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Critical Geography and the Real World in First-Year Writing Classrooms

Cover Page Footnote

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Recently, during a media analysis unit in my first-year writing class, we discussed the influence of the media on college alcohol consumption. Students chimed in about recent portrayals of college life from television and the movies. *Animal House*, the *American Pie* movies, and the Will Ferrell film *Old School* all came up, but only one student offered a personal experience to contrast or problematize the topic at hand. I was astonished. These were (mostly) first-year college students talking about the experiences of first-year college students, but doing so from a distinctly objective point of view. Their own experiences did not seem to inform the discussion. They were willing to consider the topic at hand and discuss it but refused to shift their gaze towards their own experiences and to explore how their lives might be influenced by the images and narratives of college fed to them by the media and the culture around them. They examined the text of culture from a distance, ignoring their existence and participation in that text.

This split between the academic and the “real” was particularly noticeable during another classroom discussion. While our class was having a lively debate about an extremely graphic and physically imposing anti-abortion display that an off-campus group had set up in a central location on campus, one student suggested that the display was important and necessary to allow students to begin to confront difficult debates. As he put it, it would prepare them for later on when he and his fellow students would need to negotiate “real” life. The implication in the student’s statement was that campus life and, more importantly, the debates about women’s choice, personal freedom, the public use of space, free speech, and, even, the emotional encounters and conversations raised by this politically charged demonstration were in fact *not real*. For this student, anything that occurred in the physical terrain of campus was a mere fiction, a simulation of a world lived beyond the physical and temporal boundaries of the campus, a warm-up for the reality that arrives with the job market and student loan payments.

Too often, it feels as if students consider the view from the classroom as if it were some detached god-eye peering out onto the world with an isolated, all-seeing omniscience. This omniscient view separates the observer (the classroom) and the observed (the world and culture) and suggests that the world of the classroom is not connected with the world they live in. This distance makes the classroom (and, more broadly, life at the university) simply the practice round that precedes the “real world.”

It is this idea of the real world that I wish to explore. It is alarming how students (and often teachers as well) persistently rely on language that juxtaposes the classroom with the real world. Typically, this language use takes the form of off-hand remarks in casual conversation, and, therefore, we rarely consider how

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these remarks situate the classroom and academic work. For when we speak of a reality “outside” of the classroom, it is implicitly juxtaposed with a fiction within. And, if the classroom is merely a fictional space within the real world, then the work and conversations within it are as well.

Since these classroom conversations, often informed by critical pedagogy, help students explore discourse, power, and the construction of identity and culture, I find it troubling that they are considered not real.¹ Ideally, discussions of ideology, culture, and discourse provide students in writing classrooms with better awareness of the ways that rhetorical context shapes meaning in different writing situations as well as in broader cultural contexts. Reading the text of culture is an important critical thinking skill and one of the foundations of a liberal education. When discussions of culture are easily dismissed as fiction, it undermines the goals of a liberal education to develop a critically aware citizenry. The classroom quickly becomes the production zone where new workers acquire the information to succeed in our new technocracy. This acquisition process may lead to market success, but may also blanket students in dominant ideologies that prevent them from acquiring the knowledge and skills to critique or change their communities. The university should not be simply a vocational institute, but rather a place for developing the skills for life-long learning and inquiry.

Jonathon Mauk’s recent dissertation, “Writing in Place: A Story of Geography and Composition Pedagogy,” emphasizes this tension between vocational learning and inquiry as it highlights the role of critical geography in composition pedagogy and the community college. Mauk focuses on the ways that the pedagogy of the four-year university classroom is often applied indiscriminately to community college classrooms with little regard for the different cultural geography in different institutions. Because many community colleges lack a residential life, the population is often more transient. The campus is set up for a commuter student but not the classroom assignments. Using assignments designed for the four-year university within this physical landscape, Mauk finds that students have trouble developing an academic sense of self. Mauk suggests that his students sees academic space as separate and apart from the rest of the world. Mauk sees this relationship with academic space as problematic and argues that a greater focus on the geography of our classroom spaces will help students conceive of the space outside of the campus, outside of the classroom, as academic. And the academic space needs to be conceived as transportable and mutable—as something that is tied to being, rather than material surroundings exclusively (121).

