



EYES ON THE OUGHT TO BE

WHAT WE TEACH WHEN WE TEACH ABOUT LITERACY

KIRK BRANCH

Introduction

In 1984, as a freshman at Marquette University, I volunteered at the Milwaukee Urban Day School's GED preparation class, run in the inner city by Sister Regina. One afternoon, Sister Regina introduced me to my new student, an African-American man at least ten years older than me who had just been released from prison and wanted to get his GED. She gave me a workbook to get us started. The first page focused on the proper use of *was* and *were*: He was to circle the correct word in each sentence. About halfway down the page, we encountered a sentence constructed to highlight the phrase *If I (was/were)*. An asterisk pointed me to a grammatical rule I had never learned before: In a hypothetical situation, the first or third person singular takes *were* instead of *was*. I spent the remainder of my session with him explaining what *hypothetical* meant and when he should use *were* with *I* instead of *was*. The rule intrigued me, surprised me, and seemed crucial to convey. I have never spoken that construction incorrectly since. My student never came back.

Fortunately, I learned more vital things from my work there. One student provided me an eloquent history of the Montgomery bus boycott when it became clear that I didn't recognize a reference to Rosa Parks in our textbook. I received a gentle introduction to the politics of race from a student supporting Jesse Jackson's presidential bid. Another student taught me simply by describing his life: In his thirties, married with five children, and studying to get his GED, he worked twelve hours a day, seven days a week, for minimum wage, then something over \$3 an hour, with no overtime,

meaning he brought home slightly more than \$200 a week working literally half of his life. Sister Regina, listening to him tell me about his work, disrupted my sheltered suburban view of the world when she asked, “Who says slavery has been abolished?” Yet a singularly pressing memory is my voice repeating definitions of *hypothetical*, coming up with model sentences, teaching myself a rule that might be worth knowing if one were to find oneself writing a book about literacy but could not conceivably matter in almost any other situation, to me or to him.

Even in the initial encounter of a college kid with GED students, one can see themes and dynamics that, in many ways, shape the field of adult literacy education. Although literacy teaching has a history of prioritizing the minutiae of standard English grammar, the linguistic transformation emphasized in such a project has other counterparts. Conceived as vocational education, literacy instruction receives the task of making individuals employable and economies strong. Educators in prison imagine literacy teaching as a key to the transformation inherent in rehabilitation. Advocates of a critical pedagogy seek to transform social structures and to help adults recognize and accept political agency in their own lives. And the literacy crisis that recurs every ten years or so bases many of its anxieties on the dramatic need to deliver urgent educational changes to needy people, people who can’t—can’t read, can’t speak correctly, can’t work, can’t stay out of jail.

Yet other kinds of transformations occurred at the Milwaukee Urban Day School. The passing of the GED marked an important event in many students’ lives, often a significant accomplishment in battling a lifetime of educational struggle and underachievement. But I also changed. I had never before recognized my own racial and class position so concretely as I did when I started working at that school and had never before thought of my life as lived in relation to others, as made possible in part by people not afforded the same opportunities I had. I learned about civil rights and life in what was then one of the most segregated cities in the United States.

The reflections occasioned by such jarring experiences have shaped the questions and settings I consider in this book. Each time I have moved into a different setting of nontraditional adult education, the necessary intellectual, emotional—even physical—adjustments have discomfited and intrigued me. Moving from one institutional and discursive environment to another—community schools to vocational school to county jail writing class—has required specific and sometimes surprising changes in my pedagogical practices and theories. Because these experiences inspired the questions I ask in this book, I describe them briefly here as introduction.

I moved to Seattle after I graduated, seeking residency so that I could afford graduate school at the University of Washington. Soon after I arrived, I signed up as a volunteer at the Goodwill Adult Learning Center, where I remained as a teacher for eight years (with occasional breaks).

Central to the development and philosophy of the center were the works of Paulo Freire, whose theme-based education for Brazilian and Chilean peasants became the basis of the curriculum we learned to teach with there. Fiercely student-centered, the curriculum emphasized the lives of the students who came to the school, and we were to spend time developing and pursuing generative themes that came out of the students' own experiences. Such lesson plans would, ideally, culminate in a project that actually promoted change: students inviting a speaker to educate about AIDS prevention, for example, or organizing a meeting with a housing official to discuss a particular policy.

