4

STUDENTS WORKING

I get through my days knowing that I am earning my college degree and keep in mind that these managers who have the power to tell me what to do today will potentially be working for me after I graduate and obtain a job they could never have with their level of education and lack of integrity. . . .

“Karen,” retail worker/student

In *Bait and Switch*, Barbara Ehrenreich investigates life as an unemployed white-collar worker by going “undercover,” adopting the identity of a professional writer and public relations specialist looking for work. To do the research for the book, Ehrenreich created a new identity, “Barbara Alexander,” drew on the skills and experience she had built in her own “real” career, and marketed herself as a public relations person and event planner. *Bait and Switch* manages to convey some sense of the quietly desperate lives of the tens of millions of people who have white-collar occupations but find themselves in a relatively continuous job search. They are either employed and looking for work because they fear losing their jobs, partially employed as contract workers or in part-time positions with little security and no benefits, employed as temp workers or in retail simply to make ends meet, or fully unemployed.

Because this state of semiemployment is a common predicament in the current American economy, a historically low unemployment rate paints a very distorted picture. Data compiled to calculate the unemployment rate counts only those who are willing to work but have not found any job at all as “unemployed.” Much of the real story of employment in this economy is therefore left out. The unemployment rate does not track those who are working part-time or in any job they can find, nor does it track those who have stopped looking for work altogether. In addition to an unemployment rate, the Economic Policy Institute offers an “underemployment rate” as a more accurate indicator of what is happening in this layoff-dependent, more fully casualized economy. The underemployment rate accounts for those who are working part time but want full-time work, those who have stopped looking for work
because they are discouraged by lack of success, and those who are not working or looking for work but indicate that they nevertheless want work and have sought it within the past year.

In 2002, while the unemployment rate was 5.8% (relatively low by historical standards, but up nearly two points since 2000), the underemployment rate was 9.5% (Mishel, Bernstein, and Boushey 2003, 223). The unemployment rate is woefully inadequate as an indicator of economic security and job availability in the fast-capitalist economy, which has replaced long-term jobs that offer the opportunity for steady advancement with lower-paying service jobs and part-time, temporary, and contract positions—and which has made layoffs a part of business as usual, even in companies that remain extremely profitable.

_Bait and Switch_ chronicles people’s existences in the shadowy, often lonely and depressing world of the white-collar underemployed. After months of dead ends, Ehrenreich finally gets what looks like a promising interview with the insurance company AFLAC. She drives several hours toward what she expects will be a busy corporate office that in some way reflects the public, established image of a company whose brand is now as well known as AFLAC’s. What she finds instead is a small, isolated office in rural Virginia that seems to be staffed by only one person, who wears a tie with ducks on it. While she had marketed herself as a public relations person, she quickly comes to understand that the “interview” is for a sales position that pays only on commission. Moreover, the meeting actually isn’t as much an interview as it is an informational session for people who might be willing to do insurance sales. The sales positions are contract positions offering no benefits and no operating budget. Coming near the end of the book, the description of this experience solidifies the “bait and switch” metaphor that permeates each chapter. The promise of working in one’s field of expertise for a nationally known company that seems well-established turns out to be yet another contract sales job that actually requires upfront money and effort to acquire an insurance broker’s license. She would be far removed from the corporation itself, her only connection to it being this one person who works out of an isolated office and shows little actual interest in her skills or goals. There is clearly no possibility of moving into a legitimate, permanent position in the company. So this “interview” might be better described as a sales opportunity with the interviewee as the mark. Drawing on the same rhetoric of individualism and entrepreneurship that permeates the thriving self-help industry that Ehrenreich has been targeted by over
the previous months, the AFLAC representative emphasizes “the need to ‘hit the ground running’ and ‘make a total commitment.’” When she asks about health insurance for this job that would involve selling health insurance, he ironically answers, “We’re independent contractors; we get our own.” She is then told that she won’t even get office space or materials: “Our associates use their home offices” (2005, 181).

Throughout Bait and Switch, Ehrenreich exposes many of the lows of life in the realm of the white-collar underemployed. A large and growing industry niche that includes job coaches, appearance consultants, get-rich-quick schemes, and quasi-religious (or overtly religious) positive thinking books and seminars has arisen to prey upon this demographic. Typically expensive and offering much promise that it often doesn’t deliver upon, this industry responds to the desperation and embarrassment of college-educated, skilled people who have been led to expect that if they “work hard and play by the rules” they will lead economically successful, secure lives. Rather than seeking to help the underemployed understand and address the broad political economic causes of their predicament, this industry sells a mixture of blame and hope driven by highly individualistic philosophies. In this world of winners and losers, people are invited to compare themselves unfavorably to the financially successful and fundamentally change themselves accordingly. In the seminars and consulting sessions Ehrenreich attends, the focus is therefore on redressing her perceived inadequacies (in attitude, dress, and rhetorical packaging of her skills and experiences) and projecting confidence and boundless optimism. Reflecting on her experiences, Ehrenreich writes:

> It goes without saying that a smiling, confident person will do better in an interview than a surly one, but the instruction goes beyond self-presentation in particular interactions: you are to actually feel “positive” and winnerlike. By the same token, you are to let go of any “negative” thoughts, meaning, among other things, resentments lingering from prior job losses. As one website I quoted warned, “If you are angry with your former employer, or have a negative attitude, it will show.” The prohibition on anger seems unlikely to foster true acceptance or “healing,” and it certainly silences any conversation about systemic problems. The aching question—why was I let go when I gave the company so much?—is cut off before it can be asked. (2005, 220)

Ehrenreich is addressing the lack of discussion among the underemployed that could lead to recognition and action directed at the root
political economic sources of their very pressing and all too common problems. What career coaches, best-selling books like *The Ultimate Secret to Getting Absolutely Everything You Want*, and faith-based networking organizations have in common is a propensity to radically privatize economic issues, making broadly systemic problems that are the result of specific policies and politics seem like individual, biographical problems. So the development of a potentially powerful, collective political awareness and identification is arrested, and this alienated group of underemployed that reveals serious problems with the structure of our current economy becomes just another politically inert marketing demographic:

When the unemployed and anxiously employed reach out for human help and solidarity, the hands that reach back to them all too often clutch and grab. There are the coaches who want $200 an hour for painstakingly prolonged resume upgrades and pop-psych exhortations. There are the executive-oriented firms that sell office space and contacts doled out one name at a time. And there are, in churches around America, groups that advertise concrete help but have little to offer beyond the consolations of their particular religious sect. In every one of these settings, any potentially subversive conversation about the economy and its corporate governance is suppressed. (2005, 219)

Struggling in quiet isolation, fearing the dire consequences of a health problem, people are compelled to look inward for what is “wrong” with them to make themselves worthy of a job. Many of them end up back in higher education as students or even as adjunct faculty. Indeed, we might justifiably add higher education to the list of entities that “clutch and grab” at the underemployed. Might the formula of hard work + education = success be considered another form of *Bait and Switch* for many who buy into it? Certainly distance education and niche programs are largely aimed at an older population of people who are either dissatisfied with their careers or feel that they need further credentialing in order to be more competitive. Moreover, part-time adjunct work offers a veneer of dignity and professionalism to older workers with professional experience who can’t find good jobs but don’t want to work in, for instance, retail—where the pay is comparable, but the work is repetitive and more transparently low-status.

I have used *Bait and Switch* in a senior–graduate level writing class I teach that uses work as a theme for inquiry and writing. Reflecting on the portrait of economics and work the book depicts, “Paige,” an office
student, writes: “We keep working and chasing this unattainable ideal that we have in our minds that work can bring us. . . . I understand that work will be stressful and make you unhappy, yet I don’t believe that this can happen to me. I am chasing this ideal whether I think I am or not.” Paige had worked since her teens and financed most of her own university education. She indicates in her journal that she had never really thought extensively about the relationship between her work and her education. As she reflected upon those journal entries as they unfolded over time, however, she came to understand that the two continually inform one another. She noted a realization growing in her journal entries that her desire for education is formed, in part, by her desire to escape the working world that she already inhabits. In these entries, a dialectic emerges over time about work and education that is informed by the vocabulary that emerged in the class.

In the initial weeks of the class, we had examined “the American work ethic” through reading, discussions, and writing about our perceptions of our own working lives and those that tend to be promoted in the popular media. During one discussion, I mapped the different perceptions of how we (the class) feel about our challenges and how we tend to respond to the challenges faced by our communities and society more generally. At the beginning of the next class, I gave them the following writing prompt for a journal entry:

*Scan these columns and reflect on whether your own responses to situations tends to be more “Individualist” or “Systemic.” Think through this on paper. Does your perspective surprise you? You will read this aloud to a partner.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individualist</th>
<th>Systemic</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One is born into the world and “makes her own way.” Economic and educational success are primarily matters of innate ability and one’s character.</td>
<td>Socialization, policies and relationships are very important. History, identity and one’s given socio-economic status (working-class, middle-class, etc.) are directly relevant to their educational and economic paths and successes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wealth and poverty are primarily the result of moral behaviors and “character.”</td>
<td>Wealth and poverty are primarily the result of systemic policies and social conditioning.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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At the end of the semester, as Paige reflected on this conversation and period of the class, she writes that her journal continues with the idea about work ideals with [a] discussion of the American work ethic. It seems as if this essay is right on target with the ideas that I had at first about work and what it can give you. This essay, however, explores that idea a little deeper by talking about education, affording clothes for an interview, and character. In this journal I delve deeper by addressing that ideals truly are unattainable if you do not have the means necessary to achieve them. This is an important factor that comes into play again in the journal reflection about being a believer in a systemic system (9/20). In this [journal entry] I acknowledge that it would be ideal to live in an individualistic world where every man can work up the ladder toward the American dream. Keeping with my original thoughts from my first journal,
I default to the idea that people cannot escape the vicious circle they are stuck in. . . . Here I discuss education and how that determines what job market you are prepared to enter. I also discuss luck, and how those who do break the chain of labor they are born into are truly an oddity in the labor market. My ideas remain consistent with my initial reflections, but as I learn more and read more I begin to associate other elements to the idea about the unattainable ideal.

Paige brings her perceptions of her working life and experiences into a critical dialectic with her perceptions of, and work in, education. She finds contradictions there that are both consequential in her own life and not easily resolved.

As a working student who is trying to better her economic circumstances at an urban university, Paige is hardly alone in today’s education scene. If Horatio Alger’s “Ragged Dick” were written today, young Dick would almost certainly continue to display a strong work ethic, moxie, and boundless optimism on his path to success. However, the fast-capitalist Ragged Dick likely wouldn’t follow a trajectory in which he learns a trade and then works his way up in a particular business. Now a requisite step on his path would likely be a degree at a two-year college or a regional university. Moreover, if Dick is a non-native speaker of English, this path might include a detour at some point to gain adequate fluency. Despite many broad changes in the character and perception of higher education over the last thirty years, it continues to hold a place in the public imaginary as an accessible economic and social equalizer. It is seen as a place that is somewhat removed from day-to-day economic survival, where deserving people might “catch up.” It is both deeply rooted in the American ethos and a part of the myths of opportunity that drive immigration. Film dramas about high school students from underprivileged families, like *Real Women Have Curves*, typically end with the deserving going off to a happily-ever-after at a university. In the popular television show *America’s Extreme Home Makeover*, scholarships for children often take their place among the goodies from Sears and Pottery Barn that are given to families that have fallen on hard times. Like the wedding in a Shakespearian comedy, entry into the university is the happy ending. The economic challenges that still plague many students through their educational trajectories and beyond—along with the deeply emotional, powerfully socializing experience of class—are magically shed as students pass through the ivied gates. This image of
the university as a path to economic success carries its own powerful metanarrative. It exerts a strong influence on the discursive space of our classrooms; it is an integral part of the marketing of contemporary higher education, and it is linked to the literate development of our students. The ways that students feel comfortable constructing themselves in classes, what they talk and write about, the languages they use when they talk about it, and the value systems they feel compelled to adopt in their writing—all are shaped by where they think they are and what they think they should be doing there.

