Reinventing The University

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The student has to appropriate (or be appropriated by) a specialized discourse, and he has to do this as though he were easily and comfortably one with his audience, as though he were a member of the academy or an historian or an anthropologist or an economist; he has to invent the university by assembling and mimicking its language while finding some compromise between idiosyncrasy, a personal history, on the one hand, and the requirements of convention, the history of a discipline, on the other hand. He must learn to speak our language. Or he must dare to speak it or to carry off the bluff, since speaking and writing will most certainly be required long before the skill is “learned.” And this, understandably, causes problems.

David Bartholomae
“Inventing the University”

Education may well be, as of right, the instrument whereby every individual in a society like our own, can gain access to any kind of discourse. But we well know that in its distribution, in what it permits and in what it prevents, it follows the well-trodden battle-lines of social conflict. Every educational system is a political means of maintaining or of modifying the appropriation of discourse, with the knowledge and the powers it carries with it.

Michel Foucault
“The Discourse of Language”

On March 29, 2000, a headline on the front page of The New York Times announced “Citing a Crisis, Bush Proposes Literacy Effort.” Above the fold—interspersed with articles about the failures of NASA’s management, the conflicts facing Haitian immigrants in the United States, the efforts of nonprofit groups to exploit a loophole in the tax law, and decisions of OPEC nations to increase oil production despite Iran’s resistance—is an article about politics and literacy. It opens with this paragraph: “Once again mooring traditionally Democratic issues to the agenda of his Republican presidential campaign, Gov. George W. Bush of Texas today proposed a five-year, $5 billion program to
address what he termed a national literacy crisis among children” (Levy A1). “America must confront a national emergency,” the article quotes Bush as saying in a speech to a coalition of Asian-American groups.

Too many of our children cannot read. In the highest-poverty schools—I want you to hear this statistic—in the highest-poverty schools in America, 68 percent of fourth graders could not read at a basic level in 1998. . . . [W]e will not tolerate illiteracy amongst the disadvantaged students in the great country called America. . . . [M]ore and more we are divided into two nations: one that reads and one that can’t, and therefore one that dreams and one that doesn’t. Reading is the basis for all learning, and it must be the foundation for all other education reforms.(A1; A18)

What was candidate (now President) Bush’s solution? According to his aides, “his plan would help roughly 900,000 children with poor reading skills, at a cost of $1,000 per child per year for tutoring and other assistance,” and “[b]esides that $900 million, an additional $100 million a year would go to testing and teacher training” (A1). Literacy crises, however, soon disappear in the machinations of election-year politics, as aides to Vice President Al Gore “quickly dismissed” the “Bush plan” by attempting “to shift attention to Mr. Bush’s tax-cut proposal,” a cut that, Gore’s aides claim, “would leave no money for new education initiatives” (A1, A18).

What is interesting to me is neither Bush’s reductive definition of literacy nor that the way he narrates a literacy crisis to an audience comprised largely of minorities serves as a political strategy in a campaign that is eager to rebuild its image after a bloody primary. Nor is it the amount of money that he suggests will solve the problem, nor the political language of defining a problem, nor the Republican Party’s new-found concern with minorities, poverty, and education, nor the way that literacy is situated as the central function of education in America. What is interesting to me first is the fact that Bush is willing to identify the existence of a literacy crisis at all, and second, his implied suggestion that such a crisis breaks along cultural lines.

Why is the fact that Bush is willing to acknowledge the existence of literacy crisis surprising to me? After all, we’re due to begin talking again about a literacy crisis and a back-to-basics movement, as we do every so often in America (though a cursory survey of the public discourse over the past twenty years suggests that, despite Governor Bush’s assertions, there are decidedly mixed opinions about the existence of a literacy crisis at all). I suppose there are several reasons that I am surprised—including the mere fact that Bush and I agree on something. At this point, I’ll limit myself to two. First, similar to many teachers and textbooks, Bush invokes a universalized definition of literacy, as if what it means to be literate can be separated from the contexts in which literate practices
are meaningful. Second, even in connecting literacy and culture, Bush’s proposed solutions to the cultural biases in literacy leave the educational institutions relatively unchanged, thereby perpetuating cultural biases, albeit different ones, in the name of addressing what he is calling the crisis in literacy. If, in an effort to respond to any literacy crisis, we are to get clear about the conditions of literacy in America and if we are to generate legitimate alternatives, then we must come to terms with both the ways that particular definitions of literacy have been universalized in an effort to speak of literacy for all people in every situation, and we must be willing to change our academic institutions, which historically have served to prepare and certify Americans for and in literacy.

Whenever issues of language and literacy surface, as Antonio Gramsci argues, a reorganization of cultural hegemony is about to occur. This book is an effort to participate in the current discussions of language and literacy and in the emerging reorganization of cultural hegemony. It is about reinventing the university, about reorganizing and reconfiguring the institutions that play such a significant role in the conditions of literacy in America. It does not propose a different model of literacy instruction, but argues that we need a different model of literacy itself—a collaborative, context-specific model that emerges from the conflicts between competing cultures, including the culture of the academy and the culture of the students and teachers who comprise it. ReInventing the University does not suggest, naively, that we can escape a cultural hegemony, but suggests instead that we can collaborate on a cultural hegemony that, in the end, will meet more of the literacy needs of students, teachers, and American society itself.

At the same time, this is a story of my efforts to participate in this new cultural hegemony and to legitimize others to participate in the conversations that give rise to the cultural hegemony. It is a story of failures and successes, dead ends and promising paths. Also, it is a story of my efforts to reinvent the university even as I am searching for my place in it and working within its confines. And as is often the case with stories, it concludes as an aporia, without a clear solution or resolution, a story that rereads and rewrites without offering surefire solutions, only some suggestions.

As we know, critics have been identifying literacy crises since 1870, which, not incidentally, was shortly after the institutionalization of the German model of education and the emergence of English departments in American colleges and universities. And the coupling of literacy crises and American educational institutions is not surprising. In their introduction to Contending with Words, Patricia Harkin and John Schilb argue that this literacy crisis was defined by
critics as a failure on the part of American colleges and universities to teach writing and reading in ways that were consistent with conventional values (3). What is surprising and new, I think, is what social and historical contexts for education and literacy suggest about both the condition of literacy in the United States and U.S. educational institutions today. In a recent survey of first-year students, researchers at UCLA discovered that students increasingly view education as a means to higher incomes rather than a way of expanding their experiences and perspectives. According to this large survey, 74.9 percent of first-year students identified their primary goal in college as economic success, while 40.8 percent indicated personal growth and development. For their peers twenty years ago, the numbers were almost reversed. According to the director of the survey, the trend is more significant in light of “unprecedented levels of academic and political disengagement,” a lack of engagement that can also be seen in dropout and graduation rates in America. According to ACT, Inc., the national college-drop-out rate for first-year students increased consistently from 1983 until 1996 (though it decreased slightly in 1997), and the graduation rate had reached a new all-time low in 1997. If we consider cultural variables, then the numbers from the same period are even more revealing: though the average composite ACT score of female students increased four times between 1990 and 1996 as the average score of males remained constant, this average score for females (20.8) is still below the national average; further, the increases in the scores of both females and minorities occurred predominantly in mathematics and not in English, reading, or reasoning abilities.