At Goodwill, I learned to recognize the political nature of education, to accept that something was always at stake in teaching, that teaching was always about more than encouraging the learning of basic curricular goals. Goodwill believed in teaching as a form of overt political activism, an approach that is as compelling as it is hard to realize consistently in a classroom, but while I struggled with and revised and argued with the curriculum that Goodwill encouraged, I also came to accept completely the notion that my teaching should have a social agenda, that I should see my teaching as helping students change the structures that oppressed them. I know that my interest in teaching in all settings still privileges issues of social change and political justice. My work at Goodwill committed me to that project, but my movement from location to location (including into college teaching) forced me to question as well the practical and theoretical limits of the curriculum I learned at Goodwill. At Goodwill, I was also introduced to the work of the Highlander Folk School, the subject of the fourth chapter in this book.¹

I continued working at Goodwill after I started the graduate program at the University of Washington, where I received a Masters degree and began work toward a Ph.D. in eighteenth-century British literature. In my third year as a graduate student, I received a teaching assistantship and began teaching composition. That following summer, while I taught a particularly wonderful group of students at Goodwill, I quit graduate school and began seeking work as an adult basic education teacher. Nothing else I had ever done was as exciting and intellectually stimulating as the teaching I did at Goodwill, and I wanted to make it my career. I landed a job at the Seattle Vocational Institute (SVI), teaching adult basic education (ABE), level 1, for adults with reading skills measured by the Test for Adult Basic Education (TABE) at a fourth- to sixth-grade level.

That transition proved one of the most difficult of my working life. At Goodwill, I worked with students, volunteers, and staff on creating a learning community and fostering political empowerment through education. My mandate at SVI presented a stark contrast: I was hired to help students pass the TABE at a higher level, so that they could get into ABE level 2.

There was considerable institutional desire regarding this as well, because ABE at SVI was free; students began paying after they tested out of ABE 2 and into the vocational classes. After SVI became a pilot site for the Integrated Curriculum for Achieving Necessary Skills (I-CANS) program, for which I was the school representative, I became fully introduced to what I later realized was a discourse of vocational education in transition, moving away from a focus on particular occupations and toward a discourse of competencies, general and extensive lists of skills that employers want from employees, based on what the discourse refers to as “the high-performance workplace.” I learned a great deal from participating in this project, and met some wonderful teachers throughout the state of Washington, but I also found myself responsible for implementing a curriculum that I didn’t believe in, that saw my students primarily in terms of future employees and made all of their education center around that, a point of view fundamentally opposed to the student-centered discourse I had learned at Goodwill. I remember distinctly a conversation I had with one of the I-CANS organizers at a weekend retreat, who told me that the best way to assess Goodwill’s performance was to see how many of their students got a job.

During my year at SVI, I became disillusioned with the notion of making a career as an adult basic educator, in part because I realized that social justice was not a central or even, in many cases, a recognizable goal of the profession, and in part due to the challenges the field posed economically and logistically (as with composition, ABE relies on the work of underpaid, overworked adjuncts who receive no benefits and typically hold jobs in two to three different schools). I quit and returned to graduate school the following year, changing my focus from literature to composition and starting with questions I had learned to ask in my teaching at Goodwill and SVI. At Goodwill, I learned to be skeptical about how I defined and understood the oppression my students experienced. No doubt my students came primarily from an economic and social underclass, but they were far savvier about the conditions of their own oppression than I could ever be, and I began to question my assumptions about what they needed to learn to produce social change. I also learned about the history of critical pedagogy at a community level: At Goodwill I first studied Paulo Freire and Myles Horton, who convinced me of the necessity to start with the students in planning a course of study. At Goodwill, my interaction with nonreading adults provided me the perspective I needed to challenge powerful assumptions about literacy made in texts like Ong’s *Orality and Literacy*. My experience at SVI forced me to recognize the competing discourses surrounding education for adults and the ideological complexities surrounding literacy as a concept and inspired the questions that became the basis for my second chapter.