To make the academic “mutable,” we need to move critical pedagogy from abstract ideas of gender, race, and class to more concrete discussions of the effects of ideology, discourse, and power on bodies within a physical environment. Over the last few semesters, to help make my students’ academic experience more mutable, I have introduced them to the idea of critical geography through a series of assignments and activities. This method of critical inquiry examines the intersection of the built environment, ideology, and culture. Critical geography not only explores how the built environment is shaped by culture, but also how the physical landscape reinforces that culture and its underlying ideologies.

The unit that I devised has two key assignments. First, students observe a classroom on campus and write a short one to two-page observation and analysis

¹ For more on social epistemic theories of writing instruction see Berlin; Shor.

for homework. Later, students write a more detailed analysis on their own about a site or artifact of their choosing. Both assignments are helpful in encouraging students to consider the dialogue between space (i.e., the physical landscape) and culture. Reader response moves beyond asking what a poem *is* to include what a poem *does*. These assignments take a similar approach to the physical landscape and built environment: they ask not only what it is (observation) but what it does (analysis).

Discourse and ideology inscribe our bodies by manipulating the spaces those bodies inhabit. As students consider how culture functions spatially, they develop a more complex understanding of rhetorical context and discourse communities. Ultimately, I believe that this richer understanding helps them become more effective writers and critical thinkers. Students learn that culture is not merely expressed linguistically, but physically as well.

Several classroom conversations help make these connections among ideology, culture, and the built environment as we work towards the writing assignments. Early on, I have my class do some in-class writing on the following two questions: “What is the difference between place and space?” and also “Do people control space or does space control people?” For both questions, students struggle to find explicit definitions and begin to recognize that these two questions have answers that overlap and inhabit one another. The physical parameters of a space contribute to the way in which that space is made into a place with meaning and vice versa. Our sense of place helps us craft a sense of physical boundaries. The cultural and physical feed into one another, and this conversation helps introduce this dialogic.

These questions lay the groundwork for additional discussions of more concrete examples. For example, we consider how the vestiges of the English pastoral might contribute to the ideology that connects lawn and home with success. We also consider the consequences when this ideology becomes codified in stringent municipal housing codes that ignore the climate of the local geography. Reading about and discussing the emerging national landscape that has appeared with the stripmalling of America, students consider how a built environment that is increasingly hostile to pedestrians, but privileges the automobile, affects the relationships within a community. On a more local level, my classes examine how the basketball arena on our campus has a Pepsi sign twice as large as the university’s logo. Our class discussion connects this observation to debates about the branding of identity and the commercialization of public spaces.

These in-class analyses prepare students to examine a particular type of text as a group: the classroom itself. Students are asked to observe a classroom (during class time and preferably not a class they are enrolled in) and consider what their observations indicate about who has authority, how knowledge is created or communicated, and how the space might teach certain lessons about obedience or indifference exclusive of the subject matter being taught.²

During the in-class discussion regarding this assignment, I pair their writing assignment with a discussion about different classroom organizations and their effect on the relationships in the classroom. For example, I usually have my students sit in a circle, but on the day of this discussion I left the desks in a standard row arrangement. After only a few minutes, one student spoke up and

² This activity is adapted from Stephen Reid.

said that the rows made him uncomfortable and asked when we could move the desks back into a circle. Granted, part of this discomfort came from being accustomed to our classroom community being arranged in a particular way, but the change helped emphasize that spatial organization matters and affects how that space is used.