In light of these and other conditions, Mark Edmundson seems to have it right when he explains the seemingly contradictory mix of boredom and ambition in contemporary students by suggesting that the problem lies with the educational system itself, and specifically with its increased emphasis on training and entertaining and not on transformation. Students (and their parents) have become consumers, Bill Readings argues, in contemporary academic institutions that are busy transforming themselves into “bureaucratically organized and relatively autonomous consumer-oriented corporation[s]” (11). The implications for education have been dramatic and far-reaching. In American colleges and universities, education has become immersed in what bell hooks calls a “crisis of engagement,” a condition in which knowledge has been “commoditized” and “authentic learning” has ceased. This crisis in education, she maintains, is also “a crisis in meaning” that affects students and teachers alike, both of whom are uncertain about the purpose of education, as well as “unsure about what has value in life” (51). Some have gone so far as to argue that if the social crises of meaning in America continue, the end of education may be forthcoming.
Along with the social contexts of education, the social contexts for literacy help to complete the picture of literacy in America. Currently in America, forty million adults sixteen or older have what the National Institute of Literacy has designated as “significant literacy needs.” Historically, according to Jan Nespor, literacy instruction has undergone three distinct phases that have increasingly separated literacy practices from their social contexts:

Literacy instruction, which had at first been part of an apprenticeship in certain forms of complex social activities and had later become part of a routinized form of social practice (religious observance), had now become routinized and embedded in a hermetic context: the public school. Formal literacy instruction was no longer grounded in everyday contexts of use (even of the ritualistic-religious variety). Instead, children were placed in particular institutional contexts whose sole function was to impart “skills” abstracted from contexts of use. Instead of learning to do things that entail reading and writing, one learned to “read” and “write” in courses designed to teach nothing but reading and writing. (176-77)

As the practices of literacy instruction shifted from invoking context-specific abilities to universalized skills situated within their own classrooms, the cultural values that these versions of literacy represented shifted from communal values and towards increasingly institutionalized cultures, first of the church and then of the state. Along with an increasingly decontextualized understanding of literacy came an increasingly institutionalized version of culture, which, more and more, became the purview of experts.10

Together, the practices of literacy instruction and the institutionalization of cultures produced a cultural capital, or what Bill Readings (drawing upon Pierre Bourdieu) calls “the confluence of symbolic and sociocultural capital” (105 ff), as the standard for certification by experts. In this way, the means of social reproduction had been textualized within classrooms designed to provide socialization into the dominant cultural values through developing competencies in the sanctioned versions of literacy.11 Drawing upon Gramsci, Louis Althusser explains that social reproduction in the public domain occurs through repression and violence, yet in the private domain—in which he includes educational institutions and cultural formations—social reproduction occurs through what he calls ideology, or consent.12 In spite of the oversimplification between public and private domains, I believe the distinction is helpful in understanding the ways that education and literacy contribute to social reproduction in contemporary American society.

Within the contexts that I have constructed, the act of becoming literate amounts to being certified in certain social practices and, through them, in particular cultural values. My reading of the crisis goes something like this:
particular versions of cultural capital have been institutionalized within American colleges and universities as the standards for certification. As such, these cultural values have formed the basis for full-fledged admission into social and economic credibility and authority. Or, to flip it, particular versions of what it means to write and read have been situated within U. S. colleges and universities as a way of ensuring the currency of particular cultural capital and as a way of exerting social control. This control occurs primarily through consent but also through repression, and some, such as Keith Gilyard and J. Elspeth Stuckey, would even argue, it occurs through cultural suicide and violence. In being situated so in the academy, sanctioned versions of literacy—not only certain ways of writing and reading but also, through these practices, versions of who to be and how to see the world—come to serve as the cultural capital of U. S. society at large. After all, academic writing, according to a best-selling textbook in composition classrooms, “has wide-ranging implications for the way we think and learn as well as for our chances of success, our personal development, and our relationships with other people” (St. Martins 2).

What I want to suggest is that the narratives of education that dominate U. S. colleges and universities are inextricably tied to the dominant versions of literacy in society, and to the versions of cultural capital that make these literacy practices meaningful. For example, school-based literacies, as Ron Scollon and Suzanne B. K. Scollon have demonstrated, privilege syntax and sequential relations among sentences, the ability to fictionalize writers and readers as rational minds, and truth values over rhetorical and social conditions. These are the literacy practices and the cultural capital of white, middle class America, the same practices and capital that, in part, have given rise to the narratives of education, literacy, and meaning in U. S. schools. However, the coupling of education, literacy, and social control is not, on the face of it, necessarily new or different. John Trimbur has argued that, in fact, this crisis is more the result of the appropriation of literacy by educational institutions and a meritocratic social order and less an actual decline, whatever that may look like, in the literacy practices in America (294). What is different about my reading of the situation has to do with what I believe to be an increasing social illegitimacy of these institutionalized versions of literacy and the cultural capital they endorse, especially in an increasingly different America. One could say this reading is not new, for Victor Villanueva, Helen Fox, and others have made similar cases about these conditions for minority, or world majority, students. However, I would like to argue that, even for traditional mainstream students—white, middle class, often male—the sanctioned versions of literacy in the academy are suffering from what Jean François Lyotard has called (in The Postmodern Condition) the mercantilization of knowledge and the legitimation crisis, a condition in
which the standards for literate performance have ceased to hold meaning for an increasing majority of students, including those whom these literacy practices and cultural capital have historically represented.\textsuperscript{15}

In the increasing differences between the literacies that students are bringing to the classroom and the literacy of the “traditional college curriculum” that Maureen Hourigan writes about (50), we can see what I believe to be the cultural conflicts that have given rise to the contemporary crisis in literacy and education. As part of larger social crises of education and meaning in American society, these conflicts cannot be resolved by institutional response from American colleges and universities, which in the past has meant new conferences, journals, books, and other institutional formations designed to address increasingly specialized aspects of literacy and education.\textsuperscript{16} For not only has this modernist trend failed to address the conditions of literacy in American society, but it has also contributed to larger crises of meaning and education in postmodern America by institutionalizing a version of culture that is more and more irrelevant to students.\textsuperscript{17}

According to Readings, in \textit{The University in Ruins}, there are three options: reaffirming a national cultural identity, reinventing cultural identities that are relevant to American society, and abandoning the “social mission” of academic institutions, at least in terms of representing cultures (90). Though Readings’s sense of the shift from reason and culture to excellence provides insight into the contemporary conditions that are being called the literacy crisis, his position—that academic institutions need to abandon their social function—is not just unnecessary but will only exacerbate the contemporary conditions. And Richard Miller’s optimistic pessimism in \textit{As If Learning Mattered} (202), though helpful, ends up selling short the efforts of committed teachers towards educational and cultural reform. Though I will take up Readings and Miller again the epilogue, let me mention briefly my position that it is impossible for literacy practices \textit{not} to endorse particular versions of cultural capital. Abandoning the social mission of academic institutions will merely deny this intertextuality, thereby increasing the degree to which sanctioned literacities in the academy ensure social reproduction. It is not necessary to sacrifice widespread change in order to praise the local.

Within this context, I hope \textit{ReInventing} serves Readings’s second option—a redefinition of the institutionalized cultures, a redefinition that contingent, local, and on-going, that legitimizes students and teachers to engage institutions and history in conversations over the practices of literacy and their relations to classrooms and institutions.
If culture in a postmodern society is a highly contested term, then trying to understand the culture(s) of classrooms is an effort that is doomed almost before it begins. Conventional definitions of culture, such as “a vast structure of language, customs, knowledge, ideas, and values . . . which provide . . . people with a general design for living and patterns for interpreting reality” (qtd. in Evans 273), lead critics and theorists to focus upon traditional variables—gender, class, and ethnicity—as the boundaries along which cultures break. With conventional definitions such as this one, we can talk about a culture of a particular group of people, as Henry Evans does when he argues that, “[b]ecause a people’s sociopolitical condition dictates its educational needs, multicultural education for African Americans is necessarily different from multicultural education for European Americans and other emigrant cultural groups” (276). However, the cultural dimensions of gender, class, and ethnicity rarely exist in isolation from each other, and as Maureen Hourigan argues throughout *Literacy as Social Exchange*, the confluence of class, gender, and ethnicities often gives rise to competing literacies (125-27). In classrooms, the situation is complicated even more when the cultures of specific disciplines and individual teachers are superimposed upon the competing cultures and literacies that are already present in classrooms.

What I propose to examine in *ReInventing* is the culture of the academy. I want to argue that the extent to which people—students and teachers, in this case—share particular practices (and, in so doing, assume particular positions and accept specific versions of the world) is the extent to which they share a literacy and a culture that makes it meaningful. In so doing, I want to talk about the cultures of classrooms and cultures of particular classrooms. I want to talk about how they may be similar to and different from the cultures of classrooms constructed by other sections of the same course or, more obviously, from classrooms constructed by other disciplines. And the degree to which classrooms sanction different practices and, through them, different positions for people to assume and versions of the world to accept, is the degree to which we can distinguish among competing literacies within the academy. It is this tension between the social and the individual that give rise to the ways that I am using literacy and culture throughout this book.