I continued to work at and write about Goodwill until I left Seattle to accept a job as an assistant professor at the University of Kansas in Lawrence. At the beginning of my third year there, I helped develop an educational program at the Douglas County Jail, at the behest of Mike Caron, the program director, and with my colleague in the English department, Anna Neill. For almost two years I taught there, a class hard to label. Focused on GED at the beginning, it became something else by the end—part poetry, part life writing, part bull session. I shared two and one-half hours a week with inmates I called students, some in the class for over a year, others there for only one week. Most were there for a month or two, awaiting trial, serving county time for a minor offense, or being held before transfer to the Kansas Department of Corrections (KDOC).

This was an entirely unique teaching experience for me, to say the least. My classroom was entirely male, for one thing, and made up of a population I had never had such extended contact with: mostly black; mostly poor; mostly young; so many addicted to crack or meth; abusive fathers and abused sons; most of them, as far as I knew, petty criminals (I never asked, but often learned, inadvertently, what crime had landed them in jail). Almost every week, I had a somewhat different mix of students, some who had been with me for a few weeks or months, one or two new.

When I arrived at the brand new, state-of-the-art jail to teach my class, I turned in my license and my keys, allowed correctional officers (never *guards*, Mike counseled us) to search my bags, passed through a metal detector and two large doors—electronically operated, sliding, metal and glass—took an elevator to the third floor. The door opened onto a long brightly lit corridor with doors to all the pods and to the classroom. Usually I brought with me a handout consisting of several poems, perhaps chosen for some theme but mostly just short ones I liked and hoped would engage the students, and typed-up copies of the writing students had provided me the previous week: poems, life writing, and free writes that I photocopied from their composition books at the end of every class.²

I had what seemed to me several privileges when I taught. No officer joined us, though occasionally Mike sat in. I picked up and dropped off students every evening at the medium pod and sometimes at the minimum. It always felt extraordinary to stand in that large two-tiered pod, at the officer's desk in the middle, greeting students in their orange jumpsuits (white in the more casual minimum pod, inmates in maximum wore red, in special protection yellow), waiting as the officer electronically opened cell doors or called in students from the enclosed basketball court, covered 40 feet up by some sort of mesh. Back in the classroom, we sat at desks arranged in a circle and succeeded, it seemed to me, however briefly, in turning a carceral space into an educational one as well (it was always, still and determinedly, a carceral space, a fact made clear by the jumpsuits, the panic button dis-

cretely hidden in my pocket, the narrow windows and thick walls, the constant background noise of clanging doors and mumbling loudspeakers.)

Why, though, was I there in the first place? When Anna and I accepted Mike's offer to begin an educational program at the jail, I would have answered this question by simply referring to my longstanding interest in teaching somewhere else, somewhere I had never taught before, outside of a university classroom. That is, I went to the jail not out of a belief in the power of education to rehabilitate, to reform, to enact positive change, but because, frankly, it sounded kind of cool. I'd always wanted to teach in a prison or jail for precisely those selfish reasons, and it met all my expectations. It was fun, it was challenging, it was destabilizing, it was surprising, it was always different. But over the time I worked there, I couldn't help but wonder about what I thought I was doing, about what I thought this would do for these students, for the addicts, thieves, armed robbers, domestic abusers, drug dealers, drunk drivers, check kitters, gang members, absent fathers, that passed through that narrow-windowed jail classroom.

This became a matter of some urgency to me one morning when I read the court report in the daily paper, a morning ritual whose meaning changed drastically after I began teaching at the jail, because now the faceless names whose sentences and crimes were closely detailed were, in some cases, my students. One morning, a month or two into my time at the jail, I read about the sentence of a student in my class, a sweet, gentle, soft-spoken, introspective, smart young man: twenty years for a rape committed in the back of a restaurant during a crack deal gone bad.

Teaching in the jail, at that moment, lost its exotic appeal, a necessary loss that made the experience richer and more nuanced, more complex, more unsettling. This was a crisis unlike any I had ever faced in twelve years of teaching, a crisis I still haven't resolved. Before he was my student, I would have been comfortable and even a little self-righteous in the revulsion I felt about his crime; before moving onto something more pressing, like making another cup of coffee, I would have very briefly contemplated his sentence with a sense of justice and just desserts. Now he was my student, and to what possible end? I was volunteering my time and expertise in the service of what? And more vitally, of whom?

