed to obscure the reality of white, suburban enclaves competing unfairly for resources with inner-city ghettos and barrios. It might be found that the evocation of “toughness” on crime has been calculated to imply that alternative views of the electric chair signify weakness, masking the likelihood that the innocent are sometimes executed, while eliminating the possibility that a desire to do justice without descending into savagery could be something nobler than “bleeding-heart liberalism.” The issue here is not truth, correct conclusions versus false ones; the issue is honesty, a rhetoric of inquiry versus a
rhetoric of manipulation, a practice of sustaining debate versus a tactic designed to preempt it. Bamboozlements are not overcome by posing counter-arguments, because they are not in themselves argumentative. They can only be exposed for what they are, displayed for their naivete or intellectual laziness or cynical distortion. The business of critical pedagogy is to scrutinize representations, rendering them problematic in and through public dialogue, not because we know them to be bamboozlements but precisely because we do not yet know, precisely because a free citizenry must remain alert to the possibility of deception and manipulation.

Elbow worries about Freirean wannabes bamboozling themselves and their students, though he also admits that teachers are, even at their worst, amateur bamboozlers: “most teachers are not good at conscious deception. . . . They simply allow things to be fuzzy in their own minds” (“Bamboozled” 93). And the worry is reasonable even if the (self-)deception derives from good intentions. Were a teacher and her students to work together (in a writing course, say, or a civics course) to examine the politics of representation through scrutiny of significant public mystifications, the teacher would certainly be mired in bamboozlement if she believed, and led students to believe, that their isolated work is changing the world. Innocence is not helpful even when harmless, and it is not always harmless (particularly if the students are gullible or if school administrators don’t appreciate the teacher’s enthusiasm). But if, for Elbow, this “radical” teacher’s activity deserves critique, a move that her own pedagogical philosophy should encourage, how much more deserving of scrutiny are the bamboozlements that she and her students are investigating, public flim-flams that do not, themselves, encourage public reflectiveness? And if the students’ efforts to identify bamboozlement are of limited effect, how much greater might the effect be if a society of critical inquirers were engaged in the same principled activity? To be sure, one bamboozlement does not justify another: the teacher’s obligation is to consider more carefully the meaning of her practice. But if it is possible to imagine such careful self-scrutiny, then perhaps it is reasonable to conclude that the ideal of a society of inquirers is an appropriate aspiration for an educator.

We have certainly been bamboozled as teachers and have probably done our share of bamboozling, including unreflective ventures in critical practice. But it is not critical teaching that risks bamboozlement; it is teaching. We have been at least as self-deceived in our conscious and unconscious involvement in traditional forms of educational practice that show themselves, on examination, to be authoritarian, functionalist, and culturally biased, as well as unreflectively committed to such values as technological superiority, competition, and the pursuit of merely individual prosperity. We have also been self-deceived by
those more liberal practices, sometimes generalized as “process pedagogy,” that
seek to resist authoritarianism and functionalism, but that sometimes also
romanticize “expressivity,” “authenticity,” and the power of “self”—actualiza-
tion, thereby mystifying students and teachers alike about social and political
realities, such as school testing or the conventions of public discourse, that do
not readily accommodate “process” ideology. Bamboozlement is, of course, no
more necessarily linked to expressivist pedagogy than it is to critical pedagogy:
teachers can mystify themselves or others through any unreflective practice.
Indeed, that is the point: what opens the door to bamboozlement is unreflec-
tiveness, not an “incorrect” or “unrealistic” educational philosophy. We would
add, however, that what makes critical pedagogy conceptually different from
other perspectives is not just its introduction of an altered philosophical
framework for teaching but the attendant concern to scrutinize representa-
tions, thereby rendering problematic the common sense knowledge forming
the silent backdrop of all our pedagogical activity, traditional, liberal, and rad-
ical alike.

