

Line by Line: A Journal of Beginning Student Writing

Volume 3 | Issue 1

Article 2

September 2016

The Struggle for Meaningful Education

Maura Cullen
University of Dayton

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ecommons.udayton.edu/lxl>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#), [English Language and Literature Commons](#), and the [Rhetoric and Composition Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Cullen, Maura (2016) "The Struggle for Meaningful Education," *Line by Line: A Journal of Beginning Student Writing*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 1 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://ecommons.udayton.edu/lxl/vol3/iss1/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of English at eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Line by Line: A Journal of Beginning Student Writing by an authorized editor of eCommons. For more information, please contact frice1@udayton.edu, mschlangen1@udayton.edu.

The Struggle for Meaningful Education

Writing Process

This assignment was to create an informational synthesis essay that compared two different sources that were discussed in class, and give an example on how the topic has affected my own life. I read Walker Percy's text, "The Loss of the Creature," and carefully analyzed the meanings behind the "preformed complexes" that society pushes on people. Then I looked into Paulo Freire and Donald Macedo's excerpt, *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World*. This reading emphasizes the implications of literacy, and I spent most of my time trying to figure out the complex ideas that these authors are portraying. This assignment illustrates the connections that are apparent in both readings, and then shares an example of these ideas through how my literacy has expanded in my own life.

Course

ENG100

Semester

Spring

Instructor

PJ Carlisle

Year

2016

Maura Cullen

Dr. Carlisle

ENG100 28

16 February 2016

The Struggle for Meaningful Education*

Every moment holds the potential for unique discovery. Even in a typical school day, there is always the possibility for an accident that makes a person stop and turn. That person may see a teacher take off his shoes, experience a lesson with provocative material, or even physically avoid a crash into something in the hallway when switching classes. Even for just one small second, there could potentially be a pause before the same person shakes his or her head in disagreement, wishing to continue his or her route without the untraditional disturbance of the daily routine. These little breaks of habit, however, almost always remain short-lived. The world then continues as it usually does, and the person lingers on his or her path of familiarity. Walker Percy's text, "The Loss of the Creature," along with Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo's excerpt from, *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World*, both attempt to challenge this notion and transform the common ideas of everyday experiences into a deeper understanding of the world around them. According to Percy, all people form their own mental image of an experience or "creature" the way it *should* be, derived from what he calls an "educational package" that society has enforced. However, these preconceived notions of what is truly authentic in the public's "expert" eye have the destructive potential to expand into disappointment when the specific standard does not meet the high hopes that have been set for it. The struggle to find a real, personal understanding of a certain subject or experience is solely experienced in opposition to the framework of how material is presented to humans within their immediate world.

Freire and Macedo's text provides a perfect example of some of the ways these same preconceived notions have spread to today's education in the form of a pedagogy of literacy. In order to fully understand language, Freire and Macedo stress the importance of "knowing the world" before being fully able to succeed in a traditional system of learning. Just as Percy pushes humans to resist the preconceived notions of understanding, Freire and Macedo search to find a new way to discover language. These temptations appear today not only in everyday life, but also in the classroom where everyone is expected to read material in one specific approach. Percy, Freire, and Macedo all work to show certain ways to recognize this barrier that the society sets up against humans. In an attempt to help us see the world through a more genuine perception, they describe how a person can work against this notion in his or her own life.

Percy suggests that humans hold specific expectations on how the world naturally works. Based on what others have told them, many people have the idea that they need to have the exact same remarkable, life changing experience that the world tells them is necessary for certain situations. However, when it does not live up to its expectations, the people may become disappointed, almost as though they do not do something correctly or miss out. Humans form their understandings of the natural world from those whom Percy calls "experts" on the subject, using these experts for verification to know whether or not they have succeeded in achieving the experience that they believe they are *supposed* to have. However, Percy stresses that there is still a potential to escape this insecurity; a real or deep experience, "may be recovered by a dialectical movement which brings one back to the beaten track but at a level above it" (Percy 49). It is when people displace themselves from common agreement of society that they can view something more clearly.