Another student pointed out that the bulletin board in the classroom contained a variety of advertisements and that credit card ads were the most common. They also noted how the windows and the clocks in their classrooms were available for the teacher's view, but not for the students.³ We considered how these different features—a circle of desks versus rows, a teacher's lectern, etc.—affect the relationships and power within the classroom. As we drew a diagram of the typical classroom on the board, one particularly savvy student noted how the arrangement of desks reflects the rows of scantron ovals that have become the mainstay in public education at all levels, primary school on up.

After completing an analysis of the classroom, students were then asked to perform an analysis of a space of their own choosing. To provide them with the necessary critical vocabulary, we read and discussed essays on space and the physical landscape including Mike Davis's "Fortress Los Angeles: The Militarization of Urban Space," John Fiske's "Shopping for Pleasure: Malls, Power, and Resistance," Eric Liu's "Remember When Public Space Didn't Carry Brand Names," Robert Mugerauer's "Toward an Architectural Vocabulary: The Porch as Between," Tom Wolfe's essay "O' Rotten Gotham," and selections from *Geography of Nowhere* by James Howard Kunstler. These essays helped the class generate a critical vocabulary that included terms like resistance, trickery, militarization, power, branding, and between. This language and the concepts they represented helped open up their readings of their sites. Also, it helped to bridge the gap between what was being read and what we see in the everyday. For example, when we discussed militarization of the urban landscape in Los Angeles (Mike Davis's essay), students began to make connections with the camera that oversees the activities of the central plaza on campus, the lock down that characterized their high school experiences in a post-Columbine world, and the quasi-military character of the SUV fad.

After discussing these ideas within the classroom, students are then asked to take this critical vocabulary into their community to consider how these ideas play out in the built environment of their daily lives. The assignment sheet asks students to consider how and why people define what a particular space means and how individuals of different cultures interpret and perform the codes of a particular space. Most significantly, it asks students to examine how the layout of a particular space affects how individuals use it and how attitudes about public space in a community reflect that community's values.³

The student essays from this past semester reveal students' engagement with the idea of a culturally constructed landscape. Students begin to see that critical inquiry is not just a part of a classroom space, but a way of seeing and understanding the world that roots itself in our being. For example, one particularly compelling essay examined how "nature has become commodity. It is something to be marketed and consumed by the American people." The writer focused on how this commodification of nature can be seen in everything from nature tapes

³ This essay assignment is adapted from John Trimbur and Diane George.

at the mall to a carefully crafted and maintained waterfall at a nearby recreation area. The student noted,

[T]he rock we were sitting on where the water was thundering down had a screw in it. I glanced around a little more, . . . and I noticed even more screws connecting the rocks keeping them from eroding, shifting, keeping the falls thundering. . . . They had been arranged for an effect. . . . I guess we modify nature for our own pleasure and convenience a lot more often than I thought.

This student paper grappled with the ways in which our ideas (and ideologies) of nature constructed not only our understanding of nature, but also the actual landscape of nature itself.

Most importantly, this student began to see her work beyond the mere choreography required by the fictional space of the classroom. In the postscript to this assignment, the student was proud that she “brought all of the ramifications of [her] topic to a point, [because she] felt like it actually had some purpose other than a grade.” These comments reveal a student seeing the writing and thinking of her essay as more than a school essay. Her writing became a valid commentary on the culture around her, an intellectual inquiry that occurred in her being, outside of the space of the classroom.

In her personal evaluation of her writing from the semester, this student commented on her peer workshop feedback and noted, “everyone has always thought I have a way with words, but no one has ever complimented their meaning.” This student realized that academic writing isn’t just about the style, tone, or fancy words, but it is about thinking carefully, communicating clearly, and applying difficult ideas and new concepts in a variety of contexts.

Another student evaluated the geography of campus and focused on the accessibility of the university’s counseling center. The student suggested that a “counseling office should be [as] comforting and accepting as possible to pass with a satisfactory grade. All too often, however, places of practice fall short of providing such an environment.” The student pointed out how the counseling center is not located in the health center as one might expect, but “sits in the basement of an academic building halfway across campus. . . . If not cumulated [sic] with other health services, the counseling center should have its own building. . . . To have it stuffed away in the bottom of some unpredictable place shows that CSU just doesn’t care.” For this student, a map of campus became a lens through which to see the values and priorities of the university.