Of course, if such a pedagogy is to actualize its potential, teachers must
understand its demands on them and find explicit, culturally sensitive ways to
implement it. Elbow’s adroit playing of the doubting game effectively chal-
lenges American advocates to confront practical issues without hiding indefi-
 nitely behind the disingenuous observation that critical pedagogy is, after all,
“just a theory.” So, let us face that discomfiting challenge and explore the possi-
bility of implementation by looking more carefully at how American teachers,
working in conventional school settings, might understand the four “princi-
ples” of Freirean practice that Elbow extracts interpretively from Pedagogy of
the Oppressed. As we do so, however, we propose to take unapologetic advan-
tage of Freire’s invitation to imagine his practices in other social circumstances
than those in which they were first formed, recognizing that American teachers
far more frequently confront the culture of privilege—middle-class students,
well-to-do, already literate, bound for success—than the culture of poverty
and oppression. In mainstream U.S. education today, critical pedagogy is not
for the poor and disenfranchised. It is for the bamboozled, only some of whom
are poor and disenfranchised. The principles are, once again, (1) the teacher is
an ally of students; (2) the subject matter is students’ own experience; (3) the
end is changing the world; and (4) the teaching and learning processes are pri-
marily rational and cognitive. And let us start with the immodest notion of
“changing the world,” even though it comes third in Elbow’s original order,
since, of the four principles, no other is more immediately damaging to the
realistic possibility of a “critical” American classroom if it cannot be sympa-
thetically recomposed. Why struggle over the nature of the teacher’s role or the
substance of a syllabus if the end of the enterprise is either inconceivable or unacceptable?

Surely, it is difficult to conceive a less plausible ambition than the one Freire refers to as “intervention in reality” (Pedagogy 81), the more so for American teachers when Freire’s sources of theoretical inspiration range from Karl Marx to Che Guevara. Elbow observes wryly that few teachers propose in their classes “a particular set of partisan activities designed actually to change some social, personal, or political situation” (“Bamboozled” 90), implying not only that the end of a critical pedagogy is, on the face of it, impractical but also—assuming that the word partisan means blind, prejudicial adherence to some cause or faction—that it is wrong-headed. But what does it mean to change the world? Freire, to be sure, speaks frankly of liberation, the “incessant struggle” of oppressed people to “regain their humanity.” His pedagogy “makes oppression and its causes objects of reflection by the oppressed, and from that reflection will come their necessary engagement in the struggle for their liberation” (Pedagogy 25). He speaks admiringly of “revolutions” in Cuba, Mexico, Bolivia, which “broke open the closed structures of rural areas” (Politics 95). Freire’s language, with its references to “oppression” and “struggle,” appears to equate, and sometimes does equate, “changing the world” with political revolution. Because his argument emerges from conditions of life among the poor in Latin America and Africa, it fails to ring true, as Elbow seems to imply, for “ordinary” Americans (even those who may be economically disenfranchised) in the mostly comfortable environments of U.S. life and education. But critical theorists understand that “oppression” is a relative construction, as is the “struggle” that responds to it. Concrete circumstances give specific meaning to the notions of freedom and domination and also shape the imperatives, as well as the strategies, of action. Notwithstanding the uncomfortable overtones of revolution, Freire’s argument does not identify the transforming of reality with catastrophic social disequilibrium or the dramatic overthrow of existing institutions. True revolution consists in the emergence of a new subjectivity among dominated human beings (81–84), an educational and political project the radicalness of which depends on the tolerance of an existing social order for the dialogue of renegotiating reality. Repression of dialogue in apartheid-ist South Africa proved over decades to have tumultuous consequences. By contrast, tolerance of dialogue in American political history, though that tolerance has been sorely tested, has largely retained its social value even amidst the agitations of labor unions and civil rights activism.

To equate change with revolution is finally to misunderstand the nature of change, to see it mechanistically, as though the “ordinary” condition of life is stasis, a monolithic, imperturbable order that is rarely, and then only violently,
destabilized as pressures build up within and overwhelm it, leading to a new monolith. For Freire, however, it is change, not stasis, that is the natural condition of society because society is comprised of “uncompleted beings conscious of their incompleteness” (*Pedagogy* 20), “restless beings incessantly pursuing a fuller humanity” (24), beings forever “in the process of becoming” (57).

Critical thinking “discerns an indivisible solidarity” between the world and human beings, perceiving reality “as process and transformation, rather than as a static entity.” The mechanistic view of history, which Freire calls “naive,” sees historical time as a “weight” that has yielded a “normal present” to which, as a matter of “common sense,” human beings must accommodate themselves. But for the critic, history is the “continuing transformation of reality, for the sake of . . . continuing humanization” (65). The challenge of critical pedagogy is to intervene creatively in processes of change that are always and necessarily under way, not to deploy kamikaze politics in the vain hope of dismantling massively impervious social institutions. The realistic possibility of directed social change derives from this insight while the pragmatics of change derive from analysis of existing social conditions.