Maybe like most crises, one answer came not in my thinking but in my practice. I continued teaching at the jail, he continued coming to my class until he was shipped off to KDOC, we kept doing what we did in that classroom. Whatever I thought about his crime did not change my sense that, like the other students, he must be welcome in my classroom. But I could never stop wondering what possible point this work could have beyond broadening my own perspective on my world. I still wonder this. What did I think this class would do? What role did I hope it would play, if any, in changing my students' lives? How did I know what my students needed? And was

any of this even worth trying to achieve in two and one-half hours a week, when, for the rest of their time, my students were officially defined by their crimes, given little or no agency in determining how they spent any time, under continuous surveillance in an incredibly boring place?

And too, I was faced, literally, with what I had known before only as statistics representing the overwhelming racial and social imbalance of American prisons, the predominance of African-Americans and poor people, the social crisis of addiction addressed through the mandatory sentencing at the core of the war on drugs. The criminal justice system in this country is so flawed, so undeniably tilted against poor and minority populations, that the limits of any educational solution, in isolation from a reform of the system in general, are constantly apparent. Were teachers like me simply props, tokens of a rehabilitative ideal no longer operative? What effect could we have against a system so socially skewed and demographically biased, that has criminalized addiction, and that is based on tough-on-crime philosophies that prioritize overwhelming security over any hope for meaningful change? What good is it, in other words, to work to reform prisoners, when the real crisis is the prison system itself, a system that more than mitigates against any large-scale rehabilitative potential of education? Could I hope that an educational process focused on individual change could matter inside systems and institutions themselves so dramatically in need of reform?

That last question fuels my chapter on the discourse and history of correctional education, but I hope it also brings focus to everything else I do in this book. It is a question that demands that we look outside our particular classrooms, beyond the lesson plans and syllabi we bring to them. It is a question that suggests a dual emphasis to our work that can often feel—perhaps because it often is—contradictory: By working to serve individual students, do we suggest the correctness and justness of the institutions and systems that they find themselves in and that we support with our own work? Conversely, by working to address the manifest injustices in such a system, do we neglect the individual lives presently caught within it? I would argue that, at least in spirit, these are questions almost any teacher in any institution could ask about the work they do.

So, although I rarely focus on my own teaching in this book, it is a book about my teaching. Without the experience at Goodwill, the vocational institute, the county jail, and other settings, I would not have developed the perspective on this work that shapes my analysis. I hope that the passion that I have about teaching in these settings enlivens, but does not overwhelm, my explorations. Although understanding the ways that institutions and discourses shape teaching practices and theories is personally relevant to me, it's also vital for literacy educators at all levels who sign onto a project of transformation when they teach in any setting.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

In Chapter 1, I introduce two educational thinkers that are central to my work in this book. The first, Myles Horton, remains to me one of the most unsung educational figures in American history, a practitioner who disdained research and scholarship in favor of on-site work with the Highlander Folk School, developing educational programs that focused on social change and a more democratic society. The title of this book comes from a speech he delivered in which he praised Highlander's constant focus on the world as it ought to be, rather than on the world as it is. I extend Horton to argue that *all* educational practice, simply because it has in mind a future for students, projects a vision of the world as it ought to be. What that "ought to be" should be, I think, forms the center of most educational debates. Because teaching necessarily has in mind a future world, I argue that the literacy practices we teach our students also have in mind a future world, that literacy can never be wholly understood primarily in terms of the local. Although New Literacy Studies has emphasized what people do with literacy, I argue that teaching literacy practices means hoping as well that literacy will do something to people, to our students. Thus, the focus on local definitions of literacy—the focus of New Literacy Studies—remains inadequate to help teachers understand and analyze what they hope to accomplish by teaching, and what they hope their students will accomplish by learning, particular literacy practices. Educational literacy practices, I argue, always invoke a future world that ought to be. I also introduce the ideas of Basil Bernstein, whose discussions of pedagogic discourse have proven enormously valuable for my analysis in this book. For Bernstein, primary in all pedagogic discourse is what he calls the "regulative discourse," a discourse of morality and the social order, a discourse, I argue, about the world as it ought to be. Bernstein puts into the foreground the tension over control of pedagogic discourse, which is always a tension over the control of the regulative discourse, the "ought to be" behind instructional practices and theories.