For me, the most salient conflicts within literaci(es) practices center upon issues of legitimacy and authority and the ways that these have been appropriated within academic institutions in America. Within American colleges and universities, the naturalization of literacy practices in English departments has resulted in a widespread alienation and lack of engagement through the privileging of an academic cultural capital and denying alternatives. This is so, in part, because of the ways that the sanctioned literacy practices have been
decontextualized from the social and cultural contexts that make them meaningful. If I can construct historical and social contexts, perhaps I can clarify my reading of the contemporary conditions of education and literacy in America. One context for understanding what I am calling the contemporary crises in literacy and meaning is to see it in relation to what John Trimbur calls a “the rise of mass public education” and an institutionalization of “a meritocratic educational order” (280). With the appropriation of an elective model of education in the late nineteenth century, American colleges and universities shifted their social function from serving an aristocratic social class to providing a means for social mobility for a developing American middle class. As such, American colleges and universities appropriated the American Dream of equality and individualism—a dream that, as we all know, presupposes a universal culture and a egalitarian society. Nevertheless, the new elective colleges and universities, in the absence of the sorting mechanism of social class, needed a method for certifying eligible students for admission into the newly elite status of the educated middle class, and this process, as Susan Miller argues in Textual Carnivals, came to be situated within English departments and specifically in literature and composition classrooms (51). Together, literature and composition classrooms were the sites where students were socialized into the cultural capital of the academy and by virtue of their certification entered into the newly forming middle class.

Within the new American colleges and universities, the ensuing specialization that was part and parcel of the elective model of education only served to decontextualize the certificatory function of schools and the standards for certification in the cultural capital of the academy. Given how well known this history is, I will merely hit some highlights. In what seems like a contradiction to its contemporary function in American colleges and universities, the discipline of English studies originated in the Dissenting Academies of England during the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a period during which rhetoric, as the production of discourse, still possessed a significant social function. In America, the development of English studies occurred in such a way that separated the rhetorical from the poetic in a process that ultimately denied the role of rhetoric within the larger social context. In order to maintain the legitimacy of the new discipline of English studies in American colleges and universities, English departments denied the intellectual status of the rhetorical, now limited predominantly to composition, in order to preserve the privileged status of the poetic and, ultimately, the shape of future departments and the discipline. In terms of literacy and legitimacy, one of most significant results was the decontextualization of a social literacy as interdependent practices of discursive production and consumption and the institutionalization of
a decontextualized academic literacy that restricted the production of discourse to nonliterary texts and privileged the consumption of literary works.

In contemporary American colleges and universities, the function of English departments is still the same—to certify students. The problem is that, within these departments, historical, class-based versions of literacy have been naturalized and legitimized. For a number of reasons that had equally as much to do with the history of literary studies as with the social mission of educational institutions in America and the discipline of composition studies itself, American colleges and universities have reduced the official role of literature classrooms in this process of certification to the point that, now (according to administrators, faculty members in other departments, and many composition specialists) composition classrooms, more than literature classrooms, serve as the site where students are certified in the standards for literate performance and, through them, in the cultural capital of the academy, though literature’s presence can still be seen (or felt).

As defined by composition studies under the auspices of the English departments, the discursive practices of the sanctioned academic literaci(es) colonialize students into the cultural capital of the academy. The problem, however, is less with the skills and abilities of the students and more with the cultural capital that the sanctioned literacies invoke. This is so not merely in the “classrooms filled with the children of color,” as Villanueva explains, whose cultural capital “differs from the white middle class” but also in those classrooms filled predominantly, and often exclusively, with children of an increasingly fragmented and different white middle class. My contention is that the cultural capital of the academy is increasingly less relevant to even the children of the white middle class, those purportedly mainstream students whose literacies are being shaped by sit-coms and MTV, by email and the Internet, by mega-malls and market-driven advertising—in short, by the realities of postmodern America.

To be sure, white, middle-class communities have historically been the recipients of the cultural legacy legitimized by conventional academic literaci(es); I would never try to argue that the personal and educational histories of many of the students who appear in these pages have not predisposed them towards the culture of the academy, or, on the other hand, that their experiences are the same as those that the world-majority students from Helen Fox’s Listening to the World have. What I would argue is that, even for the prototypical white, middle-class student, the cultural capital of the academy can be, and increasingly is, foreign and other.

These conflicts emerge most evidently in the issues of authority and credibility. For example, while students in Fox’s Listening struggle to understand the authority of “original”—as in the original source or the original thought
(which dialogic literacies would deny)—the students with whom I have worked, coming from a society that privileges cultural equality and individualism, struggle to understand that authority and credibility within conventional academic literacies come more from scholarly books and numerical studies, as well as from their opinions and experiences, and not from their opinions and perspectives alone. In these and other ways, the cultural values that students bring to classrooms are different from those of the academy. If, even for competing reasons, the cultural capital of the academy is foreign to the students who comprise American colleges and universities today, then the answer to the current conditions that have been called the literacy crisis is not more fragmentation or specialization, nor is it the denial of these differences implicit in the calls for back-to-basics movements. Instead, we must begin to consider alternatives to the conventional literacies of the academy, alternatives that reflect legitimate versions of cultural capital, legitimate for students, teachers, institutions, and disciplines. Only in addressing students’ literacy needs, and not solely the needs of institutions, can these alternatives can escape the current crises of legitimacy and meaning in American education and American society.

The read(writ)ing I am making emerges from the conflicts and historical conditions that comprised my experiences within various English departments across the country. First as a student, then a student-teacher, and later a teacher, I found myself increasingly disillusioned with the dominant cultural capital of the American academies and American society, with the currency that others have called a cultural Calvinism. According to Lester Faigley, cultural Calvinism requires that “children of the professional middle class often must go to school twenty years or more and serve an apprenticeship after that . . . just to achieve their parents’ status” (Fragments 54). In order to succeed, cultural Calvinism demands of us “the self-discipline and faith in deferred gratification that [our] parents possessed,” and yet “the terms of success for the professional middle class exacerbate [our] anxiety because affluence threatens to lead to self-indulgence,” which undermines “the Protestant ethic of hard work and delayed gratification” (54). For me, it was more, however, than simply the amount of investment that was necessary; it included the prevailing definitions of success (i.e. affluence) and the concomitant anxiety and uncertainty. In short, cultural Calvinism appeared to me, as it did to others, to be mentally, emotionally, and spiritually bankrupt. As I successively acquired my (provisional) institutional legitimacy by earning degrees and experiences, I found myself initially alienated from, and then increasingly uninterested in, the sanctioned literac(i(es) of the academy, in spite of my historical and social background that would suggest
otherwise. Nevertheless, my growing distaste for the dominant cultural capital of the academy and society did not interfere with my success in the classroom—at least in the terms defined by my teachers and the institutions in which I studied. As a white, male, middle class European-American student, I found it relatively easy to participate in the cultural capital of the academy by accommodating and assimilating the literacies as defined by classrooms, teachers, and institutions and by making the necessary adjustments along the way. When I took a theory course from a professor who despised social constructivism, I wrote a paper attacking the relativism of Stanley Fish and his interpretive communities. When I wrote for a professor who privileged social constructivism, I used Fish et al. to legitimize positions that lauded provisionality and contingency. I could demonstrate proficiency in the sanctioned literaci(es) of the academy. Clearly, I had learned my lesson.

Well, some might say I hadn’t. When it came time to write the dissertation, I had begun to explore literacies, culture, and the academy in earnest, and I was determined to make the experience both satisfying and rewarding, in and of itself, by centering upon these very issues that I had been working through (implicitly at least until the latter stages of graduate school) in my experiences within the academy. What I discovered, however, was that I had not learned my lesson. I had not expected that, even in the latter stages of being a student, at the point at which I was more like my professors than ever, I would still be expected to perform the dominant literaci(es) of the academy. This insight came the hard way: after literally seven drafts, my dissertation was accepted (my dissertation director did much penance that year), and I was finally legit, or so I thought, and I could move on to the intellectual work that I found most satisfying. Again, I was wrong. Over and over, I would still be expected to acquire a legitimacy through institutionally specific forms and discourses, as recognized by department chairs and academic deans.