Percy clearly illustrates this concept as he discusses the story of the dogfish and the sonnet. In this story Percy concludes, “a young Falkland Islander walking along a beach and spying a dead dogfish and going to work on it with his jackknife has, in a fashion wholly unprovided in modern educational theory, a great advantage over the Scarsdale high-school pupil who finds the dogfish on his laboratory desk” (56). This is because, in a classroom, the students only see the object, in this case it is the dogfish, in the way that they have been told to look at it. This is what Percy calls the “educational package” of something; the inability to recognize anything more than what has been presented to them. However, to a person who has never seen a dogfish before, it stands as an entirely different experience. It is the islander’s own experience to figure out what the dogfish is, unlike the students who have a sheet of paper to dissect something and only search for what their teacher says is truly inside of it. The students have never looked inside a dogfish before; they are merely looking at what they are being *told* is in it. This does not only apply to one subject, but to all. Percy claims, “similarly the citizen of Huxley’s Brave New World who stumbles across a volume of Shakespeare in some vine-grown ruins and squats on a potsherd to read it is in a fairer way of getting at a sonnet than the Harvard sophomore taking English Poetry II” (56). In both of these cases, neither the islander nor the citizen sees their objects in the “educational package” that the world bestows upon the average person, and they hold the power to form their own findings within their own experiences.

Like Percy, Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo share similar beliefs as they expand the idea of the “educational package” in the form of literacy. The main objective that Freire points out is that, “reading does not consist merely of decoding the written word or language; rather, it is preceded by and intertwined with knowledge of the world” (Freire and Macedo 100). In order to understand specific words, a person must understand the context behind it. Freire discusses the

process of how he learned words, and brings himself back to the times when he was younger; “the *texts*, the *words*, the *letters* of that context were incarnated in a series of things, objects, and signs” (100). First, he recognizes symbols and pictures, eventually connecting them to sounds and words. Learning is a process, and everything that has come from what he calls his “immediate world” is what he links into what he knows and how he perceives his surroundings.

This “restless searching” that he uses to understand the world derives from a teacher he had in secondary school who made him read words in a new light. He states, “those moments did not consist of mere exercises, aimed at our simply becoming aware of the existence of the page in front of us, to be scanned, mechanically and monotonously spelled out, instead of truly read” (102). However, in the educational system today, Freire discovers how the world has digressed into memorization and does not actually help in a person’s literary understanding. He states, “mechanically memorizing the description of an object does not constitute knowing the object” (103). Freire implies that a person needs to start with something that is meaningful within his or her life in order to establish any start in learning. Merely reading a page of something that a student is required to read does not institute the level of ability that a student has the potential to learn from his or her own experiences. Freire’s teacher fully breaks through the “educational package” that Percy describes and finally allows students to see the work in their own eyes. There is no sheet in front of the students like the students in the lab; no “expert” telling Freire what stands as right or wrong. Freire’s class creates a new level of finding that the islander has with the dogfish; he does not know what is inside of the dogfish just as Freire finds meaning through his own interests.

Knowledge is built on the foundation of how experiences are presented to people, but can only be expanded within the realm of the resources that are offered. In the forward to Freire and

Macedo's texts, Ann Berthoff, of the University of Massachusetts, describes Freire's radical theories of literacy. She states, "instead of education as extension—a reaching out to students with valuable ideas we want to share—there must be a dialogue, a dialectical exchange in which ideas take shape and change as the learners in the Culture Circle think about their thinking and interpret their interpretations" (Berthoff 94). This "culture circle" stands as the small, conformed unit of knowledge that has been presented to a learner; and remains isolated from new, worldly thought experiences. When students are confined to the roots of local knowledge and limited experiences, they lose out on the impact of potential discovery on unique, untraditional understandings. Berthoff emphasizes Freire's notions on the importance to break free of the conformity of a "cultural circle" pedagogy and stands behind the motivation to struggle for a more profound education.