Changing the world, then, is neither more nor less than “intervening in reality.” Human beings ceaselessly change what we ourselves have made in the first place, although we are only able to participate in its re-making when we first perceive human beings to have been its makers, when we understand ourselves as subjects, not as objects of the will of others or of an ontological historical process. One function of pedagogy is to assist that understanding. But just as a mechanistic view of change—stasis followed by revolution and a new stasis—is unhelpful to understanding the possibility of critical intervention, so too is a teleological view, which supposes that the aim or conclusion of intervention is social utopia—a preconceived political order. Utopian thinking presumes a “modernist” view of history, in which great individuals and great events occasionally take society upward another notch in the long march toward a perfected condition. A utopian understanding of change justifies Elbow’s concern about “partisan” activity on behalf of some explicit political agenda, raising the specter of a “visionary” individual or group willfully imposing on others. The modernist image of steady progress toward the end of history is a damaging illusion that can lead to elitist and paternalistic formulations of intervention, denying equal participation in the project of transforming reality to those who lack the requisite genius, the latest technologies, the “professional” expertise, the appropriate class affiliation, or the correct political vantage point. A desire to “save the masses,” to do something “for” the less enlightened or the dispossessed, turns would-be progressives into the new reactionaries, the latest oppressors. Freire retains a notion of “utopia,” just as
he retains a concept of “revolution,” but he insists that “a true revolutionary project, to which the utopian dimension is natural, is a process in which the people assume the role of subject in the precarious adventure of transforming and recreating the world” (Politics 82).

Human beings can and do work to change what they perceive to be limiting to their potential to be more fully human. But the change is not controlled by a privileged group, not “progressive,” not “developmental,” and not linear; rather, it is a continuing process of critical reimagining in the pursuit of social justice, typically a dispersion of slow, unpredictable communal “dialogues,” including oppositional discourses, perhaps never fully aware of their tendencies, their “bearings,” as they proceed. Change is what we see when we look backwards, when we understand ourselves historically; it does not begin from a blueprint. Dialogue can occur in any community setting—a church basement, a union hall, a town meeting, a public school; it does not continue “on behalf of” the voiceless but rather, recognizing the entitlement of every citizen to speak, insures a voice for everyone. The intent of critical pedagogy is to renew that dialogue wherever it has been silenced or perverted, to insure that all citizens have opportunity—and requisite ability—to participate, and to assist the development of practices of inquiry that can unveil bamboozlement. The commitment to full participation and the explicit challenge to bamboozlement are precisely what separate Freirean dialogue from the current workings of practical American democracy, where the debate may be animated—“democrats” and “republicans” hammering away at rising costs of welfare—but where no one scrutinizes either the common sense framing the terms of debate—“people who won’t work should not expect handouts”—or the exploitation and oppression that such “common sense” enables. For Freire, common sense itself, with its attendant bamboozlements, becomes the object of attention. And those who are least enfranchised speak about the nature of their disenfranchisement. There lies the “revolution.”

An issue that is crucially corollary to these problems regarding the nature and possibility of social change is the relationship between “changing the world” and “changing the school.” Elbow speaks at times as though schools enjoy a reprieve from life, suggesting, for example, that Dewey is less radical than Freire because he advocated a “laboratory” or “practice” kind of action whereas Freire intends “to make a difference in the real world” (“Bamboozled” 90). Indeed, Elbow’s challenge of the practicality of a critical pedagogy begins significantly from the assumption that schools simply are what they are; we should not pretend we are doing things that the realities of the school world render impossible. To be candid with students, for instance, teachers should explain up front the power arrangements that circumscribe school life, that
render teachers and learners alike helpless before imposing institutional realities: this is my course and I have developed it without consulting you; credit decisions are unilaterally mine; we are not studying your lives here but rather my course materials; we are not trying to change the world; this is not education designed to make you free (94). His point in commending these frank admissions is, however, less to draw critical attention to the power realities of schooling—something that a critical teacher would seek to do in somewhat similar terms—than to underscore, through overstatement, the seeming impracticality of bringing that kind of attention to bear in the first place. After all, the prospect that Elbow envisions, large numbers of students simply leaving public schools in favor of alternative education, must rest on the dubious assumption that students already wish for, and are determined to seek, the freedom their teacher is telling them they cannot have in this classroom. Even if such an assumption were plausible, the politics of such a move would seem more reckless than productive since the teacher offers to say nothing more to these freedom lovers than “Seek your freedom somewhere else,” when he might have said, feeding off of their energy, “let us work where we are to analyze and change the conditions of schooling.” But the assumption is not really plausible, and we doubt that Elbow wishes to be reckless. More likely, he wishes to be truthful in emphasizing the limitations of critical pedagogy—but overstates the limits.