All the while, not only were academic literaci(es) unable to meet my intellectual needs, they were also unable to provide for material needs. As everyone knows, it is virtually impossible to live upon T.A. and adjunct salaries. As a teaching assistant, I earned $3,750 plus tuition remission each semester, and later as an adjunct, I would be paid $500 a credit hour, which meant that, if I taught the maximum load allowed by that institution—three courses—for the semester, I would earn $4,500 each term. To make matters worse, I learned that, upon graduating, I would be entering into a job search in which, only 35.7% of new Ph.D.s in the classics, modern languages, and linguistics were obtaining tenure-track appointments (the lowest percentage, incidentally, in twenty years). Furthermore, only 61.4% of these same graduates would find full-time teaching appointments (ADE). Even after I began to
earn a full-time salary, I discovered other problems, such as the loan officer’s assurance that, if I were a medical doctor, she would be able to obtain much better interest rates for me.

The conclusion that I reached—the same conclusion that many of us, I’m sure, have reached—was that, if legitimacy was going to require such a constant investment of time and energy, then some other return would be needed, an intellectual compensation, perhaps, that would make the expen ditures worthwhile. So I began to search for literacies that would satisfy both the academy, in which I had chosen to work and my intellectual needs. One could say I began to look for ways to integrate my literacy needs with the literacy needs of my discipline and my profession. To my surprise (though, in retrospect, it shouldn’t have surprised me), I discovered that there were others, such as Victor Villanueva, who were writing about similar issues of legitimacy throughout graduate school and beyond and who were searching for more satisfying alternatives. What was different, though, was our context.

Obviously, literacies and crises are contingent terms. Some argue that what is being called the literacy crisis has less to do with the educational system and more to do with changing public values, and others assert that there is no literacy crisis, that what is being called the literacy crisis is the symptom of a shift in understandings of literacy in which simply writing and reading are not enough. Regardless, the advantages of being literate have been described in context-free and universal terms. The benefits attributed to being literate have been numerous: intellectual achievement; rational thinking; abstract language; critical attitudes; awarenesses of time and space; political freedom and democracy; complex governmental formations; economic security; upward mobility; better citizenship with middle-class values; personal fulfillment; lower crime rates; urbanization; and others. When resituated within historical and social contexts, the benefits that have been ascribed to literacy—what Beth Daniell calls “the modernist promise of literacy”—are actually the results of culturally-based discourses and literacy practices, not, in fact, intrinsic to a universal literacy itself, and are, in Daniell’s words, “inequitably fulfilled” (404).

A closer look at the grand literacy narratives in the academy will reveal the ways in which these versions of literacy are wedded to modernist practices and modernist discourses. In “Literacy and Politics of Education,” C. H. Knoblauch identifies four competing versions of literacy in American schools, which sanction “fundamentally different perceptions of social reality; the nature of language and discourse; the importance of culture, history, and tradition; the
function of schools, as well as other commitments, few of which are negotiable” (76). The first two versions of literacy are what Knoblauch calls functional literacy and cultural literacy, both of which, in his words, “dominate the American imagination” (76-77). As represented by basic and technical writing programs and by business, industrial, and military training programs, functional literacy defines literacy as a set of minimal mechanical skills designed to communicate information (76). Cultural literacy, on the other hand, exchanges a mechanistic version of skills for purportedly transcendent cultural values, usually the values of Western European societies (77). The remaining versions of literacy are what Knoblauch calls personal growth literacy and critical literacy. Drawing upon the American narratives of unlimited freedom and individualism, personal growth literacy, as endorsed by subjective theories of writing and the whole language movement, posits language as expressive of individual imagination through writing, reading, and speaking (78). Finally, critical literacy posits a connection between the practices of writing and reading and the awareness of social conditions in the ways that it recognizes the ability of those with authority to name the world for others (79).

In spite of the surface differences among competing versions that Knoblauch provides, all of them are situated within modernist discourses, which efface difference in their agendas towards unity and totalization, and reflect a Eurocentrism, which, as Danny Weil points out, depends upon a universalization of the world (96). As for functional and cultural literacies, it is fairly easy to recognize their cultural and linguistic biases. Many have dismantled the cultural presuppositions behind them. Imbued with conventional dualities and predicated upon an artificial orality-literacy binary, functional literacies privilege the practices of standard English and Eurocentric subjectivities and exclude other discursive practices and subject positions, such as those of African-American English, that fail to conform to these standards. In doing so, functional literacies simultaneously reinforce dominant cultures, histories, and traditions and maintain the marginalized status of the functionally illiterate. In a not wholly dissimilar way, cultural literacies endorse universalized practices and engage in cultural discrimination, not by overtly endorsing standard discourses but by privileging the cultural capital they bear. In some ways, personal growth and critical literacies are only now beginning to receive the same critical attention. Though these literacies are generally seen as liberal and/or radical alternatives designed to alter or transform society, they, too, are legitimized by and, in turn, legitimize modernist narratives. For example, personal growth literacies tend to deny conflict and posit a nonexistent social equality. Also, personal growth literacies fail to acknowledge the ways that the stories that people can tell are those that are culturally available to them, the conventions of which are constructed and constrained by the contexts in which they
appear. For another example, critical literacies have been criticized for their use of binary oppositions and false dichotomies, for their reductive understandings of social class, for their blatant sexism, and for their belief in false and correctable ideologies, much of which reflects their dependence upon foundational understandings of the world based upon a belief in the ultimate accessibility of reality and the existence of universal truths.

Clearly, literacy is a contested term, one that, in the ways it is defined, has significant intellectual, social, and moral implications. For these insights, we have postmodernism to thank. By the end of the twentieth century, the ways that poststructuralism and postmodernism had problematized the modernist project had a significant impact upon the study of literacy. Around the same time as critics were championing the most recent crisis in literacy, a group of likeminded scholars and intellectuals turned their attention to the versions of literacy that dominated American schools and American society, and they began talking about the literacy myths, to use Harvey Graff’s term, that these hegemonic versions of literacy engendered. In doing so, they relied upon an interdisciplinary approach to the study of literacy, an approach that came to be called the new literacy studies. Assuming a social approach to literacy, these researchers (who ranged from Graff, James Paul Gee, Ron Scollon and Suzanne B. K. Scollon to Shirley Brice Heath, Jennifer Cook-Gumperz and John Gumperz, and many others from a variety of disciplines) argued that the literacy myths were actually the results of historical and social literacy practices, and not inherent within literacy itself. Furthermore, they suggested that the dominant versions of literacy denied their social and historical conditions and the interrelations among writing, reading, and power in the ways that they situated literacy within individuals rather than communities. As an alternative, these researchers argued that all definitions of literacy—including critical literacy—are inherently political in the ways that they establish power relations among people and naturalize particular versions of reality. In regard to classroom practices, they suggested that school-based literacies endorse certain values and versions of culture that are important to the hegemony of those currently in power. Though perhaps relying upon an oversimplified understanding of hegemony in their early work, the proponents of this new literacy studies emphasized the political dimensions of being literate and the role of literacies in social reproduction.

Within the contexts generated by the new literacy studies, what critics have called the literacy crisis becomes less about declining skills or rising standards for reading and writing and more about the standards and legitimacy of sanctioned literacies themselves.
In the acts of reread(writing)ing the narrative of literacy in the academy, I have legitimized my own narrative, a narrative that bespeaks my own histories and cultures, my experiences in classrooms, as both a student and a teacher, and in institutions, as colleague and faculty member, and my experiences in the world beyond classrooms in all its forms—husband, father, friend, etc. As much as I might want or as much as I might be expected to do so, I cannot escape this situatedness, my situatedness, within the world; consequently, what I have done is legitimize a contingent narrative within a sea of contingent narratives, a narrative that is provisional and incomplete, a provisionality and incompleteness that, in the end, I cannot escape or avoid. However, such a recognition does not vitiate the rereading and rewriting that I do here, for all readings and writings are, in the end, provisional and incomplete.

Neither are these acts of rereading and rewriting an attempt to give rise to an alternative literacy construct that can be imported into classrooms and imposed upon students and teachers, for doing so would make it no different from conventional literacies that deny the difference of classrooms and students, institutions and disciplines. Rather, it is an attempt to negotiate the positionality and provisionality of literacy classrooms and my own situatedness within the discipline of English studies in American colleges and universities.