In Chapter 2, I introduce the discourse of correctional education, exploring both its assumptions about the role of education in the process of rehabilitation and the way that the prison itself—as an institution and as a political concept—shapes the discourse. I explore back-to-back amendments in the Violent Crime Prevention and Law Enforcement Act of 1994—the first banning Pell Grants for prisoners, effectively ending an almost two-decade-long expansion of higher education in prison, the second requiring that inmates who have not graduated from high school pursue a diploma equivalent if they want credit toward their sentence for good behavior. These amendments highlight contradictory impulses surrounding literacy

education in prison: Namely, that basic literacy education will prevent crime, but extended literacy education is a luxury. I then explore the most common theory in the field, which argues that offenders have particular social-cognitive deficits that make them more prone to crime, the correction of which should be the primary goal of teaching in prison. Because this theory defines criminality in terms of individual shortcomings, however, I argue that it must ignore the social conditions of actual prisons and the overwhelmingly skewed social and racial demographics of the penal system. I also explore other approaches to correctional education, which suggest that it is the prison itself, as much or more than the individual prisoner, that should be an object of reform in correctional education. In all cases, I claim that the prison and the criminal justice system largely shape the field of correctional education, an argument about the fundamental agency of institutions on educational practices that I return to throughout the book.

I take up the discourse of vocational education in Chapter 3, my particular interest being the ways in which this changing discourse relies on defining a world that ought to be in terms of a world that already exists. A brief history of the concept of competence within education demonstrates that it has shifted from referring to an inherent human trait—a potential for competence in several contexts—to a skill—a competency that one may or may not possess. I argue that just as early studies of literacy argued that literacy allowed for a conception of knowledge that transcends ideology, projections of competence place education outside an ideological framework by basing practice on common sense and straightforward descriptions of the world as it is. I explore this in relation to lists of competencies within two primary texts: the Secretary of Labor's Commission for Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) documents and a Northwest Workplace Basics Assessment System document designed for implementation within adult basic education curricula in Washington State. I argue that these texts are especially concerned with changing methods of control in the workplace and that an emphasis on the competencies workers need fosters a perception of control in the high performance workplace as nonexistent. I examine several of these competencies, paying special attention to the notion of learning to learn, which, in the British context, appears as lifelong learning, a hard-to-argue-with notion that is closely tied to the economic reality facing most workers who will need to move, and be efficiently retrained, into new jobs regularly throughout their lifetimes. I also argue that priorities and rhetorical strategies within the SCANS and NWB texts continue to shape educational reform, most prominently the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. Throughout, rather than only engage in a critique of this discourse of vocational education, I emphasize the purpose it serves from an official policy perspective: The discourse of competency in vocational education allows for a representation of the current economy as not reliant on inequalities of

wealth and opportunity, but on an abundance of workers prepared to fill positions in idealized high-performance workplaces in which hierarchical control is no longer necessary.

In Chapter 4, I turn to the history and pedagogy of the Highlander Folk School in Monteagle, Tennessee, focusing especially on the 1930s through the 1960s. I examine the ways in which educational literacy practices at the school mattered only in relation to their value in developing a more democratic society, and I look closely at the history and practice of the Citizenship Schools—literacy classes developed in the 1950s to enable African Americans to vote—as an example of how Highlander tied learning to read and write to their broadly democratic vision. I point out the ways in which the literacy practices of Highlander became understood as an official threat, and I examine the surveillance files of the Federal Bureau of Investigation—maintained, irregularly, throughout that period—as well as the harassment from various federal, state, and local agencies, which succeeded, briefly, in closing down Highlander in the early 1960s on spurious charges. I am particularly interested in the ways that a concern over literacy practices—which in Highlander’s case included direct involvement in strikes and union organizing throughout the South, and later a practical commitment to integration and civil rights—became translated into a concern over who sponsored those literacy practices. To phrase this differently: How were the threats represented by Highlander’s radical literacy pedagogy turned into threats of Communism? I hope, in this chapter, to suggest the difficulties of educating for literacy practices that challenge official perspectives, as well as the challenge and power of imagining, from within an educational institution, literacy practices in terms of social change, rather than as a way of accommodating individuals to some sort of real world.