We agree, as Freire does, that there is no reason to assume that schools are ideal locations in which to enact a critical pedagogy or, still less, to suppose that schools are the point of origin for more comprehensive social transformation. But we would add that there is no reason to assume that other locations are better or easier or that the school is somehow less a part of the world than other venues might be. We agree that the school does not readily permit a redistribution of authority, but we would add that this reticence does not distinguish it from other institutions or other potential sites of critical engagement. The school is part of the world, and the contradictions inherent in establishing critical dialogue there exist equally in establishing it elsewhere. The larger point, which critical theory has explored in some detail, is that, while schools do indeed function to reproduce existing social arrangements, they are also, no less than other social institutions, sites of contestation, where competing social values, diverse constituencies, various pressures for conformity and change vie with each other for authority. Hence, the school is as good a place for dialogue as any, and as limited as any, and when school practices change, as they surely do, something is different, not just in a laboratory that simulates the world, but in the world. When teachers work to change the schools, therefore, they work to change the world. This does not mean that what happens in
schools constitutes the starting point for more pervasive social change. As Freire notes, schooling is too deeply “rooted in the global conditions of society” to serve as the “lever” of transformation (Shor and Freire 129). Changing the school is part of changing the world, but it is not the agency by which the world is changed. It is only the part of the world that teachers and students—along with school administrators, parents, school board members, and other committed citizens, working collaboratively—can change.

Elbow’s other representations of Freirean practice are best reviewed against the backdrop of this understanding of the school world—because they accurately presume a conflict between the sort of school that critical practice envisions and the kind of school that presently exists in American institutional reality. There are two ways of responding to the remaining principles, therefore: one is to rewrite Elbow’s expression of them, accommodating the differences between American schools and Latin American “culture circles,” but the other is to examine how existing school practice would need to be, and can be, reconceived in order to meet their expectations. We propose to respond in both ways. Consider the principle that the teacher must be a collaborating ally rather than a supervisor of students. Elbow believes that the role of ally is largely unavailable to classroom teachers, given the power arrangements of schools, and would be inappropriate even if available to the extent that teachers are legitimately expected to be “credit-givers” (“Bamboozled” 88), not intellectual comrades. In this formulation, Elbow presents teachers with stark choices (rather than contraries to embrace): either be an ally or be a credit-giver; if they must be the second, then they cannot be the first. To be sure, this issue is less complex in the circumstances of Freire’s culture circles, noninstitutional, indeed countercultural, settings that do not implicate the teacher in the accrediting actions of a state educational apparatus. But Freire’s reasoning about the critical teacher is applicable beyond the culture circles if one appreciates his careful definition of the relationship between the teacher and the learner. He establishes some contraries of his own for us to embrace, neither usurping the critical authority of the student nor shirking the teacher’s role in sustaining the practice of critical inquiry. “The role of an educator who is pedagogically and critically radical,” he writes, “is to avoid being indifferent, a characteristic of laissez-faire educators. The radical has to be an active presence in educational practice. But the educator should never allow his or her active and curious presence to transform learners’ presences into shadows of the educator’s presence” (Literacy 140). What is finally at issue, Freire suggests, is not the (naive) claim that teachers can give away their authority, can “empower” students in the face of the overdetermined institutional reality of the school, but instead the more plausible claim that the teacher can foster an atmosphere
of critical engagement that includes learners as active subjects, while conceding, indeed drawing scrupulous attention to, the concrete circumstances of the school world. It is in such a context that Elbow’s recommendation of cautionary statements a teacher might make at the beginning of a course could be meaningful. His statements in that circumstance, instead of drawing ironic attention to the unlikelihood of critical activity, would focus student attention on the reality of school life, inaugurating a cultural investigation suited to the oppositional aspirations of the course.