Berthoff also describes Freire's ideas about the "banking concept" of education, a kind of pedagogy wherein teachers feel responsible to "deposit knowledge" into the students' minds. Freire directly describes how it is instead the students' job to do this for themselves. When the "banking concept" is used, there is no more dialogue; students cannot discuss concepts and must resort to simply memorizing what is presented to them. The banking method is, of course, similar to the "educational package" that Percy describes in reference to the dogfish. When Percy explains how humans think of things in the way of how things *should* happen, the form of memorization that Freire discusses turns into the one and only answer that becomes ingrained within a student's mind. The student then loses his or her ability to step back and realize that he or she is truly what Freire calls "oppressed." Just like the oppression of not seeing Percy's dogfish from a personal stance, Freire's inability to have a "dialectical movement" prohibits the ability to acquire true language and understanding.

Like Freire, I have also experienced a teacher who broke out of the “educational package” of learning. During my junior year of high school, I took a class called Honors Modern Literature and the Arts, and from day one I was drawn into a radical aura that caused me to question the ways I look at the world. My classroom looked like an old bomb shelter and I had to go downstairs to get to it. Immediately, I wondered if it was even a classroom. There were murals on the wall, only Christmas lights up, a ladder that led to the roof, and all of the tables were set in a circle. The darkness overwhelmed me as I looked at a mini stage and a bunch of statues in the form of knights from years past. There was even a fort made in the corner of the room. I did not know then, but that little corner would be used so many times within the next two years for some of the best moments of high school. Freire describes the importance of the atmosphere, place, and even the objects surrounding the process of learning. He states, “the old house- its bedrooms, hall, attic, terrace (the setting for my mother’s ferns), backyard- all this was my first world” (Freire and Macedo, 100). This class was my own first world of real knowledge that came from my own perception. I watched as other students walked in the room, all with the same idea in mind. I will never forget the moment when my teacher walked in; he took his shoes off, climbed up to a pillow on his table, and positioned himself in the lotus pose. I looked around and wondered if anyone else felt as confused as I was, and chuckles murmured from the other end of the circle. To top it all off, he hit a gong next to him to signify the class starting.

This was my first encounter with an untraditional class; there was no uniform seating, no lights, and no usual, sterile concept of a classroom. Freire states, “truly, that special world presented itself to me as the arena of my perceptual activity and therefore as the world of my first reading” (100). Just as Freire’s first reading of the world came through his surroundings, mine also came from this pure moment of realization that all classes uncreatively mimicked each

other, regardless of what subject that was being taught. The lessons that my classmates and I encountered in Modern Literature never ceased to confuse us to the point of frustration. The concept of my class failed to act as the “educational package” that other teachers had, and still have, forced upon me. I absolutely hated the class for the first half of the year because of my incessant need to reaffirm the structure that I held so close to my heart. I had mastered the format of concrete courses, and my usual breeze of a day completely flipped as I had to rethink how to see and survive in this strange class. I was a type-A person, so the class gave me so much anxiety that I did not appreciate it until it ended. The disappointment I had towards the class, while attending it, can be understood in the way in which Percy describes how a disappointed sightseer who goes to the Grand Canyon, “may simply be bored; that the great thing yawning at his feet somehow eludes him. The harder he looks at it, the less he can see. It eludes everybody” (Percy 48). I let my peers’ expectations of Modern Literature foster my entire view around the class, and I set my hopes too high before I even got to see how it was for myself. I also got frustrated because I could not break through the barrier and see what my teacher was trying to show me.

As the class went on, it was normal to have my teacher sit on his table with no shoes and a gong. It was normal to watch crazy Swedish movies with subtitles and other films acted entirely by Barbie dolls. We were expected to analyze the meaning that derived from each of these, and the longer the class progressed, the more intense the movies became. One of the movies included *Persona*, directed by Ingmar Bergman, and to this day it still scares me. We looked into readings such as *Madame Bovary*, with an emphasis on “provincialism,” the book, *Dubliners*, with the effects of “moral paralysis,” and even made our own trial to demonstrate the novel, *The Turn of the Screw*. Most importantly, however, was “Duchamp Day” at my school. No one knew about it except for students in our class, when we all created our own “Duchamp”