The paper suggested that this student considered how physical layout, hierarchy, and power are interconnected. In doing so, this student seemed to be taking on Mauk’s “mutable academic being.” By turning the critical analysis skills from the classroom to an actual used space on campus, this student began thinking critically about the physical space of her educational environment and her lived environment. Instead of seeing critical reading as a skill to be used in the classroom with an assigned text, this student applied critical reading skills to a text of her choosing. Although they were applied within the context of an assignment, this student decided where and when to be critical. This critical engagement generated from the student as opposed to being generated by classroom space or academic texts.

Finally, another student used the examination of a juice bar to explore the

ways in which health and class are related. The writer observed a local juice bar, its patrons, and the advertisements on the wall and wrote that:

in American culture, you need to have money in order to participate in the health craze that is going on and become healthy. . .Fast food restaurants are less healthy and cheaper, thus forcing the poorer to remain unhealthy. The only people that can afford to buy the hiked up prices of organic foods are in the upper to middle economic range.

Later the essay concluded that:

American culture makes it hard for people to get out of their economic class, since society has set so many obstacles, with one huge one being how others view you. If you are seen as being obese or unhealthy then you are at a disadvantage to the healthy or slim people. The only way to gain the prestige of being looked at as healthy is to have money.

This student's paper showed a writer grappling with new ways to consider the body and also the way that the codes of the body not only provide access to particular spaces but also to class mobility.

This student's awareness of the cultural codes inscribed on spaces and bodies in spaces is similar to the way other students were able to uncover layers of meaning in the texts they examined. This engagement with the layers of meaning inscribed in their spacial texts allowed students to write about their subjects with more depth and a different kind of development. They connected what they were seeing with larger cultural trends and ideas.

For example, several essays explored the connections between the use of public space and ideas of democracy. In one essay, a student considered the central plaza on campus and its free speech regulations as emblematic of larger American ideas of pluralism and open debate. This student noted how the rules and regulations that controlled the use of this democratic space compromised its democratic function. The student wrote that "through my observations, I have realized that not only is the Plaza a mixture of democracy and lack thereof, but that our entire society is. I don't think it will ever change because of the fact that our culture has to maintain order." This student's depth can be seen in the way that the overall conclusion is problematized. The essay sees the plaza as emblematic of the dialogue our culture must engage in to be true to democracy while also maintaining some kind of order. This awareness of culture as a dialogue moved this essay's claims beyond either/or thinking into a terrain of complexity required by an academic attitude.

As each of these essays considered how ideology informs how we read the physical landscape and how that landscape reveals ideology, the students confronted the ways that a text might be layered with meaning. I must note that many of these papers had trouble generating specific evidence to support their claims; however, my students also engaged these new ideas with a level of depth that never characterized essays produced during my media analysis units. The willingness to ask new kinds of questions and explore the intersection of the spatial, the cultural, and the ideological helped students explore "the body" of the real.

I see these assignments as useful because they help to collapse the distance between the polarities of our real world/classroom binary. Reducing this distance

is important because the real world/classroom binary, like all binaries, derives its power from the separation and marginalization that contributes to the construction of hierarchies. Eco-feminist theorist Val Plumwood describes this quality of binaries particularly well in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. She writes that dualistic binaries are “a relation of separation and domination inscribed and naturalised in culture and characterized by radical exclusion, distancing and opposition between orders constructed as systematically higher and lower” (47-48). Notably, Plumwood also points out that the idea of dualisms not only depends on a radical exclusion of one pole by the other, but also acts to create two separate spheres of reality and deny the relationship between them. As Plumwood notes:

[t]his dualistic construal of difference usually treats it as providing not merely a difference of degree within a sphere of overall similarity, nor a major difference of degree within a sphere of overall similarity, but a major difference in kind, even a bifurcation or *division in reality* between utterly different orders of things. (50, my emphasis)

This system of separation and bifurcation of realities becomes the necessary component for binaries to subvert each other. In short, they function because dualism “denies continuity” (50). So the radical exclusion within binary systems is essential to the hierarchies within them by “denying or minimizing overlap qualities and activities, and by the erection of rigid barriers to prevent contact” (49).