As Freire tells Ira Shor, the objective “is not for the teacher to have less and less authority,” but rather that “the democratic teacher . . . never transforms authority into authoritarianism” (Shor and Freire 91). Being an “ally,” then, does not mean denying or evading responsibility as a teacher, including the responsibility to judge; it means trusting the reasoning abilities of the learner (Pedagogy 41), trusting the possibility that the learner can teach and the teacher learn (53), understanding that it is not the mission of the teacher to domesticate the learner by “giving” a knowledge that the learner can only depend helplessly on the teacher, as expert, to provide (124). Nonetheless, rewriting Elbow’s version of Freire’s “principle” does not explain away the teacher’s inescapable position within the power arrangements of the school. Aronowitz and Giroux have noted the importance of facing up to the “contradictory roles” that transformative intellectuals occupy in schools, earning a living within institutions that help to produce dominant culture while offering “forms of alternative discourse and critical social practices” at odds with the “overall hegemonic role of the school” (40). The teacher does not, cannot, give away authority in the process of becoming an ally. The teacher can only make authority a problem for critical analysis and join with other teachers in the same practice, together creating classrooms in which students are invited to examine “hegemonic” practices, including the arrangements of schooling, and thereby assume roles as knowing subjects. Through such a practice, teachers acknowledge the difficulties of critical engagement while also adapting strategies of engagement to the circumstances of the school world, confronting with learners that powerful silence about themselves that schools, like other social institutions, depend on for their reproduction of dominant culture. Does this effort count as changing the world? In the larger sense, no, because of the practical limits of formal schooling for social transformation. As Freire laughingly tells Ira Shor, “I am not thinking that when I say goodbye to the students I have twenty-five more revolutionaries. No, no! But what we may have after finishing the seminar is an increase in the curiosity of the people.” Having asked new questions, having discovered a new critical awareness, perhaps some of those students “will become much more strongly engaged in the process of transformation” elsewhere (Shor
Perhaps, too, the world of the school will have seen a transformation in how some teachers envision the practice of education.

Another of Freire’s four principles, according to Elbow, is that the object of study “is the actual lives of the students and their perceptions of their lives,” rendered as problems for critical reflection. And once again, we must try both to rewrite the principle in the context of American education and also to imagine how ordinary school practice would need to be reconceived to accommodate Freire’s intent. To be sure, the preparation of the culture circle entails the sort of “anthropological” analysis that Elbow describes (“Bamboozled” 88), a prior ethnographic study of the local reality of the peasants leading to a derivation of generative words and themes from their life-world that will later form the substance of the literacy workshop (see Education for Critical Consciousness). These words and themes then serve to relate the practical business of learning to read and write to the cultural work of investigating the conditions of life evoked through the generative language. Freire’s approach presumes learners who have never experienced active control of the written word and who rarely if ever have had motive or leisure to inquire systematically into the circumstances of their lives. In short, his methods reflect his experience of a specific educational setting and do not transport to other settings, least of all the American school in which broadly literate, media savvy students engage familiarly in superficial academic rituals of thinking, doubting, investigating, and discussing. But the larger questions here go beyond pedagogical tactics and have to do with how “knowledge” and “learning” are to be understood and how teachers and learners are to relate to each other in the pursuit of critical understanding. For all the evident differences between the culture circle and the school room, one similarity stands out: in each case, the critical educator works with learners as they become serious, active producers of knowledge, “knowing subjects,” rather than passive recipients of information.

Focusing on the “actual lives” of students does not mean a “voyeuristic” preoccupation with their “private” experience of the world, nor does it mean that education is “about” student biographies or “about” finding meaningful issues with which students can identify—“drugs, sex, suburbs” (“Bamboozled” 89). It’s worth underlining the fact that peasants in the culture circles are learning to read and write: these activities constitute the proximate object of study. But Freire does not conceive of reading and writing as mere technologies to be given to people who lack them. Instead, these competences represent ways of understanding the world, ways of composing and recomposing reality. There is a reciprocity, therefore, a dialectic, between understanding the world and living in the world—reflection and action—naming the world and changing the world. “Actual life” and the perception of actual life are focuses of instruction, but they
are dialectically related to the proximate object of study: each informs the other. Hence, when Jonathan Kozol invites his learners to read or write such words as ‘tenement,’ ‘landlord,’ and ‘rat,’ instead of Dick, Jane, and Spot, his object of study is equally the substance of literacy—sounds, letters, words, combinations of words—and the reality that his learners experience, a reality concretized through these words. When a college writing teacher invites her learners to read Toni Bambara’s “The Lesson” and write about it in the context of sociological arguments relating wealth and social class, she is teaching reading and writing—but she is also encouraging a critical perception of American consumerism, an investigation of students’ own images of The Good Life. In either of these instances, writing and reading ultimately become ways for learners to act upon their experience as “knowing subjects.” The formal curriculum of the school represents, in Freire’s terms, diverse ways of understanding the world, “knowing” it verbally, mathematically, historically, or physically. Learning disciplinary knowledges opens new possibilities not only for understanding the world and students’ own positions in it, but also for transforming the world—where change is conceived not as “improvement” through technological or other advance but as continued negotiation, through dialogue, of free and fair communal life. The object of study is precisely “the lives of students”—as some disciplinary knowledge contributes to the composing and enables the recomposing of those lives, as a specific knowledge provides the lens for posing problems about the conditions of life.