Not only do most postsecondary students work, according to a recent National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) study—for many, school is even on the margins of lives that center primarily around families and work. Among those whom the study characterized as “highly nontraditional,” the majority (67 percent) considered themselves “primarily workers” rather than students.\(^1\) In contrast, only three percent of traditional students self-identified as primarily workers. All nontraditional students are more likely than traditional students to primarily self-identify as workers (National Center for Educational Statistics 2006, 29). Like the majority of the highly nontraditional students in the NCES study, my own students’ school-related work is juxtaposed daily with significant hours at jobs.\(^2\) Most students are also already workers, have developed deeply entrenched, complicated identities as workers, and

1. The NCES categorizes a “traditional” student as one “who earns a high school diploma, enrolls full time immediately after finishing high school, depends on parents for financial support, and either does not work during the school year or works part time” (2006). Nontraditional students have the following characteristics:
   - delays enrollment (does not enter postsecondary education in the same calendar year that he or she finished high school);
   - attends part time for at least part of the academic year;
   - works full time (thirty-five hours or more per week) while enrolled;
   - is considered financially independent for purposes of determining eligibility for financial aid;
   - has dependents other than a spouse (usually children, but sometimes others);
   - is a single parent (either not married or married but separated and has dependents); or
   - does not have a high school diploma (completed high school with a GED or other high school completion certificate or did not finish high school).

Students are considered to be “minimally nontraditional” if they have only one nontraditional characteristic, “moderately nontraditional” if they have two or three, and “highly nontraditional” if they have four or more.

2. NCES findings on the overall picture of work among postsecondary students are summarized in chapter 1.
see higher education as a way out of current circumstances. Getting this far in their educations has meant overcoming many challenges beyond those presented by coursework. Jenny, a twenty-two-year-old senior classmate of Paige’s, works as a server in a restaurant. She has had seven jobs thus far—in retail, childcare, and as housekeeping staff in a hotel. She writes: “I wouldn’t change anything about my work history, because the crummy jobs inspired me to work somewhere better and made me appreciate my subsequent jobs more. My current job makes me happy for now, but it is not something I want to do forever and that inspires me to do well in school and get an even better job.” At one point, she quit school and worked two jobs for a year. Nontraditional and first generation college students leave college without getting degrees at significantly higher rates than traditional students and those whose parents were college graduates (National Center for Educational Statistics 2005, 14–15). They thrive within, endure, or just eventually give up on institutions that often do not actively recognize their lives and experiences.

Literacy is interwoven with immediate economic and educational imperatives, and work inside and outside of the university is a part of a broader political economy that confers potentially contentious meanings, values, and identities. If writing is social, productive work that is solicited, enacted, and valued at particular locations, its positioning within its immediate socioeconomic networks and material surroundings is essential to both pedagogy and research. In this chapter I will argue that examination of the terms and significations of fast-capitalism and casualized labor—for instance, what it means to be an “associate” at a retail store, a “contract worker” at a cable company, or an “adjunct writing instructor” in an English department—can lead to more nuanced understanding of how the work of the people who labor under these labels is positioned within the broader economy. These terms can reveal much about how discourse is tied to the everyday material; how it signifies who does what under what circumstances; and how labor, literacy, and materiality are bound up in a dialectical process of identification among writers. I begin with a theoretical framework drawing on Pierre Bourdieu, Lev Vygotsky, and Mikhail Bakhtin that enables an understanding of how identities are formed dialectically in relation to cultural artifacts.

LOCATION AND IDENTITIES IN “FIGURED WORLDS”

As I argued in the introduction, “process” has largely become appropriated by the bureaucratic architectures of FYC and the constraining
administrative goals and apparatus that sustain it. Among the most salient features of what might broadly be called the “post-process” movement in rhetoric and composition are its focus on power, location, and institutionalism—on the material spaces of articulation. It “foregrounds the writer’s situatedness in history and in his or her writing practice; and it makes visible the ‘apparatus of the production of authority’ that all writers tend to submerge in their discourse” (Olson 1999, 12). Foucauldian, it is not a naive rejection of authority, but a recognition of how authority derives in particular writing contexts, including within educational settings. Where the writer writes and for whom—i.e., “location”—is therefore profoundly important, as are the immediate circumstances of textual production. Bruce Horner envisions writing classes where students and teachers might examine the historical, social, and institutional foundations of rhetorical conventions and what he calls the “social material conditions of process” (2000, 35). Other recent work brings globalization into the frame of analysis, further complicating the conceptions of literacy that inform writing courses at institutions that primarily serve nontraditional students. Opening up to the broad social realities of writing in fast-capitalism means accounting for and accepting the inevitability of constant evolution and hybridity. For instance, LuMing Mao examines the complicated “border zones” that form the intersection between Chinese and European American rhetoric. Mao’s own experiences within this borderland inform the ways he approaches literacy in the writing classroom. Mao explores with his students Western and non-Western ways of reading and writing—fostering understanding of, and sophistication with, multiple literacies. Using language as a starting point, this conception of writing pedagogy consciously situates itself in relation to globalization and the discourses of diverse workplaces, and therefore resists being centered in any generagized discourse (like “academic writing”).

Min-Zhan Lu similarly points to examples that illustrate that English is being used around the globe and is constantly hybridizing, relentlessly changing in particular contexts that bring multiple languages and cultures into play. Lu characterizes this hybridization in economic terms, arguing that the needs and values of global capitalism significantly define the terms of language use and writing pedagogy (2004, 43). Even pedagogies that are informed by multiculturalism and an awareness of multiple literacies can be subsumed by marketplace prerogatives in often unrecognized ways. Lu therefore advocates an interventionist pedagogy for composition that fosters awareness of “relations of injustice”: 
To intervene with the order of Fast Capitalism, it is the responsibility of Composition to work with the belief that English is enlivened—enlightened—by the work of users intent on using it to limn the actual, imagined, and possible lives of all its speakers, readers, and writers, the work of users intent on using English to describe and, thus, control those circumstances of their life designed by all systems and relations of injustice to submerge them. (44)

She argues that we should see writing education as a way of helping students to “compose against the grain” of the dominating and totalizing discourses of fast-capitalism (46).

Mao and Lu point toward a more radically social pedagogy that situates itself within the global economy of fast-capitalism. Other work that I would also call more radically social emphasizes personal transformation, and like Lu, these scholars are not afraid to assert social justice as a primary concern of writing education. This work ruminates on the purposes of writing pedagogy in ways that show a disaffection with what had became the normal science of the field during the social turn. Specifically, it redresses the field’s inability to sustain a discussion of how to do politically engaged pedagogy when it rejected expressivism and embraced a more postmodern view of discourse and subjectivity. Essentially, the practices that shape identity formation fell out of the concerns of many writing pedagogies as adaptation became a primary goal. Much of this work takes a second look at Paulo Freire—understandable, given the historical centrality of Freire to the more overtly political articulations of pedagogy that emerged in the field in the 1980s, but then became the object of scathing critiques in the 1990s. In a recent *College English*, for instance, Robert Yagelski describes a general drift away from political engagement in the field that seems to have paralleled its rejection of expressivism. Addressing the dismissals of Paulo Freire and the disdain for critical pedagogy that became common over the past decade, he counters, “I cannot see how we can justifiably teach writing in ways that reinforce an unjust and unsustainable status quo, nor can I imagine how Freire’s message of literacy as a transformative act can be considered irrelevant in the face of deeply troubling developments that raise hard questions about the status quo.” Yagelski describes a general lack of consensus in rhetoric and composition concerning the purpose of writing during a politically charged and troubling time in which the “struggle [for a broader purpose in writing pedagogy] may have more urgency now than at any time in recent memory” (2006, 533).
Also focusing on finding purpose through engaging more directly with politics in writing pedagogy, Jessica Enoch points to the often overlooked political aspects of Kenneth Burke’s pedagogical philosophy, arguing that it should be contextualized within the cold war tension and paranoia of the early 1950s. Enoch links Burke to John Dewey and Freire, and shows that he is not advocating an intellectually distanced critique, as has often recently been assumed, but is rather conceptualizing a pedagogy that leads to critically, politically engaged praxis—action with language. Burke offered his approach as a counter to the increasing tendency to see education in overtly capitalistic terms, specifically as a way of conditioning students for a culture of competition. Burke pointed out fifty years ago that American schooling centered on competition: people learn to compete for grades, then for jobs, and then for power—perhaps on a global scale. Burke “warns that this daily competition can easily translate into rivalry on the national level, where ‘national differences’ may become ‘national conflicts’” (Enoch 2004, 280). Enoch argues that Burke’s pedagogical theory can be used as a means of critically examining with students the root societal causes of war—with an eye toward political transformation.

Shari Stenberg similarly describes her desire for a greater sense of purpose and political relevance in the field’s approach to pedagogy. Lamenting the lack of “ethical and moral focus” in an intellectual environment that often dismisses the idea of positive historical transformation as a relic of modernity, Stenberg argues that the now well-worn critiques of Freire’s humanist-driven pedagogical models have provided little by way of a replacement that is capable of persuasively accounting for and appealing to the emotional lives and moral and spiritual sensibilities of students (2006, 277). Thus, ironically, the desire not to force a particular politics onto students has actually led to a loss of connection with students along personal, moral grounds—we conceive of writing as a form of social action, but we avoid (political) questions of where and why to act. As a means of connecting with students and finding a deeper sense of purpose with them in writing pedagogy, Stenberg advocates liberation theology, which has roots in both Catholicism and leftist political movements in Latin America.

Also drawing on liberation theology, Carl Herndl and Danny A. Bauer advocate what they call a “model of confrontational performance and articulation.” They describe a rhetoric that doesn’t cater to the assumptions on which exploitive and unjust social structures are founded. It is
unabashedly confrontational, as it “seeks to expose the working of hegemony by disrupting common-sense consensus and asserting powerful alternatives to the dominant social formation. It makes apparent what ‘normal’ discourse obscures: the political, ideological, and metaphysical work of discourse” (2003, 570). Herndl and Bauer’s rhetorical model discerns the degree to which subjects “come into being” through writing (581). It recognizes that social dynamics are inextricably bound with the processes of naming—process that are enacted against the backdrop of, and perhaps in conscious opposition to, the cultural dominant:

When those who had been excluded from the traditional norms of the universal usurp that position and speak as enfranchised subjects, the performative contradiction exposes the exclusionary nature of the conventional norm of universality and broadens the definition, creating a new space and subject position for the previously excluded. (577)

They therefore call upon teachers and students to create a new discursive space and subject position—to “come into being” in politically creative and dynamic ways.