As is always the case, my reading and writing of the wor(l)d will privilege particular dimensions and overlook others. What makes it different, however, is that it attempts to recognize its own history, the contributions that people and experiences have made to it, the ways that it has been changed and transformed in its encounters with others and with the world.

As such, this narrative, in the act of reading and writing, is an effort to read and write itself, to construct its own literacy of literacies and education, of teaching and learning in America.

For some time, it has become something of a truism in contemporary intellectual circles that schools are powerful and persuasive social institutions. In the act of educating, schools situate students within specific social practices, and in doing so, they naturalize and legitimate particular discourses and cultures, along with the cultural capital that accompanies a proficiency in these discourses and values. One of the ways that this process of socialization occurs is through the literacy instruction, both tacit and explicit, that students receive in the course of the programs. In classrooms, instruction in the practices of literacy, or the acts that are considered to be writing, reading, thinking, etc., conducts students into the discourse communities of the academy and, to borrow Lester Faigley’s pun, offers them conduct upon which to model their discursive practices and their
discourses. As such, the discourses of the academy “discipline” students, as well as their teachers, through the practices and the versions of literacy that they sanction, less by coercion, though there is plenty of that, and more by consent. Even in many ostensively radical classrooms, students cannot escape the tendency of academic literaci(es) to privilege a naturalized version of academic culture at the expense of the literacies and cultures that lie beyond it. More specifically, academic literaci(es) denie(s) the difference of subjectivities and versions of the world in the literacies that students bring with them (constructed-inscribed within their primary and popular discourses) in favor of a universalized (academic) subject position and uniform versions of the (academic) world—that is, in favor of the cultural capital of the academy. From the perspective that I have assumed, this denial is responsible for the contemporary crisis in literacy and meaning. And I see in this crisis, as I have suggested earlier, a condition in which learning to write, read, speak, think, value, etc. academically amounts to acceding to institutionally sanctioned discursive practices, subject positions, and versions of the world that maintain the current social relations and institutional formations and that alienate writers and readers from themselves and their experiences.

As such, the contemporary crises in literacy and meaning are actually crises in the cultural capital of the academy itself. Critiques of the academy, of course, are expected from those who are elided in the cultural histories of the academy. However, at the same time, there is a growing discontent, I believe, even within the dominant academic cultures, and it can be seen, for example, in the currency that subjectivist literacies have within the academy. Within the contexts I have established, one way to understand the popularity of expressivist theories of writing and reader-response theories of reading is to construct them as reactions to the dissatisfactions of the dominant literacies of the academy, with their universalized practices and uniform cultures, by more mainstream theorists and practitioners. In the ways that the academy has accepted, for example, the contraries of Peter Elbow’s doubting-believing game or the contingencies of Wolfgang Iser’s textual gaps and indeterminacy, we can see a desire for alternatives to the universality of the dominant literacies of the academy. (In some ways, the reactions to expressivist and reader-response theories suggest the threat that these approaches potentially hold for the dominant literacies of the academy.) Unfortunately, the degree to which expressivist theories of writing or reader-response theories of reading privilege the individual is the degree to which these potentially transformative practices have been constructed within institutional formations and colonialized by these institutions. In denying the social implications of such practices and restricting them at the level of the individual, being constructed and colonialized within institutions have robbed
these practices of their potential for change. If these individual practices can be resituated within historical and social contexts, then these practices, as some have suggested, could transform classrooms and institutions through dialogue and difference, not unlike the dialogic classrooms that Kay Halasek describes in A Pedagogy of Possibility.

If it is true that the dominant standards for literate performance in American colleges and universities (and, by extension, in American society) are failing to satisfy the literacy needs of American students and American society, then such dissatisfaction represents potential sites of power that can enable us to reinvent the academy. Moreover, they enable us to do so in ways that go beyond merely assimilationist explanations of reconciling personal histories with institutional discourses, as I would argue David Bartholomae offers in “Inventing the University,” to enacting classrooms in ways that lead to mutually satisfying literacies, literacies that satisfy both writers and readers and the academy itself. Of all the obstacles that such reinventings must overcome, one of the biggest is the issue of institutional legitimacy. Without this legitimacy, alternative literacies will remain in conversations at conferences or in print without transforming classroom practices, or, perhaps worse, they will be assimilated within institutions before they can produce any changes within the narratives of education that dominate American colleges and universities.

In The New Literacy, Paul Morris and Stephen Tchudi have documented the failure of conventional literacies and traditional discourses to respond to the cultural and linguistic needs of a postmodern United States. However, these insights into language and culture are not new to the academy. For example, scholars in applied linguistics and contrastive rhetorics, such as Ilona Leki and Ulla Conner, have long argued over the relationship between culture and language. Furthermore, others, such as Geneva Smitherman, Tony Crowley, and Rosina Lippi-Green, have argued that standard literacies reinforce cultural biases and social discrimination, and in so doing, these and other scholars have ushered in what James Comas has argued goes beyond a political turn in language studies to the “recasting of our disciplinary infrastructure in the mode of ‘the political,’ that is, the infrastructure of canons, curricula, pedagogy, and modes of research” (190).

His accusation of political essentialism notwithstanding, it is clear that the politicized contexts of literacy studies, composition studies, contrastive rhetorics, applied linguistics, literary studies, and related disciplines have given rise to challenges to conventional literacies and traditional discourses within the academy and have sought to legitimize alternatives. Perhaps most recently, Patricia Bizzell, in “Hybrid Discourses,” argues that these alternative, or “hybrid,” discourses have had a currency within academic institutions since the
late 1980s and the early 1990s, at least within the disciplines of composition and rhetoric. Turning to the work of Keith Gilyard, Helen Fox, bell hooks, Mike Rose, Victor Villanueva, and others, Bizzell argues that these alternatives have certain features in common—nonstandard versions of English, nontraditional cultural references, personal experiences, offhand refutations, appropriative histories, humor, indirection, and textual reproduction. Beyond those whom Bizzell cites, others in composition and rhetoric who have experimented with alternatives to conventional academic literacies include Scott Lyons (mixed blood rhetorics) and Winston Weathers (narrative rhetorics). In addition to scholars in composition and rhetoric, scholars and intellectuals in other disciplines, such as Gloria Anzaldúa (anthropology/chicana-women’s studies), Marilyn Cochran-Smith (education), Lemuel Johnson (comparative literature), Anne Sullivan (biology), and Jane Tompkins (literary studies), have experimented with alternative discourses in their intellectual work.

At the same time that alternative literacies and discourses are surfacing in scholarship, they are also appearing in composition classrooms across the United States. Bizzell, in her article on hybrid discourses, argues that teacher’s composition cannot ignore these alternative discourses if they are going to prepare students for success in other classrooms and other contexts, and in a related way, Peter Elbow, in “Inviting the Mother Tongue,” advocates for the legitimacy of students’ primary discourses in classrooms conventionally dominated exclusively by academic literacies. Even before Bizzell and Elbow, however, others, such as Lillian Bridwell-Bowles, Xin Liu Gale, and Derek Owens, were calling for alternatives to conventional academic literacies as legitimate ways of learning and knowing in classrooms. In a similar way, essay collections, such as *Elements of Alternative Style* and *Writing in Multicultural Settings*, had begun to challenge conventional academic discourses and to recognize the importance of cultural literacies in writing classrooms.

*ReInventing* falls within both of these traditions. However, there are several differences. One of the biggest is that *ReInventing* extends these challenges beyond the composition classroom to include literature classrooms, English departments, and the institutions in which they exist. In doing so, I hope to bring together the interrelated practices of producing and consuming discourses under the heading of literacy. As a result, these challenges are not simply to conventional ways of producing discourses but also to ways of consuming them. Another difference includes the manner in which I try to reread and rewrite what critics are calling the contemporary crisis in literacy, not as a deficiency in students’ abilities but as a lack of legitimacy of academic culture. Still another difference is the way in which I don’t limit myself to authorizing cultural conflicts within the conventionally recognized differences—class, gender,
and ethnicity—but include additional differences, differences that cut across these conventional fault lines (to play on Miller’s article “Fault Lines in the Contact Zone”). In yet another way, I am trying to reconceive our business as teaching students to control discourses and as engaging in intellectual work to reread and rewrite culture and society, and I am speculating on what, in an ideal world, this revisioning would look like at departmental and institutional levels. One of the purposes of this text, then, is to contribute to the process that Patricia Bizzell, Helen Fox, Xin Liu Gale, Keith Gilyard, Derek Owens, Victor Villanueva, and others have begun in acquiring an institutional legitimacy for these alternative literacies.