In the final chapter, Chapter 5, I attempt to present some of the implications of this research for anyone concerned with the teaching of literacy practices, regardless of whether they teach adults or children, in a literacy center or an elementary school or a college writing class. My argument throughout, that educational literacy practices are necessarily embedded within particular institutional contexts that inherently shape those practices, requires that I explore this as a problem teachers must contend with. This is especially true in those cases in which the goals of teachers and the goals of the institutions they teach in are at odds, even potentially contradictory. I begin the conclusion by exploring a strong model of education as a process of social reproduction, one intended primarily to legitimize and reproduce class and social divisions in society. Understood this way, teaching becomes a sort of trap for teachers whose work primarily serves ends they must “misrecognize,” to use a critical term from Bourdieu and Passeron’s model of reproduction. Rather than attempt to escape that trap by claiming to work for ends separate from the institutions we teach in (an impossible ideal), we

need theories of pedagogy that allow for moral action in morally ambiguous contexts, theories of pedagogy that will allow us to resist and perhaps reshape the contexts that will always shape us in return. I return here to Bernstein's discussion of the pedagogic device, arguing that his theory highlights vulnerabilities in the process of reproduction. In my conclusion, I explore those vulnerabilities, especially as they regard the construction of contexts that project, in their descriptions of the world as it is, visions of the world as it ought to be. My goal is especially to advocate an attitude toward teaching and scholarship that requires a trickster consciousness, an always grounded approach to pedagogy that resists official discourses seeking to universalize necessarily local and variable contexts.

THE (UNACHIEVABLE) GOALS OF THIS BOOK

Overall, this book is shaped by Myles Horton's belief that any goal worth working toward is one that is ultimately unachievable. He argued that if your ultimate goals were ones you thought you could achieve, you were limiting yourself. Getting disenfranchised citizens the vote was critical, but it was only a start to developing a more engaged citizenry who could work toward a more democratic society. In his autobiography, *The Long Haul*, Horton wrote

It's important to distinguish between this goal of freedom and self-governance and the goals of the people who want only to 'Save the whales' or to 'Desegregate the South' or to organize a labor union . . . the goal I'm talking about is one that can never be reached. It's a direction, a concept of society that grows as you go along. You could go out of business if you were only for saving the whales: you'd save them, then you'd be out of work. That would be the end of it. . . . The nature of my visions are to keep on growing beyond my conception. That is why I say it's never completed. . . . In any situation there will always be something that's worse, and there will always be something that's better. (228)

Horton's argument here means that to work toward something that seems impossible to realize is not a mark of futile activity, but a sign that you might have chosen the right goal. It means that it might make sense, after all, to work toward the reform of a system so seemingly entrenched and flawed as the criminal justice system, even as you hope your teaching has some effect on a group of prisoners. Horton invokes a vision of a world that is continually shaped and reshaped by us, a world that will never be right, that will never be good enough, that will always need more. It's a world we shape by

living in the present but focusing on something larger and more profound, something so big that we can't ever reach it. As a teacher, this has become for me an educational question, one almost always in some sort of conflict with the official goals of the institutions in which I teach: Why am I teaching this to students? What role will what I teach have to do in working toward a world in which we need to live? What role will my students have in shaping this world? To teach toward the world as it is, the world in which we live, is tantamount to proclaiming as a goal the neutrality Horton redefines as immoral, to accepting a world predicated on injustice and the imbalance of power, to agree with official assessments that everything is, more or less, as it should be, to set our goals so low as to see them realizable in a single lesson plan.

Of course, the location of our teaching practices within state institutions will always mean that such unachievable goals will exist in tandem with official educational goals we may not embrace or believe in. I use Basil Bernstein and Myles Horton to argue that teachers must carve out a space to act within discourses and institutions, even those that appear so restrictive as to almost determine action. The authority of a teacher typically relies on some sort of institutional credentialing in addition to, or in some cases perhaps instead of, whatever expertise or knowledge an individual teacher might have. As a relatively inexperienced graduate student at the University of Washington, I received the job of running the Educational Opportunity Program writing classes, thus having some measure of authority over other teaching assistants in the department. I remember my awareness of my utter lack of qualifications to run this program and my anxiety at meeting the first group of graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) who would use my curriculum, my textbook, my ideas about teaching, as guides for their own classrooms, and I remember, mostly, my surprise that none of them ever questioned or challenged my ability to do that, at least to my face. I recognized then what I also remember understanding less clearly the first time I entered a classroom as a teaching assistant, that the position I had been granted by the university offered me an authority that I didn't feel myself. Certainly this is an authority that I could lose, but it was also one I did not have to create wholly on my own: Much of it came from the university and the English department.