project. This was based on Marcel Duchamp, a modern artist who used a urinal as a work of art and signed it as “R. Mutt,” and his was one of his first of what he called “readymades;” a new form of modern art. We all created an art piece in the same mindset that Duchamp used, and on a certain day we took off a class period to turn our school into a museum and observe people’s reaction as they walked through the building after class. Utter confusion spread on their faces, and instead of embracing it and trying to understand what was going on, they started posting on social media. Percy describes how it is hard to get out of our “sightseer” mindset, and how, “instead of looking at it, he [the tourist] photographs it” (47). Just as Percy describes the tourists’ inability to live in the moment, my own peers needed verification that they were among the others in this glorious “sight to be seen.” However, most students had a moment where they were finally displaced from the “educational package” that even a school hallway brought to mind, and their auto pilot thoughts were forced to a raging stop when they had to seek alternate routes to class. They wanted to see more, just like the islander investigated the dogfish on his own.

My peers encountered exactly what my class did on the first day of Honors Modern Literature and the Arts, and I have never looked at art the same since. The many projects and trips we took blew my mind even more as I tried to figure out the source of an artist’s thought. I became an artist in that class, and I had the privilege to be in the same room the next year with the same teacher for another class, “Honors Composition and Writing Center.” My school offered a writing center where students dropped in during their lunch to get their paper proof-read. Obviously, my class then lasted all three lunches, so I and the 18 of my classmates became really close for an hour and a half class. We all took turns on breaks to eat lunches, and we loved each other so much that we usually did not even leave and ate in there.

The looks on the students' faces when they came into the center to get their papers proof-read appeared as the same as mine did on the first day of Modern Literature: utterly confused and in awe. For me, my classroom was no longer a place to learn through lecture; but instead a new home to make significant interpretations of the world around me. I had become so accustomed to it that I never realized why other students thought differently when they came in to get their paper read. I remember my classmates and I would sit on the couches in the back corner of the room when no one came in for a tutoring session, just talking. The dialogue that we encountered proved even greater than an entire day in all of my classes combined. Freire stressed how a "dialectical movement" must take place to learn, and the writing center fostered the opportunity to expand my literary skills and truly absorb knowledge in a more meaningful fashion through discussion; something almost unheard of in a traditional math or science class.

The structure of writing center was even more unorthodox than the class had been, believe it or not. We received the syllabus at the beginning of the semester with everything we had to do by the end, and we were told to turn it in the week before the semester ended. Now, there were many things that went into it, including a 30-page paper on any topic that we could choose; but since the class was mostly to help people who came in on their papers, most of it was to be done on slow days or at home. I became so close to my classmates that rarely anything got finished in class. It almost felt like a free hour-and-a-half to hang out with friends, hiding in the fort so we did not have to tutor. I finally found "it:" a genuine finding of the notion of learning. Percy discusses how, "the sightseer measures his satisfaction by the degree to which the canyon conforms to the preformed complex" (47). Since that complex was completely shattered, I gathered so much knowledge from peers that I learned more through them than any class, with

the dialogue sparking it all. Every paper proved to be so open that it allowed me to expand on topics that I actually cared about while improving my literary skills.

Freire and Macedo describe how, “reading the world always precedes reading the word, and reading the word implies continually reading the world” (Freire and Macedo 104). In both classes, I had to continuously read the same idea in different formats, and the structureless writing styles allowed me to explore even more possible techniques while genuinely enjoying the learning process. Although I experienced “relentless searching” in my classes, in hindsight this searching was one of the most significant educational experiences I could have gotten. I did not like it at the time because it did not coincide with the ideal version of a traditional class; but today I use the same processes to search for meaning. In order to truly see something for the way it is, a person has to step back and recognize the world around him or her, and see it through genuine eyes. It is when this happens that “experts” cease to exist.

* This essay received the award for Excellence in Synthesis Writing.

Works Cited

- Berthoff, Ann. Foreword. *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World*. By Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo. ABC-CLIO Inc., 1987. Rpt in *Readings for ENG100: Writing Seminar 1 Third Edition*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2014. 91-99. Print.
- Freire, Paulo, Macedo, Donaldo. Chapter 1: The Importance of the Act of Reading: *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World*. Rpt in *Readings for ENG100: Writing Seminar 1 Third Edition*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2014. 100-104. Print.
- Percy, Walker. The Loss of the Creature. *The Message in the Bottle*: New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975. 46-63. Print.