Over the years, I considered myself to be a fairly competent teacher of writing and reading. As is the case for many who experiment with engaged pedagogies, I believed that my efforts in classrooms encouraged and empowered students in ways that led to satisfying learning for them, and in part, the responses from students seemed to confirm my impressions. For example, one writer from an introductory composition course I taught wrote in a student evaluation that the instructor “Definately42 knows the subject, personality is open to our level. Can make you think when you really didn’t want to.” Another student noted that I am “Knowledgable about all areas of the subject being taught and always willing to help with writing problems.” One student from a contemporary American literature course wrote that “The learning atmosphere was comfortable and casual” in spite of cramming an entire semester into eight meetings, and this same student goes on to cite my “level of knowledge and enthusiasm for the subject” and characterizes me as a “very bright person” who “loves the material that he teaches.”

In addition to responses from students, I was encouraged in my efforts by Patricia Bizzell, Peter Elbow, Victor Villanueva, and others in the profession. In spite of the frustrations that accompany teaching, I always found myself excited about the prospects of each new semester—different writers and readers, different ideas and understandings, and a different subjectivity as a teacher, one that had been changed by the experiences with other writers and readers and with my own writing and reading. From my perspective, I believed that I was growing as a writer, reader, and teacher, if only because I had written more, read more, and taught more at the beginning of each semester than I had at the beginning of the previous semester. Along the way, I began to construct my own literacies. For example, I recognized the ways that Paulo Freire’s emphasis upon the cognitive dimensions of learning enabled students to transcend the social passivity that can accompany expressivism, and yet I saw merit in the feminist desire of bell hooks and others to teach the whole person, not just the mind, and I struggled to bring these two
together in the literacies I was constructing. And I assumed all along that oth-
ers in the academy, both students and teachers, would also be interested in
negotiating the differences between the literacies of the academy, with their
cultural capital, and the popular and private literacies that we brought into
the classroom.

As more experienced teachers might have told me, that assumption is not
necessarily true. In what came as a surprise to me, some responses from stu-
dents and colleagues suggested that my efforts to construct literacies might not
be as productive as I had thought or hoped. One student in a second semester
composition course wrote of me in a course evaluation that “[the instructor] was confusing when he taught and I wondered where he was going with his
教学方法.” Another student from an American literature survey wrote
in the course evaluation that “Mr. Schroeder had an approach to this class that
I have never encountered before. The class was very loosely structured and, at
times, decisions regarding its direction were made by the students. Quite hon-
estly, in taking a class I look to the instructor to share with me the knowledge
he/she possesses on the topic.” In the course evaluation of the same class,
another student wrote that “Although the group work was very productive, I
would have enjoyed more lecture. It was very apparent that the instructor was
highly knowledgeable and I would have liked him to share more of his knowl-
edge with the class” and, later, that “While I have learned a tremendous
amount from this class, its ‘loose’ structure made me a bit uneasy from time to
time. Being an English major lends itself to the discipline that critical thinking
skills foster. Perhaps this is why I wanted a bit more discipline.” Still another
student, this time from an Introduction to Literature course, asks what she
believes to be a rhetorical question in her course evaluation: “Do you really
even want to be here? It’s like you don’t even want to be a teacher—as if you
just settled for this profession,” which couldn’t be farther from the truth.
Something wasn’t working.

Not unlike these responses from students, some responses from colleagues
and administrators were disconcerting. After I suggested in a faculty meeting
that one of the problems with conventional academic essays might be the limits
of linear reasoning, a colleague asked, “What other ways are there to think
besides linear?” In response to a set of my student evaluations from one summer,
the chair of the department wrote that “The numerical ratings for the final
item—the overall rating—are more positive than negative, although they are not
outstanding,” and, in response to the next fall’s set, that “In terms of the num-
ers” the students had assigned to the prompt “Overall, I rate this instructor . . .”
I was “certainly doing well” and that “it is important to keep this in perspective.”
Nevertheless, she continued,
in the large picture of student evaluations—and I see a lot of these—yours are not par-
ticularly outstanding, and I know you are striving for excellence in your teaching. The
positives that come through consistently in the narrative comments are exactly the
things that I value most—knowledge and a willingness of help. The students are very
appreciative of your personal interest in them, and that interest is much in keeping with
what [the institution] wants to offer. The single consistent comment on the critical side
seems to be a lack of clarity, and I wish I understood more about what the students
mean. It seems as if it is less about a lack of clarity in explaining literature and more
about a lack of clarity in explaining the course and your expectations. Do you think I’m
right about this? If you are interested, we can talk about some of your assignments and
your mode of presenting them, if that is the source of some confusion.

Near the end of the evaluation, she wrote, “At any rate if you’d like to talk fur-
ther, I’m here. From my end, as an employer, I see absolutely no reason for
concern; my only interest is as a colleague.” Though my material existence
might not be at stake, my practices and methods clearly were.

Perhaps the best example of the conflicts over the legitimacy of my class-
rooms is a letter that students in a second semester writing course submitted to
the chair of the English department:

This letter is regarding the Tue-Th COMP2 class taught by Chris Schroeder. We
understand that some members of our class came to you to complain about Chris’s
teaching methods, and we would like to counter those complaints. We feel that
Chris is an interested, positive, and generally a good teacher. He is obviously dedi-
cated to really teaching us about writing and how to think about language. His
method is one that we really appreciate because it involves treating us as thinking
adult individuals who are responsible for our own learning. Chris trusts us to be
able to have our own ideas, and some members of the class seem to resent having to
think and not being spoon-fed knowledge.

When I received a copy of this letter from the chair, I had mixed feelings. Here
was a classroom divided against itself. Something, perhaps even something
from our semester, authorized a contingent of students to offer their readings of
the classroom to the department chair, in an example of students using their lit-
eracy skills in order read and write the classroom. At the same time, a different
 group of students felt compelled to challenge the reading offered by the first
group—again another literacy act. Unfortunately, the issue at hand was the
legitimacy of my classroom practice, the very practice that had been encourag-
ing students to use their literacies to reread and rewrite their worlds.

These experiences, and others, play an important role in this narrative that I
am trying to tell.
Literacies exist as historical and social constructions that comprise specific discursive practices, which, in turn, legitimate particular versions of who to be and how to see the world. In other words, becoming literate, or what James Paul Gee defines as learning to control a discourse, involves acquiring and/or learning specific discursive practices and the skills and/or abilities to use these practices in such a way as to construct sanctioned versions of the self and the world.

Accordingly, school-based literacies serve to socialize students into particular versions of who they should be and how they should see the world in a process that is called education. Within this context, success in the classroom amounts to becoming literate in, or learning to control, the discourses of specific classrooms and particular disciplines, a process that, as David Bartholomae points out in “Inventing the University,” is particularly difficult for students because of their relative lack of experience in academic contexts. In his words, he explains that students must “invent the university by assembling and mimicking its language while finding some compromise between idiosyncrasy, a personal history, on the one hand, and the requirements of convention, the history of a discipline, on the other hand” (590). In spite of the ways that his article offers insight into institutional realities, his explanation—in my view—has two significant shortcomings. The first is
that it is overly sanguine about the agency that students have. From my experiences on both sides of the desk, students are rarely accorded the space in which to negotiate this compromise between individual experiences of histories and social conventions of disciplines. The second problem is that Bartholomae’s explanation suggests that education is a monologic, one-way process in which the students are the ones who must accommodate disciplines and institutions, rather than a dialogic, two-way process in which students, teachers, institutions, and disciplines are challenged to change and are transformed by the acts of literacy that transpire in classrooms. If we reread and rewrite learning and education as a collaborative, dialogic process that centers upon transformation and change, then we, as teachers, must reinvent the university, classroom by classroom, as we challenge disciplines and institutions to respond to the literacies and cultures that students bring with them into the classroom. In collaboration with students, teachers, and others, ReInventing the University is an attempt to rewrite the conditions that are being called a contemporary crisis in literacy. This book examines the practices of conventional academic literaci(es) in an effort to foreground the cultures and values that they endorse and to offer an alternative approach to literacy that legitimizes alternative versions of cultural capital.