These scholars are, in various ways, locating literacy education. Much of the discussion of “location” in rhetoric and composition has focused on creating relationships between postsecondary institutions and the communities within which they are situated. Service-learning approaches, for instance, are usually centered on reaching out from the institution to the community in some way. Recent discussions of narrative, however, are also concerned with positioning students socially. Ann Robillard, for instance, examines narrative tendencies in working-class students, relating them to a sense of time and trajectory through education. She positions her argument against conceptions of academic discourse that seek to isolate students and their writing in academic settings—in a sense making higher education the limit of the discursive universe, denying the embodied histories of our students. Renee Moreno argues that in the present political climate we must see the literate education of people of color in relation to politically reactionary institutions that are hostile to diverse literacies (see also Sullivan 2003). This work demands that we turn the focus back on our institutions themselves, examining their relationships with (and positions within) a local political economy that shapes literacy and learning. How is any particular educational institution a part of the broader political economic process practices in its locale?
Pierre Bourdieu (1977) and Dorothy Holland, William Lachicotte, Debra Skinner, and Carole Cain (1998) have articulated very useful theories of how identifications form, continually and dialectically, through practice. Bourdieu has become particularly popular in educational and rhetoric-and-composition research of late because his work offers a means of accounting for how social structures shape identity without making those structures homeostatic or overly deterministic. Bourdieu transcends a general tendency to create a false dichotomy between “mechanism and finalism,” pointing out that we don’t really respond to situations mechanistically, according to explicitly stated instructions or rules—such as they might appear in organizational policies, religious dogmas, or codes of conduct (mechanism). Nor do we, in our everyday lives, pursue clearly identified objectives strictly according to objective plans or explicitly prescribed roles (finalism). Rather,

the structures constitutive of a particular type of environment (e.g. the material conditions of existence characteristic of a class condition) produce habitus, systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations which can be objectively “regulated” and “regular” without in any way being the product of obedience to rules, objectively adapted to their goals without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary to attain them and, being all of this, collectively orchestrated without being the product of the orchestrating action of a conductor. (Bourdieu 1977, 72)

“Transposable dispositions” are formed through practices within social environments and are also perpetuated though social practice. They compel particular agents to respond to situations according to how they have self-identified. The identification also evolves through the response. So the identification is socially formed, but the full range of particular events one encounters in real life can never be anticipated—the responsive actions themselves are interpretive and adaptive. Identity is neither determined nor fixed: it is a general disposition, always evolving and being shaped through practice.

Two aspects of Bourdieu’s approach are important to emphasize here and will reemerge later in this chapter. The first is that he is careful not to mark a clear distinction between the internal/personal and the external/social—a proper understanding of identification and sociality for Bourdieu transcends the distinction between the two. We internalize
the assumptions that prevail within our social environments, but we also externalize and alter—we are both product and variously creative producers of the social. Second, Bourdieu distinguishes most responses or “moves” from what he calls “genuine strategic intention” (73). The term “strategy” suggests a broad perspective that recognizes a correspondingly broad range of possibilities, and conscious choices made among them. “Moves,” in contrast, are made according to perspectives that have been substantially overdetermined by those socializing “structuring structures.” An example might be a violent crime in which someone is injured: a person who self-identifies as a “policeman” will respond with a different range of “moves” or habituated responses than a person who self-identifies as a “medical doctor.” A less obvious example might be how two people from different socioeconomic classes respond to a waiter approaching a table at a posh restaurant. “Genuine strategic intention,” in contrast, suggests a more metaconscious and thorough analysis of a particular situation, and responses calculated to produce more explicitly identified goals. Genuine strategic intention therefore means that an agent is not only negotiating her identity in dialectic with her surroundings, she is to a certain degree aware that she is doing so and making choices and acting accordingly. It therefore connotes a degree of control and agency. So Bourdieu’s conception of the social recognizes people’s agency, but it also shows how possibilities—for understanding, knowing, and action—are continually shaped by deeply ingrained habits of socialization. It is “moves” that get us through typical days; we don’t often act with genuine strategic intention.

Moving from Bourdieu to discussions of specific processes of identification, Dorothy Holland et al. also offer a useful way of thinking through how students encounter “figured worlds.” The term “figured worlds” references the recursive relationship between identities and institutionality, and Holland and her colleagues illustrate how this happens in day-to-day practice. Their studies show various agents negotiating identities: through narrative in Alcoholics Anonymous, through an unofficial but deeply engrained lexicon in romance, through an official lexicon in psychological diagnosis, and through caste position in Nepal. They parallel these figured worlds to educational institutions, arguing that the common signifiers and euphemisms of educational bureaucracy are an important part of how identification occurs among students, and they therefore significantly shape both actions and perceptions of possibilities. As with Bourdieu, the relationship between societal structures and consciousness isn’t cast as overly deterministic or static. Nor are
people constructed as free agents acting according to will or biological disposition without significant social conditioning. They locate a flexible middle ground between a “culturalist” perspective (that views culture as the clothes that are placed on humans that remain the same in all contexts) and a “constructivist” perspective (that sees humans as highly culturally malleable, like liquids that can be poured into bottles):

We can discern at least three interrelated components of a theoretical refiguring of the relationship between culture and self. First, culturally and socially constructed discourses and practices of the self are recognized as neither the “clothes” of a universally identical self nor the (static) elements of cultural molds into which the self is cast. Rather, differentiated by relations of power and the associated institutional infrastructure, they are conceived as living tools of the self—as artifacts or media that figure the self constitutively, in open-ended ways. Second, and correlative, the self is treated as always embedded in (social) practice, and as itself a kind of practice. Third, “sites of the self,” the loci of self-production or self-processes, are recognized as plural. (Holland et al 1998, 28)

Holland and her colleagues’ reference Bakhtin and Vygotsky as they articulate a dialogic, practice-centered theory of identification. Bakhtin’s dialogism is connected to Vygotsky’s social model of learning and identification, as language is understood as deeply entwined with the formation of consciousness.

Articulation to others and to ourselves is how selves are formed. The formation of self plays out in “figured worlds,” frameworks within which perceptions are dialectically formed in day-to-day practice, a process they call “self-authoring.” Figured worlds are therefore spaces of authoring that both enable and constrain the possibilities of understanding and articulation. Neither overdetermined by external factors nor formed by independently acting agents, figured worlds are “coproduced” through the “activities, discourses, performances and artifacts” that one experiences, encounters, and enacts in everyday life (Holland et al 1998, 51). Identities are an ongoing outcome of people’s efforts to identify within figured worlds.

In Holland and her colleagues’ Alcoholics Anonymous case study, new members are initiated through a combination of factors: common readings that help to form a common conceptual vocabulary (Bill Wilson’s *Big Book*); close relationships with fellow group members, including a sponsor who assumes a mentoring role; and, perhaps most importantly,
the sharing of stylized narratives that conform to a generic pattern and form the basis of the self-identification of “alcoholic” (Holland et al. 1998, 66–97). The identity “alcoholic” is co-produced by this complex of artifacts. Through hearing the “stories” of others, and then eventually constructing their own stories within the narrative genre that has been established within the organization for sharing, new initiates learn to adopt the self-identification of “alcoholic.” One’s history and behaviors are made sense of through the lens of this “figuring world,” and current and future behaviors and responses are shaped by that ongoing, dialectical identification within the framework of the group. Another case study illuminates how the identities and behaviors of college-age women are shaped, in part, through romantic relationships and perceptions of attractiveness. Women in the study classified men according to a commonly held vocabulary—“brains,” “jerks,” “jocks,” and so on. They also classified each other according to such terms as “Susie sororities” or “dumb broads” (102–3). Though seemingly superficial, these terms were nuanced and prescriptive of behaviors—a part of a broader process of socialization that powerfully shaped identification and decision making. Women’s self-identifications, identifications of other women, and behaviors with men were negotiated in relation to these terms. Holland and her colleagues take a Vygotskian approach to understanding this process, one in which

thoughts and feelings and motivation are formed as the individual develops. The individual comes, in the recurrent contexts of social interaction, to personalize cultural resources, such as figured worlds, languages, and symbols, as means to organize and modify thoughts and emotions. These personalized cultural devices enable and become part of the person’s “higher mental functions,” to use Vygotsky’s terms. (100)

This is how their mode of analysis joins Bakhtin with Vygotsky in a very persuasive and generative model of analysis. They articulate Bakhtin’s unceasingly dialectical “space of authoring” as an aspect of Vygotsky’s “zone of proximal development.” Bakhtin’s discursive, dialectical conception of identification relies on a conception of identity as a fluid “position” rather than a fixed and knowable point. They thus describe the self as a part of an active dialectic,

a position from which meaning is made, a position that is “addressed” by and “answers” others and the “world” (the physical and cultural environment). In answering (which is the stuff of existence), the self “authors” the
Vygotsky had shown that learning does not proceed along singular, individualized trajectories, as Piaget might have us believe. Rather, it takes place in radically material, radically social environments. Learning is varied, responsive, and mediated socially by “cultural artifacts,” a term that is used quite broadly to reference particular objects, the configuration of environments, and even language. Learning is fostered by activity in “figured worlds.” New elements from our daily lives enter into our consciousnesses and eventually become a part of our deep consciousness—our basic frameworks of understanding, identification, and behavioral response. This is what Vygotsky terms “fossilization”: we perceive and do without being conscious of why we perceive and do in that particular way (117). Bakhtin adds to Vygotsky through exploring the particular ways that discourse and dialectic contribute to this process. Importantly, figured worlds aren’t just created by immediate social and material artifacts, they resonate with their own histories. Doing their own social archaeology of the deeply habituated assumptions concerning gender and relationships that manifested in their study of the figured world of college romance, Holland and her colleagues arrive at the tradition of courtly love. Courtly love has complicated roots in politics and culture that stretch back a thousand years and involve European as well as Eastern elements. The study shows how women’s status within relationships with men, as well as their perceptions of love and gender roles, are significantly shaped by the courtly tradition. They also discuss the political functions of courtly love, uncovering how the tradition has been used in historical struggles for power.

To summarize, a few general characteristics of figured worlds are important to how I am articulating writing and writing education here:

- A theme that plays out through the studies is that identities are plural within particular people. While people may struggle to define themselves singularly, they actually maintain different identities simultaneously as they move through the various
spheres that constitute their lives. Identity thus has a perpetual “openendedness,” and it is not only evolving, it is multiple and contingent. It is also innately dialogic, continually involved in the process of being addressed and responding. Discursive modes that are still commonplace in standardized writing pedagogies—like traditional, form-driven approaches to argumentation—discipline this tendency through encouraging singularized voices that carry out safely limited purposes.

- Identification and learning are tied to historical, cultural, and material artifacts. We build ourselves and our worlds out of the materials that are available to us. Holland and her colleagues use Levi-Straus’s concept of *bricoleur* in their explanation of language as an ideologically loaded material of social construction. The self-author “builds with preexisting materials. In authoring the world, in putting words to the world that addresses her, the ‘I’ draws upon the languages, the dialects, the words of others to which she has been exposed” (Holland et al 1998, 170). Creativity is thus at once enabled and constrained by the available “stuff” of daily life. The languages and discourses we use encourage certain situated self-conceptions and discourage others.

- Identification and articulation are thus innately tied to history and politics. We act within historically figured worlds, and we reproduce them and change them with our own actions.

- Bourdieu’s “genuine strategic intention” comes out of some degree of awareness of the elements that are shaping our identities and behaviors at any given time. This awareness and the measured agency that can come out of it can be gained through consciously engaged historical and ideological dialectic. The ways that figured worlds are figured can only be illuminated when we understand their historical contingency and juxtapose them against alternatives.