The corollary to this, as suggested by the awkward transitions I describe at the beginning of this introduction, is that what I did as a teacher and as a writing program administrator also met particular institutional goals, regardless of whether those goals were my own. I felt this most acutely when I went to work at SVI and acquired in the process an institutional mandate that I often found extremely stifling and counter to my own impulses as a teacher. I did not abandon my ideas about the potential of education to play a role in social change, but I recognized that implement-

ing them in that setting meant doing something besides what was explicitly sanctioned by SVI, and that it meant defending what I did in language that SVI used about their desired outcomes. (The cynical reader will note that, even though I did this, I still quit, largely out of frustration with such limitations.)

This tension, too, then, is at the heart of the questions I engage in this book. I have become particularly interested in understanding how teachers might respond to the variety of often contradictory official mandates they are expected to deliver through their own teaching. Teachers working under the dictates of No Child Left Behind, for example, have become responsible not only for students in the United States achieving 100 percent proficiency in standardized measurements but also, seemingly, for dismantling economic and social barriers to equal opportunities for education. The causal relationship between increasing test scores and equality of opportunity remains, of course, an unquestioned and apparently common-sensical principle. How teachers might respond to such pressures without succumbing to what Herbert Kohl calls the “stupidity that leads to tears” seems a vital question for those of us who teach, and especially for those of us working with teachers in training. It is not enough to expect teachers to question the assumptions they are asked to accept as teachers, since such challenges will not do away with the institutional goals that inspire them. Teachers often literally embody goals they do not support, and figuring out how to teach in such circumstances matters as much as anything else we might hope to do as teachers.

So while I engage in critique throughout this book—critique of assumptions made about the relationship of education and economic opportunity, for example, or about the power of education to provide the cognitive skills that will turn a criminal into a noncriminal—I do so understanding that the critique itself is not sufficient. Critique will never do away with the contradictions that teachers experience when they find themselves teaching toward goals that not only are not their own but are in some cases directly counter to their own hopes for their teaching and for education in general. (What teacher entered the profession inspired by the vision of helping students learn to be successful at passing standardized tests so that their school retains federal funding and some degree of autonomy?) More than tools to critique official—or any—assumptions about education (as vital as those are), teachers need to learn how to teach within, and not abandon, flawed institutions—institutions like prisons, certainly, but also institutions like public schools, universities, vocational training centers, all those institutions that not only are flawed, but are destined to remain flawed, as long as they are operated by people.

This is a foreground to a theme that I return to throughout the book, especially in my chapters on the discourses of vocational and correctional

education. I do not shy away from critiques of these discourses, but I also recognize their power, both within institutions and within society at large. As I note throughout this book, the power of these discourses is often political and cultural, not educational, which means, in turn, that critiquing them as educationally misguided will likely have no effect, because their educational value was never the primary purpose. It means that, while teachers need to develop both the tools of critique and the tools to develop other politically and culturally powerful approaches to education, they still likely will need to teach in places determined by educational discourses that often have education as more of a rhetorical than an actual goal.

My conclusion engages this issue directly: I am interested there in figuring out how to teach within institutions and systems that have goals we cannot wholly accept. I assume that this describes the work of a large portion of the readers of this book. In the conclusion, I use Bourdieu and Passeron's strong model of education as social and cultural reproduction to suggest that teachers, especially those of us—most of us—within official education, have space to work against such reproduction even as they, inevitably, serve it. Here, too, I have found the work of Basil Bernstein enormously productive, because Bernstein points out places in which pedagogic discourse is vulnerable, in which teachers and scholars can assume agency even in the face of increasing official attempts to limit what counts as viable theories and practices for education. My call in the conclusion, that teachers should assume a trickster consciousness, not to bring any system to its knees, but to pester, annoy, and creatively resist its simplifying impulses, I hope appears evident throughout this book. As teachers and as scholars of teaching, and as teachers of teaching, we should be encouraging more creative and interested people to enter educational arenas that appear more and more narrow, because engaging and not turning our backs on these inherently flawed systems is the only chance we have at improving them. This sort of trickster consciousness, of course, complies with the systems it resists, and in that tension, between resistance and complicity, lies a central and difficult aspect of most educational work. I hope this book suggests interesting approaches to working with that tension, even as it argues that the tension is unlikely to ever disappear.