As I explained earlier, the conditions that have given rise to what "more self-centered"—but it would be more direct and not have that tucked-in, hiding feeling for me. Victor took that risk and it worked. It would be a risky move if you did what I suggest, but it would be more unusual and interesting. Your voice throughout is kind of “cooler” than what I feel the real sub-rosa voice is. And since your book is about (or starts from) a hypothesis or foundation of pissed-offness or alienation, why not embody it instead of just talking about it? I feel it’s already there but hiding.

From: Christopher Schroeder
To: Peter Elbow
Subject: Re: your mail

Yet what is a “real sub-rosa voice” if not another construction, a reading and writing of a self and a situation that may or may not align itself, more or less, with experiences and with interpretations?

There are many stories behind this story, told in multiple voices. Some of them truly *are* cool, academic, disciplinary. But yes, some of them are more personal. For instance, I used what became part of this book as my dissertation, and I think it’s clear in the book that what I was trying to do—reread and rewrite classrooms through rereading and rewriting literacy—didn’t go over well with my committee. Though my dissertation director trusted what I was trying to do, other
candidate George W. Bush and others have called a crisis in literacy are more indicative of problems with the ways that specific versions of writing and reading have been institutionalized within English departments and, by extension, of the function that English departments have played in American colleges and universities. Through denying the social contexts that make them meaningful, conventional academic literacies rely upon a cultural capital that is often foreign to and illegitimate for students. As Jimmie, a traditional student majoring in ceramics, explained to me on the second day of a composition course, “I wouldn’t talk the talk even if I could.” In the language of this talk, the alienation identified by Jimmie and countless others with whom I have worked has emerged from the ways that conventional academic literacies deny the legitimacy of the primary and popular literacies of students in favor of unified and totalized literaci(es) of the academy. In striving to efface difference, conventional academic literaci(es) in classrooms ultimately deny students’ subjectivities, or versions of who they are, and versions of the world that are constructed through their primary and popular literacies. In a similar way, the denial of difference at the institutional and disciplinary levels serves to obfuscate conflicts within disciplinary-specific epistemologies, let alone between and among disciplines, in favor of purportedly tran-

members read against my efforts, and several drafts later, I capitulated to conventional discourses and graduated. In a similar way, I have encountered resistance from colleagues, department heads, and deans as to the legitimacy of contingent literacies and the narratives of education invoked by them.

Clearly, Peter, these stories and others are part of the context from which this book is constructed, and I would never try to pretend that they aren’t. The issue, however, and I get around to this in the book, is once again a question of legitimacy—an issue which you yourself acknowledge elsewhere, though to the best of my knowledge, you haven’t foregrounded the ways that your own cultures converge with and diverge from the cultures of the academy.

Besides, narratives still have credibility problems in the academy, as we all know. To try to resolve this conflict, I have acknowledged the narratives in the prologue and epilogue. Their absence in the main chapters, at least from the surface, reflects my concern that my critique could be lost in the issue of legitimacy if/when readers discover the writer behind it.

The difference between the stories in Keith’s *Voices of the Self* or Victor’s *Bootstraps*, or even Mike’s *Lives on the Boundary* or Xin Liu Gale’s *Teachers, Discourses, and Authority* or, from the other side of the
scendent meanings and universal truths, meanings and truths that, in turn, reinforce the states of universalized academic literacies.

At this early stage, allow me to issue a disclaimer: there will be no solutions forthcoming, no alternatives that provide a roadmap for others to follow, for to do so would be to revert to the mandates of conventional academic literacies that demand context-free uniformity and universality and, as such, would work against the contingency and specificity of constructed literacies. (And, perhaps more important to me than to others, to do so would misrepresent my understanding of intellectual work by aspiring to closure.) Rather, you can expect, in the forthcoming pages, to encounter my (re)reading of the current crises in American colleges and universities, particularly in light of the ways that these crises are generated and reinforced by literacy practices, and my efforts, along with those of students and colleagues, to respond to this understanding of the crises in education through classroom practices and theoretical speculation. In short, you shall find my efforts to construct literacies of the American academy and within the colleges and universities I have worked.

It may be obvious that the constructed of constructed literacies comes from Women’s Ways of Knowing, which transformed my experience as a graduate student. As my friend Joe Camhi has been quick department, Jane Tompkins’s “Me and My Shadow.” and the narratives here is that, by virtue of their cultural positions—their ethnicities, classes, genders, or other cultural variables—their stories are authorized by contemporary discursive and disciplinary formations in ways that yours and mine are not, and may never be. In today’s academy, they are constructed as outsider-insiders; their experiences are granted authority that by virtue of our cultural contexts, ours have not been accorded.

I mean, what can I—a white, middle class, young male—say about my experience with literacies and classrooms that by all accounts should situate me as an insider, as one who (ought to) reaps the benefits of the very discourses and institutions that I want to brazenly and insouciantly critique? Maybe Tompkins has it wrong. Maybe that “public-private dichotomy,” which she translates as “the public-private hierarchy,” is not merely “a founding condition of female oppression,” as she argues it is, not “a standard of rationality that militates [only] against women as culturally legitimate sources of knowledge” (1080, 1081). Maybe it’s a founding condition of oppression for people in general, students and teachers alike, whether they’re female or male, black or white, rich or poor, or both or somewhere in between.
to point out repeatedly over the years, there are many flaws with the scientific legitimacy of the study that Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule report, and others have criticized it for its competition-collaboration, man-woman, and cognitive-social bina-
ries. Nevertheless, the distinctions that the authors make among received, subjective, procedural, and constructed knowing provided me with a language to discuss my experiences as a writer and a reader. Though I have become suspi-
cious of linear narratives, I found that I could use Belenky et. al’s received know-
ing to talk about my experiences with writing and reading in college classrooms, and I could understand my lifelong efforts as a writer and a reader outside the academy differently with their subjective knowing. I could identify a period of time during my master’s degree where I began to shift from received knowing to procedural knowing (knowing that exchanges a mixture of received and subjective knowledges, with the concomitant problems of authority, for a knowing based upon reasoning and reflecting and that recognizes the differences of authority that distinguish between separate and connected knowing) At some point, constructed knowing (knowing that reconciles the authorial differences between separate and connected knowing) became a metaphor for my understand-
ing of what it means to be a writer, reader, intellectual, and teacher. And the more I began to explore these issues, the more I discovered the cultural implications that were involved in understanding what it means to write, read, think, learn, teach, etc. For example, received writing and reading—or what, using a different discourse, we might call current-traditional rhetorics—amount to something very different from subjective writing—or what using that same different discourse, we might call expressivist rhetorics—and implicit in each were competing understandings of who readers and writers should be and what intellectual work, as well as learning and teaching, was. And I began to exploit these differences in my own work and gradually began to encourage students to do the same.

At some point, I began calling the convergences constructed literacies. Though I saw them as essentially dialogic literacies, I preferred the term constructed, insofar as it foregrounds the contingency and specificity of these literacies. The more I began to experiment as both a writer, reader, and a teacher, the more I began to construct an explanation for constructed literacies: the literacies that emerge from the conflicts of competing cultural practices. To this end, I have found the notion of the contact zone, or political spaces in which or even beyond, positions that are not permitted by conventional literacies and institutions.

But try saying that from inside the academy as a white boy.