**THE FUTURE PERFECT: MARKETING NARRATIVES OF SUCCESS**

Students are compelled by the cultural tropes, marketing aesthetics, and disciplinary norms of higher education to adopt identities that seem to derive from its figured worlds. To what extent do these figured worlds mesh with the working, already actively economic lives of students where
other “figuring worlds” might prevail? To what extent are these identities consciously brought into dialectic in educational settings in a way that fosters “genuine strategic intentions”? In my experiences, students in English classes might discuss “race” and “gender,” Richard Wright and Virginia Woolf—but they are less likely to write from and about their own daily, somatic, routinizing experiences of race and gender working at Neiman Marcus, McDonald’s, Wal-Mart, or Hooters. These worlds also constitute the “stuff” of literate development and identification. They are certainly figured and figuring too—by carefully crafted public images, by corporate cultures calculated to rationalize behaviors through training and everyday work procedures, and by specific social interactions at particular job sites. Likewise, identification in school settings, if examined at all, is probably more commonly relegated to the realm of representation: the embodied, historical position from which one identifies and examines remains largely obscure.

Karen, quoted at the beginning of this chapter, sees education as a chance to move on, and she finds a measure of comfort in feeling superior to her managers and in the belief that she will, at some point, be in a more powerful position than them. It is notable that she juxtaposes her identity as a student with her identity as a worker. She is casting herself as at once the subordinate of her manager (within her work framework) and his superior (due to the educational trajectory she feels that she is on). She seeks the strength to endure in one world from the promise she thinks her efforts in another are creating. She works at a nationally known retail store she chose to call “Format.” As part of an assignment, she wrote a thick description of a day of work at Format and then reflected critically on that day. She is required to learn the names of all of her fellow employees, but she found that “nearly impossible because it seems as though new people are hired every two weeks.” She complains of indifferent, revolving-door managers as well as sexism. When examining the language of her employee handbook concerning equity and sexual harassment, she finds that there are material practices that are disturbing but fall outside of what is explicitly described as “sexual harassment”:

Another policy that I am faced with on a daily basis at work is not in the company handbook. It may not even be at any other Format store besides ours. However, this informal, unwritten rule is quite noticeable within the specific store in which I work. My store manager, who I will refer to as “Kevin,” has
his own personal method of evaluating potential employees. Although he does evaluate potential employees according to their abilities and work references, he also looks at how physically attractive he perceives them to be. Kevin will not, and never will, even consider hiring a person who in his eyes is unattractive. When he does come across a potential employee who he sees as unattractive, he simply says that they are not Format material.

Karen finds it ironic that while the policies concerning financial issues in the employee handbook are quite specific (for instance, the policies concerning employee discounts), the sexual harassment and equity policies are very general and brief. Notably, she herself never explicitly labels Kevin’s behavior as “sexist,” and her description of his hiring practices never reaches the level of condemnation. The description constructs the practice as more of an annoyance than a violation of rights.

Among female students’ descriptions of their workplaces, behaviors and policies that could easily be labeled sexism on the job are quite common. However, this sexism is rarely personalized or overtly politicized in students’ descriptions. Rather, it is accepted as a normal and inevitable part of the common terms of employment on their jobs. This is a primary theme that emerges in analysis of students’ work autobiographies—in contrast with their research work, which I address below. While specific instances of sexual harassment are labeled as such, more systemic sexist behaviors and policies are not personalized in the autobiographies, nor are they explicitly challenged as the natural prerogative of employers.

Natalie, who makes eight dollars an hour working in the women’s shoe department at an upscale retail store, also mentions the pressure on her and her female coworkers to dress well:

The dress attire at work is business professional with a trendy spin. Our managers expect us to wear trendy clothes and that is due to the fact that I work in the [shoe department] which is more aimed toward teen-agers and the young adult clientele. Often times we are asked to keep up with what is in Fashion Magazines and put outfits together based on that. “Trendsetters” is a key word in my department. Since I work in shoes I use it as the perfect accessory. For me, I will not put a limit on how much I will pay for a pair of shoes, but I try and find clothes that are less expensive.

A concern with appearance incorporates the bodies and identities of these low-paid women into the overall branding/image-making schemes of many of their employers. Their wages and positions make them working class, but they are expected to dress as though they can afford
expensive clothes. What is being conveyed to customers within this figured world? That these women make far more than they do? That their primary financial support is coming from someone else—perhaps a man? This body-branding is also a part of how retailers consciously attempt to shape the behaviors and thinking of their employees. A surprising number of female students who work in retail indicate that they are pressured by their employers to buy the clothes at their stores. Sharon says that she is required to dress as a “hip surfer girl” when she goes to work at a mall clothing store for young people. In the figure of the consumer-worker-model, identity, labor, and consumerism are bound together. Katrina, who works at another clothing store, relates a de facto dress requirement to her own self-esteem, competence, and worth as a worker:

The dress code is not strict, although the guidelines for dress are quite clear. We may wear any color we wish, including other brands of clothing, providing the label of the other brand does not show or is not prominent. In theory, employees could get away with never wearing our company’s clothes as long as the labels on our clothes do not show. In reality however, that is a different story. I recall one specific day in which my manager I will call “Charlotte,” hassled me about not wearing any clothes from our store. I had only been working there a few days so I did not have adequate time to purchase many articles from the store. Additionally, since our clothing is rather expensive, I did not have an abundant supply of their clothing to choose from in my wardrobe. That day I had chosen a tasteful outfit to wear to work that looked as if it could have at one time come from the store. As I walked through the glass doors, I was ready to work and felt good about the way I looked. I approached Charlotte, my manager, to find out what tasks needed to be completed that day. The very first words out of her mouth as she looked me up and down were, “Don’t you own any ______ clothes?” in a condescending tone. I was taken aback by this comment. Questions began to run through my mind in an attempt to decipher the message she was trying to convey to me. Hadn’t I dressed fashionably? Didn’t my clothes look as though they came from ______? Weren’t none of my clothing labels showing? Hadn’t I followed the dress code guidelines? I eventually came to the realization that although the dress code did not specifically state that employees must wear ______ clothing, the managers made it a priority to convey their preferences of employees that did wear the company’s clothes.

Workplace policies and cultures obviously have a significant influence on these young women’s lived experiences as women. By the time they
enter a postsecondary classroom, gender has already powerfully shaped the types of employment they seek and find, how they are perceived and treated on jobs, and how they dress and conduct themselves in professional settings. Moreover, their working lives are already deeply intertwined with the figured world of market-niches and branding. Karen has learned that one's conventional attractiveness can make the difference in whether one gets a job. Sharon, Katrina, and Natalie have been oddly positioned as both workers and consumers by their employers, who pressure them to buy clothes that strain or break their bank accounts. Meanwhile, through their writing, “student-selves” work in ongoing dialectic with “worker-selves.”

How is writing education in postsecondary institutions positioned in relation to these working lives—how does it function in the overall process of identification of oneself and how one’s labor is situated in the economy? How does the trend toward positioning students as consumers shape the identification of students and their perceptions of the character and possibilities of education? Just as with the young women working in retail, we might see the media/marketing/curricular creation of the “college student” as a transposable disposition, a figured way of seeing and responding that is shaped by the cultural artifacts of higher education. In spite of dramatic changes in the landscape of higher education over the past three decades, a particular ideal or aesthetic is still a deeply entrenched part of the popular imaginary—and it continues to shape the public faces of our institutions. My own university’s Web site, for instance, portrays students living and learning within a calm, cloistered environment. Aerial photographs depict the campus as an enclosed space dominated and buffered by green. While the internal space of the photographs is new buildings, the surrounding area is forest and athletic fields—visually suggesting a high-tech, intellectual oasis. Students of different races appear in a montage of pictures in various studious and social tableaus. They sit on grass, at benches, in front of computers, or in classes; they walk with friends and play intramural sports; they work in labs and go to basketball games—“student life.” The site doesn’t completely obscure the fact that the university is in an urban setting. Pictures of the city’s skyline and its professional football stadium are included in the campus tour photos. Nevertheless, the general impression created by the Web site, as well as in much of the university’s recruiting materials and fund-raising publications, is of students living and learning in a pastoral, at least somewhat protected,
space. This is space designed to enable bright people to think and work creatively, engaged with the problems of “the real world” but still not quite “of” them in a day-to-day sense.

I do not believe that the university’s depiction is dishonest. It is an attractive campus, and this depiction of campus life doubtlessly helps enrollment and fund-raising. People expect an institution to put its best foot forward in public presentations. Parents, students, and donors are more likely to feel comfortable with a university that plays on the common conception of what a college campus “should” look like: a calming, familiar blend of contemporary and Gothic (or perhaps colonial) architecture and students who are relaxed but engaged. A modern, urban skyline on the distant horizon in some of the photographs only suggests vibrancy, relevance, cutting-edge technology, and the promise of prosperity—the best of both worlds. Our campus is less than fifty years old, and much of it has been constructed in the last twenty-five years. General public conceptions of what a university should look like merge with the university’s need to create a campus that is both functional and appeals to that public expectation. This “place” is created by a complicated mixture of cultural expectations, functional needs, and marketing strategies. It is not only structured by deeply embedded cultural perceptions of what a university should be, consistent with the market-driven logics of fast-capitalism, it is consciously constructed with branding and marketing in mind. Building facades, walkways, natural areas, and student activity centers anticipate the expectations of students and parents of college life.

More typical than not, however, my university is not a protected world separate from “the real world” of work and adulthood. Here, students and faculty are very much of our city and our region, and all of our daily lives are shaped by economic relations of production and consumption and the ideologically loaded discourses that sustain them. Ours is a public, urban university enrolling over 21,000 students situated in a sprawling, diverse metropolitan area of over 1.2 million people. Two very busy highways frame the campus and the intersection of two major interstates is less than five minutes away. The majority of our students are commuters, and large, concrete parking decks (along with expansive asphalt parking lots) dominate much of the perimeter of campus. In spite of its thinning green borders, the university is very much a part of the metropolitan region in which it is situated. Parking lots are ubiquitous because ease of access is important. Hurried students typically
Students Working

travel here by car or bus from jobs, or leave here for jobs when they are finished with their classes.

John Alberti has lamented that

too often our discussions of the future of literary studies and pedagogy in higher education are limited by models of college life rooted in enduring but increasingly misleading images that take the experiences and practices of elite research universities and liberal arts colleges—more accurately, discursive representations of these experiences and practices that are themselves almost stereotypes—as the norm for higher education. (2001, 563)

Alberti points out that the overwhelming majority of students now attend what he calls “working-class” or “second-tier” schools.