It won't take an astute reader to note that my theoretical sympathies exist most directly with the approach put forth by the Highlander Folk School, but my intent in this book is not to read the discourse of a particular site against the discourse of another. As compelling and provocative as Highlander is, it is not an educational model that can be grafted onto teaching practices within other institutions. So I am not interested in critiquing vocational education or correctional education based on the distance they fall from the mark set by Highlander. What interests me primarily is the shape, and the shaping, of these discourses, the various claims they make

about teaching and learning, about literacy, and about change. I seek in this book to explore frankly the notion that we are determined in part by the institutions we teach in and the discourses we use to support that teaching. Understanding these discourses and institutional connections is critical, but it can't provide us a place from which to teach outside of them, and although we do well to resist certain notions about teaching and learning that have come to be dominant, we also cannot pretend that these notions do not shape what we do in the classroom, as well as our reasons for doing it. I am most critical of the discourse of vocational education, but it is a discourse that educators refuse to contend with at their own peril. Likewise, I resist easy critiques of correctional education—which its focus on criminality and rehabilitation make it vulnerable to, from the perspective of someone trained in critical pedagogy—because the institutional complexities that shape the discourse of education within prisons are almost overwhelming, and an analysis that acts primarily as a critique covers those complexities in shadow. Still, as indicated by my clear affinities with Highlander's goals for education—"brotherhood, democracy, a kind of *world, in which we need to live*"—I am in the end arguing for and not simply about various ways of understanding literacy instruction.

Myles Horton, founder and director of Highlander, claimed that Highlander focused not on the world as it is, but always had its "eyes firmly on the ought to be." This book extends Horton's argument by claiming that all educational practice has its eyes on the ought to be, and that what ought to be should be forms a central issue within educational debates.

This book explores tensions surrounding the teaching of literacy practices in three settings of nontraditional adult education: correctional education, vocational education, and the Highlander Folk School. Alternatively tied to rehabilitation and criminality, to becoming a qualified and valuable employee, and to addressing issues of social and racial injustice, what literacy is supposed to do, and thus what it means, varies widely across these discourses. It explores texts as varied as curricular ideas for prison classrooms, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, the FBI surveillance files of the Highlander Folk School, and lists of competencies employers want in their employees; at its center is the belief that teachers and scholars must understand the worlds which they, and the institutions they teach within, aspire to create through the process of education, and that teachers must necessarily learn to work with morally vexing and sometimes contradictory goals.

"Eyes on the Ought to Be" suggests gaps in which teachers and scholars might have particular agency in reshaping the ends of pedagogy; identifying such agency should be a central project for teachers and scholars in a period of increasing official attempts to control educational discourses and practices at every level.

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What's lost when literacy is imagined solely as an engine of economic development? Nothing less than hope, Kirk Branch argues: hope of a democratic future in which teaching literacy is about energizing citizenship, not simply enhancing workplace productivity. Stifling this hope is a bewildering array of curricular policies and pedagogical practices that at bottom share a common assumption: that public investment in literacy education must pay dividends that can be taken to the counting-house. "Eyes on the Ought to Be" documents this dangerously short-sighted logic, and the damage it has done in the lives of people Branch has had the privilege to teach at college, in jail, and in the community. Page after page, student voices join his to insist that educational institutions are failing at the one task that matters most, sponsoring literacy that is generative of civic engagement in the public sphere. Branch knows that his critique is only meaningful if it motivates us to risk transforming these institutions, especially those we serve directly as teachers and scholars. With urgency and care, "Eyes on the Ought to Be" instills the hope that, against considerable odds, we can get the job done.

Peter Mortensen
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

A compelling and astute book. Branch penetrates the relationship among teachers, students, and the institutions that bind us. He shows why teaching and learning literacy for change is so difficult but also what it takes to persevere.

Deborah Brandt
University of Wisconsin-Madison