If I had more legitimacy, I might have written a different book.
cultures come into conflict, to be another useful metaphor for talking about constructed literacies. In practice within classrooms, constructed literacies shift the focus from the decontextualized practices of conventional academic literacies to the context-specific practices of literacies that represent competing cultures. My belief is that, in classrooms, constructed literacies not only can dissolve the conditions that have generated what is being billed as the contemporary crisis in literacy and meaning but that they can also provide a legitimacy for what many have seen to be the impotence of postmodern classroom practices. Within the contact zones of classrooms, constructed literacies can escape what has been called the postmodern paralysis by supplementing the distinctly postmodern “contending with words,” or literacy-crisis management (Harkin and Schilb 5), with a legitimacy and an agency that foregrounds the ways that writers and readers can reread(write) the wor(l)d. In so doing, constructed literacies can authorize the discursive practices of students’ primary and popular literacies within classrooms and encourage them to integrate these with the practices of conventional academic literacies into powerful constructed literacies that generate new knowledges and competing forms of cultural capital.

The first two chapters of ReInventing the University provide historical and social contexts for the practices of constructing literacies. In the first chapter, I briefly recount the educational practices of American colleges and universities within the historical contexts of English studies and of literacy, before I turn to an analysis of the practices of best-selling textbooks in literature and composition as a way of understanding the cultural capital sanctioned by conventional academic literacies. In naturalizing universalized discursive practices, I will argue, textbooks in literature and composition exacerbate the contemporary crises in education by invoking a version of literacy that effaces difference in favor of uniformity and universality. In chapter two, I turn from the practices of textbooks to the practices of ostensibly radical pedagogies, in order to consider the ways that they, too, participate in the contemporary crises of education in America. In traditional classrooms, students are disciplined into conventional literacies through emphasis on the mastery of traditional canons and academic analysis, at the expense of popular texts and practices, and through discourses that tend to ignore life experiences, histories, and cultures in favor of those experiences, histories, and cultures that are recognized as legitimate by the academy. In a not dissimilar way, the practices of what are considered nontraditional classrooms can also contribute to the conventional crises in literacy and meaning. In this chapter, I take up the classroom practices of James Berlin’s postmodern critical pedagogy and the practices of Ira Shor’s student-centered pedagogy in order to discover the version of literacy these
practices legitimize and the ways that these literacies contribute to the current crises of literacy and meaning. In brief, I will argue that Berlin's practices seem to replace the totalized literaci(es) of the American academy with a similarly context-free Marxist literacy, and Shor's practices privilege students' primary and popular discourses in ways that deny the political realities of academic discourses, even as they ultimately authorize the conventional discourses of the academy.

With these chapters as critique, the remainder of ReInventing the University serves as my performance. In chapter three, I turn to the practices of my own classrooms and the version of literacy that these practices endorse, as well as the ways that they fall short of legitimizing students and their discourses. In chapter four, I consider some of the ways that the literacies my students and I have constructed (as well as have failed to construct) have challenged us to reinvent the academy, specifically by exploring how, in constructing literacies of classrooms, we have established alternative subject positions for students and teachers and alternative understandings of learning, teaching, and education. Throughout these chapters, I rely extensively upon students in constructing literacies of classrooms and in offering alternatives to current educational narratives, alternatives that emerge from practices and that are authorized by them. In creating spaces in which writers and readers function as cultural producers, constructed literacies invoke postmodernity, in both aesthetic and social forms, as a provisional foundation for legitimacy, and they provide students and teachers, within communities of dissensus, with the requisite legitimacy to reinvent the university.

Finally, the interludes that appear between chapters create a matrix of exigencies and constraints and, in so doing, chronicle the various responses to the legitimacy of these practices and literacies. Though I began this investigation years ago as an undergraduate in an advanced writing course, I decided, at some point near the end of graduate school, to use a part of it as my dissertation as a way of trying to bridge professional and personal concerns. In the first interlude, the director of my dissertation narrates the struggles that part of this text endured, in much earlier incarnations, to acquire a legitimacy within the unique setting of the academic dissertation. In the second interlude are various communiqués from former department chairs, in response to efforts of mine to authorize for them what I do in classrooms. In the third, students, who, in their training as writing center tutors, had been assigned to observe and critique one of my first-year composition courses, reflect upon their perspectives and perceptions of my classroom practices. In the fourth, two students who appeared in successive composition classrooms reflect upon their experiences over the previous year. In the last interlude, two practicing professionals (Peter
Elbow and Victor Villanueva) offer their responses to the practice of constructing literacies.

If, as I’m suggesting in this prologue, the literacy crisis is less a crisis of skills and abilities and more a crisis of authority and legitimacy, then the arguments that follow in the chapters are fairly straightforward. However, I don’t make these arguments as conventionally academic utterances. In addition to all the differences mentioned earlier, still another difference about ReInventing is that it attempts to make this case differently. In general terms, the differences are two. The first is the arrangement/structure of the book. Unlike the hierarchical structure of conventional academic texts, the structure of this book is narrative. I tend to agree with Lee Ann Carroll when she argues, generally, for the narrative basis of meaning and knowledge, when she argues, specifically, that “the stories we tell are the stories that are culturally available to us to tell,” stories in which “the conventions and the details” have already been “written and read by the culture” and which are “constrained by the context” in which they are told “with much left out or suppressed” (920-23). In an effort to acknowledge the narrative basis of ReInventing, I have used a narrative, discursive organization. In the first chapter, I have tried to offer the conflict, as in a conflict between the cultures of the academy and the cultures that students bring into the academy and of their worlds beyond the academy. In the second chapter, I have injected a complication in the form of the (unintentional) ways that the crises of literacy and education are exacerbated by purportedly radical pedagogies. In the third chapter, I generate a crisis, in that, unlike what one might expect from conventional academic scholarship, the classrooms that students and I have inhabited have not been able to adequately resolve the literacy and educational crises in classrooms. Finally, I offer an anti-resolution in the fourth chapter, an effort to speculate how, in spite of my failures in the classroom, my revisions of the crises in literacy and education might play out at departmental and institutional levels.

The second difference has to do with the role that personal narratives play in ReInventing. I also agree with Carroll when she argues that the “non-narrative forms,” such as conventional academic writing, are “closely related to suppressed personal narratives” (927). In fact, I would go beyond Carroll to argue that (suppressed) personal narratives are central to intellectual work. Thus, I’m offering the interludes here, along with the personal narratives that appear in each chapter, as auto-ethnographies, balancing and contextualizing the more conventional scholarship that is also here. As Mary Soliday has suggested, there is a tradition of literacy narratives within composition and rhetoric, a tradition of “autobiographical and self-reflective writing” as a way of understanding “sociolinguistic assimilation” into the academy (263). What makes the literacy narratives in ReInventing different from other literacy narratives is that these do
not presuppose a coherent essentialist self, as literacy narratives often do. In the pieces of literacy narratives I offer, I find myself working both to escape the culture of the academy even as I recognize its value. Furthermore, ReInventing invokes multiple literacy narratives, or at least pieces of multiple literacy narratives—professionals who have struggled with me in articulating this narrative; department chairs who have had to supervise me in my efforts to do intellectual work out of this narrative; students who, as outsiders and not from my classrooms, have had to understand these narratives; students from my classrooms who, as experiencing these narratives, have been unsure as to how productive they are for them; and finally, practicing professionals who have responded to this narrative from within their own contexts and with pieces of their own narratives—in the interlude chapters and throughout the second half of the book.

In addition, I would add that part and parcel of intellectual work is learning to read and write the world and to tell narratives that revision the world, and this may be the difference between Carroll and me. Where we might part ways is in the manner in which these narratives can be rewritten and reread when we bring different cultural contexts to bear on them, when we retell these narratives within different contexts. What I have tried to do is to tell the literacy crisis from within a different cultural context—one of an insider who has struggled to get outside, one who has seen the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual bankruptcy of the conventional academic game, as it is currently played, and who wants new, different ways of doing intellectual work, as a way of making the academic game more satisfying and rewarding. As a response to what has been called the contemporary crisis in literacy and education, ReInventing the University argues that constructed literacies provide an alternative to the conventional literacies of American colleges and universities. Situated within historical and social practices, constructed literacies foreground the politics of literacies, as well as the relationships between literacies and cultures; they authorize students and teachers to resist sanctioned knowledges, proffered subject positions, and endorsed versions of the world, in favor of alternatives that integrate competing discursive practices with the practices of the academy. In doing so, constructed literacies can serve, I believe, as a useful voice in the ongoing dialogues over the nature of education, as well as of what it means to be literate, in America.