While our “second-tier” campus is, to a certain extent, constructed to conform to popular expectations of what a college campus should look like, most of our students likewise don’t fit the image of the college student from the popular media. Neither privileged nor particularly profligate, most don’t party their free time away on fraternity row, few enjoy much leisure time or do a semester of study abroad, few have the space in their lives for activist politics, and few take raucous spring break vacations in exotic locations. Primarily first-generation college students from middle-, lower-middle, or working-class families, the majority of our students pay part or all of their own way through school with their own paychecks and loans. In addition to being students, for at least part of every week they are waiters, package handlers, fast-food workers, telemarketers, front desk clerks, office assistants, landscapers, retail workers, data entry clerks, nannies, baristas, and so on. Older students, many of them in our evening classes, sometimes hold more professional jobs as computer maintenance technicians, teachers, office managers, secretaries, and health care workers. In short, they are not preparing to enter the working world, they already help to constitute what the U.S. Department of Labor finds is the largest and fastest-growing job category in the United States, the “service-industry” sector. Most of the jobs created by the “new” or “information-age” economy are service jobs, and most service jobs are low-paying—nearly all of the new jobs created by 2016 will be in the service sector (U.S. Department of Labor 2008).3

3. The largest number of new jobs created by 2016 will be in nursing, followed by (in order) retail sales, customer service representatives, and food preparers. A report recently released by the Department of Education focuses on increasing the number of graduates with technology skills, but various economic studies suggest that
As with most other large, public universities, the university employs high numbers of adjunct faculty, who also fit their schoolwork into lives that may include other jobs and classes at other schools. The school’s advertising doesn’t foreground the fact that we employ large numbers of part-time teachers who make two thousand dollars per class, don’t get health benefits, can’t afford regular dental care, and are one serious illness away from financial catastrophe. Photographs that accurately depict the daily lives of our students and the majority of our writing faculty might also depict them on gridlocked streets and interstates, searching for spaces in parking lots, or working in cubicles at offices or behind counters at coffee shops—living lives that are anxious, pinched, scattered, and already very “real.” The hard-edged realities of casualized teaching labor and commuting student service-workers clashes with the traditional, dreamy aesthetic of higher education as protected, separate, gentrified space. Writing from and about the material conditions of their lives requires students to make a conscious effort to confront, or at least negotiate, the figured worlds of university and student life that are pervasive in media and encouraged by the marketed aesthetic of the university.

However, I don’t think that the material conditions of students’ lives are a common starting point for inquiry and writing at the university. I think that most of their intellectual work moves smoothly downstream from a traditional conception of education and student life. Certainly, textbooks genericize the student writer, and most do little or nothing that recognizes that students have both jobs and financial concerns that include, but also move beyond, paying tuition. The overwhelming majority of undergraduates will never publish anything academic, but they nevertheless are compelled to write reams of “academic discourse” for the same reason that mall visitors are funneled down spacious hallways with polished faux marble floors. The untidiness of one’s lived experiences in the outside world is kept safely at bay. Unfortunately, the term “nontraditional student” often still seems to carry at least a measure of implicit disparagement wherever it is used in academia. It is not a gelled identity in the popular or the professional imaginary. Indeed, in my experience, when colleagues use the term it is a precursor to the identification of some limitation or inconvenience—even reflective of a measure of disappointment with their own careers. The professional-level, high-tech jobs are already scarce. The category “computers and software engineers” is fifteenth on the Department of Labor list.
implicit assumption is that “nontraditional” is inferior to “traditional.” New faculty from graduate programs at more exclusive universities are warned by some new colleagues that they will have to get accustomed to “the students here” in the same tone that white colonial settlers might once have been warned that they will have to adjust to life in the bush. When students’ lives enter the picture in often inconvenient ways—for instance, with a child care issue, a transportation issue, or a conflict between a work schedule and an out-of-class activity—it is an intrusion on what is imagined as the proper work and aesthetic of higher education. Meanwhile, teaching jobs at elite universities are scarce and “traditional” college students are now far from average. According to the NCES, in 1999–2000, only 27 percent of undergraduates could be correctly classified as “traditional.” Indeed over the past thirty-five years, the entire profile of students has changed considerably. Since 1970, undergraduates have gotten older (39 percent are now older than twenty-five) and more female (56 percent versus 42 percent in 1970). More students are now also part time (39 percent versus 28 percent in 1970).

First-year writing programs continue to be sustained through genericized conceptions of students, academia, and academic discourse. Susan Miller has critiqued the “presexual, preeconomic, prepolitical” juvenilized subject of composition (1991, 87). She argues that this generic writing subject—though far from the reality—has provided a kind of stability for composition’s theoretical discourse. The generic student-writer has been a common subject around which curriculum could be built. Writing education remains innocuous and detached, and “composition” maintains a staid and therefore solid, if also paradoxically marginal and subordinate, place in curriculums. The figured world of student life remains largely unproblematicized for some very practical reasons. It is difficult to standardize pedagogical approaches that conceive of students as already consequential, already working in a real economy, and already facing the day-to-day challenges of economic survival. Poverty and economic justice may sometimes be the objects of study, but they are less often studied as critical ongoing factors in the present lives of students—a vital part of their experiences and literate development. Meanwhile, students will pursue their lives in the future within the same fundamental political economic framework that creates the conditions within which so many already currently struggle. Pursuing the aesthetic, widely marketed ideal of postsecondary
education therefore requires a stubborn tunnel vision that denies, or at least brackets off, many of the harsh realities of work and education in the fast-capitalist economy. We might see the subject positions that students are invited to occupy by particular writing assignments and genres—as well as by programmatic goals, like “learning to write academic prose”—as yet more kinds of transposable dispositions, more means of ameliorative social formation and political control.

"ASSOCIATES," "STUDENTS," "CONSUMERS," ETC.

Many of the important, persistent questions for writing teachers center around the authorial position that our students feel invited to occupy and the subjects that they are encouraged to investigate and write about. Understanding this positionality requires that students gain awareness of, and their own perspectives on, the political economic discourses that shape their everyday lives, at work and at school. Among the characteristics of fast-capitalism is that it has further blurred the lines between education and work. Education and the marketplace exhibit more synergy. Higher education is increasingly explicitly marketed as a form of job training, and it is now more generally constructed in consumerist terms. Likewise, management theories promoted in business schools and best-selling books reflect a sophisticated understanding of the relationship between language, identification, and increased loyalty and productivity. In other words, they resonate with an understanding of language, culture, and the formation of consciousness that has formally been more exclusive to humanities departments.

This phenomenon has been examined in much research over the past decade. For instance, in the influential The New Work Order: Behind the Language of New Capitalism, James Paul Gee, Glynda Hull, and Colin Lankshear describe a broad tendency toward discourse-driven social engineering in fast-capitalist business practices. Drawing on research from a training program at a technology firm, they argue that policies and procedures in the contemporary workplace aren’t just geared toward managing the behaviors of workers that are directly associated with productivity: they are consciously, unapologetically designed to “indoctrinate”—to change thinking and social habits, even identities. These changes are brought about, in part, through the conscious manipulation of language as a habituated aspect of day-to-day social interaction and as a means of understanding ourselves and the world:
What we are really talking about here is a textual creation of a new discourse . . . with new social identities: new bosses (now “coaches” and “leaders”), new middle managers (now “team leaders”), new workers (now “associates”, “partners”, “knowledge workers”), and new customers (now also “partners” and “insiders”, who are said to drive the whole process). (1996, 26)

Gee, Hull, and Lankshear go on to characterize this discourse as not only “imperialistic” but colonizing, poised “to take over practices and social identities that are (or were) the terrain of other Discourses connected to churches, communities, universities and governments” (26). The spreading of the discourses and practices of neoliberal economics into higher education has been the subject of much discussion of late. David Noble, for instance, notes the increasingly active presence of corporate brands—Burger King, Coca-Cola, Pizza Hut, and so on—on university campuses. Others point to the direct impact of legislative funding changes designed to harness more of the work of higher education for private industry (for instance, Martin 1998; Miyoshi 1998; Slaughter and Leslie 1997). Still others, like Michael Apple, Jill Blackmore, Derek Bok, and David Geoffrey Smith, note the pervasiveness of market discourses within discussions of goals and administrative processes in higher education. This work generally describes how “students” are increasingly construed as “consumers” and education as product within discussions of administration and curricular goals.4

In practice, the boundaries between the “real world” of adulthood and work and the otherworldly state that still characterizes popular conceptions of the university is muddied to say the least. The conflation of “student” and “consumer” in education is similar to the conflation of “associate” and “consumer” in retail. As the discourse of the fast-capitalist marketplace subsumes the discourses of higher education, production and consumption are brought into one, more tightly bound, framework. The creation of a critical space from which one might examine the broader circumstances of production and foster a more empowering understanding of consciousness, identity, and alterity—i.e., strategic intention—is made less likely. Important

4. It should be noted that this shift in higher education is not recognized just by those who advocate resistance or point to its shortcomings. A considerable number of books, like Frank Newman, Lara Couturier, and Jamie Scurry’s The Future of Higher Education: Rhetoric, Reality, and the Risks of the Market (2004), construct this shift as inevitable and either advocate its acceleration, or (in the case of this book) argue for its inevitability and advance strategies for managing it.
choices with profound pedagogical ramifications are made not through open, informed deliberative processes among informed scholars, but at the largely invisible level of institutional and curricular architectures. Service-economy jobs and higher education function according to the logics of the new political economy. Both rely on marketed images to at least partially conceal day-to-day material realities. Many universities sell a gentrified ideal of college life for the same reasons and according to the same logics that the Gap uses thin, conventionally attractive models to sell its clothes. Students and teachers are compelled to enter the university looking to assume a new life and identity just as they might when they buy a new outfit: for marketing purposes, “hip surfer girl” becomes “hip coed.” Likewise, a part-time teacher who may never have attended a departmental meeting and may have no advanced credentials in the subject she is teaching becomes a “professor.”

This structuring also works at the level of local economies. The casualized economy of fast-capitalism relies heavily on part-time, “flexible,” and temporary labor—and full- and part-time “students” supply a significant portion of that labor. Moreover, the economy increasingly relies on higher education for ongoing professional training. According to Stanley Aronowitz, 13 percent of the American workforce attends some postsecondary institution (2000, 28). While the higher average age of students over the past thirty years is, in part, explained by the expansion of access to higher education, it is also explained by a labor market that pushes anxious adults back into higher education so they can make themselves more competitive for decent professional jobs. Discussing the broad social ramifications of ongoing changes in management structures and capabilities enabled by erosions of workers’ rights and rapid advances in communications technologies, Evan Watkins connects emerging managerial philosophies with technology and displacement in fast-capitalism. This displacement is related to the changing role of higher education in the political economy. As Watkins describes it, “What the new flexible production has made possible is that it is no longer necessary to utilize explicit coercion against labor at home or in colonies abroad. Those peoples or places that are not responsive to the needs (or demands) of capital, or are too far gone to respond ‘efficiently,’ simply find themselves out of its pathways.” Using a new term for what Marx famously identified as the “lumpenproletariat,” Watkins calls those workers whose technical skills have become outdated or whose labor is too expensive for a casualized economy “throwaways” (1998,
In the very influential *Post-Industrial Lives: Roles and Relationships in the 21st Century*, business sociologists Jerald Hage and Charles H. Powers famously distinguished fast-capitalism from industrial-capitalism in terms of the continual and anxious adaptation required by the latter. Hage and Powers equate human labor capacity in fast-capitalism with the machinery of industrial work, warning that “rapid growth in knowledge not only makes products obsolete, but also means that human capital depreciates quickly” (1992, 39). Always “depreciating” workers must continually update their skills in order to be of value to employers. “Retooled” workers are those that have “updated their knowledge” of areas of specialization as well as the new technologies that are common within chosen professions. When living “post-industrial lives” people are constantly at risk of becoming “unskilled,” and skills themselves function as a type of commodity. When moving toward being “unskilled,” workers must anticipate the new knowledge they will need and adapt accordingly—or risk quickly becoming victims:

The technological elimination of unskilled and semiskilled jobs means that a great many people will be caught in a world of despair, lacking marketable skills or hope for the future. That translates into what Marx referred to as the *lumpenproletariat*, an underclass of unemployed or marginally employed individuals living under dire circumstances and surviving by whatever means possible. (1992, 41 [emphasis in original])

Hage and Powers predicted that ongoing fears of falling into an underclass will change not only a variety of social institutions (including education), but also human consciousness itself. “Lifetime education” may, on the surface, seem desirable for those of us who work in higher education—but large numbers of older, “working-age” people going back to school is actually among the outcomes of an economic system that leaves much of the American workforce in a state of perpetual insecurity.