In the classroom/real world binary, the real world, the realm typically defined strictly in market terms, supersedes and oppresses the critical inquiry of the classroom, naturalizing its exclusion from the reality of the work world. In doing so, it denies the interdependence and co-habitation of the classroom and the work world. It denies that they are a continuous reality informed by the same ideologies.

Using critical geography in writing classrooms helps blur these distinctions between the real and the academic; it emphasizes that we are not merely disinterested observers noting the nuances of a media culture from afar. Rather, like characters in a thickly woven meta-fiction who self-consciously consider their fictional world, these critical geography assignments emphasize that we are in the middle of the text of culture and ask students to self-consciously examine the text that they inhabit. We cannot extricate ourselves from the world that we see with our critical lens. The intertwining narratives of culture and the classroom become like the inter-dependent narratives of a Borgesian labyrinth. Instead of two separately ordered worlds or realities, the end of one passage and the beginning of the next, the end of one story and the beginning of the next, become unclear

Seeing the classroom as distinctly separate yet intrinsically intertwined with the world beyond allows us to understand the classroom from a more phenomenological approach that emphasizes synergy and relationship instead of distance and separation. In *The Visible and the Invisible*, French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty suggests that our capacity to see and feel the world around us requires that we, too, must be visible and tangible beings. In order to sense the world, we must occupy the realm of tangibility with the objects that we touch and see. Merleau-Ponty insists, “he who looks must not himself be foreign to the world that he looks at” (35), and therefore individuals are inextricably linked with their environment. They inhabit a shared phenomenal realm that defies the distinct

categories of subjective self and objective world.

Merleau-Ponty's philosophical outlook merges mind and body and self and world, and it undermines the classroom's separation from the world. Phenomenology seeks to undo the body-mind dualism; it is useful to begin to see that same dissolved dualism reflected in our understanding of the classroom. In contrast to the Cartesian rift between the world of the mind and the world of the body, the academic/real binary reverses the hierarchy of this relationship. In the Cartesian framework, there is an intrinsic separation between the body and the mind in which the mind is privileged over and dominates the body. In the binary at hand, this hierarchy is reversed as the classroom (theoretically the terrain of the mind) becomes subjugated to all that is external to it. The university is a fantasyland that contrasts with the world of the job search. All that is external to the mind achieves an embodied and physical (or real and tangible) existence from the seemingly ordinary signifier of capital and economy. Most importantly, regardless of whether the mind is subjugating the body or vice versa, the key point here is that the language of the real bifurcates the mind and the body, the academic and the real. The university, and the classroom in particular, has become a disembodied mind: a thinking entity knocking around within but disconnected from the body-shell of the real world.

Confronting spatial and tangible components of ideology and culture might help us to move closer to a classroom that sees its intrinsic inhabitation within the text that it reads. Similar to the way Merleau-Ponty's philosophy bridges the gap between self and world and the visible and the invisible, critical geography emphasizes the connection between the classroom and the world that it sees. By raising students' awareness of their relationship with the spaces they inhabit and the ideological components of these settings, we might begin to highlight the inter-relatedness of the academic and the real.

In the online journal *Philosophy of Education*, Merleau-Ponty scholar Marjorie O'Loughlin explores the implications of phenomenology for education and suggests that "[a]s teachers, educational theorists and the like, we need to direct our attention to the realities of bodies in discursively constituted settings." With bodies in mind, O'Loughlin suggests "while we cannot deny the fundamental category of gender (or race or disability), we need also to examine (differently) embodied subjects' 'first hand' involvements with 'place,' and the intimate connection of the sense of 'place' with other dimensions of living that subjects experience." In short, we need to consider students as "ecological subject[s]," bodily attached to a geographical location and encountering it in the fullest sense." Although O'Loughlin's argument focuses more particularly on issues of place in terms of a larger geographical sensibility, her idea of "bodies in discursively constituted settings" reorients our understanding of classrooms and environment from a series of discrete objects within an inert setting to a system of ideologically constructed relationships between bodies and the spaces they inhabit.