But this adaptation of Freire’s principle to the school context sharply defines the difference between what critical pedagogy envisions and what American schools actually do. The school curriculum, far from representing disciplinary knowledges as ways of understanding and acting in the world, represents them as static, commodified bodies of information, designed to “explain” the necessity or desirability of the world-as-it-is, while preparing students for docile service in it. Changing this perception of school studies requires directing explicit critical attention toward the differences between the two ways of conceiving knowledge, along with classroom enactments of authentic disciplinary inquiry, consciously designed to oppose the inert transferring of information that Freire calls “banking” education (Pedagogy 45–59). While these practices take time and energy to concretize as the work of Monday morning, many teachers, indeed many students, are already allies in the effort, even if they are not advocates of critical pedagogy. They recognize already the dissatisfactions of lecture formats, the lack of engagement, the deadening of curiosity. Consistent with the nature of social change generally, the task is to intervene creatively in the midst of these dissatisfactions, seeking to imagine alternatives. No doubt, the aspiring critical educator will encounter
the problems that worry Elbow, including negative reactions from students to an unfamiliar focus on dimensions of social experience ordinarily left outside of school studies. The issues the teacher introduces may not seem “relevant to the real lives of the students” (89) because students are not accustomed to thinking of their lives, certainly their school lives, in critical terms. There could even be some bamboozlement because the work is difficult for teachers as well as learners and the potential for missteps is significant. But never mind: the real bamboozlement perpetuated across the curriculum does not derive from the clumsy aspirations of critical teachers; it derives from the well orchestrated “banking” of reified, ossified information that schools settle for as a pale facsimile of learning. “Knowledge,” Freire says, “emerges only through invention and reinvention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry men [sic] pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other” (Pedagogy 46). The pursuit of this idea can tolerate some minor-league bamboozlement along the way.

The fourth and final principle that Elbow identifies in Freirean method is an insistence on rationality, critical thinking, the posing of problems. The opposition that most interests Elbow is that between “education as cognitive dissonance,” a model of skepticism, doubt, resistance, which he ascribes to Freire, and “education as emulation or participation,” identified variously as the Platonic, Socratic, Freudian, and Piagetian model. The second depends on belief, trust, admiration, and a willingness to participate in, rather than resist, “what is different from the self” (“Bamboozled” 96–97). Elbow does not repudiate the first in favor of the second: he intends here a real embracing of contraries. But he argues that a resistance model may be somewhat more appropriate for adult Brazilian peasants, bamboozled for centuries by the assumption that their misery is part of a divine plan, and proportionately less appropriate for middle-class American adolescents already steeped in skepticism, isolated in their individualism, and fearful of dependency or commitment. We suggest, however, that Elbow has picked the wrong target when he invokes Freirean liberatory rationality in what would otherwise be a plausible critique of American adolescent alienation. The real target is the authoritarian rationalism that currently dominates American schools and that may very well encourage just the alienation that Elbow describes. Freire speaks of the “culture of silence” that results when people are not free to speak their word. In such a culture, people are “mute,” prohibited from “creatively taking part in the transformations of their society and therefore prohibited from being” (Politics 50). Freire has in mind, to be sure, the oppressive conditions experienced by the peasants in his culture circles. Yet how apt a metaphor is the “culture of silence,” suitably modified in the context of American education, for characterizing
sullen, apathetic students whose school days are comprised of lectures, artificial discussion, and cold attention to ideas they are not invited to own, explore, or even react to as something meaningful in and for their lives. Alienation is a response to bamboozlement, ineffective but understandable. Freire has much to say, by contrast, about the comradeship, the mutual trust, the selflessness that come to exist among teacher-learners and learner-teachers involved together in projects of cultural transformation. He can imagine an “unquiet pedagogy,” a critical stance, that does not entail alienation—that promotes just its opposite, communal engagement, faith in a productive future, commitment to an articulate public pursuit of social justice.

We acknowledge, with Elbow, the dehumanizing impact of authoritarian rationalism in American education, and we support, as he does, the need for belief, affirmation, and commitment outside the self. We also think that liberatory rationality responds to that need by imagining a culture of creative dialogue to supplant the culture of silence. And we suspect that there is little in that imagining with which Peter Elbow, long-time foe of bamboozlement and long-time advocate of “unquiet pedagogy,” would disagree.