Most student-workers spend part of each week working in low-end jobs that can offer little agency, recognition, pay, or even stability. During the other part of the week students attend classes in institutions that offer the “bait and switch” promise of escaping these “dead-end” jobs even as they reinforce the basic cultural and economic logics that create them. In the context of higher education, the dead-end job of the present doesn’t often come into full focus as the subject of legitimate examination and critique. Students’ identities and worker identities remain juxtaposed, but aren’t often brought into critical dialectic. Work remains on the
margins of curricular focus, unvalidated and unexamined, but looming nevertheless as a kind of morality play boogeyman, the impetus for betterment and the cautionary consequence of a lack of ambition and hard work. The implicit goal is to escape it—to adapt to a seemingly immutable environment, rather than to critique it; to become as aware as possible of the forces that shape one’s circumstances and consciousness; and to imagine how they might be more just, equitable, and democratic.

**WRITING THE POLITICAL ECONOMIC**

In the remainder of this chapter I am going to outline a highly dialectical approach to teaching and writing work in composition that seeks to recognize and address some of the deep contradictions that characterize postsecondary writing. A dialectic approach that focuses on political economic structures can highlight opportunities for more strategic intention as it foregrounds the question: how do students’ lives as workers and how we do our work in writing education “figure” writing and writers? I have developed a writing class that focuses on work as an ongoing aspect of students’ lives as well as the many issues associated with work in the contemporary political economy—from economically driven immigration to welfare-to-work policies. I have built the course from a variety of very helpful models. Ira Shor discussed the importance of examining labor throughout his work, but provided a particularly strong rationale in *Critical Teaching in Everyday Life* (125–54). James Zebroski (1994) describes a very useful model for a writing class centered on the theme of work with considerable depth in *Thinking Through Theory*. I have also participated in conversations concerning work as a theme with fellow members of the Working Class Studies Special Interest Group in listserv exchanges and at a CCCC workshop.

In these classes, my students write about their own lives as workers, they interview others about aspects of the work they do, they examine the discourses of work on the job and at school, and they research broad topics that shape the terms of work in and out of education. The assignments I have used vary and evolve, but generally I start with a thick description of a day in students’ working lives or with a “work autobiography.” Then students move to essays based on interviews that they do with workers. Group-centered research projects follow, which center on topics that students have generated out of the personal explorations and interviews. Students have explored a variety of topics, including globalization, women in the workplace, the history of the
labor movement, labor practices at Wal-Mart, and economically driven immigration. Along the way, they do daily writing, common reading as well as reading for their research topics, and synchronous online discussions. The general trajectory is designed to encourage students to connect the terms of day-to-day work in and out of school with general policy/political issues. In the terms of the political economic as described in the introduction to this book, it brings the micro into dialectic with the macro. Class emerges as an outcome of political economic processes and power (rather than exclusively as a social identifier) or a means of “understanding oneself” outside of the material and the social. John Alberti, Martha Marinara, Shirley Brice Heath, and Amy Robillard have all addressed how working-class students’ working lives and perceptions of work can alienate them from their writing selves in academia. This is certainly intertwined with retention problems among nontraditional students. Heath points out that working students often don’t feel full identification as students—many dip into and out of higher education to suit immediate needs. Robillard points to “a strong disconnect between the self that works and the self that attends classes.” I am very interested in how that disconnect shapes and perhaps undermines what we are trying to accomplish in the classroom. I am interested in fostering dialectic between the self that works in the service economy and the self that attends the university in search of a secure middle-class life.

To be clear, this is a writing class in which the usual elements of process are taught and supported. We develop ideas for research and writing, we journal, we workshop and revise drafts for varying audiences and purposes, and we reflect on our writing and we develop writing portfolios. However, the class fosters an awareness of how articulation—the ways we “come into being” through language—are often overtly framed by political economic factors (Herndl and Bauer 2003, 581). It actively seeks to recognize the relationship between the writer, that which is written, and the immediate educational context within which this process is enacted. Writing is conceived of as a mode through which the writer reflexively struggles with the meanings and identities assigned within fast-capitalist configurations of production and education. In so doing, the pedagogy is designed to create the conditions for novel understandings and identifications. It is intended to highlight contradictions, not resolve them, and class is approached as a political economic (rather than a more purely social) phenomenon.
The first half of class is spent discussing, researching, and writing about issues raised in various readings that center around work. Assigned texts become platforms for discussions of the material present, what it is, and how we may have gotten here. Readings are intended to help situate “work” in American culture. I have assigned historical work from a variety of sources, including excerpts from Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* and Max Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism.* Students locate more contemporary views of work from a variety of sources, including editorials, political speeches, and (of course) popular media.

We also do more contemporary readings. In different classes I have assigned David Shipler’s *The Working Poor: Invisible in America,* Michael Zweig’s *The Working Class Majority: America’s Best Kept Secret,* and Barbara Ehrenreich’s *Nickled and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America* or her *Bait and Switch.* Shipler’s *The Working Poor* has resonated particularly well with students. Shipler relies on intimate profiles and interviews to depict the complex array of factors that contribute to poverty in America—among them, low wages, welfare policies, the cost of health care, poor financial decision making, domestic violence, drug addiction, language and cultural barriers, unequal education, the cost of housing, adolescent sexual abuse, and race and gender. Shipler’s book complicates the myth of upward mobility through hard work that continues to play a powerful role in American political discourse as it chronicles the lives of people who simply are not able to pull themselves out of poverty through work. Interestingly, however, many students see aspects of their own lives in Shipler’s stories—the book therefore can’t be read with the same detachment as the works on most literary reading lists.

Finally, we read some of the narratives from *Gig: Americans Talk About their Jobs.* My students clearly find the working world depicted in *Gig* very familiar, and contentious, overtly political policy issues—like health care coverage, the right to organize, and the right to full-time employment—emerge out of discussions of the interviews. Research and articulation proceed inductively from the lived experiences of the political economic. On this point, I agree with David Seitz and Russell Durst, who

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5. John Alberti’s reader, *The Working Life,* published by Pearson Longman in 2004, is a very useful text for this type of class. It offers excerpts from Franklin, Weber, and Adam Smith, as well as work from writers as diverse as Woody Guthrie and Nicholas Negroponte.
argue that critical pedagogies that examine work and the contradictions of “the American work ethic” have a much better chance of succeeding when we start where students are—at everyday embodied experience in the world of work and education. Discussions and research on the terms of work on particular jobs blossom into discussions of the terms of work and education in the fast-capitalist economy—how things are, how they have been, and how they might be.

Students compile their own work histories, write descriptions of jobs they currently hold or have held, and examine perceptions of work—how these perceptions are formed and how we might rethink them in light of our critical examinations. The professions covered in a single class can be very broad—from textile mill worker and oil changer to insurance lawyer, software developer, and real estate agent. These narratives become rich texts for classes. Through them, we analyze the discourses of work and the material terms they identify and often mask—including job titles, job descriptions, specialized jargon of various professions, and the surprisingly common terms that people use to describe the jobs they have held in their working lives—“between jobs,” “shit work,” “dream job,” and so on.

During the second half of the class, we turn toward extended group research projects that center on work. Ideas for these research projects often come directly out of the students’ work descriptions and interviews. One student who works as a telemarketer, for instance, complained that he increasingly calls households at which no one speaks English. He was frustrated because this wastes his time. A front desk clerk at a medical practice whose first language is Spanish complained about the rude comments that patients have made about her accent. Students had very contentious discussions of these experiences, and the contention is very much a part of the politics of our region, which has seen a rapid influx of primarily Hispanic immigrants over the past fifteen years. While some students discussed difficulties with, and resentments about, working with and among those whose native language is Spanish, others conveyed their shock and dismay when they witnessed incidents in which non-native speakers were discriminated against. Discussions about immigrants and language provided an opportunity to contextualize immigration in broader economic and political terms. While the discussion was fractious and even somewhat disturbing (there was no general, satisfying resolution), it did complicate the often overly simplistic assumptions that characterize
most popular media treatments of immigration and work. Students researched particular, concrete questions—such as why immigration has been so concentrated in the Southeast over the past decade, and how educational and civic institutions might respond to non-English speakers. Among the interesting projects that came out of that course was a paper written by a woman about race and economics at a restaurant at which she waited tables. She interviewed a Hispanic busser, a cook, and a waiter, noting similarities and differences in biographies, perceptions of work, and education.

Other issues that students have researched in various sections of the class have included:

- Globalization—treaties, outsourcing, debates on points of view, effects on wages and local economies, policies on immigration, the impact of International Monetary Fund policies on the economies of developing nations, and immigration policy.
- Women in the workplace—salary disparities, choices of occupation, advancement, and balancing work and motherhood.
- The labor movement—history, current state of the movement, labor laws, and recent and ongoing confrontations.
- Wal-Mart—effects on local economies, labor violations, and reliance on public money and welfare.
- Education—“the achievement gap,” the casualization of teaching labor in higher education, the role marketplace values and needs play in the shaping of curriculum, trends in federal aid for higher education, and the increasing use of contingent teaching labor in higher education.

The factors can also be very specific and personal, and the paths that students take in their writing are often very surprising. One student wrote about her own experience as a fast-food worker and related it to the documentary *Supersize Me*, incorporating some very interesting research on the fast-food industry. Her Web-based, multimodal project made connections between fast food and fast-capitalism, articulating a relationship between poor nutrition, quick calories, and life at the bottom of the economic ladder. Students that examined class and voting patterns created an interactive Web project that presented statistics showing the rate at which voter participation in elections declines with income levels.
Another student investigated voting patterns in an effort to try to understand why working-class people often didn’t seem to vote in their own economic interests. She was surprised by the underrepresentation of African Americans among voters; this led to a larger project that linked incarceration rates among African American males with recent legislation in a number of states that made it illegal for convicts to vote. A group of students who were all born outside of the United States developed a Web site focusing on work and immigration. Among that group was a Vietnamese man in his mid-thirties who had started his own small business and a Philippine woman who, as a child, had been sent to the United States to live with relatives to expand her opportunities. Both discussed the difficulties of living, learning, and working in the United States and maintaining the cultural identities of their native countries. The Vietnamese man wrote about the growing gap between Americanized and non-Americanized generations in his family. He explained the difficulties that many new immigrants face as they adjust to life in the United States, and associated a willingness to quickly adapt culturally with the likelihood of relative economic success. The Philippine woman described the growing independence and confidence she had gained as a worker and student. This has caused friction with certain family members, as she is no longer willing to conform to their expectations for her gender. Her work became an examination of the contrasts between a work discourse within which she believes she is more culturally “American,” and a discourse of home that she believes limits her in ways she finds increasingly unacceptable. Another student provided an overview of state and federal child support laws, and described her own frustrating struggle to collect the child support that the father of her young son owed. Her project became an examination of the relationship between this legal/bureaucratic discourse and the material realities of both parents’ working lives.

HOW DO YOU SOLVE A PROBLEM LIKE SOPHIA?

In his description of the work of rhetoric and composition as material practice, Bruce Horner writes

if we see the institutional location of the composition course and its inhabitants not as autonomous constraints on actors but as a location reproduced and potentially changed by actors through their practices, then the apparent marginality of that location has potential for both hegemonic and
counterhegemonic work. It is not necessary to somehow escape that location, or attempt to liberate students from it, because it is not separate from the “real world” but both constituted by and constitutive of it. (2000, 57)

While this inquiry-based approach examines work, it doesn’t proceed as though the educational context within which we are all working together is neutral or not a part of the total political economic milieu we are seeking to understand and author. It recognizes that we start from an institutional location that, as Horner points out, is continually constituted by us. Therefore we also examine issues like our perceptions of “higher education,” the marketing of our institution and its position in our region, the current terms of work in higher education, and the relationship between higher education and the economy.