Relationships between bodies and spaces are important because writing and reading at their very core are also about relationships. Because writing operates within multiple rhetorical and cultural contexts and must respond to these various environments and audiences, this phenomenology of the classroom and the critical geography assignments are particularly appropriate. This idea of relationships, writing, and environment (i.e., rhetorical context, space, or place) has become central to many scholars in the emerging field of ecomposition.

In particular, Sidney Dobrin and Christian Weisser have done much to help bridge this gap between the idea of rhetorical context and a larger concept of environment and ecology. In the lead essay to their edited collection on the theories and pedagogies related to ecocomposition, Dobrin points out that “composition and rhetoric studies . . . is also a study of relationships: between individual writers and their surrounding environment, between writers and texts, between texts and culture, between ideology and discourse, and between language and world” (12). Dobrin further emphasizes the intrinsic connection between space and writing when he writes, “the relationship between discourse and the construction of environment, nature, and place is a deeply enmeshed, co-constitutive relationship. It is difficult, if not impossible, to separate the writing from the place and the place from the writing” (18). Writing and reading are acts that are always situated rhetorically, but they are also situated geographically within a physical environment. In these formulations, Dobrin and others, like O’Loughlin, have focused on the idea of place and geography as being instrumental to understanding rhetorical context.

This examination of space, though, is not just about relationships; it is also about power, discourse, and ideology. By examining the way power operates in our classrooms and in the physical landscapes of our communities, we might develop a critical gaze that examines not only the space from which it emanates, the classroom, but also the ideologies implicit in the space of the classroom and the university. Hopefully, through this gaze into the lived spaces of their lives, students might begin to consider the academic vision of critical thinking as a part of their lived experience, as a part of the real and not merely sequestered in the windowless room where they have composition class.

Mauk articulates the reasoning behind these types of assignments particularly well when he points out that “space actually functions in the re-processing of the systems [of culture]”(80). He cites Michel Foucault’s assertion that “space is fundamental in any exercise of power” (qtd. in Mauk 80) and reinforces the idea that, when we talk about space, we are not just talking about the physical landscape, but also discourse, ideology, language, and, of course, power. This role of space and geography in the naturalizing power structures suggests that it is imperative that we also include the physical in the cultural critiques taking place in our classrooms.

In addition, I believe that discussions of culture can often persist in the muddiness of abstract objectification. That is, we can talk about culture as something “over there.” However, physical observation of spatial organization and the built environment forces a more careful exploration of the tenuous line between the tangible, the visual, the linguistic, the cultural, and, most important, the individual’s role within this matrix of experience. On this intersection between place and culture, Mauk writes that “critical theorists . . . making claims about power and space are not suggesting a pre-meditated plot by governmental organizations; rather they are describing the subtle inclinations of a system which maintains its power through the control of bodies in space”(80). His use of these terms “bodies in space” implies an intermingling. Bodies don’t exist within the shell of the classroom, but fill that space, investing it with meaning, just as much as the chalkboard and the lectern. As Merleau-Ponty has suggested, the organism is not separate from its environment; it lives, rather, within and amongst it: it is a part of it.

We are bodies that teach and learn in physical spaces. Unless we shift the idea of the academic and the critical from its fixed location in a physical space to a more mobile sense of being, the work of the classroom will continue to be the fiction within the lives of our students: the play within the play that unsettlingly resembles real life, but, because of our naturalized notions of space, seems to be a production only and not the real thing. For all the world is a stage, not just the classroom, and we are all players in it. ☐

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