In the following, I will share work written by a student who enrolled in a section of the course described above. I have chosen to present a problematic case rather than an ideal. I do not offer the work as systematically derived evidence of the success or failure of this approach. I offer it as a means of showing how a dialectical, open-ended approach can illuminate the interrelationship between genre, ideology, situatedness, and literate development in postsecondary writing. The work will show a writer locating herself in the way described by Horner in that she is doing both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic work. However, somewhat complicating what I take to be Horner’s assertion, this student does the two simultaneously—asserting self-contradictory voices that ventriloquate the two realms of her everyday life: low-end service work and a student’s work in higher education.

The student author is “Sophia,” a junior who has worked as a waitress at Shoney’s for five years since high school. In the first essay she wrote in the class, a work autobiography called “Maybe This Is My Destiny,” Sophia indicates that she enjoys her work in the restaurant. While she makes only $2.15 per hour plus tips and receives no benefits, she nevertheless seems to embrace the role of the happy, if objectified, service worker who is helping her company and herself:

To be honest with you, in a restaurant good food is not what makes a customer come back, it’s how they are treated by their server. It was the determining factor of whether my customer was satisfied or not, and I did all that I could and more to make sure I gave 100% satisfaction. The key to the job was really smiling and being personable. Any customer can get over bad food or bad décor if they have a server that is friendly, jokes around, and acts like they are
interested in him or her. That is why I have never received a bad complaint, the restaurant maybe, but not me.

The rhetoric of this passage could easily be used in a training manual for new servers: her concern is for the satisfaction of the customer and the lack of complaints she has received, and vocabulary like “100% satisfaction,” “smiling,” “personable,” “friendly,” and “interested” describes service-work employees as they might be idealized in any training program or manual. Writing as a server in a restaurant, Sophia is speaking largely from the figured world of service-work, where she makes the money she needs to survive and pursue her goals, has no recognized identification with others in her economic position, and sees no value in recognition of the political factors that shape her work and relations. She is “a good worker.”

In “Maybe This Is My Destiny,” Sophia indicates that while all of her fellow waitresses are female, her managers are primarily male. She relates a conversation she had with a manager that, as she put it, “reveals just how sexist the restaurant business [can] be.” When she asked one of her managers why all of the waitresses are female, “[he] told me that when most male customers come in they want to have a female server so they can feel like the dominant person. He said that sex sells, and having pretty servers tends to bring customers back.” Interestingly, Sophia identified this as sexism, but also indicated that she wasn’t particularly troubled by it:

(1) I knew that this scenario was not politically correct, but once I thought about it I saw just how true it was. Male customers flirt and compliment my co-workers and I all the time. All we do is smile and flirt right back. (2) It is sad to say, but that is where most of my good tips come from, and I am not trying to change that as long as everyone is happy, enjoying their food, and not getting too aggressive or offensive.

I see in Sophia’s characterization of the restaurant business as “sexist” and her statement about political correctness mostly a genuflection to her academic context. In this statement she wants to make it clear that she understands how this behavior is to be characterized at the university, and her phrasing could even suggest that the essay serves as a kind of exposé. This is the voice of the working college student with one foot in the classroom, where issues like gender equity are a more serious concern. However, Sophia is only a college student for part of the week. During another substantial part, Sophia is a waitress.
The second statement exhibits a liberal individualist perspective as it is understood in the culture of fast-capitalism, one that sees little value in making connections between politics and one’s own working life. As the essay develops, she writes largely from the figured world of low-end service work in the fast-capitalist economy. She accepts the situation as immutable reality, and claims that she is even willing to benefit from sexism that manifests as female subservience if it makes her more money. Sophia doesn’t generalize from the situation about the plight of women or gender in the workplace. She was willing to excuse the sexism because of what she saw as its material “truth.” An African American first-generation college student, she is earning money to support herself and pay for her education. She recognizes the politics of the situation and suggests that they trouble her, but she simultaneously dismisses this line of critical thought—a line that might lead to more “strategic” rather than purely pragmatic thinking. Adopting a familiar rightist technique of political censure, she suggests that naming her manager’s thinking sexist is “political correctness.” The implication is that examination of the situation from a political or justice-driven perspective—and perhaps asserting herself as a worker who is deserving of respectful treatment and fair compensation, regardless of gender or attractiveness—is not worthwhile. She claims that she is not offended by the manager’s blatant sexism, or what is perhaps a more often latent sexism that permeates her work more generally.

Interestingly, for her research essay, Sophia chose to write about issues that women face at the workplace. While sexism on the job had been a topic that emerged in class discussions, she was not directly prompted to do research on that issue. She joined a group of three other women who chose for their class project to put together a joint Web site that examines women’s workplace issues and provides resources for others interested in research or help with particular problems. Her first essay had been entitled “Maybe This Is My Destiny,” but the second essay, composed for the Web site, was entitled “The Worth of a Woman.” In it, Sophia takes a significantly more condemning view of sexism, and moves to a point of view that generalizes from personal experiences, rather than seeing them in wholly individualistic, apolitical terms. “Working women” becomes a generalized category for research and policy, and the perspective seems far more driven by a consciously politicized concern for workers’ rights and dignity. She associates economic valuation with gender in both political and cultural terms.
She begins this second essay with a quote from the first:

“Most male customers come into a restaurant wanting to be served by a woman, so they can feel dominant in the situation,” according to James Brown, general manager of Shoney’s Restaurant. This sexist theory is not only offensive, but in many cases true. (3) Being a server is typically a women’s occupation, and it is an occupation where how much money you make often depends on your physical attributes instead of your personality. This occupation, along with others, has been laid out as a choice occupation for women, and they are mainly the lowest-paying and least beneficial jobs in the labor force. When either a man or woman mainly dominates an occupation it is considered segregation in the work force, and this occurs even though women have more career options than before. Occupational segregation, which includes choice of occupation and wage disparity, is only one of the many discriminations that workingwomen endure in today’s society.

Moving from the perspective of worker to academic research writer, Sophia expresses a sense of outrage, but it is qualified. The research that Sophia presents in this essay examines “wage disparity” and “wage depression” (terms she uses) in traditionally female occupations. Here she identifies sexism as a broad political and economic issue—tying it to occupational choices, wages, and systems of valuation. This is very different from the individualist stance of the first essay, where Sophia’s identification as a woman only emerges when she relates how her gender helps her to make more money because men like to feel superior and flirt. In contrast, in the second essay she speaks largely from the figured world of higher education in a class that is discussing and writing about work and education. In Sophia’s research essay, “workingwomen” becomes a category for research and policy, and the perspective is far more driven by a concern for workers’ rights and dignity. She starts the essay from her own experience, but moves quickly to research that is statistical and policy-oriented. The overall tone of the second essay conveys a sense of urgency about the problem of gender-based wage and job discrimination. Mostly gone is the rhetoric of loyal service, customer satisfaction, and adaptive self-entrepreneurialism. In this writing, she employs vocabulary from her reading like “gender segregated workforces,” “employment conditions,” and “government policy processes.” She still, however, reinforces some of the viewpoints that she also critiques. In statement three in the passage cited above, for instance, she takes issue with how much money women make being based on appearance, but
then says that it should be based on personality—essentially exchanging one beauty pageant attribute for another.

I see very important things happening in these two essays that have to do with genre, discourse, and the figuring worlds of work and school. Clearly the genres of writing invited by the two assignments encourage different points of view. The work autobiography assignment does not explicitly invite students to generalize about their experiences, nor does it ask them to use research. In work autobiographies, student authors very rarely generalize about their positions as workers or the circumstances of workers other than themselves. Likewise, they very rarely use terminology like “equity,” “disparity,” or “market” that indicates a macro perspective on the political economic or a concern with labor rights. Complaints are very common, but they are highly local and individualized, even when they can easily be generalized in a variety of ways and might be addressed within current labor law. This may be both a product of dominant individualist ideologies in the society at large, as well as the oft-cited tendency of the personal narrative genre (perhaps most famously critiqued by James Berlin [1988]) to reproduce the self-contained, self-interested, rational-choice-making capitalist subject.

The second essay, in contrast, is a “research essay.” The assignment asks students to research a topic that comes out of their prior writing, class discussions, or class readings. Here the writing conforms more to students’ conceptions of an academic research essay, conceptions that have been shaped over a number of years before they enter an upper-level undergraduate writing class. That conception has also been particularized within this class—by the assignment, by the readings and discussions in class, and by students’ “readings” of what I value as their teacher. So it is shaped not only by the genre of the academic research paper—as it exists as a general form in students’ imaginaries and how it has been described in this class—but also by a class that fosters the adoption of particular terminologies and critical perspectives. These essays are also shaped, of course, by the research that the students discover and bring into dialectic with their evolving conceptions of themselves and their work. While, as a teacher, I do much to try to ensure that multiple perspectives are represented and valued in the class, the class is certainly slanted toward a labor-rights, social justice point of view. It is therefore unwarranted to identify a radical transformation in Sophia’s consciousness based on the contrasts between the two essays because they are written in progressive sequence. The writing in the second essay is just as “figuring” of authorial position,
rhetoric, and perspective as that of the first essay. However, that figuring does enable alternative understandings that can generate new insights, especially when students are compelled to compare the two essays. This is an important part of how writing works as a social, dialectical process. As Sophia researches, writes, and engages in dialectic with others and her reading, she is seeing herself as a worker through different lenses—and those lenses are inevitably shaping her self-identification.

Describing how identification occurs from a perspective heavily informed by Vygotsky and Bakhtin, Holland and her colleagues work through the complicated interface between everyday language use and self-identification. Marx writes that “the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual . . . in its reality it is the ensemble of social relations”: importantly, Holland emphasizes that Vygotsky and Bakhtin were working from Marxist assumptions about identity and socialization (quoted in Holland et al. 1998, 35). The model of selfhood that informs their research blurs distinctions between the individual and her social context, describing learning and identification as fluid, open-ended, and highly dialectical. Identification is an ongoing, constructive process in which subjects use the available “tools” in their environment to work through who they are and how they should make decisions and act. Moreover, identification changes from environment to environment with social roles and their accompanying discourses. Selfhood is never completed nor contained. When Sophia writes from the position of waitress, though her writing shows evidence of awareness that she is in an academic context she adopts many of the characteristics of her work identity as she writes about her experiences. When she writes a research paper about gender in the workplace, she writes more from a position of scholar-researcher. Neither writing shows a unified “essential self,” but both show her undergoing dialectical processes of identification that are tied to situated roles, conceptual vocabularies, and material contexts. She is a working student, and her self-identification is shaped by work at school and Shoney’s. When juxtaposed, the worlds of education and service worker bring about many contradictions, but how do we make those contradictions the object of study? I opened this section with a question that is also a pun “How Do We Solve a Problem Like Sophia?” For the sake of catchiness, I chose the pun over what might have been a more accurate title, “How Do We Get Sophia to Focus on the Problem”—or the contradictions that shape physical and intellectual labor, power, and opportunity in her everyday life?
For the final essays in the class, I encourage students to adopt a multimodal form (though they have other options). At this point in the semester they have conducted primary and secondary research on a topic. They have written about their own experiences and critically examined the political economics of work and education through various readings and discussions. A multimodal format can enable students to incorporate conflicting or ambivalent perspectives from their work in the class as they work through their own, evolving thinking. The form therefore can foster the creative tension of dialectic as varied viewpoints, voices, and information are juxtaposed. As students blend research writing with narrative accounts of their own experiences, they connect the macro with the micro in interesting and often quite novel ways. The multimodal form gives students the opportunity to move out of the solipsism of narrative and the distanced, linear formalism of more traditional academic research writing. After reading Ehrenreich’s *Bait and Switch*, Sophia was very concerned with the issue of job security, and she was asking interesting questions about the role of higher education in her own life and in society more generally. She begins her essay both with an articulation of that concern as the theme of the essay and with an explanation of the form she has chosen to adopt:

When the parties have ended and you’ve said goodbye to your college buddies, will you be ready to enter the workforce? Will you have a job waiting on you with open arms? What if you ended up spending months searching for the career that your degree promised you? What if you landed the job of your dreams only to be sent packing with no reasons why? There are many college-educated people that have graduated without immediately landing a job, and even worse, there are many college-educated people that have been pushed out of white-collar employment, and forced to work minimum wage occupations. This could be you. Read on to find out why.

For the final essay I chose to elaborate on the discussion of white-collar recession within the U.S. This is the idea that college-educated, white-collar employees are either being laid-off at high rates, or having difficulty finding employment. I chose the multi-modal format because I wanted to use personal narratives to illustrate the on-going problem that so many people are experiencing. My paper will be an eye-opener for college students that believe having a college degree is all they need to break into corporate America.

Will this be your last resort?

My mother always told me that the only way someone could get a well-paying job was by graduating from a college or university with a good record
and good grades. What if you knew beforehand that going through four or more years of college, and working hard to get your diploma would not guarantee your success in the workforce? Would you go through it? Would you spend the money on tuition and room and board just to find yourself in debt due to student loans, or would you resort to something else? My mother works for the U.S. Post Office, and many of her coworkers are college graduates, some of them even have Masters in a particular field of study, yet they are still working amongst people that never went to college and some that do not even have a high school diploma. Why is that? My mother does not have a college degree, but she makes good money and she is secure in her position, so why should I continue with my college education knowing that I could easily get a job just like hers?

Sophia draws on her mother’s work experience to question her own desires and goals for her education. However, this isn’t just personal narrative—already she speaks of wages, the present and future of white-collar labor, and the insecurity of the economy. She also explains why she chose this form for the essay, displaying an awareness of the relationship between form and function.

Barbara Ehrenreich’s official Web site includes a public board that invites discussion of the experiences she relates and the issues she raises in *Bait and Switch*. Sophia quotes several of the contributors to this discussion board. One quote is from Bruce Swanson, who feels that education is not always the answer:

I’m a math/chemistry teacher and I’ve worked as a college instructor, engineer, computer programmer, machine operator, shoe repairman and janitor among many. I also ran a labor union for a while as well at a church. (All true.) Education is the answer only when it is the answer. Right now, it is not. Even when it is, it is a myth that our educational system can deliver. The colleges do not train job ready people; they only produce good candidates for training. The reason for that is that most knowledgeable worker jobs or skilled trade jobs require at least a couple of years on the job full time using the tools of the job to become truly proficient. The educational system simply cannot provide that but the people who run it will never admit it. Education in this country is a great lucrative industry for those staffing it and they exploit the ignorance of the youth eager to work and accumulate. . . .

Among the remarkable aspects of this rhetorical move is that Sophia is finding commonality with other workers as she relates her own personality with theirs. The form she has chosen invites this multivocality—but
the shift is simultaneously conceptual and indicates a move away from the
perception that workers’ situations are individual toward a perception
that economics are relational and collectively created and experienced.
Sophia integrates the experiences of others with her own and then
examines those experiences in terms of her research. Swanson, the per-
son she quotes here, has not so ironically worked as a contingent college
instructor and sees higher education as a piece of a broader economic
milieu that is fundamentally insecure and even somewhat predatory in
its relationship to the current economy. Sophia is connecting higher
education to the “bait and switch” aspects of the current economy. The
essay draws on extensive secondary research and connects trends in stu-
dent loans, white-collar underemployment, and outsourcing—relating
all of these factors to her own position as a soon-to-be graduated college
student who works, has financed her own education, and has been moti-
ved (in part) by the dream of economic security.

The essay includes elements of analysis, emotionally laden critique,
and some alarming statistics about layoffs and the lack of availability of
professional-level, high-paying jobs for college graduates. However, in
spite of all this, the essay ends with advice for how motivated individuals
can break into corporate America:

In conclusion, studies have shown that having a college degree or higher
may not always guarantee you a position within corporate America. While I
am not implicating the idea that experiencing college life first hand is not
worthwhile, I am issuing a warning for everyone that thinks having a college
degree is the gateway to having a successful life. What was once a marketable
attribute for any résumé, may not grant you the callbacks that you desire now.
I do advise everyone to get involved with internships while in college. Having
that experience can make transitioning from college graduate to corporate
employee much easier and it can give you the opportunity to have a job after
graduation. Most of the time in corporate America, it is not about what you
know or how many degrees you have; it is about who you know, and how they
can help you. Networking is often the key to success, and if you master that,
along with your college education, then gaining a position within a reputable
company should be no problem; just make sure that you have a last resort.

Sophia has not become a labor activist in this class. I see this conclusion
in a number of ways. She might be said to be adopting a “bootstrap” or
“isolated individualist” perspective—a perspective that we had critiqued
as a group on many occasions. She warns her readers that a college
education isn’t “a gateway to a successful life” but she then offers some practical advice for heightening one’s chances for success. This advice assumes the hue of self-help—it leaves collective, structural, and political change out of the equation. She speaks of “mastering” networking and gaining experiences through internships. Moreover, she puts faith in the trajectory from higher education to economic success, asserting that with networking skills, experience, and a college education “gaining a position within a reputable company should be no problem.” The certitude of this trajectory is aggressively dismantled in *Bait and Switch*, which Sophia professes to admire.

Amy Robillard, in her treatment of the role of narrative in working-class life, notes a need for closure and positive outcomes in working-class narrative. There is a tendency to have faith in a future perfect in which hard work and diligence will be rewarded. The type of open-ended speculation with which academics feel comfortable in their own scholarly work may be uncomfortable for those who have come to higher education looking for security and a sense of control over their own lives. Robillard writes, “I know that my own need for closure could easily lead me to write trite narratives: and then and then and then and then a happy ending” (2003, 90). Writing of work memoirs in his own classes, David Seitz has framed this need for closure in the writing of working-class students in terms of the need for control “over their past and future work identities, over tensions between work and family life, over constraints of social class and gender” (2004, 216). Janet Bean similarly claims that “by casting themselves in the role of hero in a narrative of meritocracy, they affirm their ability to control their own lives” (quoted in Seitz 2004, 216). Sophia may very well be making a reflexive move toward security and control after raising such troubling issues in this essay. She still works at Shoney’s and is still going into debt to finance her own education—it is understandable that she wants to feel as though she is still on the right track. The marketing of the university, its implicit and explicit promises of economic transcendence and a smoother road ahead, certainly contribute to this disposition.

Overall, Sophia’s portfolio showed that she became a better writer in the class—more reflective, more rigorous in her revisions, more assertive, and more focused—in part, because she wrote about things that were relevant to her daily life and work. I could have structured this class and assignment in a way that would have helped Sophia to produce a tighter, more conventional, and seemingly more controlled and
politically informed argument in the end that I found more satisfying. However, this risks having Sophia do school with me just as she does the happy worker role at Shoney’s. Sophia is a writer who has used writing to engage in dialectic with others, complicate her own notions of her work inside and outside of the university, and situate herself with respect to the political economic realities of her position at school and on the job.

I admit that I nevertheless find where she ends up unsatisfying. The problem with this essay is that she wraps things up in a way that isn’t true to the problems that it has raised. In the end, she couldn’t, perhaps wouldn’t, sustain focus on the deep systemic problems and contradictions she describes. Through critical thinking and a thoughtful assimilation of resources, Sophia creates a wonderful tension but doesn’t rigorously follow through on it, opting instead for triteness and neat closure. I certainly don’t have a problem with optimism in general, but I do when it is clearly denial. She began the class with an essay that sounded at times as though it was written by the ideal employee envisioned in a training manual. In between she asked very good questions, and did research that led her to some troubling revelations. But then she ended her last essay with a paragraph that reinforces the myth of success through hard work and education. I believe my task as a teacher is to keep the endings open, to keep the focus on the complications and contradictions. As Robillard puts it:

As a writing teacher, I’ve learned to distrust the neat and tidy endings, the conclusions that look to a bright and happy future despite the contradictions and complications woven through the body of a piece. As a writing teacher, I’ve learned to distrust the very way of writing that is most comfortable for working-class students. (2003, 90)

The challenge is to continually find ways to help students write in dialectic with the discourses and social practices that shape our lives—to be true to their own discoveries and even their own anger and frustrations. Fostering dialectic means resisting quick, easy closures—those initiated by us and in various ways by our sponsoring institutions. As with many students, I do wish that I could have gone on with Sophia, having her respond to questions about this essay. Though I understand her desire for certainty, I don’t think that a pedagogy of hope can ever rest easily with the kind of forced conciliation that Sophia seeks at the end of her essay. She still feels a need to seek biographical solutions to deep systemic problems. In the process she denies both important aspects of her own life, and the conclusions to which her own work and thinking in
the class have led her. In my view, a more hopeful future lies elsewhere. Discovering alternatives requires a willingness to confront the economic logics and inherent contradictions of the very educational terrain in which we are all working.

Some of Sophia’s classmates investigated labor justice movements inside and outside of the United States and found reason for hope without feeling compelled to write themselves back into a Horatio Alger narrative. One wrote of a movement in Argentina in which workers are taking over factories and managing them as collectives, not only successfully recovering the businesses, but sharing some of the profits with local communities (Lavaca Collective 2007). This is a movement of factory workers, but they are acting strategically in response to world bank policies that are decimating their communities and robbing them of opportunities. Another wrote of the general philosophy and activities of the Jobs with Justice coalition. Another investigated labor unrest at a company owned by Daimler-Benz and located near her own hometown in rural North Carolina—a company that she has considered working for after school. This project was a crash course in labor rights for a moderately conservative engineering student in a state in which less than 3 percent of workers are unionized. Five workers at that plant who were instrumental in its unionization were later fired for leading a strike, and the struggle of “the Freightliner Five” has become a popular cause among U.S. labor activists.

It is important to point out that I was able to structure a class around work, encourage critique of commonplace assumptions about the economy and labor, and create an atmosphere of rigorous debate in this class because I am a tenured faculty member whose credentials and expertise are recognized by his institution. I can afford to be critical of my institution, and if called upon to do so, I can make an informed defense of what I am doing in the classroom and why. My own risk level is very, very small. Many writing teachers don’t have the latitude or institutional backing to feel comfortable doing what I do. Like many of the scholars cited in this chapter, I connect myself with a legacy that includes Vygotsky, Bakhtin, Burke, Freire, and hooks and risks seeing pedagogy in terms of a desire for social justice, or as Mark Wood puts it, “a better world.” Is there still a place in rhetoric and composition at which we are willing to risk articulating our own contradictions, deep dissatisfactions, and even our angers? Do we then have the courage to risk and act upon our own utopian impulses?